

BUNE 'MAIDEN; BELOVED' IN ANCRENE WISSE

IN a passage on the hound of hell, *Ancrene Wisse* speaks of God's love for man, calling the soul God's dear *bune*. Dickins and Wilson understood this as 'purchase'. Though they noted the Nero manuscript here reads *spuse* 'spouse' (the usual word in this context), they thought *bune* in the sense 'purchase' probably represented the original, since other manuscripts have *bugging* 'buying' and the Latin version has *mercem* 'purchase'.¹ Salu hence translated the sentence, 'When he [the hound of hell], for such a poor price, the momentary satisfaction of a desire, bargains for your soul, God's dear purchase (*godes deore bune*) which he bought with his blood and precious death on the dear cross, always remember the price he paid for it, and judge then of its value and hold it in the higher regard.'² Norman Davis also glossed *bune* as 'purchase', deriving it from Old English *bygen* 'buy'.³ Wada likewise translates it 'purchase'.⁴

Bune elsewhere in *Ancrene Wisse* (and the *Lambeth Homilies*) certainly means 'buying, purchase, expense' (as accepted by *OED*). We hear that one cannot 'have a pair of laced shoes without paying a price (*bune*)', and that the cleanness of chastity is no purchase from God (*ne beo nawt bune ed Godd*), but a gift of grace.⁵ Yet the hound of hell passage may have another solution.

Welsh loans are a feature of the AB language.⁶ There is also a Welsh noun *bun* meaning 'maiden, woman, sweetheart'. Might it be the word in *Ancrene*

¹ *Early Middle English Texts*, ed. Bruce Dickins and R. M. Wilson (Cambridge, 1951), 210-11.

² *The Ancrene Riwe*, tr. Mary Salu (London, 1955), 129.

³ *Early Middle English Verse and Prose*, ed. J. A. W. Bennett and G. V. Smithers, 2nd edn (Oxford, 1968), 456.

⁴ "Temptations" from 'Ancrene Wisse', ed. Yoko Wada (Osaka, 1994), 127.

⁵ Salu, 161, 163; *Ancrene Wisse: Parts Six and Seven*, ed. G. T. Shepherd (London, 1959), 9, 12.

⁶ Bennett and Smithers, 418.

Wisse? The evidence is thus. A North British hero of the seventh-century *Gododdin* is described as *diffun y mlaen bun* 'breathless in the presence of a girl'.⁷ He was a lion in battle but modest and respectful with women. A twelfth-century hymn by Master John of St Davids praises God as creator of 'male and female' (*mascul a bun*), sun and moon, letters on wax tablets, flame on a rush, and 'dear gentle woman' (*bun hygar buir*).⁸ Dafydd ap Gwilym declares (as often) that he is in pursuit of Morfudd, his beloved (*bun*); Cardiganshire records of the 1340s, revealing her unfortunate husband as a man of substance, indicate her rank.⁹ These instances show *bun* (still a Welsh word for 'maid, maiden') was applied to women of some status. We may note too that Middle Welsh *bun* was pronounced with a central [ü] and not the varieties of [i] it has in Modern Welsh.¹⁰

As a standard but dignified term, this word might be used of human souls as loved by God. If *bune* is a loan from Welsh *bun*, treated as a weak feminine noun and meaning 'beloved', it offers a stronger meaning than does 'purchase'. The author of *Ancrene Wisse* would be telling each of his female readers of the infinite value of her soul, seen as 'God's dear beloved (*godes deore bune*) which he bought with his blood and precious death on the dear cross'. *Spuse* in his next sentence, 'May you never thus lightly sell to his enemy and yours his dear spouse who has cost him so much', contains the same idea. The author is there not changing the metaphor (as he would if *bune* meant 'purchase') but repeating it.

If *bune* is a borrowing from Welsh and means 'maiden; female beloved', it allows three conclusions. It reveals the Nero manuscript's *spuse* as near the

⁷ *Getriadur Prifysgol Cymru* (Caerdydd, 1950-2002), 348; K. H. Jackson, *The Gododdin: The Oldest Scottish Poem* (Edinburgh, 1969), 116.

⁸ Marged Haycock, *Blodeugerdd Barddas o Ganu Crefyddol Cymnar* (s.l., 1994), 20.

⁹ Helen Fulton, *Dafydd ap Gwilym and the European Context* (Cardiff, 1989), 214; Andrew Breeze, *Medieval Welsh Literature* (Dublin, 1997), 115.

¹⁰ D. Simon Evans, *A Grammar of Middle Welsh* (Dublin, 1964), 1.

original sense, which is misunderstood in other texts. Their *bugging* 'buying' and Latin *mercem* show they took *bune* as 'purchase' (like modern editors), though the first was clearly puzzled by it. It also underlines the author's emphasis on Jesus as the soul's lover, which goes back to the Song of Songs, but was given new life in the twelfth century by Bernard of Clairvaux and Hugh of St Victor.¹¹ Finally, as another Welsh loan in the AB language, *bune* would tend to locate it near Wales. Scholars like Gelling and Dance (who know no Welsh) perennially cry down this factor, suggesting the AB language could be placed in the West Midlands at a distance from the border regions of Shropshire or Herefordshire.¹² This seems perverse. Welsh loans would surely figure in these texts only if they were written in a region where Welsh was heard each day; like Basque in Pamplona.

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¹¹ Rosemary Woolf, *The English Religious Lyric in the Middle Ages* (Oxford, 1968), 46, 58-60.

¹² Margaret Gelling, *The West Midlands in the Early Middle Ages* (Leicester, 1992), 70; Richard Dance, 'The AB Language' in *A Companion to 'Ancrene Wisse'*, ed. Yoko Wada (Cambridge, 2003), 57-82, at 75 n. 51.

