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Kirjoittanut Seppo Heikkinen

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FM Seppo Heikkisen latinan kielen alaan liittyvä väitös “The Christianisation of Latin Metre – A Study of Bede’s De arte metrica” tarkastettiin 21.3.2012 Helsingin yliopistossa. Vastaväittäjänä toimi professori Andy Orchard (University of Toronto) ja kustoksena professori Olli Salomies. Väitöskirja on luettavissa osoitteessa <https://helda.helsinki.fi/handle/10138/30099>.

Mr Custos, Mr Opponent, Ladies and Gentlemen,

The purpose of my thesis is to examine the several ways in which the Venerable Bede’s De arte metrica both transmitted and transformed the cultural heritage of Latin poetry to the medieval audience as the author attempted to create a handbook on Latin verse that was suitable for monastic scholarship and to formulate a clear-cut norm for Christian poetry.

On the surface, Bede’s De arte metrica, like any guidebook of a detailed and technical nature, may seem rather bland and unexciting, and this, indeed, is how many generations of modern scholars have viewed it. The obvious reason for this is that, at least superficially, it seems to follow both the wording and content of the previous treatises on metre that came about in late antiquity, a starting point that may seem little less than depressing: Late Latin grammarians are almost notorious for their sheep-like following of their predecessors, and where they do depart from their example, the results are often highly idiosyncratic, or, to put it in plain English, very silly. As Bede has been viewed as a late exponent of this tradition, his originality has tended to be underrated. What may be a credit to Bede’s ethos but is misleading for anyone who studies his work, he does not blow his own trumpet. His original insights are frequently offered in almost, but not quite, the same words as his sources use: consequently, one must keep a close eye on how he manipulated his sources, what he deemed worthy of direct quotation but also on what he felt necessary to add or to leave out. As in all discourse, one word often makes a world of difference and, according to my observation, Bede was an accomplished virtuoso of rephrasing.

Bede’s contribution to the teaching and analysis of verse took place on many levels. Firstly, he integrated the presentation of syllable lengths into his presentation of poetic metres, a necessary procedure, as Bede taught and wrote in eighth-century Northumbria for non-native Latin speakers. The classical poetic metres with which Bede still primarily deals are based on the alternation of long and short syllables, but, by late antiquity, even native speakers of Latin had lost the ear for syllable lengths and had to rely on written sources to learn them. Even Saint Augustine confessed in his De musica (this is not one of his better-known confessions): “quae syllaba producenda vel corripienda sit, omnino nescio” (“I do not in the least know which syllables should be long or which ones short”). We may cite the opening of Vergil’s Aeneid as an example: “Arma virumque cano.” Now, neither arma nor virumque was a problem even for a medieval speaker, but cano is a different matter: the metre requires that it should have a short a and a long o (cănō), otherwise the rhythm falls apart, or “komppi kääntyy”, to put it in colloquial musicians’ Finnish. However, the way a medieval speaker, or, indeed, a modern Italian, would naturally pronounce it is cănō, making the metre all but unrecognisable. To address this

problem, Bede integrated syllable prosody into his presentation of metrics in general, which became the prevailing practice in medieval treatises on metre. The prosodic changes which Late Latin had undergone did, however, leave their mark on Bede's presentation of syllable lengths: as the hexameter poets whom he regarded as the best were the Christian epic poets of late antiquity, several post-classical syllable lengths managed to worm their way into his presentation of syllable quantity, mainly, many vowels that are long in the classics but short in post-classical Latin. These features were regarded as the norm by several generations of Bede's followers, and, even on the simplest level of vowels and their lengths, Bede can be seen as both a preserver of tradition and as its reformer.

Now, the central role which the dactylic hexameter plays in Bede's treatise requires some explanation. Few modern people read hexameter verse on a daily basis, and we mostly associate the metre with Homer and Vergil, or in other words, ancient epic verse on gods and heroes. Why Bede should have based a fundamentally Christian work on the discussion of such a metre may strike many as strange, but there are several historical reasons for this, some of them stranger still.

