

The Company Hymns Keep:  
Reading Isaac Watts' Hymns in Early New England  
a proposal  
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Isaac Watts' involvement in the Massachusetts and Connecticut colonies in the early eighteenth century has been well-documented, from his gifts to Yale's library to his correspondence with Cotton Mather, Benjamin Colman, and Jonathan Edwards. Yet scholars have overlooked the fact that Watts' hymns first appeared in print as appendices in sermon pamphlets, as well as the role those pamphlets played in the development of new religious sensibilities and societies in America. In 1712, Mather began the practice of filling blank pages at the end of his printed sermons with selections from Watts' *Horae Lyricae* (1706) and *Divine Hymns* (1709), texts he had already begun using for his family's private devotions. The Psalms still held exclusive reign in public worship services, so the inclusion of the hymns in sermon pamphlets indicates how these pamphlets were meant to bridge public religious ritual and private religious observance—hymns are read, not sung, together with sermons visible, not audible.

Furthermore, by choosing to anthologize hymns rather than Psalms, New England clergy also made Watts an unwitting player in a growing controversy over the place of personal expression in public religion. Ministers looked to Watts' verse to help bring aesthetic excellence and emotional authenticity into their parishioners' spiritual lives, but this new expression also gave common churchgoers inspiration to make themselves heard. Edwards' own congregation chose to replace the Psalms with Watts' hymns in their liturgy in 1742, not long after Edwards had included a Watts hymn in his printing of *A Divine and Supernatural Light* (1734)—but they did so while Edwards was away, and without his input. This paper surveys the American publication history of Watts' hymns during the first half of the eighteenth century, and establishes those hymns' place in the practices and influences of religious reading during that era.