A Monastic Echo in an Old English Charm

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On fols 185r-185v of British Library MS Harley 585, there is an Old English metrical charm, commonly called *Charm for Delayed Birth.*[1] This charm is perhaps misnamed,[2] because it deals, not with delayed birth as such, but with the inability of the *wifman* for whom it is written to conceive at all, or to bring a child to term without miscarriage.[3] The charm seems divided into three sections, thought by Dobbie to be 'three originally separate texts (ll. 1-15, 16-20, 21-31) which were combined into one by the scribe of the Harley manuscript'.[4] Each opens with a variation on the phrase, 'Se wifman, se hire cild afedan ne mæg' [the woman, who is unable to bring forth her child . . .], and each suggests a remedy whereby the woman may both conceive and bear a healthy, living child. In all of these sections, we find elements pertinent to both conception or childbirth, and death, since linkages are made between the grave and the marriage bed, a child's burial place and a 'grain' of earth from it which is wrapped like an infant in wool, and milk swallowed together with clear running water. All of these are evident signs of sympathetic magic underlying the charm, and the spells would be intensified by the *wifman*'s ritual enactment of issues directly involving female fertility.

We might therefore assume that elements of Christianity are not readily apparent in *Delayed Birth*, but they are certainly not unknown in the Old English metrical charm canon. In the charm[5] which precedes *Delayed Birth*, separated from it only by vernacular prose charms,[6] we notice in the opening formula that the composer or scribe has included a quasi-Christian invocation of the birth of Christ, and its wide-spreading fame which, by sympathetic magic would assume properties of perception and clairvoyance. It is to this 'far-seeing' association made with the Nativity that the charm appeals, to expose the theft or loss of cattle, and to find the missing herd.[7]

Bæðleem hatte seo buruh þe Crist on acænned wæs,

seo is gemærsod geond ealne middangeard.
(Harley MS 585, *For Loss of Cattle*, lines 3-4)
[The town is called Bethlehem where Christ was born;
It is renowned throughout the whole earth.]

Thereafter in this charm, the cross of Christ is called upon in invocatory form, with the petitioner directing his prayers to the four points of the compass in ritual address, and finally, 'þa haligan Cristes rode' [the holy rood of Christ] becomes almost a mediatorial agent before the prayer-ending 'Amen'.

Delayed Birth is the next metrical charm after *Loss of Cattle* and, in comparison, appears initially to be wholly pagan. In fact, the only immediate connection which we can draw between *Loss of Cattle* and *Delayed Birth* seems to be the common theme of birth. However, while *Loss of Cattle* employs the miracle of the Incarnation for magical ends, *Delayed Birth* concerns itself with human birth as an end in itself, and most specifically with the act of bringing a child to term without mishap. It is therefore interested in natural, not miraculous pregnancy, which is intended to lead to the birth, not of a powerful and divine Saviour, but of a normal, healthy human child.

We find this intimate central issue of human childbearing and childbirth set into instructions for the would-be mother throughout *Delayed Birth*, which at first glance seem part of a ritual magic bearing directly on the prevention of infant mortality or spontaneous miscarriage. As examples of this folk-culture enactment, we see the *wifman* instructed to step three times over a dead man's grave while reciting three formulæ which suggest a strong element of the sympathetic magic mentioned earlier. These formulæ seem evidently framed to 'insult' her condition and hence place it at a distance from her (lines 4-6: 'laþan lætbyrde' [hateful slowed birth]; 'swæran swærbyrde'[8] [oppressive heavy birth]; 'laðan lambyrde' [wicked retarded birth]). By her physical activity, too, she associates her condition with death and burial, thus removing it from her by declaring it both shameful or worthy of insult, and 'dead' to her. The antithesis of this rejection appears next in the charm for, when the occasion arises that she does find herself to be pregnant, she is to go to her husband's bed instead of to a grave, to step over him instead of over a corpse, and to recite yet another formula, again the result of sympathetic magic which makes the association of the 'cwican cilde' [living child], the 'fulborenum' [of full term] with the living man, and rejects the 'cwellendum' or 'fægan' child [the 'slain' or 'doomed' child], as she rejected the imperfect conditions of pregnancy at the grave (lines 10-11).