Firstly, the medieval monastic curriculum still relied fairly heavily on the pre-Christian classics, especially when it came to verse. Although Christian epic verse had been introduced into the monastic curriculum, the most important poetic figure of the classroom was still Vergil. This has much to do with the traditional perception of the hexameter as the noblest and loftiest of all, something which Bede says explicitly in his presentation of the metre. This sentiment had encouraged many Christian scholars of late antiquity to compose epic hexameter verse on biblical themes. Such works include *Evangeliorum libri* by Juvencus, *De actibus apostolorum* by Arator and, perhaps most importantly, Sedulius's *Carmen paschale*, a work which Bede seemed to consider in every respect superior to Vergil and which he seemed to hold on a par with the writings of the Church Fathers. Several Christian authors, including Jerome, Cassiodorus and Isidore, had also claimed that parts of the Hebrew Old Testament had actually been composed in hexameters and pentameters. These claims may strike us as ludicrous and their apparent motive was to show to the pagans that the Judeo-Christian heritage was every bit as ancient and sophisticated as the classical Graeco-Roman tradition. By Bede's time, on the other hand, these claims had an inverse effect: as the hexameter had apparently existed since the earliest times and was practically a part of God's creation, its mastery belonged to the requirements of a good Christian scholar. Rather than being a part of pagan cultural heritage that had been adopted by the Christians, it had always belonged to them: the pagans merely had had it on loan for a matter of some centuries.

This logic permeates Bede's presentations of hexameter verse. His efforts to supplant Vergilian quotations with Christian ones are less striking than his implicit claim that pagan verse is not only ideologically but also technically inferior to Christian poetry in the same metre. A case in point for Bede is a feature of hexameter poetry known as the spondaic verse. To put it in layman terms, a normal hexameter line ends "dum-di-di-dum-dum", whereas a spondaic line ends "dum-dum-dum-dum", or with a sequence of four long syllables. Spondaic lines were never common in Latin verse – Vergil uses them in less than one per cent of his lines – and they were mainly used for special effect. Bede, however, presents the spondaic lines employed by Vergil as examples of the sad state of civilisation before the onset of Christianity. That such a minor technical detail could be invested with such ideological importance may seem odd to us, but we must recall that in the Middle Ages the diminished fifth was considered the interval of the devil and that in Soviet music unresolved dissonances were regarded as symptomatic of bourgeois decadence. Aesthetic issues have a tendency to become enmeshed with ideological ones, and this is one of the characteristics which permeate Bede's work. Bede's discussion of the merits of Christian verse as opposed to pagan culminates in his chapter on the differences between pagan and Christian poets, where he refers to the former as "ancient" (*prisci*) and the latter as "modern" (*moderni*) – elsewhere he also employs the term *nostrates poetae*, or "our poets": even his nomenclature shows that he perceived a clear dividing line between the two

literary cultures. Bede's pro-Christian favouritism does not merely take the form of listing the metrical faults of Vergil and other pagans: in his short tips on style he relies almost exclusively on Christian models, mainly Sedulius, whom he apparently regarded as the most appropriate Christian substitute for Vergil. Of particular interest is a type of word order where two pairs of noun and adjective are presented in an "a-b-a-b" order; in other words, in both pairs the adjective is separated from its noun head. This line-type is known in modern classical scholarship as the "Golden line", and Bede is the first scholar to give it a proper definition. It is a sign of the impact of Bede's treatise that modern scholars have used endless hours in trying to spot golden lines in Vergil and Horace, although they are far more common in the verse of Sedulius and must be more properly considered a post-classical feature. Typically, golden word order also results in internal rhyme: if a word in the middle of the line has the same case ending as the word at the end, the halves of the line often rhyme, something which Bede noted in *De arte metrica's* companion work *De schematibus et tropis*. Bede's presentation of the hexameter may, therefore, have contributed to the evolution of regular rhyme, something which we consider one of the most recognisable features of most medieval Latin poetry, and even our own verse.

Now that we have touched on the subject of what Medieval Latin verse is generally considered to be like at its most typical, an even more central observation appears in the penultimate chapter of Bede's treatise. There Bede, after covering most of the classical, or post-classical metres he considered useful for Christians, perhaps surprisingly suggests that verse need not have a metrical structure at all, as far as syllable lengths are considered. What ensues is a brief description of rhythmic or non-quantitative poetry. The two hymns which Bede cites closely resemble the iambic dimeter and the trochaic septenarius, two metres which had been employed in Late Latin hymns, but the resemblance is limited to the number of syllables per line and the accentuation of the line-ending. It is obvious that this kind of non-quantitative verse had evolved when writers who were ignorant of syllable quantity imitated the accent patterns of earlier hymns, and Bede recognises this origin. The hymns have, in his words, not been written in iambic or trochaic verse but "in the likeness of iambic verse" and "in imitation of trochaic verse" in such a way that only the number of syllables is to be taken into account. Moreover, Bede heartily condones this new and essentially Christian form of versification. The impact of Bede's presentation of rhythmic verse is, of course, even greater than it may seem on the surface. The examples of medieval Latin verse most familiar to modern Europeans are, thanks, in part, to the works of such figures as Mozart and Pergolesi, the *Dies irae* sequence ("*Dies irae, dies illa / solvet saeculum in favilla / teste David cum Sibylla*") and the *Stabat mater* sequence ("*Staba mater dolorosa / iuxta crucem lacrimosa / dum pendebat filius*"). One may even argue that, now that the Latin classics are no longer commonly read in schools, they are the best known Latin poems. Both of them, of course, have rhyme, and neither of them observes syllable quantity in any way. Essentially, they are both derivatives of the rhythmic variant of the trochaic septenarius, as presented by Bede: in *Dies irae*, only the first half of the line is used, in *Stabat mater*, the first half is repeated, but the origin of these verse-types is nevertheless immediately recognisable.

