

The Christian and Pagan Sources of Inspiration
Comparative Study between Caedmon's Hymn of the Old English Poetry
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Received: 20/9/2020

Accepted: 17/4/2021

Published: 2021

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Abstract:

The idea of inspiration or divine revelation is echoed mostly in the cultures of nations. In the Greek mythology, there are springs or fountains called Pieren, the place where poets went to and must drink from to receive the poetical inspiration. The magical water of this place supplies poets with eloquence and makes them able to create images, metaphors, similes and other rhetorical devices. Similarly, in Roman and many European literatures, there are Muses, the goddess of poetry, these muses are responsible to urge poets and stimulate them to hover in the world of poetry. In fact, every poet has his own muse that he visits when finds himself unable to write anymore. In pre-Islam Arab literature, it can be found a similar idea of Pieren or muses theme, Arab believe strongly that the poet is someone has supernatural power because he is the tongue of the tribe who registers its deeds and fights with his poetry against the poets of other tribes. Actually, the Arabian tribes were in struggle against each other for domination the grassy prairies that their camels pasture in. Arabs of pre-Islamic era believe that there is a mysterious valley near Abqar Mountain in Yemen, every poet roams through this valley having the inspiration that helps him in his poetry. This study tries to find out the comparative aspect between the Caedmon's Hymn the first poem that is written by anonymous man called Caedmon in the old English period and Muallaqat written by the renowned poet, Imru Al-Qais in Arab Pre-Islamic period. In fact, Caedmon's Hymn and Arab poem are written in the close period.

Key words: Caedmon's Hymn, Christian revelation, Abqar Valley, Imru Al-Qais, pagan revelation, the theme of inspiration, common features.

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Caedmon's Hymn: The Christian Revelation

Caedmon's Hymn is the first recorded poem in the old English literature and it is probably written between 650 and 680 A.D. Caedmon, is a layman whose gift in writing poetry came later in his life, Caedmon grants hopes to all who wish to be poets. His poem which entitled, Caedmon's Hymn has been reached to our hand is mentioning in the West Saxon version. We do not have enough information about Caedmon's Hymn life except what comes from greatest English scholar of the next generation, the Venerable Bede, monk of Jarrow. this monk tells his story in *the Ecclesiastical History of the English people* that he worked in animal husbandry for a monastery, living with the non-religious, and reporting to the reeve, a Steward who supervised the abbess' estates. ⁽¹⁾ The story as mentioned by the monk's book is Caedmon used to go to the main hall to eat with the worker together at the table that they routinely used to have their food after the hectic day of working. After they had meals, they used to entertain themselves by singing lyrical poems accompanied with harp which passed around them. Each one has his own turn to play on harp and sing a poem. Of course, they sing the poems of Old English poetry that talked about the historical great deeds occurred one or two hundred years ago such as the historical battle of Maldon, mythic heroes like Beowulf, legendary lonely wanderers by land and sea like Widsith (the traveler song). As his turn came to sing, Caedmon suddenly felt with embarrassment because he was illiterate and never recited a poem before so he left the table and went to sleep' he used to sleep with livestock overnight every day. When he fell asleep at his bed, he dreamed that a man appeared and called him by name to sing he answered him he had no idea about what the song that he wanted me to sing. At once, the man, whose figure was somehow angelic, told him to sing about God and the creation of things. In the dream, the man dictated him the song and the verses that he had never heard before and asked him to repeat them. When he awoke, he remembered his dream and whole verses then he added more verses to the song. ⁽²⁾

¹⁾ Trapp, 19.

²⁾ Alexander et al, 4-5.

