

Anglo-Saxon Onomastics in the Old English *Andreas*

FRED C. ROBINSON

“A CHARACTERISTICALLY ANGLO-SAXON onomastic interpretation” – thus the latest editor of the *Life of St. Ethelwold* describes Wulfstan’s etymology of the name of his saint, “Adeluuoldus . . . , nomine, mente et opere beniuolus.”¹ The annotation is just, and it indicates scholars’ growing awareness of a pervasive onomastic strain in much Anglo-Saxon writing,² a tradition which frequently combines fact with fanciful speculation about the origin of names. (OE *ædel-* does mean “noble, excellent” as Wulfstan assumes, but *-wold* has nothing to do with the verb *wolde* “wished.”) Yet, despite this increasing attention to the Anglo-Saxons’ interest in names,³ there remains in the literature of the period a number of literary problems which ought to be re-examined in the light of medieval onomastics. One such problem is a textual puzzle in the OE treatments of the St. Andrew legend, which I propose to treat here.

At a dramatic moment in the poem *Andreas* the saint rounds on the Devil, who has arisen to accuse him, addressing him in these words:

Hwæt, ðu deofles stræl,
icest pine yrmðo!

(1189–90)⁴

¹ *Three Lives of English Saints*, ed. Michael Winterbottom, Toronto Medieval Texts, ed. A. G. Rigg (Toronto, 1972), p. 38.

² I have tried to suggest the range and importance of this habit of mind in “The Significance of Names in Old English Literature,” *Anglia*, 86 (1968), 14–58, and “Some Uses of Name-Meanings in Old English Poetry,” *Neuphilologische Mitteilungen*, 69 (1968), 161–71. Earlier, Kemp Malone had published several brilliant studies dealing with individual names such as Hygd, Hrethric, Hrunting, and Unferth; for exact titles see the Malone bibliographies cited and supplemented by Thomas Pyles in *Language*, 48 (1972), 503–505. See also Malone’s Presidential Address to the American Name Society, “Meaningful Fictive Names in English Literature” published in *Names*, 5 (March, 1957), 1–13.

³ John Golden has detected “An Onomastic Allusion in Caedmon’s ‘Hymn,’” *Neuphilologische Mitteilungen*, 70 (1969), 627–29, and Roberta Frank reveals onomastic effects in the poets’ handling of Biblical names: see her fine study of “Paronomasia in Old English Scriptural Verse,” *Speculum*, 47 (1972), esp. pp. 216–18. T. D. Hill skilfully integrates onomastics with a typological reading of *Elene* in “Sapiential Structure and Figural Narrative in the Old English ‘Elene,’” *Traditio*, 27 (1971), 159–77. In *Elene*, however, it is probably *Zachaeus* (“justificatus”) which is the relevant name rather than *Zacharias* (“memoria Domini”).

⁴ *Andreas and the Fates of the Apostles*, ed. Kenneth R. Brooks (Oxford, 1961), p. 38.

“Lo, thou devil’s dart, thou increasest thy misery!” The prose homily on St. Andrew reads similarly, “Ana þu heardeste stræl to æghwilcre unrihtnesse. . . .”⁵ In the Greek source which ultimately lies behind these early English versions the devil whom the Anglo-Saxon writers call *stræl* “dart, arrow” is named by his name: Ω Βελία ἐχθρότατε. . . . “Oh Belial most inimical. . . .”⁶ and then a comment is added concerning the meaning of a byname of Belial: πρὸς τί οὖν ἐπικέκλησαι Ἀμαήλ; οὐχ ὅτι τυφλὸς εἶ, μὴ βλέπων πάντας τοὺς ἁγίους; “Why then art thou called Amael [v. l. Samael]? Is it not because thou art blind and dost not see all the saints?”⁷ This subsequent comment is absent from the English versions.

