

Anglo-saxon religious poetry

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The influence of Christianity came to England from Ireland with the arrival of St. Augustine's mission. The ancient vernacular poetry unredeemed in its worldliness and paganism was sanctified by the Christianization of England. In consequence there was a marked change in the content and emotion of English poetry while leaving its form and general technique unaltered.

Instead of seeking themes common to old-Germanic the Christianized Anglo-Saxons adopted a new world of Latin Christianity along with themes and attitudes common to entire Christian world. This enabled the Anglo-Saxon poets to work on Biblical stories, associating them with Hebrew imagination. The special class of poetry which is called Christian poetry and this religious poetry flourished in about the 8th century in North England. Alliterative verse came to the aid of clerical Latin to give expression of the faith of the Laity and make it popular. The subject of the poet's song is now the story of Christ and the deeds of saintly heroes.

Caedmon

The English poet who took the first attempt to write poems on Christian themes was Caedmon. What scholars know of Caedmon's life comes from Bede's Ecclesiastical History of the English People. He is known best during the time fl. 658-680 AD., and Bede tells us that he was an illiterate herdsman to a monastery of Whitby who one night in a dream learned how to sing beautiful Christian verses praising God's name. Following his dream, Caedmon became the foremost Christian poet. Earlier he had so little gift of song that he used to leave the feast when he found the harp approaching him he used to leave the feast. One night as he lay asleep in the stable a mysterious being appeared to him in his dreams and commanded him to sing.

At his bidding Caedmon at once sang in praise of the Lord, the Creator, verses which he had never heard before. When he awoke he remembered these verses and made others like them. Thus the unlettered Caedmon was miraculously transformed into the first religious poet of England. Caedmon is remembered today for his poetic paraphrases of The Bible. He paraphrased in verse the book of Genesis, Exodus, Daniel and Judith. He is supposed to have sung about creation of the world, the origin of man, his reign, of exodus, the incarnation, the crucifixion, the resurrection of Christ, the ascension of Christ into heaven, the advent of the Holy Ghost and the teaching of the apostles.

He also sang of future judgement, the horrors of hell and the joys of heaven. Research and scholarship however, no longer admit all the poems attributed to Caedmon by Bede to be directly his work excepting the nine-lined poem quoted by Bede in his account of Caedmon's first inspiration.

Genesis A and B

The most interesting of the poems in the Junius Manuscript is Genesis. Genesis A of 3000 lines is an account of Satan's rebellion against God and his fall with the angels into Hell, narrating the substance of the first 22 chapters of the Biblical book of Genesis. The poem contains an interpolated passage of 600 lines strikingly different in language and style from the main body of the poem. This has been named Genesis B, a rudimentary Paradise Lost, describing the temptation of Adam and Eve, their Fall and Satan's rebellion

Exodus

It relates to the escape of the Israelites and the destruction of the Egyptians in the Red Sea. It is boldly and vigorously written and has an older Epic note. It is written more in the convention of heroic poetry rather than scriptural lore. Exodus brings a traditional "heroic style" to its biblical subject-matter. Moses is treated as a general, and military imagery pervades the battle scenes. The destruction of the Egyptians in the Red Sea is narrated in much the same way as a formulaic battle scene from other Old English poems

Daniel

Daniel, as it is preserved, is 764 lines long. There have been numerous arguments that there was originally more to this poem than survives today. It is a paraphrase of the first five chapters of the Biblical book of Daniel. The poet uses his materials for homiletic purposes and tries to inculcate such Christian virtue. The primary focus of the Old English author was that of The Three Youths, Daniel and their encounters with the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar II. Prosaic in tone, it also bears an interpolatory passage relating to the poem of Azariah.

Judith

The finest of the poem attributed to Caedmon is Judith of which a fragment of 350 lines, survive. It is a perfect poem full of action and passion. The Old English poem "Judith" describes the beheading of Assyrian general Holofernes by Israelite Judith of Bethulia. It is found in the same manuscript as the heroic poem Beowulf, the Nowell Codex, dated ca. 975-1025. The Old English poem is one of many retellings of the Holofernes-Judith tale as it was

found in the Book of Judith, still present in the Catholic and Orthodox Christian Bibles.

