

English 313
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Nū Sculon Herigean:
A Close Reading of Cædmon's Hymn

Nū sculon herigean heofonrīces weard,
meotodes meahte ond his mōdgebanc
weorc wuldorfæder, swā hē wundra gehwæs,
ēce Drihten, or onstealde.
Hē ærest sceōp eorðan bearnum
heofon tō hrōfe hālig scyppend;
Þā middangeard monncynnes weard,
ēce Drihten, æfter tēode
fīrum foldan, frēa ælmihtig.

Now [we] the works of the Glory-father must praise the Guardian of the heaven-kingdom, the Measurer's might, and his spirit-thought, just as He, the Eternal Warlord, created the origin of each of wonders. He, the holy Shaper, first shaped heaven as a roof for the children of the earth. Then the Guardian of mankind, the Eternal Warlord, the Lord Almighty, next created Middle-Earth, a ground for men.

In translating Cædmon's Hymn, I analyzed the poem on a number of levels. Grammatical structures, poetic style, etymology, religious history, and biographical information all contributed to my understanding of the poem and are reflected in my translation.

Among Old English poems, Cædmon's Hymn is especially interesting because of its age; it is "among the earliest attested examples of sustained poetry in any Germanic language (O'Donnell 15).¹" The version of the poem translated here comes from the early 10th century Tanner 10 manuscript housed at Oxford University. It is in West Saxon, although most of the early versions of the poem are in the Northumbrian dialect (Marsden 77; 347).¹ The only known biographical account of the writing of Cædmon's Hymn comes from The Venerable Bede's *Historia ecclesiastica gentis Anglorum*. Two of the early manuscripts containing Cædmon's Hymn, however, can be independently accurately dated. The Leningrad manuscript, with the poem in the same hand as the rest of the text, was almost certainly written in 746 A.D. While the dating of Moore manuscript, which contains the poem in the top margin, is somewhat less certain, Smith argues for a date between 734 and 737 A.D. Marsden estimates the date of original composition at around 670, and Smith likewise suggests a date between 660 and 680 AD, indicating that the poem represents "the state of the language at the end of the seventh or beginning of the eight century (Marsden 76; Smith 19; 23)."

Because Cædmon's Hymn was likely composed in Northumbria only 50 years after the area was converted to Christianity, it is often analyzed in terms of its role within the history of Anglo-Saxon Christianity (Smith 15). Smith, for instance, argues that Cædmon Hymn is notable as the first adaptation of Germanic heroic poetry tradition to Christianity: "the poem represents

¹ All of the Old English texts used were the editions printed by Richard Marsden in *The Cambridge Old English Reader*. All translations are mine unless otherwise indicated.

the beginning of such a diction and its freshness and originality must have been felt a generation or more after its composition; no mere assembling of clichés would have called for inspiration, divine or otherwise (15).” O’Donnell, on the other hand, makes the case that Cædmon’s names for God are constant with their stereotypical usage in other Old English Christian works. He claims that Bede praises Cædmon only for the aesthetic and pious qualities of his work, and neither his account nor the poem itself seems to draw attention to any particularly revolutionary adaptation of pagan terminology into Christian epithets. ✓

The vocabulary of the poem is consistent with its later usage in Old English poetic corpus. O’Donnell characterizes the words *meotodes* (2a), *wuldorfæder* (3a), or (4b), *firum* (9a), *foldan* (9a), and *frea* (9b), with the possible inclusion of *weard* (1b; 7b) and *drihten* (4a; 8a), as belonging to the “Anglo-Saxon ‘poetic vocabulary’ (Smith 15; O’Donnell 37-8).” At least nine of the eighteen half-lines are have parallels in another poem (Smith 15). To translate these terms, it is important to consider their etymological history and connotations in pre-Christian Germanic tradition.

There are several Old English words usually translated “lord” or “Lord,” all with cognate forms in the other Germanic languages. One of these is *drihten* (4a; 8a), which is related to OE *dryht*, meaning “multitude, army, or people (OED, “dright”). Green makes the case for a PG root *-*druht* used to refer to a band of warriors. Because of the high status conferred by membership in the Roman army, this Germanic word later acquired its OE meaning of “noble, lordly” (Green 271-3; 275).

