Revue de Traduction et Langues Volume 17 Numéro 01/2018, pp. 17-23
Journal of Translation and Languages **مجلة الترجمة واللغات**
ISSN (Print): 1112-3974 **EISSN (Online): 2600-6235**

Anxiety in the Old Germanic Life: A Review of Anglo-Saxon Heroic Literature

Dr. Bessedik Fatima Zahra
University of Oran 2 Mohamed Ben Ahmed-Algeria
Laboratory of LMD LEASTD
bessedik.fatimazahra@univ-oran2.dz
0000- 0002-2916-5453

To cite this paper:
Bessedik, F- Z. (2018). Anxiety in the Old Germanic Life: A Review of Anglo-Saxon Heroic Literature Revue *Traduction et Langues 17(1),* 17-23.

Received 26/ 02/ 2018; **Accepted**: 25/ 07/ 2018, **Published:** 31/08/2018

Abstract: *This essay tends to discuss anxiety as a feature of Anglo-Saxon culture. It considers three Old English poems: The Battle of Maldon, The Battle of Brunanburh, and Juliana. Using textual analyses and psychoanalytic theory, the study argues that Anglo-Saxon culture is inherently savage. The analyses demonstrate how Anglo-Saxon ethics idealize tragic heroism and glorify battle. Finally, the study delves on the image of the monster as a metaphor of the Old Germanic unconscious. By reading the image of the demon in Cynewulf's Juliana, the study considers the appearance of the devil as a reflection of the Anglo-Saxon obsession with fear. I argue that the poem, by representing the Devil, ultimately denounces the Anglo-Saxon warrior ethics.*
Keywords: *Old English Literature; Anglo-Saxon warrior ethics; psychoanalysis; The Battle of Maldon; The Battle of Brunanburh; Juliana*
Résumé : *Cet essai vise à discuter de l'anxiété entant que caractéristique de la culture anglo-saxonne. Il considère trois poèmes du Vieil Anglais : La Bataille de Maldon, La Bataille de Brunanburh, et Juliana. En utilisant des analyses textuelles et la psychanalyse, l'étude soutient que la culture anglo-saxonne est intrinsèquement sauvage. Les analyses démontrent comment l'éthique anglo-saxonne idéalise l'héroïsme tragique et glorifie la bataille. Enfin, l'étude se penche sur l'image du monstre comme une métaphore de l'inconscient Germanique. En lisant l'image du démon dans Juliana de Cynewulf, l'étude considère l'apparition du diable comme un reflet de l'obsession anglo-saxonne de la peur. Je soutiens que le poème, en représentant le diable, dénonce finalement l'éthique guerrière anglo-saxonne en soi.*
Mots clés : *Littérature du Vieil Anglais ; Ethique guerrière Anglo-Saxonne ; psychanalyse ; La Baailtle de Maldon ; La Bataille de Brunanburh ; Juliana.*

1. Introduction

In his introductory chapter of *English Literature before Chaucer* (1987), Swanton asserts that the Post-Roman period in Britain was remarkably a period of confusion,

Corresponding author : Bessedik Fatima Zahra

savagery and spiritual malaise[1]. The heroic warrior ethics, as dramatized in the literature of Old English (OE), reveals a psychological limitation of the Anglo-Saxons (AS) that celebrates anxiety, fatalism, and mortal combats. This strict social behavior is discussed in many studies on Old English Literature. By confronting these characteristic features of Germanic mentality, we intend to elaborate upon the Anglo-Saxon period as a "dark age," as it has been qualified by Swanton. Using textual analyses and psychoanalytic theory, I argue that the Old AS culture is inherently savage.

To put forward the gloomy atmosphere of the Anglo-Saxon culture, it is necessary to reflect upon a set of values and rituals which are seriously dramatized in AS heroic poetry. Because the AS heroic culture is vague and difficult to overlap owing to its old historicity, we choose to limit the scope of this paper in consideration of three OE poems *The Battle of Maldon*, *The Battle* of *Brunanburh*, which are eventually recorded in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* (911 A.D), and *Juliana*.