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We cannot of course give the critical judgment to this poem because we have not a good acquaintance about its own original language: instead we read it through another interpretation. It is important to notice that no matter how well translation is, it still unable to reach the aesthetic level of the original text. Citing the opinion of the Arab man of letters al-Jahidh 755-868 who ruled out any possibility of translating poetry into other language, he opined that the rhythmic composition was shattered, the meters was destroyed, its beauty was lost and all, that made it marvelous was removed. ⁽¹⁾

The translated text is written in simple language, lacked to imagery and metaphors which truly these rhetoric devices give the poetical features to poem. The text is no more but an echo to what is mentioned in Genesis. Caedmon in his poem talks about God, the eternal Lord who creates the universe and we have to praise and obey Him. There is no poetical sense in the translated text, yet; an outlook of the original text, it will be found that each old English line has two balanced phrases with four stressed syllables, three of which alliterate. Each half-line, if uttered musically, in time to the plucking of a harp, would fit nicely into our phonological working (short-term) memory, which can accept two seconds of speech only before recycling. The poet phonologically encodes each first half-line to make recall of the closing half-line easy such as (Heaven's Kingdom), as "metudaemaectic" (the creator's might) dose modgidance (thought). Half-line often are formulas, common fixed phrases that repeat themselves, such as "ecidryctin" (the Eternal Lord). The same word often begins different half-line, such as hefaenricaes and hefen to hrofae, or ends such lines, like "uard" and "mehti". The critics of Old English poetry point out that the poetry of that period is better to be recited orally than to be read in written form because it is written to be remembered and sang. In fact, the poets of that period depend on primarily on the device of alliteration which means "repetition of consonant sound in the beginning of each word" instead using the meters. ⁽²⁾

In fact, the poem has seven lines, two sentences of it gives the meaning of the poem which can be summarized as we must praise and give thanks to God

¹⁾ Al-Jahidh, 31.

²⁾ Fry, 282.

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who creates everything, Heaven, earth and man. It is possible that Caedmon in his dream receive the main idea and he, in turn, writes the rest of verses when he awakes or he catches some verses and then he writes the rest of the poem. Most poems take form and contribute to a pre-existing body of poetry. In T.S. Eliot term, Caedmon drew from a Biblical poetic tradition. His companions in the church fed him stories from the Old and New Testament, and he versified them.⁽¹⁾ The title of the poem itself suggests that it is a kind of religious song and it is still used to be sung till now in churches. Being pious Christian, Caedmon dedicated this poem to the religious people who though that it was a sort of divine revelation and it is given to him by God's grace. They looked at him as one of saints or perhaps like one of the disciples in the gospels whom Jesus had called by name to God's service. To them, Caedmon had received a gift of creativity in making songs from supernatural powers that God prepared them to him due to his devoutness. John Milton, the great poet also attributed his poems to a heavenly power or heavenly muse in the moments of revelation later in life, being a blind, like Homer, he composed his masterpiece, Paradise Lost in his mind early in the morning and waited until his daughters arrived to "milk" him, after that he was received dictation from unknown power to complete his masterpiece. Nevertheless, the clergymen had a refused to believe that Caedmon received his verses via muses as it was done in the pagan myth instead they believed immensely that God gave him this gift as a teacher who dictated his student.⁽²⁾ This idea has its counterpart in the writings of the great Islam philosopher AL-Farabi, who points out in his book AL-Hidood that there are two worlds ; the first is the world beyond the moon which is called obligatory existence and the second is the world under the moon which is called expected existence and between them there is, what he called, the active mind that descends the message from God to the Prophet or throws the ideas in the wide sky and the poet and philosopher in their turn collect these ideas.⁽³⁾

¹⁾ ibid, 283.

²⁾ ibid, 291.

³⁾ Al-Farabi, 80-81.