Cædmon’s Hymn contains the first recorded occurrence of *drihten* in a Christian context, ✓ and Green attributes the similar usage of cognate words in other Germanic languages to the

missionary influence of the Anglo-Saxons on Germany and Scandinavia. *Drihten* would still have been used with a secular military significance when Cædmon's Hymn was first written. Endowing a military term with a new Christian meaning would have been consistent with Pope Gregory's strategy for the conversion of Anglo-Saxon England – he encouraged the adaptation of former pagan practices to the new religion. Because the “relationship between the warrior-leader and his reunite, fully reciprocal, was one of the most potent sources of ethical inspiration in Germanic life,” the image of Christ as a warlord was particularly attractive to the Anglo-Saxon church (Green 286-9; 302). I have chosen to follow Green's interpretation of the term *dryhten* and use translation “war-lord.” This both captures the older usage of the word and distinguishes it from another name for God, *frea*.

This term *frea* (line 9b), like *drihten*, is used to refer either to a secular lord or to the Christian Lord. Green argues that the original meaning of this term in Germanic was “lord of the household” in a broad sense that includes the relationship of a lord to his wife, family, slaves, and property. Roman historians tend to discuss the German nobility collectively, using the Latin term *principes*. The OE term *frea* in its secular usage is usually reserved for the king; Green claims that this extension of the original meaning occurred when the Anglo-Saxon kings took over the functions of the Roman-era *principes* rather than because of any original connotation of central kingship (21-24; 26). This aspect of an upper class person with authority over a household was maintained in MHG *vrouwe* (“noblewoman”) even after the corresponding masculine term died out (Hennings 211). The Modern English word “free,” in the sense of a non-enslaved person, is also indirectly related to *frea* (OED, “free”). The cognates ON *Freyr* (the proper name of a Scandinavian god) and OHG *frô* (a term for gods in general) also have pagan

religious meanings which do not exist in Old English. (Green 40) In my translation, I have chosen to render *frea* simply as "lord" because it seems more general meaning than the military term *drihten*.

Weard, which occurs in lines 1b and 7b, also has strong military connotations. According to Marsden, the word used in Cædmon's Hymn is masculine singular, and he offers the gloss "guardian (80)." Other possible translations are "watchman," "guard," "keeper," and "warden." In addition, OE also has a closely related feminine noun *weard* from the same PG root. This word has a range of more abstract meanings, which include "the action of guarding" and "the function of a watchman," and is the source of Modern English "ward" and "guard" (OED "ward, n.1;" "ward, n.2"). The masculine meaning seems more likely here, used as an epithet. Accordingly, I have kept Marsden's translation "guardian" because I felt was the most commonly used and natural-sounding of the possible synonyms. I chose the phrases "Guardian of the heaven-kingdom" and "Guardian of mankind" as fairly literal translations of the Old English.

In line 2a, *meotodes* is related to the verb *metan* ("to measure, to compare"), which is the origin of Modern English "to mete out." This may be an allusion to a pagan conception of fate from the ancient Germanic belief system. Destiny was thought to be governed by three giant sisters, the Norns: "Urd, die Herrin des Vergangenen; Werdandi, die um das Seiende und Werdende weiß; Skuld, die kennt, was einst sein soll (Peterich 23)."² They live beneath the roots of Ygdrasil, the world ash tree, beside the Urdarborn, the wellspring of destiny, and bring both good and evil to mankind. The first two sisters mete out fortune and talents to newborn

² "Urd, the lady of that which is past; Werdandi, who understands that which is and that which is becoming; Skuld, who knows that which is to come."

babies, but the third assigns their death (Peterich 23-24). The usage of this term may also represent the association of an earlier pagan idea of fate with the new Christian God, whether intentionally as part of a conversion strategy, or as unintentional transfer from an older belief system. It is impossible to verify this theory on the basis of the poem alone.

In addition to historical and etymological factors, I also looked closely at the grammatical structure of the poem in producing my translation. Rather than attempting to reproduce the original word order, I chose to arrange the phrases in the order that most naturally reflected their grammatical function in the Old English sentence. I also tried to preserve the recurring patterns in the structure of the poem whenever possible by choosing analyses that incorporated grammatical repetition or parallels. In doing so, I copied the Old English poetic technique of using multiple synonyms to describe the same concept.