The *Battle of Maldon*, which recounts the victory of a raiding band of the Vikings against the men of Essex, under their heroic leader Bryhtnoth, celebrates the heroic code of honor that obliges a warrior to avenge his slain lord or to die beside him. By analyzing this poem, we demonstrate how AS ethics idealize the tragic heroism of a king and his retainers even when a victory is hopeless.

In *The Battle of Brunanburh*, which recounts the story of an English victory in 937, we intend to illustrate how the Anglo-Saxons glorify bloody battles. While *The Battle of Brunanburh* is a celebration of battle glory, it maintains a sadistic sense of war victory. In that battle taking place somewhere in the Northwest of England, the opposing army consisted in two main forces: the Scots under king Constantinus and the Norse Vikings who came by sea from Ireland under the command of a certain Analf. Finally, in Cinewulf's Juliana, we delve into the image of the monster as a metaphor of the Old Germanic unconscious.

The archetypes of demons, dragons, and evil representations in general are omnipresent in OE literature. *Juliana* is also a historical record; however, it dates back to the period between 970 and 990 A.D. and is preserved in the *Exeter book*. It recounts the story of St. Juliana Nicomedia, who was killed during the reign of Maximianus, the persecutor of Christians. By reading the image of the demon in Cynewulf's *Juliana*, I consider the appearance of the devil as a reflection of the Anglo-Saxon obsession with fear. I will argue that the poem, by representing the Devil, denounces the AS warrior life.

2. Suicidal Loyalty in *The Battle of Maldon*

The Battle of Maldon is typical in its dramatization of a heroic code, that of the retainer's loyalty to his king. This value, as Bruce and Robinson describe it, shows "*a reckless disregard for [the warrior's] life. Whether he was doomed or not"* (136). It has been argued that there is no previous OE Literature that plainly pronounces the idea of suicide as *Maldon* does (Hill 112).

Some critics, however, oppose the heroic ingredient. Swanton, for instance, claims that the poem's heroic dramatization "is not a particularly significant encounter compared with battles that had taken place in previous years" (166). For him, *The Anglo-Saxon*

[1] See for example Hill; Magennis; Bruce.

Chronicle states simply what has occurred and what has not; the only reason the battle of Maldon seems to have been mentioned is that Ealdorman Byrhtnoth had been killed (166). Nonetheless, one would claim that the poem's heroic codes cannot be simply dismissed. Psychoanalytically speaking, a serious dramatization of honor, loyalty, and revenge would suggest that the old Germanic codes represent unconscious phenomena in the Old Germanic life. Writing on these phenomena, hence, represents what Freud has dubbed as the "return of the repressed."

It is by reflecting on the ideals of loyalty and honor that the poem mirrors A.S. societal tradition. Le Goff claims OE literature to be a mirror of its own society in similar direction:

> If it is permissible to define literature, with a certain rhetorical flourish, as a mirror of society, it is nevertheless a more or less distorting mirror depending on the conscious or unconscious desires of the collective soul which is examining itself – depending, more particularly, on the interests, prejudices, sensibilities and neuroses of the social groups responsible for making the mirror and holding it up to society, or at least that part of society capable of seeing, that is, of reading. Fortunately, the mirror is also tendered to us as members of a posterity better equipped to observe and interpret the interplay of illusions. (88)

In the poem, when Byrthnoth dies, some of his retainers reflect their loyalty to the king by following him. Offa's warning before the battle call his companions that they should match to their boasts, that they should maintain their vows and remain loyal companions till death if necessary. As it is modernly translated by Charles Kennedy in his *An Anthology of Old English Poetry* (1960):

> As Offa once said, at an earlier time
> In the meeting-place when he held assembly,
> That many were there making brave boasts
> Who would never hold out in the hour of need.
> (*The Battle of Maldon* 192-195: 166)

Leofsunu, in maintaining his loyalty, says that he will not "flee one foot," but will avenge his lord in the battle (166 192-195). This immediately signals a heroic feature reflected in Beowulf when he declares that he "won't shift a foot" from the dragon, his opponent (*Beowulf* 2524). In drawing this analogy with *Beowulf* who fights courageously his enemy, Leofsunu becomes a clear demonstration of loyalty as a duty and a responsibility in Old Germanic life.