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Caedmon's account of what happened to him is cognitively true. When people speak, they seldom lean on a mental script that they copy in uttering. Our words arise unselfconsciously, instinctively. Our language process depends on a form of memory called implicit or procedural. It is difficult to find out how an utterance is composed, in case of trying to remember names, dates or so on; in fact, this is some part of knowledge of the world that stored in our long-term memory. Actually, all what we can do is to want to say something and then recall the procedures' of making language by actually doing it. We may sense, mentally, welling up of an inchoate need to utter something on a topic at hand. The uttering then is a relief. Often when we want to utter something, words come immediately despite we never used that combination before and this is exactly makes us surprised in the process of speaking that we do unconsciously. In case of standing before a crowd, trying to speak in improvisational way despite we arrange our ideas for specific time, we often leave the track of our ideas consequence and our mind recalls expressions and ideas that we never intend to say. It is like standing before a cliff and jumping out into thin air, in the relief that will fly. That sudden fear leads to stammering, blocking, speechlessness, and sometimes runaway. Perhaps, Caedmon had experienced this very same stage fright when the harp approached him. His dream set him free and gave him power to utter. Without any hesitation, Caedmon obeyed the angelic man and began to repeat what did he said to him. Apart of what happened to Caedmon in receiving inspiration from supernatural during his dream, there is undeniable hypothesis proposes that most of men who work for monastery are in touch with the story of Genesis and of course, repeatedly hearing the biblical words and expressions like creation of the world and praise God...etc. that may he insert some of lines in his poem. ⁽¹⁾

In fact, after Caedmon woke up in the morning, he did not pretend that he wrote the poem instead he said that he remembered what he heard during his dream. Bede, the scholar who told Caedmon' story stated that Caedmon had ability to memorize what he heard. He did not write his poem because he was illiterate. Of course, those who can write, they must have skill to write and

¹⁾ O'Brien, 4.

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reading and Caedmon has no this ability. The skepticism is reflected by the learned people who never believed that such an uneducated man has the ability to compose poem expertly. (For centuries, Shakespeare has borne the brunt of such disbelief; he was the son of glover and a grammar school education, good for its time, but comparable to leaving school after grade eight.)⁽¹⁾

Abqar Valley: The Pagan Revelation

Similarly, to Caedmon's Hymn, many poets receive inspiration through roaming in Abqar valley as the Arab legend pretends. Etymologically speaking, the word "Abqar" came from old southern Arabic which means a place in desert full of jinn (Al-Farahidi, 92), from middle Arabic, a valley that inhabited by an old Arab tribe named after it (Al-Jawhari, 490). Ibn Mandhoor (1232-1311) in *Lisan Al-Arab Dictionary* (Arab tongue dictionary) proposes that the place is an imaginary one and literary Arab circles invent this term in later periods to grant some of holiness to the poems of pre-Islamic poets. (Ibn Mandhoor, 780) As a literary term, it denotes anyone who comes with innovation (Abqari) (Arabic word for genius) which it is an adjective for the noun Abqar. The Arab geographic books like *Mujam Al-Buldan* (Countries dictionary) written by Yaquoot Al-Hemawi states that the location of this valley is near Abqar mountain in Yemen. He states another tale about its name, he proposes an imaginary tale that this valley named under one of jinni leaders that likes to dwell in remote places.⁽²⁾ There are many legends tell that this valley is inhabited by poets of jinn who visit particular poets and give them inspiration. Al-Qureshi states that Lafidh bin lahidh is the counterpart jinni for the pre-Islamic renowned poet Amru Al-Qais, Hathir bin Mathir for the poet Al-Nabiga Al-Thubiani, Habeed bin Al-Saladim for Abeed bin Al-Abras and so on.⁽³⁾

Arab tribes in pre-Islamic era were in fight each other and their poetry is one of the weapons that these tribes used to defend. Therefore; they celebrated and making feasts when poet emerged because they believed strongly that the

¹) ibid, 6.

²) A-Hemawi, 247.

³) Al-Qureshi, 176.

