

Don LePan for his encouragement and advice, and to Natalie Grinnell, Robin Norris, and Andrew Scheil, who read a first draft of the manuscript, for many points of advice and suggestions for improvement. All errors that remain are, of course, my own.

Stephen Glosecki, scholar, teacher, and poet, died in 2007; I am grateful to his wife Karen Reynolds for permission to include his translations of *Judith* and the Old English metrical charms. His style of translation is very different from mine;<sup>1</sup> I hope readers will enjoy hearing once again his unique and powerful voice.



Liuzza, *Old English Poetry: An Anthology*

<sup>1</sup> I have discussed my own ideals of translating Old English poetry in the introduction to my translation of *Beowulf* 2nd edition (Peterborough: Broadview Press, 2013), 36-43.

## Preface—*The Birth of Poetry*

### Bede, *Ecclesiastical History* IV.24 The Story of Cædmon

Bede “the Venerable,” the most learned writer of the Anglo-Saxon period, was born in Northumbria around 673. At the age of seven he entered the twin monastery of Wearmouth-Jarrow and remained there, except for a few short excursions, until his death. Under the Abbot Ceolfrith, Bede received a thorough education in grammar, rhetoric, mathematics, music, natural science, and the study of Scripture; he was ordained a deacon at 19 and a priest at 30. In a brief autobiographical note appended to his *Ecclesiastical History* he describes himself in this manner: “Amid the observance of the discipline of the Rule [of St. Benedict] and the daily task of singing in the church, it has always been my delight to learn or to teach or to write.” Over the course of his fairly long life—he died in 735—Bede produced a body of writing that remains impressive for its clarity, intelligence, range, and devotion. His works, which survive in hundreds of manuscripts, were deeply influential and widely copied throughout the Middle Ages. Apart from a brief and enigmatic Old English poem called “Bede’s Death Song” and a lost translation of the Gospel of John that he is said to have been writing on his deathbed, all Bede’s works were written in Latin, which was at that time the international language of scholarship and of the Church.

Benedict Biscop, founder of Jarrow monastery, had traveled extensively and assembled an impressive library; during Bede’s lifetime this remote outpost on the northeastern coast of England—founded about the year Bede was born, scarcely 50 years after the rulers of Northumbria had converted to Christianity—was perhaps the most learned monastic center in all of Europe. Bede’s writings include works of Scriptural commentary, homilies, handbooks on meter and orthography, lives of saints, books of poetry and hymns, and treatises on cosmology and timekeeping. He was deeply interested in time and its measurement, a matter of some urgency in his lifetime because the Irish and Roman churches had different methods for calculating the date of Easter. In some years the two churches celebrated the feast on different days, which to Bede was a shocking sign of disunity. In his works promoting the Roman method of reck-

oning Easter he also helped establish the foundations of medieval astronomy and chronology; Bede is primarily responsible for popularizing the western "BC" and "AD" system of reckoning dates using the *anno domini* or "year of (the birth of) the Lord" as the dividing principle.

It is Bede's historical works, however, that are best known today. His *Ecclesiastical History of the English People* (*Historia Ecclesiastica Gentis Anglorum*), completed in 731, is an extensive history of England which takes as its theme the conversion of the Anglo-Saxon invaders who had displaced the native Britons. The *Ecclesiastical History* imagines an "English" people united not so much by culture or language or geography as by faith, the Roman Christianity brought to the island by Augustine of Canterbury and other missionaries sent by Pope Gregory the Great in 597. This work still provides the foundation for much of our knowledge of England in the fourth, fifth, and sixth centuries. Bede was able to take multiple sources—documents, memorials of abbots and holy men, histories, local oral traditions and legends—and weave them together into a coherent narrative. Writing very much from the Northumbrian point of view, Bede tells how the English are gradually and inevitably brought into the happy embrace of the Roman church, triumphing against the bitterness and treachery of the native Britons, the well-meaning but deluded zeal of the Irish missionaries, and the temporizing and backsliding of one pagan king after another. It is a tribute to Bede's great literary talent that the story he crafted from whatever meager evidence was available to him is still regarded by many as a fundamentally accurate account.

