

# Catherine Winkworth: Translator of Hymns

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Churchgoers may or may not be acquainted with the name Catherine Winkworth (1827–1878) but they will all know the hymns ‘Now thank we all our God’ and ‘Praise to the Lord, the Almighty, the King of Creation’, both of which she translated from German into English. The originals date from the seventeenth century. One twentieth-century critic states that they ‘are sung by British congregations with hardly a thought that they were originally German hymns—which is the measure of the quality of her translations’.<sup>1</sup> Catherine, when in her teens, was tutored in German and other subjects by the Rev’d William Gaskell, a Unitarian minister in Manchester. In 1845 she went to stay with her aunt in Dresden for a year, where she also had German and music lessons. In 1853 she was introduced by the writer Elizabeth Gaskell, the wife of William, to Baron Bunsen, Prussian Ambassador to the Court of Queen Victoria, who had published a collection of 900 German hymns and prayers, *Versuch eines allgemeinen Gesang und Gebetbuchs*, in 1833.

Encouraged by Bunsen, Catherine began to translate hymns from this anthology and in 1855 she published the first series of *Lyra Germanica: Hymns for the Sundays and Chief Festivals of the Year*, which contained 103 translations. Her second series of *Lyra Germanica, The Christian Life*, appeared in 1858 and consisted of 121 translations, largely taken from Bunsen’s collection but also from other sources. Series one ran into twenty-three editions and series two twelve editions. Both series were intended for private devotion. Although they were not set to music Catherine insisted that they be called hymns and not sacred poems—compare the Preface to the *Methodist Hymn Book* (1933) which cites St Augustine’s definition of a hymn as ‘a song with praise to God’. In 1863 in collaboration with the composers William Sterndale Bennett and Otto Goldschmidt Catherine published *The Chorale Book for England*, numbering 200 hymns, largely based on *Lyra Germanica* but including some



from elsewhere. This hymnal was intended in the main for congregational singing.

The Holy Communion hymn ‘Deck Thyself’ (*Schmücke Dich*), which can be found in both the *Lyra Germanica* (*LG*) and *The Chorale Book for England* (*CBE*), has been selected for analysis to illustrate the changes Catherine had to make to her first version for it to be sung to its original German tune. More about the tune will be addressed later. Written by Johann Franck in 1649 in the tradition of Lutheran mysticism, ‘Deck Thyself’ had nine verses, six of which appear in Bunsen’s collection. These same six verses appear in both *LG* and *CBE*, and the verse numbering (see below) follows these collections. However, since the hymn books in use today generally contain only three verses, these are the ones which we shall be considering. In addition, a verse which is not included in these hymnals but which is in both *LG* and *CBE* will be mentioned because of the changes it underwent at Bunsen’s hand.

## Metre and rhyme

In the German version of ‘Deck Thyself’ each verse has eight lines comprising eight syllables, with double rhyming couplets. In *LG* Catherine maintains both metre and rhyme in the first half of each verse but because of her unease about double or feminine rhymes, she changes the metre of the second half of each verse to seven syllables in order to finish the line on stressed syllables (masculine rhyme).

In her preface to the first series of *Lyra Germanica* she writes: ‘in translating these hymns the original form has been retained with the exception that single rhymes are generally substituted for the double rhymes which the structure of the language renders so common in German poetry, but which become cloying to an English ear when constantly repeated.’ In a letter of 11 June 1858 to Richard Massie, translator of *Luther’s Spiritual Songs* (1854) and, later, K. J. P. Spitta’s *Psaltery and Harp* (1860) she justifies alterations to the metre because ‘a hymn that sounds popular and homelike in its own language must sound so in ours if it is to be really available for devotional purposes’.<sup>2</sup> However, the German double rhymes had to be preserved throughout if the hymn were to be sung to Johann Crüger’s music setting of 1649. Crüger’s tune appeared in *The Chorale Book for England* and ‘has ever since been associated with the present words. J.S. Bach and other eminent composers have used this fine tune as a basis for their works.’<sup>3</sup>



**Schmücke Dich**

**[Franck in Bunsen's collection]**

1. Schmücke dich, o liebe Seele!  
Laß die dunkle Sündenhöhle,  
Komm an's helle Licht gegangen,  
Fange herrlich an zu prangen:  
Denn der Herr voll Heil und Gnaden,  
Will dich jetzt zu Gaste laden,  
Der den Himmel kann verwalten,  
Will jetzt Herberg' in dir halten.

