

## A Perusal of Alterity in Old English Poetry

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### Abstract

Anglo-Saxon heroic poetry expresses a great admiration and interest in the main components of the heroic lifestyle known among the Anglo-Saxons like the Comitatus, the Lord, and the Warriors as well as people's ethics, such as loyalty, courage, self-denial, blood vengeance, and wergild. While this suggests that modern readers can understand and reconstruct the cultural texture of the Anglo-Saxon culture by reading Anglo-Saxon poetry, this paper contends that the Anglo-Saxon culture constitutes a state of alterity for modern readers and that Anglo-Saxon literature is dominated by that atmosphere of alterity, which makes understanding Anglo-Saxon culture through reading its literature a speculation-based task. Relying on Jauss's and Borrow's opposing perspectives about the alterity of medieval literature, this paper analyzes some excerpts from Beowulf, the Wife's Lament, and other Old English poems to prove that such narratives do not completely display the Anglo-Saxon heroic culture; thus, reading the heroic poetry of the Anglo-Saxons does not always result in a full understanding of the Anglo-Saxon culture.

**Keywords:** Alterity, Anglo-Saxon heroic culture, Beowulf, English poetry, the Wife's Lament.

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## قراءة "الغربة" في الشعر الانجليزي القديم

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### ملخص

يعبر الشعر الانجليزي عن إعجابه الشديد بالمكونات المختلفة لنمط الحياة البطولي المعروف في حضارة الأنجلو-ساكسون من خلال التغمي بالعصبة والزعيم والبطل وبأخلاقيات بطولية كالولاء والشجاعة ونكران الذات والتأثر والديّة. لكن، وفي الوقت الذي يظن فيه القارئ أن بإمكانه فهم الحضارة البطولية الأنجلو-سكسونية من خلال قراءة الشعر الانجليزي القديم، تعرض هذه الدراسة حقيقة أن الحضارة الأنجلو-سكسونية "غريبة" بطبعها عن القارئ المعاصر مما يجعل فهم الحضارة الأنجلو-سكسونية من خلال قراءة الشعر الانجليزي القديم والمكتوب عنها عملية ظنية بامتياز. اعتمادا على نظريتي "يوس" و "بارو" في غرابة الأدب القديم، تحلل الدراسة بعض المقطوعات من قصيدة "بيوولف" و قصيدة "رثاء سيده" وغيرهما من قصائد الأدب الانجليزي القديم لإثبات أن هذه القصائد لا تعرض بشكل كامل الحضارة البطولية لذلك العصر القديم وبالتالي فان قراءة أشعار تلك الحقبة الزمنية لا تفوق بالضرورة إلى فهم شمولي للحضارة السائدة آنذاك. الكلمات المفتاحية: "الغربة"، الحضارة البطولية الأنجلو-سكسونية، "بيوولف"، الشعر الانجليزي، "رثاء سيده"

## **Introduction:**

Anglo-Saxon poetry is the available written documentation of the sort of oral Germanic culture that has dominated England since the fifth century (just about the year 450) to the twelfth century (i.e. the Roman Invasion in 1066). That culture is displayed in Anglo-Saxon poetry since *Widsith*, a poem that is dated back to the 6th c., (Chambers, 1912, p. 5; Malone, 1962, p. 10; Hedeager, 2011, p. 182) until the *Battle of Maldon*, a poem that is dated back to the 10th c. (Irving, 1961). Such poems express a great admiration and interest in the main components of the heroic lifestyle known at that time as the *Comitatus*, the Lord, the Warriors, the Mead-hall, the Ring-giver, the harp, the hawk, the hounds, and the swords as well as the social ethics of people at the time such as, loyalty, courage, self-denial, blood vengeance, and *wergild* (Pollington, 2011). Doing this, Old English poetry portrays the lifestyle of the Anglo-Saxons and their Germanic as well as Scandinavian ancestors (Chambers, 1912; Bowra, 1952; Gwara, 2008, pp. 185-192). What manifests this medieval heroic lifestyle is heroes' love of battles and hate of peace, their appreciation of courage and damnation of cowardice, their exchange of gifts for heroic deeds, and their excessive devotion to fame (Hedeager, 2011). This cultural perspective, as Bowra (1952, p. 90) writes, "demands that a short life should be rewarded by an undying renown." That is to say, the heroic code that is celebrated in Old English heroic poetry represents the commandment in light of which the Anglo-Saxons used to live, behave, and judge their morals, ethics, traditions, and manners.

This suggests that reading Anglo-Saxon heroic poetry from *Widsith* to the *Battle of Maldon* reflects the past socio-cultural foundations of the pre-Christian Anglo-Saxon community. In his introduction to *The Written World: the Power of Stories to Shape People, History, and Civilization*, Martin Puchner (2017, pp. xvii) argues that some works, Anglo-Saxon heroic poetry in our case, keep gaining "power and significance over time until they [become] source codes for entire cultures, telling people where they came from." In the same vein, R. M. Liuzza (2000, p. 17) states, "the poet [i.e. the *Beowulf* poet in particular, the Anglo-Saxon in general] looks back on a world long vanished, imaginatively bringing its textures and values to life."

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Relying on this, Vanesa Matajc (2007) sets literature as superior to historiography in terms of documenting and reflecting past cultures. Matajc writes that "literature and literary history reveal themselves as political force...by recording unemplotted events, which thus avoids narrativity and also offers the recipient the opportunity to disperse the historical chronology of events into simultaneous component parts" (p. 115). Furthermore, "literature's advantage over historiography", Skamperle writes, is that a "literary text provides the voice of the historical character, who comes alive in our minds. It creates mental places that casually connect events that are not part of history or have not been recorded" (quoted in Matajc 2007, p. 117). In short, most critics of Anglo-Saxon heroic poetry believe that reading an Anglo-Saxon piece like *Beowulf* or *Judith* enables modern readers to fully understand the Anglo-Saxon culture and its Germanic roots.