By far the most well-known episode in the *Ecclesiastical History* is Bede's story of the poet Cædmon. According to Bede, Cædmon is a layman cowherd at the monastery of Whitby who receives a miraculous talent for poetic composition and becomes, without any previous training, a great composer of religious verse in English. The story of Cædmon is both a myth (a way of explaining the origins of something) and a miracle (a dramatic intervention of God into the everyday world); Bede insists that Cædmon was the first English Christian poet, and that he did not learn any part of his art from other, more secular poets. Modern critics have pointed out that Cædmon's *Hymn* makes use of the same formulaic diction as most other poems in Old English and it is likely that Cædmon, if he really existed, was adapting an existing body of poetic practice to express the new ideas of Christian history and doctrine.

The story of Cædmon sets in opposition two different worlds—the monastery and the cowshed, the literate reader and oral singer, the religious and secular life—whose contact changes both worlds. It is important to notice, however, that this contact has little to do with literacy and the technology of writing—nobody teaches Cædmon to read the Bible or to write down the songs he makes. For Bede, the world of English poetry—even Christian poetry—is parallel to but separate from the monastic world of books and written learning. Still his poetry must have been known beyond the immediate circle of his listeners; Bede reports Cædmon's miraculous poem in a Latin paraphrase, but scribes of two early manuscripts of Bede's work added a short English verse text in the margins as a kind of footnote to Bede's story, and when Bede's work was translated into Old English in the ninth century the English poem replaced Bede's Latin paraphrase.

#### SOURCE/EDITION

The standard edition of the *Historia Ecclesiastica*, with a modern English translation, is Bertram Colgrave and R.A.B. Mynors, eds., *Bede's Ecclesiastical History of the English People* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969). This translation relies heavily on that work, as well as the earlier work of L. Stevens (London: J.M. Dent; New York: E.P. Dutton, 1910) and J.M. Wallace-Hadrill's *Bede's Ecclesiastical History of the English People: A Historical Commentary* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991).

#### FURTHER READING

- Frantzen, Allen J., and John Hines, eds. *Cædmon's Hymn and Material Culture in the World of Bede*. Medieval European Studies 10. Morgantown, WV: West Virginia University Press, 2006.
- O'Brien O'Keefe, Katherine. "Orality and the Developing Text of Cædmon's *Hymn*." *Speculum* 62 (1987): 1-20.
- O'Donnell, Daniel Paul, ed. *Cædmon's Hymn: A Multi-Media Study, Archive and Edition*. With the assistance of Dawn Collins et al. Cambridge: D.S. Brewer in association with SEENET and The Medieval Academy, 2005.
- Orchard, Andy. "Poetic Inspiration and Prosaic Translation: The Making of *Cædmon's Hymn*." *Studies in English Language and Literature*. "Doubt Wisely": Papers in Honour of E.G. Stanley. Ed. M.J. Toswell and E.M. Tyler. London and New York: Routledge, 1996. 402-22.

In the monastery of this abbess<sup>1</sup> was a certain brother specially marked by the grace of God, who used to make pious and religious verses, so that whatever he learned from the holy Scriptures through interpreters, he soon afterwards turned into poetry in English—which was his native language—of great sweetness and humility. By his verses the minds of many were often inspired to despise the world and to long for the heavenly life. After him other Englishmen tried to compose religious poems, but none could ever compare with him, for he did not learn the art of poetry from men or through a man,<sup>2</sup> but received the gift of song freely by divine grace. For this reason he never could compose any trivial or foolish poem, but only those which were concerned with devotion and were fitting for his pious tongue to utter.

He had lived in the secular life until he was well advanced in years, and had never learned any verses; therefore sometimes at feasts, when it was agreed for the sake of entertainment that all present should take a turn singing, when he saw the harp coming towards him, he would rise up from the table in the middle of the feast, go out, and return home. On one occasion when he did this, he left the house of feasting and went to the stable, where it was his turn to take care of the animals that night. In due time he stretched out to rest; a person appeared to him in his sleep, called him by name, and said, "Cædmon, sing me something." Cædmon answered, "I cannot sing; that is why I left the feast and came here, because I could not sing." The man who was talking to him replied, "Nevertheless, you must sing to me."<sup>3</sup> "What shall I sing?" he asked. "Sing about the beginning of created things," he replied. At that, Cædmon immediately began to sing verses which he had never heard before in praise of God, whose general sense is this:

Now let us praise Heaven-kingdom's guardian,  
the Maker's might and his mind's thoughts,  
the work of the glory-father—of every wonder,

<sup>1</sup> *abbess* Hild, abbess of Whitby (c. 614-80). Bede recounts her remarkable life in the *Ecclesiastical History* IV.23.

<sup>2</sup> *from men or through a man* See Galatians 1.1.

