Cædmon's Hymn: a Modern English Translation of the Old English (Anglo-Saxon) Poem

"Cædmon's Hymn" was composed sometime between 658 and 680 AD and appears to be the oldest extant poem in the English language. According to the Venerable Bede (673-735), Cædmon was an illiterate herdsman who was given the gift of poetic composition by an angel. In the original poem, hardly a word is recognizable as English because Cædmon was writing in a somewhat anglicized form of ancient German. The word "England" harkens back to Angle-land; the Angles were a Germanic tribe, as were the Saxons and Jutes. Nevertheless, by Cædmon's time the foundations of English poetry were being laid, particularly in the areas of accentual meter and alliteration. Anglo-Saxon poets, called "scops," were considered to be "makers" (as in William Dunbar's poem "Lament for the Makaris"), and poetry was considered to have a divine origin, so Cædmon's poem may express a sort of affinity between the poet and his God.

Cædmon's Hymn (circa 658-680 AD)
loose translation by Michael R. Burch

Now let us honour heaven-kingdom's Guardian,
the might of the Architect and his mind-plans:
the work of the Glory-Father. First he, the Everlasting Lord,
established the foundation of wonders.
Then he, the Primeval Poet, created heaven as a roof
for the sons of men: Holy Creator,
Maker of mankind. Then he, the Eternal Entity,
afterwards made men middle-earth: Master Almighty!

As the word "hymn" in the title suggests, the originally lyric was probably mated with a melody, but the music has long been lost, if it ever existed. Still, the poem has been preserved in 19 different ancient manuscripts and in a Latin translation by Bede, so it appears to be authentic, and to have been popular and admired in its day.

Translator's Notes: "Cædmon's Hymn" is one of the oldest surviving examples of Anglo-Saxon alliterative verse. I have indicated the alliteration in my translation, with underscores:

Now let us honour heaven-kingdom's Guardian, [n, h, g, d]
the might of the Architect and his mind-plans, [m, a, t]
the work of the Glory-Father. First he, the Everlasting Lord, [g, f, l]
established the foundation of wonders. [d, e, s]
Then he, the Primeval Poet, created heaven as a roof [e, a, p]
for the sons of men, Holy Creator, [e, s, r]
Maker of mankind! Then he, the Eternal Entity, [m, n, e]
afterwards made men middle-earth: Master Almighty! [m, t, r]

In defense of my interpretation that Caedmon may have regarded God as a fellow Poet-Creator, please let me point out that the original poem employs the words *scop* and *haleg scepen*. Anglo-Saxon poets were called *scops*. The term *haleg scepen* seems to mean something like "Holy Poet" or "Holy Creator/Maker" because poets were considered to be creators and makers. Also the verb *tīadæ* has been said to mean something like "creatively adorned." So I don't think it's that much of a stretch to suggest that a Christian poet may have seen his small act of creation as an imitation of the far greater acts of creation of his Heavenly Father.

As in the original poem, each line of my translation has a caesura: a brief pause denoted by white space. In each line, there are at least three repeated vowel/consonant sounds. This alliteration gives alliterative verse its name. The original poem is also accentual verse, in that each line has four strong stresses, and the less-stressed syllables are not counted as they are in most other forms of English meter (such as iambic pentameter). My translation is not completely faithful to the original rules. For instance, I have employed a considerable amount of internal alliteration (which gives me more flexibility in the words I can employ). And some of my lines contain more than four stresses, although I think there are still four dominant stresses per line. For instance, in the first line: HONour, HEAVen, KINGdom's GUARDian. In the second line: MIGHT, ARCHitect, MIND-PLANS. And so on. I don't think the technique is all-important. The main questions are whether the meaning is clear, and whether the words please the ear. Only you, the reader, can decide that, and you don't need a high-falutin' critic to tell you what you like!

I believe the poem is very "biblical" in its vision of creation. According to the Bible, the earth was set on an immovable foundation by the hand of God. (Little did the

ancient writers know that the earth is actually a spinning globe whizzing through space at phenomenal speeds!) We see this foundation in line four. Next, in line five, we see the hand of God creating the heavens above, where according to the Bible he then set the sun, moon and stars in place. (The ancient writers again got things wrong, saying that the earth existed first, in darkness, and that the sun, moon and stars were created later; we now know that the earth's heavier elements were created in the hearts of stars, so the stars existed long before the earth. The writers of Genesis even said that plants grew before the sun was formed, but of course they had never heard of photosynthesis.) The poem's last line sounds a bit more Germanic or Norse to me, since Middle Earth is a concept we hear in tales of Odin and Thor (and later in the works of J. R. R. Tolkien). But that makes sense because when Saint Augustine of Canterbury became the first Christian missionary to evangelize native Britons, I believe it was the policy of the Roman Catholic Church to incorporate local beliefs into the practice of Christianity. For instance, because sun gods were worshiped in Rome, the Sabbath day became Sun-day, and the birth of Christ became December the 25th (the day the winter sun is "resurrected" and the days begin to lengthen, heralding spring). So in northern climes we should expect to see some "fusion" of Norse and Germanic myths with Christianity. For instance, there was never a mention of "hell" in the Hebrew Bible; the Hebrew language did not even have a word that meant "hell" at the time the books of the Old Testament were written. The closest Hebrew word, *Sheol,* clearly means "the grave" and everyone went there when they died, good and bad. The Greek word *Hades* also means the grave, and likewise everyone went there when they died. *Hades* had heavenly regions like the Elysian Fields and Blessed Isles and thus was obviously not hell! "Hell" is a Norse term. If this subject interests you—for instance if someone has said you are in danger of "hell" and need to be "saved" from it—you many want to read my simple, logical proof that There Is No Hell in the Bible.

The original Old English/Anglo-Saxon poem and a word-by-word literal translation:

Nū scylun hergan hefaenrīcaes Uard,
Now let's honor heaven's Guardian

metudæs maecti end his mōdgidanc,
(the) measurer's might and his mode/method to-be-thanked-for/praised

uerc Uuldurfadur, suē hē uundra gihwaes,
(the) work (of the) Glory-Father and his wonders praiseworthy (which)

ēci dryctin ōr āstelidæ
(the) Eternal Lord established in the beginning.

hē ǣrist scōp aelda barnum
He first (poetically) created (for) people-children/the sons of men

heben til hrōfe, hāleg scepen.
heaven as roof (our) holy creator/poet!

Thā middungeard moncynnæs Uard,
Then middle-earth mankind's Guardian

eci Dryctin, æfter tīadæ
(our) eternal Lord afterwards creatively adorned (with)

firum foldu, Frēa allmectig.
firm earth (our) Father almighty!

Here's a slightly less literal translation that still seems faithful to the original poem:

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loose translation by Michael R. Burch

Humbly let us honour heaven-kingdom's Guardian,
the Measurer's might and his mind-plans:
the goals of the Glory-Father. First he, the Eternal Lord,
eminently established earth's fearful foundations.
Then he, the First Scop, hoisted heaven as a roof
for the sons of men: Holy Creator,
Maker of mankind. Then he, the Ever-Living Lord,
afterwards made men middle-earth: Master Almighty!