What is certain about the origin of the poem is that it stems from the Book of Judith. After the Reformation, the Book of Judith was removed from the Protestant Bible. However, it is still present in the Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox Bibles. Similar to Beowulf, Judith conveys a moral tale of heroic triumph over monstrous beings. Both moral and political, the poem tells of a brave woman's efforts to save and protect her people. Judith is depicted as an exemplar woman, grounded by ideal morale, probity, courage, and religious conviction. Judith's character is rendered blameless and virtuous, and her beauty is praised persistently throughout the poem.

Cynaewulf

Beside Caedmon, the other most important Old-English religious poet is Cynaewulf. Cynewulf lived roughly c. 770-840 AD, yet very little is known about his life. The only information scholars have on Cynewulf's life is what they can discover from his poetry. Two of Cynewulf's signed poems were discovered in the Vercelli Book, which includes Cynewulf's holy cross poem "Elene" as well as Dream of the Rood.

Where many scholars will argue that all of the poems in the Vercelli are in fact Cynewulf's, the noted German scholar Franz Dietrich demonstrates that the similarities between Cynewulf's "Elene" and The Dream of the Rood reveals that the two must have been authored by the same individual. The four poems attributed to him through his runic signatures are Christ. Juliana, Elene and The Fate of the Apostles.

Unsigned poems attributed to him or his school are Andreas, St. Guthlac, The Phoenix, The Dream of the Rood. The four poems, like a substantial portion of Anglo-Saxon poetry, are sculpted in alliterative verse. All four poems draw upon Latin sources such as homilies and hagiographies (the lives of saints) for their content, and this is to be particularly contrasted to other Old English poems, e. g. Genesis, Exodus, and Daniel, which are drawn directly from the Bible as opposed to secondary accounts.

Christ

Of all his works the most important and popular poem is Christ, a fragmentary didactic poem in three parts – the first celebrating the Nativity, the second Ascension and the third Doomsday, narrating the torments of the wicked and the joys of the redeemed.

Andreas and Guthlac

These are poems related to lives of Saints. The first narrates the story of the adventures and sufferings and success of St. Andreas in his travels related to missionary work.

Juliana and Elene

These are legendary stories of St. Juliana and the discovery of the True Cross by the mother of Emperor Constantine, St. Helena. They are poems with little artistic merit except for their adventurous element and the rareness in Anglo-Saxon poetry of being dedicated to women. In terms of length, Elene is by far the longest poem of Cynewulf's corpus at 1, 321 lines. It is followed by Juliana, at 731 lines, Christ II, at 427 lines, and The Fates of the Apostles, at a brisk 122 lines. Three of the poems are “martyrological,” in that the central character(s) in each die/suffer for their religious values.

In *Elene*, Saint Helena endures her quest to find the Holy Cross and spread Christianity; in *Juliana*, the title character dies after she refuses to marry a pagan man, thus retaining her Christian integrity; in *Fates of the Apostles*, the speaker creates a song that meditates on the deaths of the apostles which they “ joyously faced.” *Elene* and *Juliana* fit in the category of poems that depict the lives of saints. These two poems along with *Andreas* and *Guthlac* (parts A and B) constitute the only versified saints' legends in the Old English vernacular.

The *Ascension* (Christ II) is outside the umbrella of the other three works, and is a vehement description of a devotional subject. The exact chronology of the poems is not known. One argument asserts that *Elene* is likely the last of the poems because the “ autobiographical” epilogue implies that Cynewulf is old at the time of composition, but this view has been doubted. Nevertheless, it seems that *Christ II* and *Elene* represent the cusp of Cynewulf's career, while *Juliana* and *Fates of the Apostles* seem to be created by a less inspired, and perhaps less mature, poet. The *Fates of the Apostles*

It deals with the various Christian Gospels in an Elegiac manner. It is the shortest of Cynewulf's known canon at 122 lines long. It is a brief martyrology of the Twelve Apostles written in the standard alliterative verse. The *Fates* recites the key events that subsequently befell each apostle after the *Ascension*. It is possible that *The Fates* was composed as a learning aid to the monasteries. Cynewulf speaks in the first-person throughout the poem, and besides explaining the fate of each disciple, he provides “ advice” and “ consolation” to the reader. Cynewulf's runic signature is scrambled in

this poem so that the meaning of the runes become a riddle with no unequivocal meaning.

