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A literary analysis of Caedmon's Hymn: the Leningrad manuscript in Modern English

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ABSTRACT
Caedmon's hymn is an Old English poem written by a Northumbrian shepherd who had likely received the inspiration from the Christian God. It is considered as vernacular poetry, it was initially written in the Northumbrian dialect and, later on, transmitted into other translated versions. This brief paper is a literary analysis of the Leningrad version of the hymn with the aim to highlight stylistic features, use of language, themes, and value of the composition with reference to the contributions of several experts of the poem.

Keywords: *Caedmon's hymn, Christianity, God, vernacular, Old English*

INTRODUCTION

Caedmon's hymn is the first poetic composition to be known of Old English literature. An account of this hymn is given by the Venerable Bede, a monk, in his *Ecclesiastical History of the English People* [8] in which he refers of a herdsman called Caedmon who lived in Streonæshalch, (the older name for Whitby) in a period of time between 600-670 CE. According to Bede, Caedmon was an illiterate and a shy person who avoided to sing in public during feasts at the Hall, but one night something uncommon and extraordinary happened to him: he had a dream and, thereafter, could sing about the creation of heaven and earth thanks to a divine inspiration. At first those who knew him were skeptical about the verses he pronounced and, therefore, he was conducted to the abbess of the monastery of Whitby, Hilda, who after examining the situation and consulting some scholars, judged that the event was a miracle and that Caedmon had certainly been inspired by their Christian God. The hymn is an example of vernacular poetry, a literary work that used common spoken language. It was written first in Northumbrian and then translated in Latin by Bede in his *Historia Ecclesiastica*. There are different living translations of the poem which were made at the time of the Anglo-Saxons and in the following centuries, but all these renderings generated perplexities about how the original text was really produced. An Italian scholar, Roberta Bassi, affirms that Bede's version of the poem was a translation of the meaning of the composition rather than a literal work on the original text and highlights the existence of several translations in Old English of the manuscript, thus creating confusion about the originality of the hymn. [1] In her analysis, she also mentions Daniel Paul O'Donnell's, an expert of the hymn who, in his book on Caedmon's hymn, suggests the existence of eight translations of the poem.

DISCUSSION: ANALYSIS OF THE HYMN

The version of the hymn analyzed in this paper is the Leningrad manuscript in Modern English [9]:

> *Now let us praise the Guardian of the Kingdom of Heaven*
> *the might of the Creator and the thought of his mind,*
> *the work of the glorious Father, how He, the eternal Lord*
> *established the beginning of every wonder.*
> *For the sons of men, He, the Holy Creator*
> *first made heaven as a roof, then the*
> *Keeper of mankind, the eternal Lord*
> *God Almighty afterwards made the middle world*
> *the earth, for men.*

The stylistic features of the above text can be analyzed with respect to language, structure, alliteration, rhyme, stresses, genre, similes and variation. This version of the poem is written in Modern English, it is made of nine lines, there are no line-breaks, no rhymes, no alliteration, no relevant stresses differently from what we can detect in the Old English text. The language used is simple, the structure of the sentences follows the sequence 'subject-verb-object', there are commas in the text evidently used to create pauses, it contains religious terms and words of reverence and praise to God. The structure of the hymn resembles that of a psalm, a religious composition of the Book of Psalms that, in turn,

belongs to the Christian Old Testament. The term psalm derives from the Greek word ψαλμοί *psalmoi* which means 'instrumental music' and 'words accompanying the music'[2].

In poetry the genre is the way to classify a poem according to its style or subject matter. There are elegies, epic poems as well as dramatic and narrative poetry. Caedmon's hymn is a short poem composed in honour to God and talks about the existence of a common Father who created heaven and earth for mankind. It represents an exhortation to live a Christian life and can, then, be considered as a religious composition.