There is then a double discrepancy between the Greek version and the Anglo-Saxon versions of this passage: the latter omit the name-interpretation of the source and they substitute the OE word *stræl* for the name of Belial. Editors of the English texts have passed over the omission without comment but have struggled for an explanation of the odd use of *stræl*. Zupitza suggested that there had been an intervening mistranslation of the Greek text in the Latin intermediary presumed to have been used by the Anglo-Saxons, and Brooks adds that “*deofles stræl* here [in the poem], and possibly *stræl* alone in the OE prose, may perhaps signify one who serves, armed with darts, in Satan’s host” (p. 104). Possibly so, but it should be noted that in the OE poem the association of Belial with the dart is echoed later in another deviation from the extant sources. Whereas the Greek version and the twelfth-century Latin version printed in Blatt (pp. 80–81) simply say that the demons voice the intention of killing Andreas, the OE poet adds a speech for the devil in which he says,

| | |
|----------------------|------------------|
| | Lætað gares ord, |
| earh attre gemæl, | in gedufan |
| in fæges ferð. . . ! | |
| | (1330–32) |

This specification of *gar*, *earh* as the weapon to be used against the saint may argue for some deliberateness in the earlier allusion to Belial as *stræl*.

⁵ *The Blickling Homilies of the Tenth Century*, ed. R. Morris, E. E. T. S., o. s. 58 (London, 1880), p. 241.

⁶ Quoted here from Franz Blatt’s printing of the text in *Die lateinischen Bearbeitungen der Acta Andreae et Matthiae apud anthropophagos* (Giessen and Copenhagen, 1930), p. 78. This entire section of the narrative is missing from the twelfth-century Latin version, the longer and earlier of the Latin versions edited in this volume.

⁷ For the variant Σαμαήλ (for *Sammael*) see *Acta Apostolorum apocrypha*, ed. Constantinus Tischendorf (Lipsiae, 1851), p. 157.

Rather than being a mechanically retained translational blunder, this repeated association of darts with Belial is, I believe, a “characteristically Anglo-Saxon onomastic interpretation” which the English poet, along with his prose counterpart, has adopted in lieu of the name interpretation in the source. I suspect that he consciously and deliberately associated the name *Belial* with Greek βέλως “dart.”⁸ This is not a sanctioned etymology of the name, to be sure; there was in fact a bewildering number of meanings for *Belial* in circulation during the Anglo-Saxon period: *pestilens*,⁹ *absque iugo*,¹⁰ *filius praevaricationis*, *apostata*, *caeca angustia*, *caecum lumen*.¹¹ The latter two of these would appear to have been the meanings known to the author of the Greek version, who speaks enigmatically of the byname of Belial meaning “blind.” The Anglo-Saxon translators discarded this interpretation, possibly because of some uncertainty about the name *Amael*, which in one manuscript appears as *Samael*.¹² Drawing on Greek rather than Hebrew similarities,¹³ they substituted the fanciful interpretation *Belial*: *bélos*, which has an Isidorian plausibility and which, indeed, is no more fanciful than Wulfstan’s rendering of *-wold* in *Ethelwold* or Gregory’s famous onomancy practiced on the names *Angles*, *Deira* and *Aelle*.

⁸ I am not the first to cite the obvious similarity between the proper name and Greek *bélos*; this similarity was the basis of Zupitza’s theory of a mistranslation in turning the Greek text into Latin (see Brooks, p. 104). The novelty of my own explanation is my assumption that identification of Βελλα and βέλως was a deliberate onomastic interpretation contrived by the OE poet or a predecessor.

⁹ See *The Harley Latin — Old English Glossary*, ed. Robert T. Oliphant (The Hague, 1964), p. 27: *Belial* i. *pestilens*. The same rendering occurs in the OE Corpus Glossary as well as others. See *Corpus Glossariorum Latinorum*, ed. G. Goetz (Leipzig, 1894), vol. 5, p. 348, l. 11 and p. 402, l. 36. Cf. also Jerome’s commentary on Ephesians (*P. L.* 26, col. 511), where, following the explication of *Belial*, it is explained how the devil hurls darts before entering a sinner.

¹⁰ Bede, *Com. in I Samuhelem*, Corpus Christianorum, Series Latina, 119, p. 18.

¹¹ Jerome, *Liber interpretationis Hebraicorum nominum*, Corp. Christ., Ser. Lat., 72, p. 154, and *Com. in Naum Prophetam*, Corp. Christ., Ser. Lat., 76, p. 540; Bede, *op. cit.*, p. 26. Modern Hebraists agree with none of these, seeing the name as meaning “without use, uselessness.” A general term of scorn in the Old Testament, *Belial* came to be synonymous with Satan (cf. *Andreas* 1193) in the intertestamental period and after.