2. Eile! wie Verlobte pflegen,  
Deinem Bräutigam entgegen,  
Der da mit dem Gnadenhammer  
Klopft an deine Herzenskammer;  
Öffn' ihm bald des Geistes Pforten,  
Red' ihn an mit schönen Worten:  
Komm, mein Liebster! laß dich  
küßen,  
Laß mich deiner nicht mehr mißen.  
**(Franck)**

2. Eile, wie Verlobte pflegen,  
Deinem Bräutigam entgegen,  
Der mit süßen Gnadenworten  
Klopft an deines Herzens Pforten.  
Eile, sie ihm aufzuschließen,  
Wirf dich hin zu seinen Füßen,  
Sprich: „Mein Heil, laß dich  
umfassen, Von dir will ich nicht mehr  
lassen.“ **(Bunsen)**

Jesu, meine Freud' und Wonne,  
Jesu, du mein ganz Beginnen,  
Lebensquell und Licht der Sinnen!  
Hier fall ich zu deinen Füßen,  
Laß mich würdiglich genießen  
Dieser deiner Himmelsspeise,  
Mir zum Heil und dir zum Preise.

6. Jesu! wahres Brot des Lebens!  
Hilf, daß ich doch nicht vergebens,  
Oder mir vielleicht zum Schaden  
Sei zu deinem Tisch geladen.  
Laß mich durch dies Seelenessen  
Deine Liebe recht ermessen,  
Daß ich auch wie jetzt auf Erden,  
Mög' dein Gast im Himmel werden.

**Lyra Germanica [LG]**

**Deck Thyself**

1. Deck thyself, my soul, with gladness,  
Leave the gloomy haunts of sadness,  
Come into the daylight's splendour,  
There with joy thy praises render  
Unto Him, whose boundless grace  
Grants thee at His feast a place;  
He whom all the heavens obey  
Deigns to dwell in thee to-day.

2. Hasten as a bride to meet Him,  
And with loving reverence greet Him,  
Who with words of life immortal  
Now is knocking at thy portal;  
Haste to make for Him a way,  
Cast thee at His feet, and say:  
Since, oh Lord, Thou com'st to me,  
Never will I turn from Thee.

5. Sun, who all my life dost brighten,  
Light, who dost my soul enlighten,  
Joy, the sweetest man e'er knoweth,  
Fount, whence all my being floweth,  
Here I fall before Thy feet,  
Grant me worthily to eat  
Of this blessed heavenly food,  
To Thy praise, and to my good.

6. Jesus, Bread of Life from Heaven,  
Never be Thou vainly given,  
Nor I to my hurt invited;  
Be Thy love with love required;  
Let me learn its depths indeed,  
While on Thee my soul doth feed;  
Let me here so richly blest,  
Be hereafter too Thy guest.

**Chorale Book for England [CBE]**

**Deck Thyself**

1. Deck thyself, my soul, with gladness,  
leave the gloomy haunts of sadness;  
come into the daylight's splendour,  
there with joy thy praises render  
unto him whose grace unbounded  
hath this wondrous banquet founded:  
high o'er all the heavens he reigneth,  
yet to dwell with thee he deigneth.

2. Hasten as a bride to meet Him  
And with loving reverence greet Him;  
For with words of life immortal  
Now He knocketh at thy portal.  
Haste to ope the gates before Him,  
Saying, while thou dost adore Him,  
"Suffer, Lord, that I receive Thee,  
And I nevermore will leave Thee".

5. Sun, who all my life dost brighten,  
light, who dost my soul enlighten,  
joy, the sweetest heart e'er knoweth,  
fount, whence all my being floweth,  
at thy feet I cry, my Maker,  
let me be a fit partaker  
of this blessed food from heaven,  
for our good, thy glory, given.

6. Jesus, Bread of Life, I pray thee,  
let me gladly here obey thee;  
never to my hurt invited,  
be thy love with love required:  
from this banquet let me measure,  
Lord, how vast and deep its treasure;  
through the gifts thou here dost give me,  
as thy guest in heaven receive me.