In line 3a, I have chosen to translate *weorc* as nominative plural, making it the subject of the plural verb *sculon* in 1a. Although *sculon* is ambiguous regarding person, other manuscripts include the first person plural pronoun *we* (Smith 3-4). Accordingly, I have included an implied "we" along with the subject "works of the Glory-Father." This solves the grammatical issue of the missing subject pronoun in that line. I also felt that this translation fit well thematically with the beginning of the poem. The word *swā* in line 3b creates an equation between the two half-lines "works of the Glory-father" and "each of wonders." This phrasing draws a parallel between the audience as the present-day works of God (emphasized also by *nū* in line 1a) and the first "children of the Earth" in line 5b, including the listeners as part of God's creation. The implication is that God, who created the beginning of everything, is still just as involved today. Marsden gives an alternate interpretation that I find less satisfactory. He treats *weorc* as

accusative singular, making it a parallel object of *herigean* along with *weard*, *meahte*, and *modgepan*, and gives the translation "action" (Marsden 80). ✓

Lines 5a and 6b both contain different forms of the same word *scieppan*, a strong verb meaning "to create, shape, or destine." Although the usual translation of *scyppend* is "Creator", I chose the translation "Shaper" because it is etymologically related to the OE verb (OED "shape, v."). I also wanted my translation to reflect the common OE root shared by *sceōp* and *scyppend*. The word *tēode* in line 8b, from the verb *teon* (meaning "to adorn, to create"), is very similar in meaning; I translated this term as "created" to follow the Old English poetic usage of synonyms.

The word *eorðan* in 5b is a weak noun, which I have interpreted here as genitive singular, giving the translation "for the children of the Earth." This is the reading favored by Marsden, and it also nicely preserves the pattern of noun pairs beginning with a genitive in lines 1b, 2a, 3a, 3b, and 7b (Marsden 79). Another possibility is to treat *eorðan* as the parallel accusative object of *heofan* in line 6a, yielding the alternative reading "shaped the Earth for men and heaven as a roof." ✓

A similar construction is used in line 9a with *foldan*, another weak noun meaning "earth." Here I chose the translation "ground" rather than "earth" simply to copy Cædmon's usage of synonymous words for the same concept. Of all the half-lines containing noun pairs, this is the only one that does not start with a genitive noun. Because the two words of 9a could have been exchanged without affecting the meter or alliteration of the poem, this order seems to be a deliberately chosen exception to a pattern. To translate *foldan* as something other than a genitive, the only logical alternative is accusative singular: "[arranged] a ground for men." If

foldan is instead genitive singular, *middangeard* must be the single object of the verb, giving “for the men of the ground,” parallel to *eorðan bearnum* in 5b. I also referenced the Biblical creation account in translating the second half of the poem. Bede praises the poet Cædmon for the pious quality of his songs, saying “he used to make fitting songs, those that pertained to piety and to virtuous behavior, so that whatever he learned of divine writings through scholars, that he brought forth after a short time in poetic language, adorned with the most sweetness and inspiration and in well-formed English speech.”³ It seems that Cædmon focused on translating Biblical accounts into vernacular poetry, and thus it is reasonable to compare his poetic output with the original source material. In Genesis, the creation of the world is described chronologically, with each element associated with a different day:

And God said, “Let there be a vault between the waters to separate water from water.” So God made the vault and separated the water under the vault from the water above it. And it was so. God called the vault “sky.” And there was evening, and there was morning—the second day. And God said, “Let the water under the sky be gathered to one place, and let dry ground appear.” And it was so. God called the dry ground “land,” and the gathered waters he called “seas.” And God saw that it was good. (New International Version Gen. 1.7-10)⁴

If, as Bede writes, Cædmon “then arose from that sleep, and had all that which he sang while sleeping firmly in his mind, and at once added to those words many words of song worthy of

³ The Old English translation of the Latin original reads: “he gewunade gerisenlice lēoð wyrcan, pā ðe tō ārfæstnisse belumpen, swā ðætte swā hwæt swā he of godcundum stafum þurh bōceras geleornode, pæt hē æfter medmiclum fæce in scopgereorde, mid pā mæstan swētnisse ond inbryrdnisse geglængde ond in Englisc gereorde wel geworht, forþbrōhte (Marsden 78).”