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poet has supernatural abilities of eloquence. The references of history state that soothsayers and fortune-tellers in pre-Islamic era were talking understood rhymed words believing that they were dictated by jinn. This is the beginning of the oratory art as Shawqi Dhaif states in his book (*The Approaches of Writing of Prose in Arab literature*).⁽¹⁾ Many poets hovered in the image world and they imagined that each poet had his/her own counterpart of jinn that dictated him or her poetry as Ibn Shuhaid Al-Andalusi did in his book *Al-Tawabi and Al-Zawabi* who imagined that he set in a journey to the land of the counterparts of jinn who inspired many poets. Similarly, Abu Al-Alaa Al-Maari wrote his book *Risalat Al-Gufran* (forgiveness letter) which it is imaginary journey toward the hereafter (paradise and heaven) in which the counterpart of Al-Maari made conversations and dialogues with poets and how they received inspiration from supernatural power. It is worth mentioning that *Divine Comedy* of Dante Alighieri's was influenced by Al-Maari's letter.⁽²⁾

Imru Al-Qais bin Hujr, (died 500 c), is one of the most Arab renowned poet of the pre-Islamic period, acknowledged as the most distinguished poet who has recognition for his poetical ability from the Prophet Mohammed who said "he is the leader of poets" and also from Imam Ali, the forth caliph and from Arab critics of the ancient Basra school. He is the author of one of the seven odes in the famed collection of pre-Islamic poetry Al-Mu'allaqat. There is no agreement about his genealogy, but the predominant legend cites that Imru Al-Qais is the youngest son of Hujr, the last king of Kindah tribe monarchy.⁽³⁾ According to Al-Asma'ee, (122-216) he is Imru al Qais ibn Hujr ibn Haris ibn 'Amr ibn Hujr ibn Mu'awiyah ibn Thawr. His mother was Fatima, the daughter of Rabee'ah, the sister of Kulaib and Muhalhil ibn Rabee'a the leaders of Taglib tribe. He was known as 'Malik ad-Dilleel' the lost king, as he could never regain the lost kingdom of his father, who was one of the kings of [Kindah](#). Books of literature state that he was expelled many time from his father's court for his queer behavior, gambling and erotic poetry that

¹⁾ Dhaif, 12.

²⁾ Al-Ma'ari, 21.

³⁾ Al-Qairawani, 14.

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he was fond of. He lived the life of picaresque, he was reckless, flamboyant, irreverent, bawdy and bibulous.⁽¹⁾

According to Al-Asfahani, when his father was stabbed by one of Banu Asad tribe, before his death. He sent a messenger to his sons and instructed him to go to them one by one and inform them of his death, and whoever does not breakdown and shows self-control, then give him my weapons, horse, commands and will. So the messenger first went to his eldest son Nafi' who showed his sorrow and severe grieve. He then went on to see all of his sons one by one and, all of them did similar to what Nafi' had done, until he reached Imru al Qais.⁽²⁾

He found Imru Al Qais drinking wine with his friend and playing a game of dice. As he told him that his father is killed, Imru al Qais did not pay attention him, but he told his friend to continue and throw the dice. When he did he said to him 'I did not want to spoil your game'. He then turned to the messenger and asked him for all the details. He then said, "He (my father) let me get away when I was young and made me carry the burden of revenge for his blood when I was older. No sobriety today and no intoxication tomorrow. Today shall be drink and tomorrow shall be a great matter!" And then he got drunk. When he was awake and sober again, he swore not eat meat, or to drink alcohol or use oil on his body, or have sexual relations with a woman or wash his head from impurity until he gets revenge for his father.⁽³⁾

After his father was murdered by a rebel Bedouin tribe, Banu Asad, he took an oath to peruse revenge to his father. He successfully managed to attack the rebel tribe and went on chasing them. Unfortunately, this made him wanted by many enemies who fought him and lost lot of his men and troops, but, unsatisfied, he went from tribe to another fruitlessly seeking further help. Eventually, he went to Taimaa city where the famous poet, Al-Samawal lived there who proposed him to seek help from Byzantine emperor Justinian I. He sent with him a Bedouin guide who cried when he saw the mountains covered by snow that he never used before and died there. Imru Al-Qais wrote an

¹⁾ Al-Asma'ee, 143.

