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Miracle-working Poetry, Poetry Worth a Miracle?

The Cædmon Story Yet Again

All who are interested in Anglo-Saxon poetry would certainly find it extremely exciting to travel back in time and meet one of the poets who composed some of the lines we are studying, over a thousand years later, see how he worked, how he got his training, how he lived, what role he had in society. Was he rich, respected, somebody with great prestige, or the direct opposite? Since, however, this is impossible, scholars have made several attempts at reconstructing the historical figure of the Anglo-Saxon scop. All of us, who read and love Anglo-Saxon poetry, commit the venial sin of the scholar of using our fantasy to do this, and have a mental image of this very attractive person. If, however, we try to work as a scholar should, we feel very much at a loss, because there are almost no historical data we can rely on in constructing this figure. Even the historical generalisation of “the Anglo-Saxon scop” seems of very questionable value.¹

One strong temptation all students of Anglo-Saxon are exposed to is reading Bede’s story of Cædmon, which seems to be the only description of a historical poet in action, but after the first happy encounter with this attractive person a more careful reading and analysis reveals of how little use he is for us in pursuing

¹ A common denominator of all scops is a rather indistinct image, but I cannot agree to the separation of different kinds of roles like those in Jeff Opland’s *Anglo-Saxon Oral Poetry* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1980), Chapter 8, where he describes the harper-entertainer, the vatic scop, and the teller of prose stories as distinct well-defined kinds of poets in Anglo-Saxon England. He draws his parallels from rather too far away in space and time. The temptation is understandably great for such analogies because of the shortage of data.

our aim of reconstructing the historical figure of a scop, because Bede's story is anything but a historical document, simply put: its purpose is not what we wish to use it for.

Cædmon is certainly the first Anglo-Saxon poet in at least two senses. The first datable person with a name, that we know of, who composed poetry, and the first one, that we know by name, who welded together pagan and Christian tradition in his poetry.² But in literary history we cannot make much of him. He is just one among many Anglo-Saxon poets who composed religious verse, he stands out only inasmuch as we know his name, but not much of his poetry. His story, however, is a case study in how at least one member of his audience, although not in his immediate proximity, Bede, a near contemporary, appreciated his person and his compositions and how he passed his story on to his readers. This paper is one more attempt at reading Bede's story of Cædmon, and at confronting a possible reading in the context of Bede with what 21st-century minds might extract from it. My conclusion is that Cædmon is the most attractive character in the story only for the reader. Bede's central character is not him, neither is Bede's purpose to present documentary evidence about how Anglo-Saxon poetry was composed. Bede's aim was different with this story.

Another way of approaching our topic would be to retrieve the image of the early scop from the extant poems. In doing so we must never lose sight of the fact that whatever we read now, was filtered through at least one clerical mind, so we shall never have immediate access to any pagan heroic poet. He is irretrievably lost. When Christianity took root, it slowly but radically altered the social and cultural setting. Pagan poetry still remained popular in Christian Anglo-Saxon England and the ideals it showed to the listeners were not washed away by the holy water of baptism, but this poetry underwent a change. The integration of the two cultures is one of the most fascinating aspects of this early world. Bede's story of Cædmon is witness to how a contemporary mind appreciated this change, what role he ascribes to poetry in it, how he justifies the old style with the new topic.

² The earlier view, held by many, that a number of biblical poems can be ascribed to Cædmon, beside the nine-line hymn is less and less accepted now, since it is almost impossible to prove. It rests only on impressionistic stylistic evidence. There are extant poems, like *Genesis*, which fit in with Bede's description of what sort of poetry Cædmon composed, but no hard proof, "beyond reasonable doubt" exists that Cædmon had anything to do with it. The concept of Cædmon initiating a school of poets cannot be confirmed from Bede. He clearly states that nobody could do what Cædmon did as well as he, and the rest of religious poetry is definitely not less good in quality than Cædmon's hymn.

