

Károli Gáspár University, Budapest: spring term 2015

MEDIAEVAL LITERATURE (BAN 2363 e/f)

(Angol-amerikai irodalomtörténeti áttekintés 1.1: a középkor és a reneszánsz)

seminars on Fridays at 1200-1330 and 1400-1530

syllabus: <http://www.richardmajor.com/teaching/Karoli/BAN2363.doc>

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Seminar II, February 27: The beginnings of English literature



1. Quiz

2. Recap on last week

3. Presentation by András (1200) and Márton (1400): Who was Cædmon?

4. Bede, *Ecclesiastical History of the English Nation* (731)

In hujus monasterio abbatissae fuit frater quidam divina gratia specialiter insignis, quia carmina religioni et pietati apta facere solebat; ita ut quicquid ex divinis literis per interpretes disceret, hoc ipse post pusillum verbis poeticis maxima

suavitate et compunctione compositis, in sua, id est, Anglorum lingua proferret....

There was in this abbess's monastery [that is, the 'double' monastery at Whitby of the abbess St Hilda] a certain brother, particularly remarkable for the grace of God, who was wont to make pious and religious verses, so that whatever was interpreted to him out of Scripture, he soon after put the same into poetical expressions of much sweetness and humility, in English, which was his native language. By his verses the minds of many were often excited to despise the world, and to aspire to heaven. Others after him attempted, in the English nation, to compose religious poems, but none could ever compare with him, for he did not learn the art of poetry from men, but from God; for which reason he never could compose any trivial or vain poem, but only those which relate to religion suited his religious tongue; for having lived in a secular habit till he was well advanced in years, he had never learned anything of versifying; for which reason being sometimes at entertainments, when it was agreed for the sake of mirth that all present should sing in their turns, when he saw the instrument come towards him, he rose up from table and returned home.

Having done so at a certain time, and gone out of the house where the entertainment was, to the stable, where he had to take care of the horses that night, he there composed himself to rest at the proper time; a person appeared to him in his sleep, and saluting him by his name, said, "Caedmon, sing some song to me."



He answered, "I cannot sing; for that was the reason why I left the entertainment, and retired to this place because I could not sing." The other who talked to him, replied, "However, you shall sing." "What shall I sing?" rejoined he. "Sing the beginning of created beings," said the other. Hereupon he presently began to sing verses to the praise of God, which he had never heard, the purport whereof was thus: *We are now to praise the Maker of the heavenly kingdom, the power of the Creator and his counsel, the deeds of the Father of glory. How He, being the eternal God, became the author of all miracles, who first, as almighty preserver of the human race, created heaven for the sons of men as the roof of the house, and next the earth.* This is the sense, but not the words in order as he sang them in his sleep; for verses, though never so well composed, cannot be literally translated out of one language into another, without losing much of their beauty and loftiness. Awaking from his sleep, he remembered all that he had sung in his dream, and soon added much more to the same effect in verse worthy of the Deity.

In the morning he came to the steward, his superior, and having acquainted him with the gift he had received, was conducted to the abbess, by whom he was ordered, in the presence of many learned men, to tell his dream, and repeat the verses, that they might all give their judgment what it was, and whence his verse proceeded. They all concluded, that heavenly grace had been conferred on him by our Lord. They expounded to him a passage in holy writ, either historical, or doctrinal, ordering him, if he could, to put the same into verse. Having undertaken it, he went away, and returning the next morning, gave it to them composed in most excellent verse; whereupon the abbess, embracing the grace of God in the man, instructed him to quit the secular habit, and take upon him the monastic life; which being accordingly done, she associated him to the rest of the brethren in her monastery, and ordered that he should be taught the whole series of sacred history. Thus Caedmon, keeping in mind all he heard, and as it were chewing the cud, converted the same into most harmonious verse; and sweetly repeating the same, made his masters in their turn his hearers. He sang the creation of the world, the origin of man, and all the history of Genesis; and made many verses on the departure of the children of Israel out of Egypt, and their entering into the land of promise, with many other histories from holy writ; the incarnation, passion, resurrection of our Lord, and his ascension into heaven; the coming of the Holy Ghost, and the preaching of the apostles; also the terror of future judgment, the horror of the pains of hell, and the delights of heaven; besides many more about the Divine benefits and judgments, by which he endeavoured to turn away all men from the love of vice, and to excite in them the love of, and application to, good actions; for he was a very religious man, humbly submissive to regular discipline, but full of zeal against those who behaved themselves otherwise; for which reason he ended his life happily.



5. Cædmon's Hymn (c. 680)

Nu sculon herigean heofonrices weard,
Now must we praise heaven's kingdom's guardian
 metodes meahte and his modgeþanc,
Of the Lord the power and his mind-plans
 weorc wuldorfæder, swa he wundra gehwæs,
work of the Glory-Father, as he of marvels each,
 ece drihten, or onstealde.
The eternal Lord, the beginning established.
 He ærest sceop eorðan bearnum
He first created of earth for the sons
 heofon to hrofe, halig scyppend;
Heaven as a roof, the Holy Creator.
 þa middangeard moncynnes weard,
Then the middle-enclosure of mankind the Protector
 ece drihten, æfter teode
The eternal Lord, thereafter made
 firum foldan, frea ælmihtig.
For men, earth the Lord almighty.