In the same fashion, the *wifman* is instructed to take some earth for conjuring from her own child's grave, 'genime heo sylf hyre agenes cildes gebyrgenne dæl', a child probably still-born; 'then let her take', either 'herself' (merely underlining the importance of the *wifman*'s role) or 'by herself' (meaning 'with no help from anyone else'), 'some earth from her own child's grave' (lines 16-17). In the section following this injunction, she is required to drink as a potion, milk mixed with running water, perhaps denoting the water in which the unborn child lives and the milk which sustains it after birth:[9]

> Se wifman . . . nime þonne anes / bleos cu meoluc on hyre handæ and gesupe þonne mid hyre / muþe and gange þonne to yrnendum wætere and spiwe þær / in þa meolc and hlade þonne mid þære ylcan hand þæs / wæteres muð fulne and forswelge.
>
> (lines 21-25)
>
> [Let the woman then take some milk of a entirely-white[10] cow in her hand and sup a mouthful, and then go to running water and spit the milk into it, and draw forth a mouthful of the water, and swallow it.]

With each of these actions come formulæ which the *wifman* is to say: she underlines the removal from her of her past woe with the words said at the sale of the grave-clod in its black wool shroud (lines 19-20), and confirms in words her strengthening by the milk-water solution (lines 26-28). Thus, we see in each set of instructions, a prescribed action to be taken together with a specific and magically-analogous formula to be recited as part of the charm. This relationship between word and action is common to folk-magic, with the one actualizing or substantiating the other.

There is, however, in the middle of this metrical charm, an echo of something other than fertility ritual or sympathetic magic, which seems to have found its way into the folk-culture enactments almost by mistake. Whether or not we accept Dobbie's distinction of the 'three originally separate texts', we still find, in his first designated 'text', a curious marriage of disparate elements, breaking the section into two cultural milieux. The first, already described as that of sympathetic magic, runs from lines 1-11. We then come abruptly upon the second, for among the odd instructions for the *wifman* is surely the oddest of all, the hard-to-interpret lines 12-15b:

> And þonne seo modor gefele þæt þæt bearn si cwic, ga / þonne to cyrican, and þonne heo toforan þan weofode cume, / cweþe þonne:
>
> Criste, ic sæde, þis gecyþed!

Here we have instructions for an action to be taken and a formula to be recited which seem to have no clear interpretation at all, and appear to bear no relationship to each other, apart from the fact that the *wifman* has been told to enter a Christian house of worship, and her prescribed words make reference to Christ. This is, as we have seen, very different from the Christian permeation of the *Loss of Cattle* charm which goes before *Delayed Birth* in the manuscript.

As a possible answer to this problematic section, I suggest that we may be hearing an echo of a monastic reference to scripture or liturgy instead of a pagan conjuring with Christian words, since I do not believe that *Delayed Birth* uses the name of Christ for conjuring in the same way that *Loss of Cattle* or other charm-poems[11] seem to do. The conjuring which does appear in Delayed Birth is linked to sympathetic magic, as we have seen in the sections already described, and is of a homely, rustic sort in all of the other instructions. Therefore it seems unlikely that we would find a single inclusion of this other kind of verbal conjuring with the name of Christ in a poem which uses quite a different sort of magic. But this does not of course clarify what we do have here, nor does it explain what these words might possibly mean.

For a preliminary translation of these lines, then, we find the following: 'And when the mother feels that that child be living' (more freely, 'when the baby quickens within her womb') 'let her go then to church and when she is come before the altar, let her speak then, "By Christ, I said, this has been made known" '. In all probability, the line is corrupt in its grammatical and syntactical construction, but even bearing such immediate problems in mind, we cannot avoid the presence of the word 'Criste' as an inclusion from a cultural milieu which differs from that of the rest of the poem.

Clearly it is an exhortation to thanksgiving, and a Christian thanksgiving at that. It might also seem to tally with the suggestion that miscarriage has been part of the *wifman*'s problem, since 'þæt þæt bearn si cwic' does suggest a mother's awareness of foetal activity, usually towards the end of the first trimester of pregnancy after the initial danger period for spontaneous miscarriage. But what of the formula to be said by the pregnant *wifman*? Unlike the other prescribed words, this seems to have no immediate relationship to the action she has taken in going to

church and placing herself before the altar. What, therefore, if anything, does it mean? What does the instrumental or dative form of *Crist* signify? To what do 'ic sæde' and 'þis' refer? Are we to assume that substantial emendation is the only means of making sense of this, or do we merely abandon the line as hopelessly corrupt and meaningless?