The piece concerned is Book IV, Chapter 24 in Bede's *Historia Ecclesiastica Gentis Anglorum*.³ It tells the story which took place in the double monastery of Whitby around AD 680, when a simple shepherd, Cædmon, who could not sing any songs earlier to entertain his lay companions at a feast obtained the gift of composing religious poetry with the help of an angel during his sleep.⁴

From Bede's and Cædmon's point of view this is a miracle God performed on Cædmon, and thus it is described much in the vein of saints' lives. "In Bede's account, Cædmon's gift of singing in 'verses which he had never heard before in praise of God the Creator' is a miracle because God wonderfully articulated what he already had imbued in Cædmon's nature and prepared for in his Anglo-Saxon monastic surrounding."⁵ The story should not be read as if it was history, in the modern factual sense of that word.⁶ It was history for Bede, "who would have found the distinction between secular and sacred otiose,"⁷ and whose purpose was to write the success of Christianity (i.e. of God) in England. The story clearly furthers that aim, "it describes how God subordinates physical nature to a higher

3 All references to the Latin and English texts are to this edition: B. Colgrave and R. A. B. Mynors, eds., *Bede's Ecclesiastical History of the English People* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), Book IV, Ch. 24, pp. 414-421.

4 Roberta Frank draws attention to a story in Isidore of Seville of passing a harp around the table, commenting that "perhaps the Whitby diners were just doing as the Romans did." in: R. Frank, "The Search for the Anglo-Saxon Poet," *Bulletin of the John Rylands University Library of Manchester* 75 (1993) 11-36, p. 30. Bede's story of Cædmon is certainly loaded with familiar literary and mythic elements but that should not prevent us from discarding its meaning on face value all together.

5 G. H. Brown, "Old English Verse as a Medium for Christian Theology," in: *Modes of Interpretation of Old English Poetry, Essays in Honor of Stanley B. Greenfield*, ed. Ph. R. Brown et al. (Toronto, Buffalo, London: University of Toronto Press, 1986) 15-28, p. 16.

6 "Sacred history [...] in the Middle Ages assumes as part of its responsibility the recording of those instances when God manifests the divine in the world. Medieval man believed that the theophany was most appropriately manifested through an incarnation in God's elect, his saints. I would argue that one of the principal activities of sacred biography is to chronicle the appearance of the inbreaking of the divine in the world, or what Augustine referred to as the *seminales rationes* interrupting the continual flux of the world. Secular history, on the other hand, has as its responsibility to chronicle and interpret activities, points of view, and institutions all of which have little metaphysical orientation" (Th. J. Heffernan, *Sacred Biography, Saints and Their Biographies in the Middle Ages* [New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988], p. 97).

7 Heffernan, p. 97, note 43.

purpose,”⁸ in this case the uneducated mind of a shepherd is made suitable for the purpose of teaching, converting pagan Anglo-Saxons.⁹

If, on the other hand, the story is scrutinised from the point of view of poetry, interesting aspects emerge. The miracle sheds light on how mighty the persuasive power of poetry was considered by Bede and his readers, if it was worthwhile to “mobilise” God to confer this power upon somebody in order that Christian truth was more efficiently spread among people who were still pagan.

We can go further and say that it was God who inspired and, in a sense, also “composed” his poetry; Cædmon is treated merely as a vehicle. “The angel brings to a chosen vessel, characteristically humble, the obligation to receive and to be the first to communicate God’s word in English poetry.”¹⁰ What was admirable in the event for Bede and the audience was not so much Cædmon, but God at work. Cædmon could only be presented by Bede like a saint, not as a poet.

In Bede’s story the gift to Cædmon was limited to making poems on religious topics, but none could be his equal in this as it was only he who obtained the skill from God. The old verse applied to the new topics was delightful and moving so “[b]y his songs the minds of many were often inspired to despise the world and to long for the heavenly life.”¹¹ The passage shows how Bede thought that through this new medium, through yet another channel God could turn people to the new ways more easily than by only sending his missionaries to them who could probably tell the same things no less enthusiastically, but only in prose sermons. This is why Cædmon’s teachers soon turned into his listeners, his admirers. Bede only gives a prose summary of Cædmon’s first poem, and scholars have been wondering why he did not quote the original Old English poem, which can be found on the margins of the earlier manuscripts. “This is the sense, but not

8 Ch. G. Herbermann et al., eds., *The Catholic Encyclopaedia* (New York: Appleton, 1908), Vol. 3, p. 342.

9 Whether the essence of the miracle consisted in a gift of traditional language for making aristocratic verse, or whether it was a gift of an insight into scripture coupled with adequate language for the description of it, or a gift of memory, or whether God’s intention was to save pagan poetry by giving it to Cædmon to tell his truths in – as it is listed by St. Greenfield in *A New Critical History of Old English Literature* (New York and London: New York University Press, 1986), p. 230, is irrelevant. In the miracle God harnessed popular pagan poetry in order to achieve his own end.

10 B. F. Huppé, *Doctrine and Poetry: Augustine’s Influence in Old English Poetry* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1959), pp. 102–103.