<sup>3</sup> *Nevertheless ... sing to me* Or more gently, "you can sing to me." The Latin is *mihī cantare habes*.

eternal Lord, He established a beginning.  
He first shaped for men's sons  
Heaven as a roof, the holy Creator;  
then middle-earth mankind's guardian,  
eternal Lord, afterwards prepared  
the earth for men, the Lord almighty.<sup>1</sup>

5

This is the sense but not the actual order of the words he sang in his sleep, for poetry, no matter how well composed, cannot be literally translated from one language into another without losing much of its beauty and dignity. Awaking from his sleep, Cædmon remembered all that he had sung in his dream, and soon added more verses in the same manner, praising God in a worthy style.

In the morning he went to the steward, his master, and told him of the gift he had received; the steward led him to the abbess, who ordered him, in the presence of many learned men, to recount his dream and repeat his poem, so that they might all decide what it was and where it had come from. It was clear to all of them he had received a gift of heavenly grace from our Lord. Then they explained to him a passage of sacred history or doctrine, and ordered him, if he could, to turn it into verse. He undertook this task and went away; when he returned the next morning he repeated it to them, composed in excellent verse.

At this the abbess, recognizing the grace of God in this man, instructed him to renounce the secular habit and take up the monastic life; when this was done she joined him to the rest of the brethren in her monastery and ordered that he should be taught the whole course of sacred history. He learned all that he could by listening, and turning it over in his mind like a clean beast chewing the cud,<sup>2</sup> turned it into the most harmonious verse, and recited it so sweetly that his teachers became in turn his audience. He sang of the creation of the world, the origin of the human race, and all the history of Genesis; and made many verses on the departure of the children of Israel from

<sup>1</sup> *Now let us praise ... the Lord almighty* Bede gives only a Latin paraphrase; in two manuscripts of Bede's Latin *Historia* a poem in the Northumbrian dialect of Old English is added in the margins. When Bede's work was translated into Old English at the end of the ninth century and the translators substituted a version of this poem for Bede's paraphrase, the disclaimer that follows it was omitted. For the Old English of the poem, see the Preface.

<sup>2</sup> *He learned ... the cud* See Leviticus 11.3; Deuteronomy 14.6.

Egypt, and their entry into the Promised Land, and many other stories from the holy Scriptures; of the Incarnation, Passion, and Resurrection of our Lord, and of His Ascension into heaven, of the coming of the Holy Spirit and the teaching of the apostles, also of the terror of future judgment, the horror of the pains of hell, and the joys of the kingdom of heaven, and many more songs about the divine mercies and judgments by which he tried to turn all men away from the love of vice and to inspire in them the love and practice of good works. He was a very devout man, humbly submissive to the discipline of the monastic rule, but full of zeal against those who behaved otherwise; for this reason his life had a lovely ending.

When the hour of his departure drew near, for fourteen days he was afflicted with a bodily weakness which seemed to prepare the way, yet mild enough that he could talk and walk the whole time. Nearby was the house to which the sick and dying were carried. As evening fell on the night he was going to depart this life, he asked his attendant<sup>1</sup> to prepare a place for him there so he could take his rest. The attendant wondered why he should desire that, because there seemed to be no sign of his dying soon; but did what he had asked. They went there and were talking pleasantly and joyfully with the people who were already in the house; when it was past midnight he asked them whether they had the Eucharist there. They answered, "Why do you need the Eucharist? You are not likely to die, since you talk so merrily with us, just as though you were in perfect health." "Nevertheless," he said, "bring me the Eucharist." When he had taken it into his hand he asked whether they were all in charity with him, without any complaint or quarrel. They answered that they were all in perfect charity, and free from anger; and likewise asked him whether he felt the same towards them. He answered at once, "My sons, I am in charity with all the servants of God." Then strengthening himself with the heavenly viaticum, he prepared for his entrance into the next life; he asked how near it was to the time when the brothers had to awaken to sing their nightly praise of our Lord. They answered, "It is not far off." He said, "Good; let us wait until then," and signing himself with the sign of the holy cross, he laid his head on the pillow and fell into a slumber,

<sup>1</sup> *his attendant* Older monks were attended by young novices who took care of them.

and so ended his life quietly. And so it happened that, just as he had served God with a simple and pure mind and quiet devotion, so now he departed into His presence and left the world by a quiet death, and his tongue, which had composed so many holy words in praise of the Creator, uttered its last words while he was in the act of signing himself with the cross, and commending his spirit into God's hands; and from what has been said, it seems he had foreknowledge of his death.