While I realize that the following can be no more than mere speculation, given the complex and complicated history of transmission for these charms, I will nevertheless attempt the following reconstruction. It is possible that the first part of the section, 'þonne seo modor gefele þæt þæt bearn si cwic', may contain more than a mere indication of when to go to church to give thanks. Since we are evidently shifting from folk-culture to Christian practice with the introduction of such words as 'cyrican' and 'weofode', it seems reasonable to suggest that other shifts pertaining to this new cultural milieu might also be anticipated. The compiler or interpolator of these lines evidently appears to expect his reader to understand the significance of a woman whose child has moved within her, going to church and saying aloud ('cweþe') the seemingly-unintelligible phrase 'Criste, ic saede, þis gecyþed'. Cockayne, in the last century, rendered this phrase as 'To Christ I have said, this is declared'.[12] In 1909, Felix Grendon translated it as 'By Christ, I said, this [miracle] has been manifested'.[13] Dobbie interpreted it as 'By Christ, I said, this has been made known',[14] which I have included above as the translation followed by Dobbie's 1942 edition which I am using. In 1948, G. Storms translated it as 'I have said that by Christ it is manifested',[15] and Grattan and Singer assume it to mean 'To Christ I have declared this child announced',[16] in their 1952 study of the charms.

If we are to take the church setting seriously, then a more careful examination of the circumstances set out in the charm might be in order. We should perhaps recall the stories of biblical women, barren or unable to bear children, who were blessed by God and successfully carried to term a healthy living child. Yet we are still left with the problem that the *wifman* is asked to carry out the instructions, not when she has given birth, but 'þonne seo modor gefele þæt þæt bearn si cwic'; in other words, she is to perform the actions and say the words of the charm as we have them, while she is still pregnant but possibly past the danger of early miscarriage. The explicitness as to when in her pregnancy she is to fulfill her charm-task requires that we search in another direction.

I suggest that the formula to be said in front of the altar may carry within it the germ of a suggestion for an appropriate thanksgiving which might readily apply to such a situation. 'Ic sæde' might well carry the sense of 'recite', and while we have

evidently lost the indication of what it actually was that should be recited or said, the compiler or composer of this part of the charm may have had a specific prayer in mind, to which reference may once have existed here. It is not perhaps too far-fetched to cast about for a suitable prayer, and to wonder if this section of *Delayed Birth* did not once include reference to a form of the Magnificat, taken from Luke's account of the Visitation, when within the once-barren womb of Elisabeth, 'exultavit infans in utero ejus',[17] the unborn John the Baptist leaped at the presence of his Lord: 'by' or 'for Christ', *Criste*.

We should for the moment leave aside the very obvious impracticality of having an uneducated peasant woman recite a biblical or liturgical canticle, and consider that, for a naive monastic compiler or interpolator, this proposal might seem sympathetic and appropriate to such a situation. He could reason that the quickening of the *wifman*'s own child would serve to remind its fulfilled mother of this other quickening in honour of God, and thence, of the great prayer of the Mother of God herself, which is both glorification and thanksgiving. I would justify this proposal of the Magnificat by suggesting that, taken this way, it could either be the unworldly attempt by a monastic scribe to counter the pagan nature of such charms with a more Christian version of his own, or an inclusion by a semi-literate and superstitious interpolator who felt it prudent to mitigate that same paganism in the charm with a Christian reference. The link which he might make, of course, would be the movement of the foetus denoting life, 'þonne seo modor gefele þæt þæt bearn si cwic', rendered 'ða gefagnode þæt cild on hyre innoðe' in the Anglo-Saxon gospel of Luke,[18] and suggesting a ready-made scriptural 'prayer' to take the place of pagan spell-saying.

This, then, is one possible interpretation of line 15, assuming that we can translate it unemended except for an assumed auxiliary verb with 'gecyþed': 'Criste', either 'in honour of' or 'by the merits of Christ'; 'ic saede', 'I', perhaps identifying with both Elisabeth and Mary in the role of expectant mother, 'have spoken'; 'þis', 'this', the condition of healthy pregnancy, suggesting at the same time the Incarnation itself, the marvellous conception of John the Baptist by the once-childless Elisabeth, and the similar case of the *wifman* in the charm, once unable to conceive or bring a child to term, and now carrying a living baby; 'gecyþed', '[is] made known' in the demonstrative sense of 'manifested', which refers to the *wifman*'s quickening and may even echo the 'seo is gemærsod' of the earlier charm concerning the birth of Christ.

In his *Nativitas Sancti Iohannis Baptistæ*, Ælfric links the quickening of the unborn Baptist with the manifestation of God in Christ, and sees word and prophecy

as representing a revelation of wisdom or truth:[19]

> and on innoðe ða-gyt beclysed, mid witigendlicre fægnunge getacnode þone halwendan to-cyme ures Alysendes . . . He is Word gecweden, forðan þe word is wisdomes geswutelung.

