
Historical Sources of the Middle English Verse *Life of St. Æthelthryth*

Historical source study of the last text in the composite manuscript London, BL Cotton Faustina B.iii can shed light on the transmission and use of chronicle texts and their translations in late medieval England. The author of the Middle English verse *Life of St. Æthelthryth* used John Trevisa's English translation of Ranulf Higden's *Polychronicon* rather than the Latin text as the primary source for the historical section of the *Life* (lines 1–110).

The *Life of St. Æthelthryth* (nIMEV 3090) is not well known in literary, historical, or hagiographical studies; scholars occasionally remark on it in relation to the much longer poem that precedes it in the manuscript, the 5,000-line *Wilton Chronicle* (nIMEV 243), which provides an overview of the history of Wilton Abbey before detailing the life and posthumous miracles of St. Edith of Wilton (d. 984), the daughter of King Edgar (r. 959–975). The 1,100-line *Life of St. Æthelthryth* tells of St. Æthelthryth of Ely (d. 679), an East Anglian princess who is celebrated for preserving her virginity through two marriages before becoming abbess at Ely.¹ A list of “founders” of the abbey, both real and desired, divides the two poems, neither of which has been edited since the 1880s (Horstmann, *Editha*; Horstmann, “Vita”; Black).²

Latin *vitae* of Saints Edith and Æthelthryth provide the primary source material (Wilmart; Blake; Love). Both poems begin not with the *vitae* proper, however, but with national histories, placing the saints and their abbeys prominently within the development of the English nation and the English church. Felice Lifshitz refers to these texts in her discussion of the textual and cultural relationships between hagiography and nationalism. Similarly, the historical section of the *Wilton Chronicle* has been discussed recently by W. F. Nijenhuis, who argues that the *Chronicle* should be regarded as a legitimate source of historical knowledge, rather than as superstition or folklore (392).

The poet (and/or scribe) of the *Wilton Chronicle* and the *Life of St. Æthelthryth* conveniently lists the poems' sources in the margins of the texts as well as in the list of abbey founders that divides the two poems in the manuscript. Most frequently cited is Ranulph Higden's *Polychronicon*, cited in the margins as *Cronica Cistrensis*. Nijenhuis argues that the poet simply copied most of the source list directly from the *Polychronicon*, and that “it is doubtful whether the author ever consulted the works in question” other than Henricus Crompe's (now lost) history of West Saxon monasticism, William of Malmesbury's *Gesta Regum Anglorum* and *Gesta Pontificum Anglorum*, and the *Polychronicon* itself (372n11 and n13). Examination of these sources also shows that the poet used the English

translation rather than the original Latin text of the *Polychronicon*, at least in composition of the beginning of the *Life of St. Æthelthryth*.

The initial 110 lines of the *Life of St. Æthelthryth* describe the seven early Anglo-Saxon kingdoms to show how the founding of Ely was tied into the East Anglian and Northumbrian royal houses; here, history is a glorification and enhancement of Ely's and Æthelthryth's sanctity. Much of these opening lines is adapted almost word for word from book 1, chapter 51, of John Trevisa's English translation of book 1 of Higden's *Polychronicon*. The poet relied on Trevisa most explicitly for the precise geographical descriptions included in these introductory lines; information about kings or battles is included as well but much more freely adapted. For example, Trevisa's version states that "Þe þridde kyngdom was of Estsaxon, and hadde in þe est side þe see, and in þe west þe contray of Londoun, in þe souþ Temse, in þe north Sopfolk" (Babington and Lumby 2:101). The *Life* tells us that:

þe kyngdam of Estsex þe thrydde was þo [. . .] .
 Upon þe est syde þis kyngdam hadde þe see,
 Upon þe west syde the contrey of London, y wys,
 upon the sowthe syde þe water of Temse hadde he,
 upon þe northe syde, Sowthefolke, þe story saythe þis. (33, 37–40)

The descriptions of the boundaries of Wessex, Mercia, and Northumberland are similarly lifted almost word for word from the English *Polychronicon*; the poet adds some phrasing to maintain the poem's rhyme scheme, but much of the vocabulary is identical. Compare, for example:

[. . .] þe kyngdom of Norþhumberlond. Þe meres and þe merkes þerof were by west and by est þe see of oceane, by souþ þe ryuer of Humber, and so downward toward þe west by the endes of þe schires of Notyngham and of Derby anon to the ryuere of Merce, and by norþe þe Scottische see. (Babington and Lumby 2:105–07)

and

Þe kyndam of Northumbrelondys þe sixste kyndam was,
 þe whiche upon þe Est syde and also upon þe west syde had þe sowthe se,
 and upon þe sowth side of Humbre hit last doune a gret space
 By þe hendys of Derbyshyre and Notyngham shyre to þe water of Mercye,
 and upon þe north syde þe mere þerof y streyzzxt ys
 Evene in to þe Scottysshe grete se. (*Life* 81–86)

One crucial difference from the *Polychronicon* is that the *Life* poet moves East Anglia from its position as the fourth kingdom in Higden's list to the seventh place, so to build dramatically to the place of Æthelthryth's birth. The coincidence in phrasing for all of the geographical descriptions, however, is substantial enough that it is safe to postulate that the poet used

a copy of Trevisa's English version rather than or in addition to Higden's Latin while composing the *Life*.

The *Wilton Chronicle* relies on the *Polychronicon* as well for much of its first 1,000 lines, although the verbal correspondence is not as sure as that of the *Life* to Trevisa's translation. For example, Trevisa's version of the battle of Ashdown is relatively brief (*Polychronicon* V.33):

Englisshe men were i-mooved, and arrayed a bataylle þe fourþe day þer-after uppon Aschedoun. Pere Aluredus was i-dryve for grete nede to come to þe batayle to fore his broþer þe kyng, þat herde a masse þat tyme; þe whiche kyng his prayers to God þat day were moche worthy. For þeyzxx þe Danes hadde i-take þe hizxxer place of þe hille, Cristen men com from þe foot of þe hille upward azxxenst hem, and slouzxx Osrik kyng of Danes, and fyve of his dukes, and meny þowsandes of enemyes, and chasede þere oþere al day anon to þe Redyng. (Babington and Lumby 6: 349)

In contrast, the much longer narrative of the *Wilton Chronicle* (lines 259–307) includes trumpets, elements of suspense as the English falter while the king is at the church, heroic description of King Ethelred's last-minute entry into the battle, and moral reflection on the efficacy of hearing the entire mass before entering into combat.

The poet's use of Trevisa's translation in the introductory section of the *Life* clarifies the speed of dissemination of Trevisa's text. Higden compiled his *Polychronicon* in the second quarter of the fourteenth century at St. Werburgh's, Chester; Trevisa made his translation in the late 1380s when he was chaplain to Lord Berkeley (Waldron). By ca.1420, the date of the composition of the *Life*, the poet had access to a copy of Trevisa's work and possibly to Higden's Latin version as well. At seventy miles apart, Wilton and Berkeley are neighbors, of sorts; their geographical proximity would make an exchange of texts relatively easy. This sure connection between the *Life* and the English version of the *Polychronicon* raises interesting questions about the possible contents of Wilton Abbey's library, about the travel of manuscripts and poets, and about the readerly habits and literary desires of the nuns of Wilton Abbey in the early fifteenth century.

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NOTES

1. Æthelthryth (the Old English version of her name) is sometimes known as Etheldreda or Audrey (Middle and Modern English versions of her name). There is another Middle English verse life of St. Æthelthryth in the *South-East Legendary* (soon to be edited by Richard Hamer for the Early English Text Society) and an early Modern English version printed by Pynson in 1521 as part of Bradshaw's *Life of St. Werburg* (see Severs 584).

2. I am currently editing both poems, and all textual quotations are from the forthcoming edition.

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Satan and Briareos in Vida’s *Christiad* and Milton’s *Paradise Lost*

In *Paradise Lost* (1667 and 1674), Milton describes the fallen Satan as being

in bulk as huge
 As whom the Fables name of monstrous size,
 Titanian, or Earth-born, that warr’d on Jove,
 Briareos or Typhon, whom the Den
 By ancient Tarsus held, or that Sea-beast
 Leviathan, which God of all his works
 Created hugest that swim th’ Ocean stream (PL 1.196–202, emphasis in original).¹

While Milton’s epic simile has elicited considerable critical attention, his commentators have apparently disregarded Marco Girolamo Vida’s