11 “Cuius carminibus multorum saepe animi ad contentum saeculi et appetitum sunt uitae caelestis accensi” (Bede, pp. 414–415).

the order of the words which he sang as he slept. For it is not possible to translate verse, however well composed literally from one language to the other without some loss of beauty and dignity."¹² There is a simple explanation, which is logical from Bede's point: since he did not mix languages in his work, there are no Old English citations anywhere else; what he refers to as inadequate here, would be a Latin verse translation. Probably it never occurred to him that we, late readers of his would appreciate the Old English original of Cædmon's poem. He is not writing about Anglo-Saxon poetry and poets, but God first of all, and his church in England.

Seemingly a similar quality of poetry of persuading, teaching through entertainment was utilised by Aldhelm at the occasion described by William of Malmesbury in his *Gesta Pontificum*:¹³

The people at that time semi-barbarous and too little interested in divine sermons, were accustomed to return to their homes immediately after the singing of Mass; therefore the holy man (i.e. Aldhelm) took up his stand before them on a bridge which connected the town and country like one professing the art of minstrelsy; and by doing this more than once he won the favor and presence of the people.

After which, when the crowd was large enough, he could continue with a sermon.

In this case, however, poetry is only a means of *captatio benevolentiae*, only a trick in comparison with what Cædmon did, as Aldhelm did not possess the divine inspiration, he did not tell the new teaching in verse, only attracted the attention of the people with the help of traditional poetry.

Aldhelm composed Latin poetry, but if we can believe William of Malmesbury, writing about him five centuries later, he could also compose in English, and did so, although he was a cleric at the time of the story. This is also an instance which shows that poetry was well liked and important among the

12 "Hic est sensus non autem ordo ipse uerborum, quae dormiens ille canebat; neque enim possunt carmina, quamuis optime composita, ex alia in aliam linguam ad uerbum sine detrimento sui decoris ac dignitatis transferri" (Bede, pp. 416-417).

13 A. C. Partridge, *A Companion to Old and Middle English Studies* (Totowa, New Jersey: Barnes and Noble, 1982), p. 195: "Populum eo tempore semibarbarum, parum diuinis sermonibus intentum, statim cantatis missis domos cursitare solitum. Ideo sanctum virum super pontem qui rura et urbem continuat abeuntibus se opposuisse obicem quasi artem cantandi professum. Eo plus quam semel favorem et concursum emeritum. Hoc commento sensim inter ludicra uerbis Scripturarum insertis, ciues ad sanitatem reduxisse," quoted from William of Malmesbury, *De Gestis Pontificum Anglorum*, Rolls Ser. No. 52 (London: 1870), Book V, Part 1.

Anglo-Saxons, and instead of giving up pagan poetry at the coming of the new culture, ways were found how to cultivate it still, and justify the use of it. For a proof that a situation like the one in William's history about Aldhelm would not have been totally incredible, we can return to Cædmon and trace what contemporary practices of composing and consuming poetry may have been like.

Cædmon's lack of skill in verse making is shown untypical among his fellows. "Hence sometimes at a feast, when for the sake of providing entertainment, it had been decided that they should all sing in turn, when he saw the harp approaching him, he would rise up in the middle of the feasting, go out, and return home."¹⁴ This scene confirms what we have in *Beowulf*, that many of those present at feasts were skilled enough to recite a song, even if in Cædmon's company we imagine a group of far less sophisticated people to be spending the night together entertaining themselves than in the hall of Hrothgar. We might take the scene as an exaggerated one, like Peter R. Orton does, i.e. one, in which Bede presents Cædmon as "the right kind of innocent" for God to work his miracle on,¹⁵ contrasting him with all the others. Cædmon's lack of poetic talent is even more dramatic in comparison with everybody else's at least minimal skill in verse-making – although no-one of us could tell now what the poems, they composed, were really like. What Bede's text certainly proves, however, is that the scene must have seemed probable for Bede's readership, not totally impossible to have happened – i.e. it is not wide off the practices of the age. In addition, in *The Ecclesiastical History* we are not reading a kind of historical reconstruction of an age several centuries later, as we are in *Beowulf*. There are not more than two generations between Cædmon and Bede. The change in everyday customs is probably negligible during such a short time. If the description of the entertainment at the feast had not been credible for Bede's audience, another miracle would have been needed, i.e. to gather together a rather knowledgeable group of poets in the out-buildings of a monastery so that Bede could present Cædmon as "the odd one out."