²⁾ Al-Asfahani, 65- 66.

³⁾ *ibid*, 70.

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elegy to his companion mentioning his yearning to his homeland and how they suffered from the journey and death of his companion. In Byzantine, he met king Al-Harith of Ghassn (northern Arabia kingdom) who introduced him to the Byzantine emperor Justinian I who received him well in his court and agreed to supply him with the troops and weapons that he needed to regain his kingdom. But there was a man present, named 'Al-Tammah' from Banu Asad whose brother Imru al Qais had killed. He told Justinian I that Imru al Qais was having relations with your daughter when he was here, and now he is going compose poetry about her and what he did, and disgrace among the Arabs. ⁽¹⁾

So Justinian I sent a coat embroidered with gold, but it was poisoned. And he sent word that I have sent you one of my coats that I used to wear so that I may honour you. So wear it when you receive it and let me know of your news from every place you reach. Imru al Qais was exceedingly happy to receive it and wore it on a hot day. And the poison entered his body very quickly and his skin started falling off. This is where he gets his name Dhu Al- Quruh (The wounded one). He then reached Ankara (modern Ankara, the capital of Turkey) where he came by a grave of one of the princesses of Rome and he sung, ⁽²⁾

"And shall I stay as long as does Aseeb (the name of the mountain),
O' my neighbor, verily the place of visit is near.
And every stranger is close to the other stranger,
O' my neighbor we are two strangers here.

And that is where he died and was buried, next to the grave of the princess". ⁽³⁾

The story of Imru Al-Qais in his perusing to regain his father's kingdom and his journey to Justinian I, the emperor of Byzantine left its echo in that palace and no wonder that the story and life of Imru A-Qais travelled to many European countries and rooted deeply there. Though Caedmon's Hymn is

¹⁾ Al-Mawla et al, 122.

²⁾ ibid, 123.

³⁾ ibid, 123.

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mystical poem and religious one, it has the same event and atmosphere with Imru A-Qais's poem which it is somehow sensual and down to earth.

The philologists of the Basra school regarded Imru Al-Qais not only as the most renowned poets of the Muallaqat but also as the inventor of the new form of the classical od, or qasida, and of many of its conventions such as the weeping of poet over the traces of deserted ruins. He is the first who opened his poem by weeping over his deserted home besides describing his beloved in skillful way which is perhaps the best-known line of poetry in Arabic: ⁽¹⁾

"Halt, you two companion, let us weep for the memory of a beloved

In the mid sand-dunes between Al-Dakhul and Hawmal." ⁽²⁾

Al-Mufadhhal Al-Dhabi in his book *Al-Mufadhiliyat* states that convoy traveled through desert and with them was a guide called Bin Sahm A-kashab who strayed the way. He said to people who were in convoy that they were in the edge of Abqar valley and pointed out to it. In that moment, they saw a weird creature just like man walking toward them. He was so tall than camel even their camels were frightened and began rumpling and retreated. He was riding an ostrich to approach, his back was covered by green mossy and gazed at them then said: hey Bin Sahm Al-Kashab, who is the most poetical man in all Arabian tribes. The guide was so fear and did not answer him. The weird creature said then: the most poetical man who said:

"Have I deceived you by the fact that your love is really killing me and,

That whatever you command my heart, it performs.

Your eyes did not shed tears except to beat me with your two arrows,

In my broken heart which has been massacred by you." ⁽³⁾

We realized at once that he meant Imru Al-Qais. The guide swore him with his pagans (Allat and Al-Uzza), (the idols that worshiped by Arab at that time) to tell him who is he? The weird creature said: I am Hafidh bin Lafidh one of the jinn leaders. Without me, Imru Al-Qais could not say something, I

¹⁾ Dhaif, 14.

²⁾ ibid, 14..

³⁾ Al-Dhabi, 45.