¹² See note 7 above. Of course, since the exact form, and even the language, of the Anglo-Saxons’ source-text is unknown, definite conclusions concerning their deviations from the transmitted narrative cannot be drawn.

¹³ It is not uncommon for medieval etymologists to extract multiple meanings based on more than one language when explicating names. I cite one such instance (from Arnoldus’ *Liber de sancto Emmerammo*) in “Personal Names in Medieval Narrative and the Name of Unferth in *Beowulf*,” in *Essays in Honor of Richebourg Gaillard McWilliams*, ed. Howard Creed (Birmingham, Alabama, 1970), p. 44; for extended discussion of such macaronic interpretations see Roswitha Klinck, *Die lateinische Etymologie des Mittelalters* (Munich, 1970), pp. 62–65.

Onomastic embellishment of this kind is not uncommon either in OE prose or poetry. The anonymous OE prose version of "The Avenging of the Savior," contrary to the account in the surviving Latin source, contains a name-change introduced to celebrate the conversion of a Roman prefect, and the significance of the adopted name is spelled out: "... and hyne genemde on þam fulluhte Tytus, þæt ys on ure geðeode arfæst."¹⁴ T. M. Pearce has called attention to a number of onomastic embellishments in Ælfric, and a further instance is discernible, I believe, in the "Martyrdom of St. Vincent,"¹⁵ where the subtle reversal of the roles of Vincent, the triumphant victim, and Datianus, the vanquished persecutor, seems foreshadowed onomastically in the associations *Vincentius: vincere* ("conquer") and *Datianus: datio* ("giving up, surrender").¹⁶ In the poem *Andreas* itself there are, in addition to the passage under discussion here, several hints of onomastic play. I have elsewhere suggested that the poet alludes to the etymologies of *Andrew* and *Israel*,¹⁷ and it seems possible that the phrases *beorhte blican* affixed to *Mambre* (ll. 788–89) and *eadig oretta* affixed to *Dauid* (ll. 878–79) may reflect the etymological interpretations *Mambre: perspicuus*¹⁸ and *Dauid: fortis manu, utique quia fortissimus in proelis fuit*.¹⁹ Seen within the context of this name-play in the poem and of Anglo-Saxon literary onomastics at large, the *deofles stræl* of l. 1189 ceases to look like a textual blemish and assumes the character of other onomastic effects in the poet-translator's total design.

Yale University

¹⁴ *Angelsächsische Homilien und Heiligenleben*, ed. Bruno Assmann, Bibliothek der angelsächsischen Prosa, vol. 3, p. 184. The name interpretation is drawn, no doubt, from some such source as Isidore, who, in *Etymologiae*, V, xxxix, 28, glosses *Titus* with *Hic facundus et pius* [= OE *arfæst*] *fuit*.

¹⁵ *Ælfric's Lives of Saints*, ed. Walter W. Skeat, E. E. T. S. o. s. 114 (London, 1900), pp. 426–43. For Pearce's essay, see *Names*, 14 (September, 1966), 150–56.

¹⁶ Few will doubt that the meaning of *Vincentius* was apparent to Ælfric. Augustine puns on the name (see *Mnemosyne*, 3 [1935–36], ser. 3, p. 39) and Prudentius' fifth hymn in the *Peristephanon* contains numerous plays on the meaning "*vincere*." In the OE account the verb *oferswidan* (which regularly renders Latin *vincere* in glosses and translations) occurs ten times, usually in reference to Vincent. The association of *Datianus* with *datio* is more speculative, but I believe it is reasonable in context.

¹⁷ *Neuphilologische Mitteilungen*, 69 (1968), 162–65.

¹⁸ Jerome, *Liber interpretationis Hebraicorum nominum*, Corp. Christ., Ser. Lat., 72, p. 69.

¹⁹ Isidore, *Etymologiae*, VII, vi, 64–66; Rabanus, *De universo*, P. L., 111, col. 58.