In this way he intensifies the connection between words spoken ('ic saede') and a truth revealed ('gecyþed'), with the occasion of the Magnificat's utterance as a common ground for both. This then is how the charm section might once have been set down to read: 'Through Christ I have spoken, this is made known'. Therefore, 'Criste', at the head of the formula, would govern both the *wifman*'s 'saying' (the prayer of thanksgiving which the monastic scribe had in mind) and the manifestation of her pregnancy, as Christ's presence revealed Elisabeth's healthy pregnancy through a similar quickening despite her supposed barrenness, and gave occasion for the creation of the Magnificat by Mary.

Assuming that there is some merit to my suggestion of this portion of *Delayed Birth* being monastic in origin, we must still examine the role played by the Magnificat in pre-Conquest church and cloister in order to determine how widely used and well known it might have been to our compiler. The story of the Visitation itself was familiar to Christian Anglo-Saxons, and would have been dwelt upon in sermons; if we return to Ælfric, we find that he speaks of it in his *Annunciatio S. Mariæ*:[20]

> . . Ða sang Maria þaerrihte ðone lofsang þe we singað on Godes cyrcan, æt ælcum æfensange, "Magnificat anima mea Dominum," and forð oð ende.

We here see that Ælfric draws attention to the Magnificat as a *lofsang*, part of the liturgy of Vespers with which a monk would be familiar, even if a peasant woman were not. Therefore, for a monastic scribe seeking some way to offset pagan ritual with a Christian one, the Magnificat, with its graphic connection to the central issue of the *Delayed Birth* charm, might have seemed a logical and natural prayer to propose.

The general opinion on this section of the poem is that it is a Christian interpolation in a series of pagan rituals: such a view does not in any way diminish the likelihood of it being a deliberate inclusion of a scriptural element in the charm. Indeed, if the interpolation were a pagan attempt at invoking the magic of

Christianity, like others discussed earlier, we should find the 'spell' of the canticle or biblical verse written out in full, whereas a monastic inclusion which assumes familiarity would probably refer to the canticle by abbreviation or in a similarly-truncated fashion, as we find frequently used for well-known prayers and canticles in early liturgical handbooks. Even Ælfric in his sermon does not read the entire canticle, but refers to it as:[21]

> "Magnificat anima mea Dominum," and forð oð ende. Þæt is, "Min sawul mærsað Drihten:" et reliqua.

I suggest that we have perhaps lost some words in lines 12-15b which may once have contained rubric indications for such a prayer.

Setting aside the likelihood of an ordinary woman's familiarity with the Magnificat as a liturgical canticle, which of itself may not have been the primary reason for including Christian elements in a pagan poem, we must finally ask whether the monastic compiler would consider it a proper prayer rather than merely the Vespers Gospel-canticle from the Benedictine *Opus Dei*. Ælfric's reference to it as the 'lofsang þe we singað on Godes cyrcan, æt ælcum æfensange', and the glossed presence of it as part of the hymns and canticles in both avatars of the two interlinear glossed psalter families would certainly substantiate it as both an oral and literary presence in a monastic community. From this evidence, it would seem certainly to have been a regular hymn of praise, and possibly also a familiar text used for educational purposes, as the Regius glossing tradition would indicate.[22] But even if the original composition of the charm in its basic form antedated the tenth century Reform with its monastic and educational flowerings, the presence of the Old English glosses for the Magnificat canticle in the ninth-century *Vespasian Psalter* indicates its early presence in the vernacular as a liturgical and literary influence on monastic scriptoria such as the one in which this charm must have been written down and compiled.

We can only speculate on the answers to the remaining difficulties left unresolved by my interpretation, but if there is any substance to my suggestions concerning lines 12-15b, then we should be turning our attention more closely to the question of monastic influence on Old English 'pagan' verse. It would seem that, even in a collection deriving as substantially from folklore as does MS Harley 585, we may find echoes suggesting a more evident monastic influence than has previously been assumed.

NOTES

[1] *The Anglo-Saxon Minor Poems*, edited by Elliott Van Kirk Dobbie, The Anglo-Saxon Poetic Records, 6 (New York and London, 1942), pp.123-24. All further references will be to this edition.

[2] In the opinion of F. Grendon, 'The Anglo-Saxon Charms', *The Journal of American Folk-Lore*, 22 (1909), 206-07. That the poem is misnamed is further mentioned in J. H. G. Grattan and C. Singer, *Anglo-Saxon Magic and Medicine* (London, 1952), p. 188, note 7; and in G. Storms, *Anglo-Saxon Magic* (The Hague, 1948), p. 198.