## Verb forms

The hymn begins with an exhortation to one's soul to prepare for the Lord's Supper. In verses one and two both the German and the English imperative verb forms indicate this: *LG*, *CBE* 'deck thyself', 'leave', 'come', 'render', 'hasten' etc. In verses five and six the plea is directed to Jesus, asking for a frame of mind fit for the Eucharist and a true understanding of it as a preparation of the heavenly banquet (see *LG* v 5, l.6, 'grant me ...', v 6, l.2, 'never be thou ...', v 6 l.5, 'let me...'; *CBE* v 5, l.6, 'let me', v 6, l.4, 'be thy love ...').

## Vocabulary and Imagery

In both *LG* and *CBE* verse 1, l.2 'haunts of sadness' lacks the sinfulness expressed in the German 'Sündenhöhle' (den of iniquity) but a word was needed to rhyme with 'gladness'. In *LG* v 1, l.6 *LG* 'grants thee at his feast a place' is closer to the original 'Will dich jetzt zu Gaste laden' (invites you to be his guest) than *CBE*'s 'hath this wondrous banquet founded' where the personal element is lacking. *CBE* v 1, l.7 'High o'er all the heavens he reigneth' is a more literal rendering than *LG* v 1, l.7 'He whom all the heavens obey' but the basic meaning of the original has not been changed.

Turning to verse 2, the soul is personified as a bride and is entreated to hasten to meet her bridegroom, Christ, who, in Franck's words, is knocking at the chamber of her heart with his 'Gnadenhammer' (hammer of grace) v 2, l.3. She is also bidden to 'kiss' Him, her 'beloved' v 2, l.7. Bunsen toned down

these vocabulary items presumably out of respect for Victorian decorum. 'Hammer', an implement too coarse to mention in a hymn, is simply omitted. In Bunsen v 2, l.6 the bride 'is to cast herself down at Christ's feet', (not present in Franck's version) and embrace Him, 'lass dich umfassen' (Bunsen) v 2, l.7. 'Embrace', while retaining the idea of affection removes the erotic connotation of 'Liebster' (beloved).

The two English translations of verse two are obviously only being compared to Bunsen's version. *LG* v 2, l.2 'and with loving reverence greet Him' is a good rendering for v 2, l.7 'lass dich umfassen' (let me embrace you). *LG* v 2, l.7. 'Since ... Thou com'st to me' is an addition. *LG* v 2, l.5 'make for Him a way' is slightly less literal than *CBE* v 2, l.5 'Haste to ope the gates before Him' for Bunsen v 2, l.5 'sie ihm aufzuschließen' (open the door to Him). In verse 2, l.2 of *LG* 'Him' translates 'Bräutigam' (bridegroom) for the sake of the rhyme; in v 2, l.7 'Lord' translates 'Heil' (salvation) in both *LG* and *CBE* for the sake of the metre.

In the first half of Bunsen verse 5 emphasis is achieved by the repetition of 'Jesu' (Jesus) at the beginning of the first three lines. He is described as 'Sonne' (sun), l.1, 'meine Freud' und Wonne' (delight and joy), l.2, 'mein ganz Beginnen ... Sinnen' (my whole beginning, fount of life and light of my mind) ll.3–4. In both *LG* and *CBE* the first four lines start with 'sun', 'light', 'joy' and 'fount' respectively. These monosyllabic nouns stress the nature of 'Jesu' though his name is omitted. Whereas 'Jesus' is implicit in *LG*, 'my Maker' occurs in *CBE* v 5, l.5, probably to compensate for the earlier omission,



although 'Maker' refers to God the Creator rather than to God the Son. The last three lines in both *LG* and *CBE* are as close to the original as it is possible to be, albeit with one slight yet highly significant change in *CBE*: to highlight the difference between private devotion and public worship Catherine replaces 'to my good' by 'for our good' in the last line.

In verse 6 *LG* line 2, 'never be Thou vainly given'—'to me' is implied—is a more accurate rendering than *CBE* 'let me gladly here obey thee'. There are examples of both contraction and expansion in lines four to six. The German in line 4 explicitly says 'invited to Thy table'. In both *LG* and *CBE*, 'Thy table' is omitted but it is implicit. In *LG* and *CBE* v 6, l.4 'Be thy love with love requited' does not occur in the German text and is added for reasons of metre. The literal meaning of the German lines 5–6 is 'let me correctly measure thy love through this food for my soul.' In *LG* v 6, l.5, 'let me learn *its* depths' and *CBE* v 6, l.6 'let me measure ... *its* treasure' the possessive pronoun 'its' refers back to 'thy love'.

