

Three medieval poems transcribed into modern verse form and translated into Modern English:

- (1) “CÆDMON’S HYMN” ca. 750 (OLD ENGLISH)¹—the first known English poet and poem.

Nu sculon herian heofon-rices weard,
meotodes meahta and his mod-geþanc,
weorc wuldor-fæder, swa he wundra gehwæs,
ece drihten, or onstealde.

5 He ærest scop ielda bearnum
heofon to hrofe, halig scieppend;
þa middan-gearð mann-cynnes weard,
ece drihten, æfter teode--
firum foldan frea ælmihtig.

(Now we must praise the keeper of the heavenly kingdom
The power of the Measurer and his mind-thoughts,
The work of the glory-father; as he, each of wonders,
the eternal Lord, established from the beginning.

5 He first shaped, for the children of men,
Heaven as a roof, the Holy Shaper,
Then middle-earth, man-kind’s Guardian,
The eternal Lord, afterwards created,
The earth for men, the Lord Almighty.)

- (2) BEOWULF (LINES 1-11) ca. 1000 (OLD ENGLISH)²—the first full-scale masterpiece in English.

HWÆT, WE GAR-Dena in geardagum,
þeodcyninga þrym gefrunon,
hu ða æþelingas ellen fremedon.

Oft Scyld Scefing sceaþena þreatum,
5 monegum mægþum meodosetla ofteah,
egsode eorlas, syððan ærest wearð
feasceaft funden. He þæs frofre gebad,
weox under wolcnum weorðmyndum þah,
oð þæt him æghwylc ymbsittendra
10 ofer hronrade hyran scolde,
gomban gylðan. Ðæt wæs god cyning!

(LISTEN! WE have heard of the glory in bygone days
of the folk-kings of the SPEAR-DANES,
how those noble lords did lofty deeds.

Often Scyld Scefing seized the mead-benches
5 from many tribes, troops of enemies,
struck fear into earls. Though he first was
found a waif, he awaited solace for that---
He grew under heaven and prospered in honor
until every one of the encircling nations
10 over the wale’s-riding had to obey him,
grant him tribute. That was a good king!)

¹ This version of “Caedmon’s Hymn” is adapted from John C. Pope’s Seven Old English Poems, 2nd ed. (New York: Norton, 1981), page 4. All capital letters added by Pope have been removed, though Pope’s punctuation has been maintained.

² Lines from Beowulf adapted from Klaeber’s Beowulf and the Fight at Finnsburg, ed. R.D. Fulk, Robert E. Bjork, and John D. Niles (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008), page 3, with superscript dots omitted. It is important to note that punctuation and capitalization in all but line 1 has been added by the editors. The accompanying translation is by Roy Liuzza, Beowulf: A New Verse Translation (Toronto: U. of Toronto Press, 2000), page 53. This is the best recent translation; it also contains excellent introductory notes.

(3) THE CANTERBURY TALES “GENERAL PROLOGUE” (1-18) ca 1388-92 (MIDDLE ENGLISH)³

--by the “Father of English poetry,” Geoffrey Chaucer

Whan that April with his shoures soote
The droghte of March hath perced to the roote,
And bathed every veyne in swich licour
Of which vertu engendred is the flour;
5 Whan Zephirus eek with his sweete breeth
Inspired hath in every holt and heeth
The tendre croppes, and the yonge sonne
Hath in the Ram his half cours yronne,
And smale foweles maken melodye,
10 That slepen al the nyght with open ye
(so priketh hem Nature in hir corages);
Thanne longen folk to goon on pilgrimages,
And palmeres for to seken straunge strondes,
To ferne halwes, kowthe in sondry londes;
15 And specially from every shires ende
Of Engelond to Caunterbury they wende,
The hooly blisful martir for to seke,
That hem hath holpen whan that they were seeke.

(When in April when the sweet showers fall
And pierce the drought of March to the root, and all
The veins are bathed in liquor of such power
As brings about the engendering of the flower,
5 When also Zephyrus with his sweet breath
Exhales an air in every grove and heath
Upon the tender shoots and the young sun
His half-course in the sign of the Ram has run,
And the small fowl are making melody
10 That sleep away the night with open eye
(so Nature pricks them and their heart engages)
Then people long to go on pilgrimages
And palmers long to see the stranger strands
Of far-off saints, hallowed in sundry lands,
15 And specially, in from every shire's end
Of England, down to Canterbury they wend
To seek the holy blissful martyr, quick
To give his help to them when they were sick.)

³Taken from The Riverside Chaucer, ed. Larry Benson (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1987), page 23. Benson's edition is authoritative. The translation comes from Nevill Coghill, The Canterbury Tales (London: Penguin, 1977), 3. This is a highly readable translation.

My talk this morning focuses on the nature of English poetry when it was just beginning in the middle ages. I will discuss the rules, themes, and modes of presentation at three different periods, on my way to the following specific themes:

- 1) The shift of poetry from primarily oral to primarily literate (written) forms;
- 2) Consequent change in structural rules of versification and presentational contexts (**including punctuation**) of English poetry;
- 3) Consequent growing notions of authority (ownership of ideas) and creativity in relation to English poetry;
- 4) And the effects on poetry in English of the influence of three different cultures (Latin/Christian, Old Norse/Scandinavian, and Anglo-Norman/French).