We can also find the reason here of why the aesthetic power of poetry was so influential, too. The audience of Cædmon's songs after the miracle was a group of

14 "Vnde nonnumquam in conuiuio, cum esset laetitiae causa decretum ut omnes per ordinem cantare deberent, ille, ubi adpropinquare sibi citharam cernebat, surgebat a media caena et egressus ad suam domum repedabat" (Bede, pp. 414–417).

15 P. R. Orton, "Caedmon and Christian Poetry," *Neuphilologische Mitteilungen* 84 (1983) 163–170, p. 170.

connoisseurs – whether laymen or ecclesiastics –, knowledgeable critics, as many or all of them could sing themselves. The way Cædmon sang was even more amazing for his audience because he must have been notorious for not being able to sing, some sort of a freak, or at least unusual, thus his audience could well estimate the extent of the change that took place overnight.

Bede describes that later Cædmon was instructed in sacred history, biblical stories. “He learned all he could by listening to them and then, memorizing it and ruminating over it, like some clean animal chewing the cud, he turned it into the most melodious verse: and it sounded so sweet as he recited it that his teachers became in turn his audience.”¹⁶ This description reminds one of the expression in *Beowulf* which calls the poet the person whose head is full of storied verse (guma gylphlæden, *Beowulf* 868a). The poet in *Beowulf*, however, is not said to be composing the poems, just storing them in his memory. The big issue, discussed in different theories of composition is, what sort of units were stored there in the poet’s head. Cædmon, on the other hand, – as pictured by Bede –, or rather God within him, is composing new poems from the memorised stories. In Bede’s frame of mind it is rightly so, creation belongs to God.

Cædmon’s image is that of the Christian poet, somewhat like the evangelists, he is very different from his pagan counterpart. He is a tool in God’s hand to achieve a certain aim, a channel through which the new truth can reach the people. He has become a pale shadow of his pagan brother if we think about him in romantic terms. He is not the preserver of wisdom or history, he is not an oracle or a vates, he does not prophecy about the future or dispense knowledge. Neither is his poetry the means to create and immortalise warrior heroes. He is deprived by Bede of the merit of poetic creation, too. He has to withdraw “to consult his source of poetry” before he can render a new biblical story in persuasive verse form.

Would he not deserve a more favourable judgement from us? But Bede did not misunderstand him at all. In medieval terms, there is only one Text, and Cædmon is communicating this sacred Text of the Bible, so he is one in the line of a number of worthy interpreters of the words of the divine composer. The authority is not his, he is only a vehicle. His reputation comes from joining the line of transmitters each of whom reflects the divine authority absorbing also a

¹⁶ “At ipse cuncta, quae audiendo discere poterat, rememorando secum et quasi mundum animal ruminando, in carmen dulcissimum conuertebat, suauiusque resonando doctores suos uicissim auditores sui faciebat” (Bede, p. 418–419).

fraction of the light and emanating it as his own. This provides recognition for him. The best vehicle of the message is the most transparent one as far as the authenticity and truth of the text is concerned. The recognition of Cædmon by Bede is the recognition of this transparency: he humbly let God work through him and achieve his divine aim. Cædmon acted like a saint. He also died like a saint in Bede's description, he predicted the time of his death, made sure he was at peace with everyone around him, took the heavenly Viaticum and passed away with God's name on his lips.

Interestingly enough the *Catholic Encyclopaedia*, published in 1908, still confirms him in that position. "According to William of Malmesbury, writing 1125, he was probably buried at Whitby, and his sanctity was attested by many miracles. His canonisation was probably popular rather than formal."¹⁷ Further study would be necessary – whether it is worthwhile or possible at all, is another matter –, to find out if any cult really grew up around him. All that Bede described happened well before any formal canonisation process was needed to acclaim a person a saint, and he is one of the many, who have never been included in the liturgical calendar. This quotation is only an interesting detail rather about the connection of history and religion at the turn of the 20th century.

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From the above it is clear that poetry was evidently worth a miracle. If this fusion of the old and new had not taken place, Anglo-Saxon poetry would have stood a good chance of being lost all together, like early Hungarian poetry was. Did poetry also work miracles? To what extent it was instrumental in spreading Christian doctrine and culture we can hardly tell, but Ælfric's homilies and saints' lives and the surviving large corpus of religious verse prove the popularity of old-style poetry applied to the new topics.

¹⁷ Herbermann, Vol. 10, p. 132.