[3] 'Afedan', from the introduction to each charm section, is glossed in Bosworth-Toller's *Anglo-Saxon Dictionary* as *nutrire, cibare, alere, pascere*, with the English sense of 'to bring up' or 'rear'. This would refer less to a delay in giving birth than to the bringing of a child to term.

[4] Dobbie, *Anglo-Saxon Minor Poems*, p. cxxxvi.

[5] Edited by Dobbie, *Anglo-Saxon Minor Poems*, p. 123, as Charm 5, *For Loss of Cattle*.

[6] Fols 130-93 of British Library MS Harley 585 consist of a collection of both metrical and prose vernacular charms (see N. R. Ker, *Catalogue of Manuscripts Containing Anglo-Saxon* [Oxford, 1957] for further detail on Harley 585), and are referred to as 'Lacnunga', or a 'leechbook' by T. O. Cockayne in his *Leechdoms, Wortcunning and Starcraft of Early England*, 3 vols (London, 1864-66), III, 2-80. *For Loss of Cattle* is found on fols 180v-181r, and is followed by prose charms, after which is found the *Charm for Delayed Birth* discussed in this study.

[7] Dobbie, *Anglo-Saxon Minor Poems*, p. 123. This trope is found elsewhere, in altered form, in the Corpus Christi College, Cambridge MS 41 charm, also concerned with the loss of cattle (edited by Dobbie, p. 126).

[8] Dobbie has emended the manuscript reading of *swært byr ðe* to *swærbyrðe*. Both Grendon, pp. 206-07, and the Bosworth-Toller *Supplement* translate the manuscript reading as 'black' or 'dismal', assuming *swært* to be *sweart*. Although Dobbie notes that 'the simple emendation . . . gives much better sense' (p. 214), the presence of other 'black' and 'white' colour-words in the charm perhaps argues for the original emendation of *sweart* instead.

[9] See also G. Storms, pp. 201-02, who suggests an interpretation similar to my own.

[10] Although 'anes bleos' is commonly interpreted as 'of one colour' (Cockayne, p. 69; Grendon, p. 209; Storms, pp. 199 and 201; and Grattan and Singer, p. 191), and despite the fact that the term *bleo* is problematic in its indefiniteness, I would nevertheless suggest 'bleos' here to mean 'pale', 'white' or 'colourless'. Grendon discusses the significance of single-coloured animals, especially those of white or red, on p. 230, and with this in mind, we should consider the German cognate *Blass* [white], as perhaps important to our reading of 'bleos'. Such a reading would intensify substantially the sympathetic magic by having white milk taken from a white cow, both therefore of a pure and unstained colour, mixed with 'yrnendum wætere' [running water], and therefore clear

and unstagnant. In this way, all of the components for the potion are as visually pure of stain as they can be. For these reasons, a wholly 'white' cow would be far more plausible in a charm warding off miscarriage, than would a cow entirely of red, which might conversely represent the blood associated with spontaneous abortion. Because the charm specifies a colour for the cow, we must assume that this element is of importance to the spell, and 'anes bleos' as 'of white' fits the logic more closely than 'anes bleos' as 'of one' unspecified 'colour'.

[11] In Harley 585, *Against a Dwarf* and *For Loss of Cattle*; elsewhere, in British Library MS Cotton Caligula A vii, *For Unfruitful Land*; and in CCCC MS 41, *For Loss of Cattle* and *A Journey Charm.*

[12] Cockayne, p. 69.

[13] Grendon, p. 207.

[14] Dobbie, p. 214.

[15] Storms, p. 199.

[16] Grattan and Singer, p. 191.

[17] Luke 1. 41.

[18] *Ða Halgan Godspel on Englisc: The Anglo-Saxon Version of the Holy Gospels*, edited by Benjamin Thorpe (London, 1842), p. 114.

[19] *The Homilies of the Anglo Saxon Church, The First Part containing the Sermones Catholici or Homilies of Ælfric*, edited by Benjamin Thorpe, 2 vols (London, 1844-46), I, 352, 358.

[20] Thorpe, *The Homilies of the Anglo Saxon Church*, I, 202.

[21] Thorpe, *Homilies*, I, 202.

[22] *Der altenglische Regius-Psalter*, edited by F. Roeder, Studien zur englischen Philologie, 18 (Halle, 1904). If it is the case that the Regius Psalter is 'a book for study, not a service book', as noted in *The Salisbury Psalter*, edited by Celia Sisam and Kenneth Sisam, EETS, os 242 (London, 1959), p. 52, it is evident that monks learning Latin would have worked with hymns and canticles as well as with psalms, and consequently would have become familiar with the Magnificat in the classroom as well as the Office.