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used to visit him in his dreams and made him memorizing the poems that I recited. Then he vanished from our sights. ⁽¹⁾

Ibn Shuhaid Al-Andalusi in his book *Al-Tawabi and Al-Zewabi* states another story which is: that there is one of man of letter called Zuhair bin Numair knows all the muses of poets. Al-Andalusi asked him about Imru Al-Qais, Numair replied to come with him in short journey to show him the muses that inspired them. They set in a journey till they reached to a grassy valley full of trees and flowers and birds. Numair said to him: you are in the jinn valley. Who is the first poet that you want to meet? Immediately I answered him to meet Imru Al-Qais, he raised his voice; oh Utaiba bin Nawfal come here and recite. So he recited: ⁽²⁾

"Stop! Let us cry at the remembrance of a beloved and her lodgings

At the extremity of winding sand between al-Dahhul and Hawmal.

On the morning of the day of separation, when they loaded up, it was as through I were a man who broke colocynth near the acacia tress of the tribe.

My friends stopped their riding-beats beside me and they said to me do not destroy yourself with sadness but bear up

My remedy for sadness and pain is an affection on tears, but is there

Any place for crying near the disappeared traces?

Because of my deep affection my tears flowed from my eyes on to

The upper part of my chest, so that they moistened my sword-belt."⁽³⁾

I said to him: you must feel a shame because you plagiarized a poem that you did not write, these verses were attributed to the renowned pre-Islamic poet Imru Al-Qais. At this moment, Utaiba became angry and roaring with frightening voice. He said in rage voice: I was the one who made him a famous poet; without me no one knew him at all. What it is attributed to him, in fact, I dictated him. Surprisingly, I replied him: how did you say such a nonsense words; undoubtedly, there is consensus by all that Imru Al-Qais is the first who invents the poetical formulas that followed by the poets after him. He draws the path to poets in using the rhetoric devices and shows them how to open the poem and how to use the implied metaphors in comparing

¹⁾ ibid.

²⁾ Al-Andalusi, 91.

³⁾ ibid.

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horses with eagles and women with deer and wild cows ...etc. He answered me in deep and confident voice: all what you told me is correct but all what you mentioned are done by me. Actually, the tone of his voice made me a little bit sympathized and believed in what he said. Immediately, I said: ok how did you convince me that. He said let me told you my story: I said ok go head: ⁽¹⁾

When Imru Al-Qais was chased by his enemies, he reached to his homeland and when he saw his home was ruin and uninhabited, he cried and want to say poetry but he could not. Then he slept with his companions without saying anything. During his sleeping, I visited him and say to him "O' imru Al-Qais, I am your counterpart of jinn and I will recite a poem that you must memorize". So. I began to dictate him the poem that became one of the most famous poem at that time, the poem that considered the most innovative poem of the pre-Islamic poetry. So, when he awakes, he told his companions that he received inspiration from a supernatural power that visited him in his dream. ⁽²⁾

Conclusion

Undoubtedly, it is difficult, somehow, to trace the roots of two different poems back to different nations despite both of them written in close time. However; the similarity between the events of both two poems is evidently so close. the study tries to find out the common things of both poems and shows the comparative aspects between them. The events of both poems tell the idea of inspiration via the muses or what is so called in Arabic (jinn), the supernatural power that grants poets their merits in composing poetry. The story of Imru Al-Qais in his perusing to regain his father's kingdom and his journey to Justinian I, the emperor of Byzantine left its echo in that palace and no wonder that the story and life of Imru A-Qais travelled to many European countries and rooted deeply there. Though Caedmon's Hymn is mystical poem and religious one, it has the same event and atmosphere with Imru A-Qais's poem which it is somehow sensual and down to earth. Both poets receive inspiration during their sleeping via muses or jinn and this

¹⁾ ibid, 92.

²⁾ ibid, 94.

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proves that the stories or themes of muses move from one culture to another through the story-tellers that penetrating in the popular imagination,

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