⁴ The Latin Vulgate Bible, the version commonly used in monasteries during the time Caedmon’s Hymn was composed, reads “dixit quoque Deus fiat firmamentum in medio aquarum et dividat aquas ab aquis et fecit Deus firmamentum divisitque aquas quae erant sub firmamento ab his quae erant super firmamentum et factum est ita vocavitque Deus firmamentum caelum et factum est vespere et mane dies secundus dixit vero Deus congregentur aquae quae sub caelo sunt in locum unum et appareat arida factumque est ita et vocavit Deus aridam terram congregationesque aquarum appellavit maria et vidit Deus quod esset bonum (Latin Vulgate Bible Gen. 1.7-10)”

God in the same manner,"⁵ it would be possible to imagine this segment of his poem describing the beginning of creation, with the rest being added afterwards. I chose to analyze grammatical ambiguities in a way that would create a chronological structure within the poem, with the heaven created before the earth. Some of the alternative translations I have outlined above would give a general description of creation instead of emphasizing the order in which it happened.

Cædmon employs repetition with variation throughout the poem, especially with his use of synonyms. Two epithets are repeated: *ece Drihten* is used in lines 4a and 8a, and *weard* occurs in the phrases *heofonrices weard* (1b) and *monncynnes weard* (7b). The poet to give these names special emphasis through structurally unnecessary repetition. Neither occurrence of *weard* is alliterative, and although *ece* is used for alliteration, any other word beginning with a vowel could have been chosen. These terms must have been chosen instead with a specific religious significance in mind.

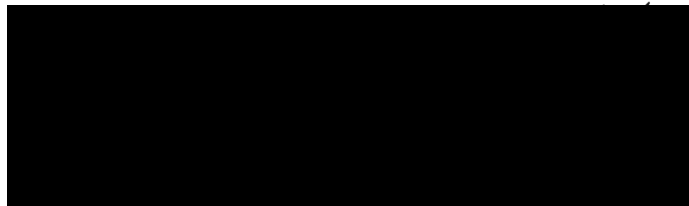
One possible explanation is that these terms emphasize certain characteristics of the Christian God unfamiliar to an audience newly converted from paganism. Norse sagas foretell the end of the world with Ragnarök, meaning "the destiny of the gods." Following a series of natural disasters, most of the gods, including Loki, Freyr, Tyr, Odin, and Thor, are killed in a terrible battle, and life is extinguished for thousands of years. (Peterich 84-86). The Christian conception of an eternal God must have seemed strange in contrast to the mortal, doomed gods in Germanic legends. Perhaps the image of the Christian God as an "eternal warlord" is stressed to emphasize his superiority to the pagan gods, especially Thor, the god of war.

⁵ "þā ārās hē from þæm slæpe ond eal þā þe hē slæpende song fæste in gemynde hæfde, ond þæm wordum sōna monig word in þæt ilce gemet Gode wyrðes tōgeþeodde (Marsden 81)."

The repetition of *weard* may also be significant. In Germanic mythology, the world is divided into nine kingdoms. The gods inhabit one of the heavenly kingdoms, Asgard, and humans live in Midgard, "Middle-earth." These heavenly and earthly realms are connected by a rainbow bridge guarded by the god Heimdall, which only the gods can cross (Peterich 21-22). In contrast, Cædmon's Hymn refers to God as the guardian of both "mankind" and "the heavenly kingdom." This parallelism removes some of the distance between God and the Christian worshipper. The term *middangeard* in line 7a draws on the traditional pagan view of creation. By immediately following this reference with the second *weard* phrase, "guardian of mankind," the poem contrasts the aloofness of the pagan gods with a Christian god who is personally involved in the lives of men.

Cædmon's Hymn is a carefully crafted poem in the Germanic tradition, and its use of heroic epithets, synonyms, and alliteration is typical of Old English poetry. It is also distinctive in two main ways: it is the oldest surviving Old English poem, and one of the few whose author is known. Any analysis of the work must take these factors into account. Despite much scholarly attention, its importance to the Old English poetic canon and the Anglo-Saxon church remains an open question, making this poem a challenge to translate and interpret.

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