Runic signature

All four of Cynewulf's poems contain passages where the letters of the poet's name are woven into the text using runic symbols that also double as meaningful ideas pertinent to the text. In Juliana and Elene, the interwoven name is spelled in the more recognizable form as Cynewulf, while in Fates and Christ II it is observed without the medial e so the runic acrostic says Cynwulf. The practice of claiming authorship over one's poems was a break from the tradition of the anonymous poet, where no composition was viewed as being owned by its creator. Cynewulf devised a tradition where authorship would connote ownership of the piece and an originality that would be respected by future generations.

Furthermore, by integrating his name, Cynewulf was attempting to retain the structure and form of his poetry that would "undergo mutations" otherwise. From a different perspective, Cynewulf's intent may not have been to claim authorship, but to "seek the prayers of others for the safety of his soul." It is contended that Cynewulf wished to be remembered in the prayers of his audience in return for the pleasure they would derive from his poems. In a sense his expectation of a spiritual reward can be contrasted with the material reward that other poets of his time would have expected for their craft.

The Phoenix

The poem is about a mythical bird which burnt itself to be reborn from its own ashes, symbolic of Christian soul.

The Dream of the Rood

The poem is set up with the narrator having a dream. In this dream or vision he is speaking to the Cross on which Jesus was crucified. The poem itself is divided up into three separate sections. In section one, the narrator has a vision of the Cross. Initially when the dreamer sees the Cross, he notes how it is covered with gems. He is aware of how wretched he is compared to how glorious the tree is. However, he comes to see that amidst the beautiful stones it is stained with blood. In section two, the Cross shares its account of Jesus' death.

The Crucifixion story is told from the perspective of the Cross. It begins with the enemy coming to cut the tree down and carrying it away. The tree learns that it is to be the bearer of a criminal, but instead the Christ comes to be crucified. The Lord and the Cross become one, and they stand together as victors, refusing to fall, taking on insurmountable pain for the sake of mankind. It is not just Christ, but the Cross as well that is pierced with nails. The Rood and Christ are one in the portrayal of the Passion—they are both pierced with nails, mocked and tortured. Then, just like with Christ, the Cross is resurrected, and adorned with gold and silver. It is honored above all trees just as Jesus is honored above all men.

The Cross then charges the visionary to share all that he has seen with others. In section three, the author gives his reflections about this vision. The vision ends, and the man is left with his thoughts. He gives praise to God for what he has seen and is filled with hope for eternal life and his desire to once again be near the glorious Cross. It is the finest of religious poems in OE, the finest narrative of the Passion in medieval verse (late 7th century, later

modified; preserved in the Vercelli Book). The tree of which the Cross was made relates the story the first English dream-poem Christ is portrayed as a young Germanic hero:

*Long years ago (well yet I remember)
They hewed me down on the edge of the holt,
Severed my trunk; strong foemen took me,
For a spectacle wrought me, a gallows for rogues.*

*High on their shoulders they bore me to hilltop,
Fastened me firmly, an army of foes!
'Then I saw the King of all mankind
In brave mood hastening to mount upon me.*

*Refuse I dared not, nor bow nor break,
Though I felt earth's confines shudder in fear;
All foes I might fell, yet still I stood fast.*

*'Then the young Warrior, God, the All-Wielder,
Put off his raiment, steadfast and strong;
With lordly mood in the sight of many
He mounted the Cross to redeem mankind.*

*When the hero clasped me I trembled in terror,
But I dared not bow me nor bend to earth;
I must need stand fast. Upraised as the Rood
I held the High King, the Lord of Heaven.*

*I dared not bow! with black nails driven
Those sinners pierced me; the prints are clear,
The open wounds. I dared injure none.*

*They mocked us both. I was wet with blood
From the Hero's side when He sent forth His spirit.
'Many a bale I bore on that hill-side
Seeing the Lord in agony outstretched.*

*Black darkness covered with clouds God's body,
That radiant splendor. Shadow went forth
Wan under heaven; all creation wept
Bewailing the King's death. Christ was on the Cross.*

It appears from a survey of Old English Christian poetry that the poets chiefly aimed at popularizing the holy writ and only occasionally added pious commentaries to the original.