Variation is a technique used in poetry to reformulate in different words and with more emphasis the same concept. Its function is that of embellishing and highlighting important parts of the text. This technique is also defined by Niles et al. as "*a double or multiple statement of the same basic concept in different words*". The use of variation is very frequent and redundant in Caedmon's hymn and it reflects a typical feature of Old Germanic poetry and, therefore, reproduces the aesthetics of an oral poetic performance as suggested by Francis Magoun in his article "*Bede's Story of Caedmon: The Case of an Anglo-Saxon Oral Singer*". [3] Examples of variation in the text are the eight appellations that the author gives to God who is described as "*the Guardian*", "*the Creator*", "*the Glorious Father*", "*the eternal Lord*" (repeated twice)*, "the Holy Creator", "the Keeper of mankind"* and *"God Almighty"*.

A simile is a comparison between two things by means of a connecting word such as *like*, *as* and *so* and usually creates the personification of an inanimate object. In his hymn, Caedmon makes an analogy between heaven and roof when he writes that "*...He...first made heaven as a roof*". The use of a simile here is symbolical and it then elicits human's imagination and creates a feeling of safety and warmth. God is above our heads and gives shelter and repair to us but we can detect here also an implicit comparison to the mead-hall, a place where warriors and thanes of the Anglo-Saxons used to gather together especially at night, thus representing a welcome, warm and safe environment.

Caedmon's hymn is an example of a composition made first orally which means that the author was able to make verses using the official poetic metre and, in this case, thanks to God's intervention, the composer could use formulas. In poetry a formula is a specific rhyming scheme or use of several syllables in each line while the process of transferring the spoken language to a written form is called '*oral-formulaic composition*'. With reference to this process, two scholars, Milman Parry and Albert Lord, affirmed that some features of Old English texts, like Caedmon's poem, resemble the Ancient Greek epics such as the Iliad and Odyssey but how Anglo-Saxon poetry was passed down through an oral tradition remains a subject of debate. In Parry's view, formulas were not the exceptional production of talented artists rather the traditional verses of singers that could be remembered and improvised very easily [4].

Caedmon is the first vernacular poet we know by name and his hymn has references to God by using words and terms of the heroic poetry. [5] Caedmon's ability to make the hymn and other poems that are included in the *Historia Ecclesiastica*, was a miracle and his writing skills were undoubtedly inspired by God with the final aim to change people's mind. The hymn differs from the usual theme of epic poems regarding battles, glorious deeds and victories over the evils of the period of the Anglo-Saxons and it also diverges from the elegiac compositions depicting conditions of loneliness, despair and deep sorrow. Here we are dealing with a 'dream song', a composition made with the help of a divine gift, to incite people to praise and worship the Christian God. In a time when Pope Gregory sent disciples and monks to England to convert people to Christianity and to fight pagan values and old ideologies, the hymn takes on a specific purpose: the Conversion of pagans. Its divine inspiration is made stronger by the fact that Caedmon was never able to compose any verse of song that did not deal with religion or that could have a vain and frivolous content.

CONCLUSION

To conclude, Caedmon's hymn is an example of a fusion of pagan and Christian themes with the scope to spread Christianity in a pagan society, as stated by Tiarna O' Sullivan [6]. In the poem, the connection between epic poems and religious compositions lies in the fact that God is considered as an 'hero' and, hence, is comparable to the heroic figures of the Anglo-Saxon period. Beowulf is a widely acknowledged hero of this historical epoch and is described as "*the mightiest man on earth*" in analogy to the "*God Almighty*" in Caedmon's composition. Beowulf and God are, then, both heroes and important characters of Old English literature and may have different roles and antithetical values but are both described as omnipotent. To reinforce O' Sullivan's comments is the statement made by another scholar [7], who affirms that the hymn shares aspects of both Latin and Germanic traditions and that elements of Latin literary and liturgical influence are evident in the text. A last reflection on Caedmon's hymn is the influence his work had on the literature of the following times, especially on the literary production of the last centuries. The concept of "*middle world*", in fact, appears in J.R.R. Tolkien's epic story 'The Lord of The Rings' as a tangible sign of the impact of the hymn on the culture and imagery of our time.

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