The intensely religious fervour of the original has been preserved throughout in both the English versions. The few archaisms which occur should come as no surprise in a nineteenth-century translation of a seventeenth-century text. All the original material has been retained in one form or another. The occasional example of padding, i.e. extra wording without any additional information, was necessary for the sake of rhythm and rhyme.

Despite the restrictions of metre with which Catherine was confronted in *CBE* there were only slight differences in

content between this version and *LG*, sometimes the one being closer to the German original, sometimes the other. The fact that she produces two translations of the same passage, each having the same or a very similar impact as the original German text on the reader/singer demonstrates both her dexterity and flexibility.

### Conclusion

There were other accomplished nineteenth-century hymn translators, e.g. Frances Elizabeth Cox, Richard Massie, Miss Borthwick, Mrs Findlater. Nor must people from an earlier age be forgotten, the best known of whom is John Wesley, who translated thirty-three Moravian hymns and who was held in admiration by Catherine, so much so that she deliberately did not translate any hymns already translated by him. However, it was not only the difference in output which contrasted Wesley with Catherine Winkworth, but the fact that his translations were much freer than her painstakingly accurate ones. Despite recurring ill health, Catherine Winkworth translated almost 400 hymns and produced her first volume at the age of twenty-seven. She was not only the hymn translator *par excellence*, a fact acknowledged by every critic, both contemporary and later, but she also showed great discernment as a compiler in her choice of over 170 hymn writers.

The following is a small selection of reviews of her work:



‘Undoubtedly, the greatest of English translators of German hymns is Catherine Winkworth ...

Not for nothing has she been called “The Queen of Translators.”<sup>4</sup>

‘Among these [existing collections of German hymns translated into English] the *Lyra Germanica*, by Catherine Winkworth, is, if a German may judge, not only the greatest favourite with the public, but decidedly the best, especially for private devotion, since it contains both the best hymns and the best renderings.’<sup>5</sup>

‘The translations contained in these volumes are invariably faithful, and for the most part, both terse and delicate: and an admirable art is applied to the management of complex and difficult versification. They have not quite the fire of John Wesley’s versions of Moravian hymns, or the

wonderful fusion and reproduction of thought which may be found in Coleridge. But if less flowing they are more conscientious than either, as poetical as severe exactitude admits, being only a little short of “native music”.’<sup>6</sup>

But what of today? In common with every hymn writer or translator from a bygone age she’s becoming less and less represented in the latest hymn books. To give just one example, in the *Methodist Hymn Book* (1933) twenty-two of her hymns appeared, in *Hymns and Psalms* (1983), which replaced it, ten (including ‘Deck Thyself’ for the first time), in *Singing the Faith* (2011) an update on the latter, just three. ‘Deck Thyself’ has been removed, but alongside ‘Now thank we all our God’ and ‘Praise to the Lord, the Almighty’ Martin Luther’s ‘Aus tiefer Not schrei ich zu Dir’ (‘Out of the Depths I cry to Thee’) has been preserved. Let us hope it will be a long time before these stalwarts suffer the same fate as the others.



### Notes

- 1 Leaver, Robin A., 'English and German Hymnody: Imports and Exports', *The Hymn Society of Great Britain and Ireland*, 12, 4 (1988), pp. 67–8.
- 2 Shaen, M. J., *Memorials of Two Sisters, Susanna and Catherine Winkworth* (London: 1908), p. 181.
- 3 *Companion to 'Hymns and Psalms'*, ed. by Watson, Richard and Trickett, Kenneth (: Peterborough: Methodist Publishing House, 1988), p. 351.
- 4 Rupprecht, O. C., quoted in Leaver, Robin A., 'English and German Hymnody: Imports and Exports', *The Hymn Society of Great Britain and Ireland*, 12, 4 (1988), p. 68.
- 5 Kübler, T., *Historical Notes to the Lyra Germanica* (London: 1865): p. viii.
- 6 Martineau, J., *Inquirer*, 20 July 1878.





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