Below, a paraphrase of Genesis by Cædmon (or a close follower) from the 'Cædmon MS' (Codex Junius 11), now in the Bodleian Library in Oxford.

No hpæðre ælmihtig ealra polde Adame & Euan
 arna ofteon, fæder æt frymðe, þeah þe hie him from
 spice, ac he him to frofre let hpæðere forð þesan
 hyrstedne hrof halgum tunglum & him grundpe-
 lan ginne sealde; het þam sinhipum sæs & eorðan
 tuddorteondra teohha gehpilcre to þoruldnytte
 pæstmas fedan. Gesæton þa æfter synne sorgful-
 re land, eard & eðyl unspedigra fremena gehpilcre
 þonne se frumstol pæs þe hie æfter dæde of adrif-
 en þurdon. Ongunnon hie þa be godes hæse bearn
 astrianan, sþa him metod bebed. Adames & Euan
 aforan pæron freolicu tþa frumbearn cenned,
 Cain & Abel. Us cyðað bec, hu þa dædfruman duge-
 þa stryndon, pelan & piste, pillgebroador.

No hpæðre ælmihtig ealra polde. adame & euan.
 arna ofteon. fæder æt frymðe. þeah þe he him from
 spice. ac he him to frofre. let hpæðere forð þesan.
 hyrstedne hrof halgum tunglum. & him grundpe-
 lan ginne sealde. het þam sinhipum sæs & eorðan
 tuddorteondra teohha gehpilcre to þoruldnytte.
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 Cain & Abel. Us cyðað bec. hu þa dædfruman duge-
 þa stryndon. pelan & piste. pillgebroador.

Yet the Almighty Father would not take away from Adam and from Eve, at once, all goodly things, though He withdrew His favour from them. But for their comfort He left the sky above them adorned with shining stars, gave them wide-stretching fields, and bade the earth and sea and all their teeming multitudes to bring forth fruits to serve man's earthly need. After their sin they dwelt in a realm more sorrowful, a home and native land less rich in all good things than was their first abode, wherefrom He drove them out after their sin. Then, according to the word of God, Adam and Eve begat children, as God had bidden. To them were born two goodly sons, Abel and Cain: the books tell us how these brothers, first of toilers, gained wealth and goods and store of food.



6. The Vikings or Norsemen fell upon the British Isles in 793, and continued to raid and conquer until their final repulse in 1066. Their highpoint was in the late ninth century, when they wiped out six of the seven English kingdoms, creating the **Danelaw** over much of the island. They were driven out by the young scholar-warrior

7. Alfred (Ælfræd) the Great (849 – 26 October 899), King of Wessex from 871.

After his victories, Alfred, who was rebuilding England, translated the *Liber Pastoralis Curae* of Pope St Gregory, adding this preface:

Ælfred kyning hateð gretan Wærferð biscep his wordum luflice & freondlice; & ðe cyðan hate ðæt me com swiðe oft on gemynd, hwelce wiotan iu wæron giوند Angelcynn, ægðer ge godcundra hada ge woruldcundra; & hu gesæligica tida ða wæron giوند Angelcynn

King Alfred greets bishop Wærferth with his words lovingly and with friendship; and I let it be known to thee that it has very often come into my mind, what wise men there formerly were throughout England, both of sacred and secular orders; and how happy times there were then throughout England; and how the kings who had power over the nation in those days obeyed God and his ministers; and they preserved peace, morality,

and order at home, and at the same time enlarged their territory abroad; and how they prospered both with war and with wisdom; and also the sacred orders how zealous they were both in teaching and learning, and in all the services they owed to God; and how foreigners came to this land in search of wisdom and instruction, and how we should now have to get them from abroad if we were to have them. So general was its decay in England that there were very few on this side of the Humber who could understand their rituals in English, or translate a letter from Latin into English; and I believe that there were not many beyond the Humber. There were so few of them that I cannot remember a single one south of the Thames when I came to the throne. Thanks be to God Almighty that we have any teachers among us now. And therefore I command thee to do as I believe thou art willing, to disengage thyself from worldly matters as often as thou canst, that thou mayest apply the wisdom which God has given thee wherever thou canst. Consider what punishments would come upon us on account of this world, if we neither loved it (wisdom) ourselves nor suffered other men to obtain it: we should love the name only of Christian, and very few of the virtues.

When I considered all this I remembered also how I saw, before it had been all ravaged and burnt, how the churches throughout the whole of England stood filled with treasures and books, and there was also a great multitude of God's servants, but they had very little knowledge of the books, for they could not understand anything of them, because they were not written in their own language