Similarly, Eadweard is said to declare that he will not give up the fight. We learn that he fights until he honorably avenges his lord and lies dead, invoking a Beowulfian ending, as Leodweard did. Death now is the explicit end of loyalty, which we perceive as a heroic paradox. Talking about the idea of death and the afterlife, Kabir's criticism on "paradise" is worth consulting here with respect to loyalty. In his book *Paradise, Death and Doomsday in Anglo-Saxon Literature* (2004), Kabir claims the absence of Anglo-Saxon contribution to literary studies on paradise, heaven, and the afterlife (8). Despite

the fact that the pre-Christian era is ignorant of biblical understanding of the Other World, Kabir reveals that numerous studies and investigations dealing with the concept of hell exist. He maintains as a result that Anglo-Saxon ideas of Paradise and Heaven is not highlighted, perhaps because of the presupposition that the Anglo-Saxons were wholly preoccupied by the horrors and delights which awaited them after Doomsday (9). In relation to our concern, it might be suggested that the AS mentality of honor and loyalty to the war lord advocates a satisfaction in the spirit of warriors that leads them to choose death instead of disloyalty. This paradoxical idea of loyalty, as it opposes our common sense, can be argued to be functioning as a pure ideological phenomenon, in the strict Zizekian sense.

Accoding to Zizek, ideology regulates the relationship between the visible and the invisible, between the imaginable and the inimaginable (1). He claims that it dominates our spontaneous relation to our social world and how we perceive its meaning and enjoy it (1). In this respect, Eadweard' and Leodweard's desire to die even though an ultimate victory is impossible reflect the essence of loyalty as an "imaginary" sacred action. The idea of "paradise," which Kabir claims to be under-studied, can be argued to be integrated in this heroic ideal of loyalty in form of ideology, so to speak.

This heroic value of loyalty to one's lord is significantly set in opposition with the humiliation and the shame of the ungratefulness to the lord. With Godric's fight, we deduce a different definition of loyalty. When Aelfwine, Aelfric's noble son, recalls past boasts in the hall concerning hard battles, he invokes his noble ancestry back to his grandfather to show that he is as noble as his line.

> AElwine spoke, undaunted of spirit:
> "Take thought of the times when we walked at mead
> Seated on benches making our boasts,
> Warriors in hall, concerning hard battle.
> Now comes the test who truly is bold!
> I propose to prove my lineage to all men (*Ibid*, 168-199)

In his declaration, he acts so that no one can rebuke him by saying that he departed from the field on which his lord lies dead. He now commits himself to revenge in an increasingly desperate military situation. For him, he now has resolved a crisis of identity.

According to this line of thought, Hill supports that the poet of *The Battle of Maldon* presents a new standard of loyalty. Retainers choose not to live on, but give raise to a loyalty which he describes as "understandable" (125). Significantly enough, he genuinely relates this instance with that of *The Dream of the Rood,* where the rood is to endure its lord's martyrdom. He says that if there exists a martyr in the poem "it would be the loyal retainer who fights in a hopeless cause, rewarded in life by the new thought that this commitment is noble and that he will lie gloriously besides his dead lord" (127). On the whole, it follows that the AS unconsciousness is heard at an appropriate whisper from the warriors' own way of thought. It can be stated in this concern that the AS mentality is arguably neither consistent nor coherent.