Most of the poetry we read, of course, is not in any kind of Latin at all, and most verse in the modern languages does not observe syllable quantity even in such languages where syllable lengths exist. Moreover, the vast majority of it has been composed in the rhythmic variants of iambic and trochaic metres: this applies equally to verse epic and pop-songs. I am certainly not trying to cast Bede as the founding father of all poetry known to Western Man, but the concept that iambic and trochaic metres could be applied to a system of non-quantitative prosody is more or less the cornerstone of most verse most of us are ever going to read. Without this insight, at least we North Europeans would have been stuck with Germanic long verse and the Kalevala metre, something which might have become a little boring in the long run.

In most cases, the metrical pedigree of modern poetry is not plainly obvious beyond the rhythmic alternation of stressed and unstressed syllables, which is derived from the alternation

of long and short in iambs and trochees, but there are cases where the origin of the metre is unmistakable. If I cite the opening line of Schiller's Ode to Joy, which we know from the finale of Beethoven's ninth symphony: "Freude, schöner Götterfunken Tochter aus Elysium" – and an old Easter hymn from the Finnish hymnal: "Aurinkomme ylönousi, paistaa voitto vuorelta" – we can see that the metre is identical with the anonymous hymn cited by Bede in his chapter on rhythmic verse: "Apparebit repentina dies magna Domini." These three lines in three languages that are barely, or not at all, related, have all been composed in the trochaic tetrameter, or its rhythmic counterpart.

Finally, the question of Bede's at times uneasy relationship with the pagan past requires some observation. If I may digress, I found it illuminating to read Elias Lönnrot's Kanteletar, his collection of Finnish lyric folk poetry. Lönnrot discusses the Karelian Marjatta poem, one of the most beautiful popular paraphrases of the nativity story. The folk etymology which associated Marjatta, or Mary, with the Finnish marja, 'berry', gave rise to a story where the protagonist is impregnated by eating an enchanted lingonberry and thereafter gives birth to the King of the Karelians. Lönnrot apparently found this very inappropriate and is very much on the defensive in a way that strikes most modern readers as highly unprofessional, if not somewhat racist in its tone:

"The sixth song of this book is sung in Russian Karelia, and I should not wonder if it were the extent of what people know about the Christian faith in those parts. The poem shows the darkness into which they have been cast through their own stubbornness and the negligence of their teachers. Nearly everything in the poem is idle nonsense, without any support in the Bible."

When Lönnrot was writing this, Finland had been Christian for several centuries; the last Finnish witch had been tried, and, happily enough, acquitted more than a hundred years previously. Yet he found it necessary to contest such perversions of the true faith adamantly. It is understandable that in early Anglo-Saxon England considerations of this sort carried an even greater weight. The ways in which the Anglo-Saxon authors dealt with paganism vary from the downright belligerent to the subtly biased. As an example of the former approach I may quote Aldhelm's hexameter riddle on the Sun and Moon, which in antiquity were, of course, identified with Apollo and Diana: "Non nos Saturni genuit spurcissima proles" ("We were not begotten by the foul offspring of Saturn [i. e. Jupiter]").

Bede went for the subtle approach, which meant that where he could not avoid pagan authors he sidestepped their content. His quotations from Vergil are devoid of all mention of pagan gods even when he cites the Aeneid where they pop up all over the place. But in some respects, his partisan approach to Latin literature went deeper: Bede's concept that even certain metrical structures or individual syllable lengths could be either pagan or Christian shows the extent to which he had assumed this ideological framework. Although not all of Bede's followers may have grasped or appreciated his starting point, his actual metrical rules which are based on these assumptions still continued to exert their influence on verse and metrics. This, of course, is due to the lucid and concise nature of his treatise as well as its rapid dissemination rather than to some of his motives.

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Kommentoi