

BOOK REVIEW

Saint Aldhelm's Riddles. Translated by A. M. JUSTER. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2015. Pp. xx + 250. Paper, \$29.95. ISBN 978-1-4426-2892-2.

Saint Aldhelm, the first abbot of Malmesbury in southern England, has been aptly described as the father of Anglo-Latin verse. An older contemporary of the Venerable Bede, Aldhelm (d. 709 CE) expounded to his countrymen the principles of classical Latin versification in two linked treatises, between which he inserted a sample of his metrical craft: 100 riddles in dactylic hexameter, ranging in length from quatrains to the 83-line tour de force on *creatura*, “creation,” that caps the collection. A. M. Juster seeks to bring the wit, wonder, and enigmatic fun of these poems to a wider audience by translating them into rhymed English verse.

As a formalist poet with well-regarded versions of Tibullus and Horace’s *Satires* to his name, Juster has the right skill-set for the task. He envisions a dual readership, both scholars and those without Latin who have an interest in Anglo-Saxon England. To serve both constituencies, he prints Latin and English on facing pages, equips them with a commentary, and relegates to an appendix the lemmas of the poems, so that readers may enjoy puzzling through the riddles on their own without having the answers given away.

Juster’s brief introduction outlines Aldhelm’s life and offers an appreciation of key features of his poetry: its lyricism, and the heavy use of alliteration and end-stopping that may owe something to Anglo-Saxon verse. Next comes the Latin with facing translation. Apart from one or two deliberate alterations, Juster reproduces the text edited by Rudolf Ehwald in 1919 for the *Monumenta Germaniae Historica* series, albeit with a sprinkling of misprints.¹ He has altered Ehwald’s punctuation extensively, but often for the worse: the line-end punctuation of the translation seems to have been copied over into the original without regard for

¹ I noticed the following (correct readings in parentheses): *Praef.* 19, *populus* (*populos*); title on p.4, *ET* (*EX*); 2.1, *nec* omitted after *possunt*; 29.1, *spectaculi fata* (*-a...i*); 33.1 *viscera* (*-e*); 49.5 *lattices* (*lati-*); 53.6 *monibus* (*mont-*); 69.6 *corpora* (*-e*); 71.3 *volians* (*volit-*); 74.5 *cuperunt* (*-ent*); 75.8 *exemplo* (*ext-*); 77.2 *elementer* (*clem-*); 100.42 *viscera* (*-e*). At 91.11, Juster omits *ciborum* at line-end because he regards it as a gloss: perhaps, but without it the line will not scan.

differences in syntax, so that in the Latin, e.g., subjects may be separated from their verbs by a full stop, or subordinate clauses set off as complete sentences. Readers working through the Latin will want to have Ehwald at their elbow for spot checks: the volume is downloadable at www.dmgh.de.

The commentary is learned, lively, and witty (for a taste, see the introduction to riddle 18 on the ant-lion). Juster points to recent scholarship on each riddle and is strong on the poems' social context and Christian resonances. He has also scoured the electronic databases to find additional sources for the phraseology of the riddles, though the parallels thus accumulated are not always apposite:² a more judicious selection or a reference to a scholarly dictionary would often have sufficed. Grammatical analysis can be imprecise (e.g. *tabescens* identified as a gerund *ad* 1.4), and Juster sometimes leaves readers to piece together on their own how the details in a given riddle relate to its answer. This is not entirely what one expects of a scholarly commentary, but taken on its own terms, it is a rewarding document of one poet's response to another: Juster's frequent remarks on the choices he made in putting Aldhelm's verses into English are fascinating.

The translation is the main event, however. Juster renders the riddles in strict iambic pentameter and uses the same number of lines as the original—a feat of compression that he pulls off with aplomb. The English pentameter has less scope for rhythmic variation than dactylic hexameter, but Juster supplies the deficit with his rhyme schemes, which shift from riddle to riddle and add an element of sonic variety. Cf. riddle 5 on *Iris*, “rainbow”:

*Taumantis proles priscorum fame fingor,
Ast ego prima mei generis rudimenta retexam:
Sole ruber genitus sum partu nubis aquosae.
Lustro polos passim solos; non scando per austros.*

I'm cast as “child of Thaumás” in quaint speech,
But basics of my birth I'll first reteach:
Born in cloud's water; I am sun's red daughter.
I seek clear skies; in storms I do not rise.

² E.g., in a lengthy list of parallels for the “surprisingly rare” phrase *aeternis legibus* at *Praef.* 3, Juster (p. 80) mingles four instances of *lex aeterna*, two of *lex sempiterna*, and one of *imperia aeterna* with Virgil's *leges aeternaque* (*Georgics* 1.60 [not 1.43 as in Juster's citation]) and Augustine's *aeternis veritatis* (*Enarrationes in psalmos* 110.9), though in the latter two passages the epithet does not modify the cited noun. This collection is too heterogeneous to be helpful: if all the material is pertinent, the onus would fall on the commentator to explain how.

The rhyme of the first couplet unexpectedly gives way to two lines with internal rhyme: “water” and “daughter” point up the antithesis that Aldhelm achieved by bracketing his line with *sole* and *aquosae*; “skies” and “rise” echo the assonance of *-os* in the Latin. Similar examples of sensitive versification abound.

The translation is not literal, as Juster notes (p. x), and there is the occasional obscurity. At 96.9, e.g., an elephant explains he was born ugly but adds: *ecce tamen morti successit gloria formae*, i.e., after death he attains to beauty (through his ivory). Readers may have trouble getting this from “Behold! Death sneaks up on my pulchritude”. Once or twice the translation transcends grammar to a free association worthy of Pound, as at 95.7 on Scylla, where the clausula *ululantia nautae* becomes “wailing sailors”: in the Latin, the participle attaches to *pignora*, Scylla’s dogs figured as howling offspring. Far from being howlers, however, Juster’s deviations from the original typically mirror eccentricities or obscurities in Aldhelm’s own language. The difficulty of expression is part of the point, and through their respective verbal textures, both Aldhelm and Juster provoke a head-scratching engagement with the content of the riddles.

In the preface to his collection, Aldhelm prays for sound scansion along with remittance of sin, as earnest a proselytizer for Latin meter as he is for Christian truth. Juster’s attractive volume may be warmly recommended for conveying the truths that the saint tried to express in a metrical form that he would undoubtedly have approved of.

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