3. Suicide in *The Battle of Brunanburh*

If we encounter suicidal loyalty in *The Battle of Brunanburh*, it remains less significant; rather, a sense of battle glory is honorably put into view. This does not deny that the poem celebrates a heroic ideal which describes an atmosphere of blood, barbarism and fierceness. In the poem, while the battle takes place, it prolongs for a whole day, which causes an overflow of the warriors' blood. Interestingly, Hill shortly states that in the victory over the enemy, the poem bears "something like sadism" (102). He says that the tone is grimly aggressive. Departing from Hill's remark, one shall demonstrate the cultural recession of the Anglo Saxons. In so doing, I may stand on theoretical evidence using Freudian theory of *sexual aberration*, which relates to the notion of sadism. Though Freud's theory is associated with sexuality, it serves to give a fresh look at AS civilization as neurotic.

Freud claims that during the development of the human character, it might be projected a psychoneurotic illness, which he calls aberration, a deviation from the innate desires with which a child is born. He claims that this deviation leads inevitably to the construction of masochism and sadism, working towards pain that generates pleasure. The fact that the dead Scotsmen lie weary of battle reminds us of Grendel's weariness after the battle with Beowulf. In this regard, Grendel's death raises a subjective sympathy to a certain extent. In the case of Brunanburh, however, a vaguely erotic pleasure of bodily humor, mixed with land defense obligation, is being provoked, which we might think of as an exaggeration. The next scene is more convenient. After the enemies are fallen apart, we are told that greedy beasts came to feed on the enemies:

> They left behind them to feast on the fallen
> The dark raven, the dusky-coated
> The dark raven, the dusky-coated
> With horny beak, and the ash-feathered eagle
> With white tail, and the war-hawk greedy
> Growing on carrion, and that gray beast,
> The wolf in the wood. Nor of greater slaughter
> (*The Battle of Brunanburh* 160:46)

This reference even functions as to maintain the sense of who the losers and winners are, rather than simply an expectation of battlefield defeat. The beasts which feed rapaciously from the enemies express a sadist atmosphere of the Anglo-Saxons. Theoretically, it is necessary to mention that the first notion related to sadism in Freud's account is the notion of the unconscious, which is *"part of our mind beyond consciousness which nevertheless has a strong influence upon our actions*" (Barry 96). To put this in context, one can easily confirm that the Anglo-Saxons are weary of the unconscious itself.

To say more on this, the last verses of the poem connect between Asthelstan, Edmund and the original conquerors of Britain, as a matter of pride. It is said that no mortal combat has proceeded since the Anglo-Saxons came. This fully justifies the presence of violence as part of history of the Anglo-Saxons. It apparently maintains the state of those who are trapped by fate and who suffer the consequences of a heroic code that demands fight like beasts.

4. The Demon as the Unconscious in *Juliana*

As we are to evaluate the mood of the Anglo-Saxon life, it is worthy to consider the concrete image of the evil in OE poems. It is generally distinguished that beasts, wild creatures, demons and dragons are omnipresent in the Anglo-Saxon Literature. This account is not empty from the representation of the demon. Unlike the famous figure of Grendel ot the dragon in *Beowulf*, the demon in *Juliana* is not silent but plays an important role in telling information within the narrative poem. When the demon first enters the cell where Juliana is imprisoned, he is identified as people's enemy and the creator of evil. The demon here bears an attitude associated with Satan. The adversary, hence, is the source of all evil in the world.

It is in this connection that one attempts to attest the AS obsession with darkness. In doing so, Derridian concept of *difference* is worth noting in our context. In setting Beowulf against Grendel or Juliana against the demon, a strong binary opposition of good vs. evil/ Self vs. Other is being projected. Setting an opposed side upon another acknowledges *per se* a mode of hierarchy where one side (good, pure, moral…) is privileged in favor of the Other (bad, impure, immoral...). This is obviously shown when Juliana and the demon carry a war of words, which Juliana clearly dominates. She manipulates the demon and forces it to confess all of its sins several times, which results in humiliating him forever in its kingdom. This logocentric idea, I suggest, may serve in projecting a preoccupation of the AS mind with the devil. Following this reasoning, the logocentric structure created through inserting the devil in OE discourse, which is an imaginary figure, is to put for us in an act of difference, a seemingly actual fact taking place in the Anglo-Saxon frame of mind. Thus, it generally reflects a quality of feeling dominated by anxiety in the general sense.

What I previously pointed to is also problematic. Opposing the good with the devil immediately calls attention to theological issues which contradicts the nature of a pagan belief. But this is no longer a contradiction if to insert Swanton's statement:

> Early medieval Europe had no alternative but to externalize its personal and institutional neuroses, and the monsters provided a convenient mechanism for fear, then as now. Whatever their origins, physical or mental, it is clear that such monsters represent an evil that could, and should, be encountered and opposed. (55-6)

Yet, the Christian perspective of *Juliana* particularly tends not only to denounce the nature of the AS mentality, but also appraises its failings. For example, Juliana, the Christian heroine, is not attracted by the treasure Eleusius presents for her, and hence, refuses to it as it dominates the warriors' mentality as a whole. Relying upon Hugh Magennis' *Image of Community in Old English*, one may safely argue that the image of the Satan or whatever demon creature is to reflect the evil side of the Anglo-Saxons themselves.

Magennis asserts that feasting and drinking are widely known as signs of corruption, wickedness and secularism, but in *Juliana* they "fit more fully than in other Old English poem into a repudiation of standard of heroic life" (86). In supporting this, he says that the evil side of the pagans emerges from their hall rituals and, the figure of the demon comes to supervise their destructive heroism relatively. This is plainly shown when the

devil admits that he is the source of their evils. According to Robert Key Gorden's modern translation in his *Anglo-Saxon Poetry*, the demon says:

> Some I have led by counsels, brought them to strife, so that on a sudden, when drunk with beer, they revived old grudges; I proffered them enmity from the goblet, so that in the wine hall by the sword they, doomed to die, stricken with torments, let their souls hasten from their bodies" (*Juliana* 173).

The drink in the mead-hall comes to be an actual mean of destruction in the AS life. On the light of this, we might see now the great standing of the life in the mead-hall in *Beowulf* as deceptive. It is revealed that warriors in the mead-hall pursue an illusory kind of happiness.

5. Conclusion

In conforming to ethos that has unified a people during a period of age, societal calamities have been identified. Under the name of honor and heroism, an entire culture has been argued to be primitive and backward. *The Battle of Maldon*, *The Battle of Brunanburh* and *Judith* have much to say about the "dark age", so to follow Swanton's words. Both literally and metaphorically, the Anglo-Saxons undeniably witnessed a world of anxiety, terror and horror.

References

[1] Barry, P. (2002). *Beginning Theory*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.

[2] Bruce, M & Fred, C. R. (1999). *A Guide to Old English.* 5th Ed. Oxford: Blackwell.

[3] Gorden R- K. (Ed/Trans. 1959.). *Juliana.* Anglo-Saxon Poetry. London: The Aldine Press.

[4] Greenblatt, S & Gunn, G. (Eds. 1992). *Psychoanalytical Criticism. Skura,* New York: The Modern Language Association of America,

[5] Le Goff, J. (1980). Peasants and the Rural World in the Literature of the Early Middle Ages, In A Goldhammer. Chicago (Trans.). *Time, Work and Culture in the Middle Ages*. The University of Chicago Press, 87–97.

[6] Kabir, A- J. (2004). Paradise, death and Doomsday in Anglo-Saxon Literature. Cambridge: C.U.P.

[7] Magennis, H. (1996). *Images of Community in Old English Poetry.* Cambridge: Cambridge UP.

[8] Mitchell, B & Fred, C-R. (1986). A Guide to Old English. Oxford: Basil Blackwell Ltd.

[9] Swanton, M. (1987). *English Literature before Chaucer.* NY: Longman.

[10] Hill, J-M. (2000). *The Anglo-Saxon Warrior Ethic: Reconstructing Lordship in Early English Literature*. Florida: UP of Florida.

[11] Kennedy, CH-W. (Ed/Trans. 1960). *An Anthology of Old English.* Oxford: Oxford U.P.

[12] Zizek, S. (1994). Mapping Ideology. New York: Verso.