While this viewpoint is insightful and inspiring as it encourages readers of Anglo-Saxon literature to go beyond the text and make use of it beyond literary values, establishing the cultural texture of the Anglo-Saxon culture by reading its poetry is too hard, if not impossible. Taking into consideration that Anglo-Saxon culture by default constitutes a state of alterity for modern readers and that Anglo-Saxon literature, in consequence, is dominated by that atmosphere of alterity, understanding Anglo-Saxon culture through reading its literature becomes a speculation-based task. This paper argues that Anglo-Saxon poetry does not completely display the heroic culture in which and for which such poems have been composed; consequently, reading the heroic poetry of the Anglo-Saxons does not always result in a full understanding of the Anglo-Saxon culture. To this end, it is significant to get an idea of what "alterity" means and why it is viewed by some authoritative critics, such as J. A. Burrow (1979) and Emmanuel Levinas (1999), as an inevitable critical approach for reading Anglo-Saxon literature (Melaney, 2017).

## **The Concept of Alterity**

In their essay, "The Alterity and Modernity of Medieval Literature", Hans Robert Jauss and Timothy Bahti (1979, p. 182) argue that when reading,

[O]ne becomes aware of the astounding and surprising otherness of the world opened up by the text. In order to become conscious of this otherness of a departed past, a reflective consideration of its surprising aspects is called for, an activity which methodologically entails the reconstruction of the horizon of expectation of the addressees for whom the text was originally composed.

This means that understanding an Anglo-Saxon poem demands that modern readers restructure the aesthetic values and artistic pleasure principles of the Anglo-Saxon people, a process that entails reconstructing the Anglo-Saxons' literary culture and its Germanic origin.

While this practice seems genius, it obviously implies that modern readers need to understand the various poetically artistic devices of Anglo-Saxon poetry in order to get an idea of the culture that has produced them. This is very risky, in Hans-Georg Gadamer's viewpoint, as "in the process of active understanding, the contrast of horizons [i.e. the medieval and the modern] must be led on to the fusion of the past horizon of aesthetic experience with the present one." (Jauss and Bahti 1979, pp. 182-183) This is very catastrophic, as Jauss and Bahti (1979, p. 183) believe, because there is no guarantee in advance that the fusion of horizons will succeed. [Thus] the initial aesthetic pleasure of the text can finally disclose itself as a naïve, modernizing pre-understanding, and the first aesthetic judgment of unreadability can also prove to be incapable of being overcome. Then the text...drops out of the canon of contemporary aesthetic experience.

In short, Jauss and Bahti as well as some other critics of "Alterity" do not believe that understanding medieval culture through scrutinizing its literature is possible at all because the differences between the medieval and modern aesthetic standards are undefeatable.

On the contrary, J. A. Burrow (1979) rejects the notion that modern, aesthetic standards differ from their medieval equivalents. He argues that not only "modern methods" can usefully be applied to medieval literature,

but also they are peculiarly appropriate to it." (p. 387) Burrow's viewpoint stems from sort of a structural/ intertextual background that takes in modern literature as an extension of medieval literature. Burrow (1979, p. 387) explains, they [medieval texts] present an impersonal, conventional face to the reader—more like the face of a building than of a person. The typical medieval love lyric, for instance, seems much more like a product of the tradition, or the code, of love poetry than the work of an individual writer.

This suggests that medieval literature is inseparable from modern ways of creative writing and critical thinking; therefore, to claim that medieval English literature is alien to modern readers is nonsensical, as Burrow (1979) believes.

Relying on these two perspectives of "alterity" of medieval English literature, this paper revisits some Anglo-Saxon poems like *Beowulf* and the *Wife's Lament*, and argues that the structural scaffold of such poems in particular, Anglo-Saxon literature in general, is neither as alien as Juass (1979) suggests nor as accessible as Burrow (1979) suggests. Rather, it is culturally alien, still narratologically accessible under specific regulations.

### **Discussion:**

Generally speaking, *Beowulf* depicts the many heroic phases of life in the Anglo-Saxon world. It introduces the materialistic phase of that heroic world as a combination of the various components of war and heroism, such as weapons, horses, ships, and halls. It also introduces the ethical phase of that world as a combination of certain ideals like loyalty, generosity, gifts exchange, courage, and prowess. These elements seem familiar to modern readers nominally, but there is no guarantee that the modern conceptualization of such elements and ideals is identical or, at least, similar to the medieval one. Loyalty, for instance, is defined in the Oxford English Dictionary as, "a strong feeling of support and allegiance." "Allegiance" is defined as "[the] commitment to a superior or to a group or cause." The words that define these two terms are understandable and evocative for modern readers, but this does not necessarily mean that such words have had the same value for English people in medieval Britain. Loyalty, for

instance, is always associated with different aspects of life and behaviors, such as patriotism, religiosity, family relations, love, friendship, etc. Nevertheless, its modern concept and reverberations are descriptive and socially ornamental while they are socially generative for medieval people, as evident in some Old English poetry.

Beowulf, for example, views loyalty as the golden cord that generates, motivates, and designs the various heroic aspects and behaviors of the Anglo-Saxon people. It is the generator of Beowulf's desire to pay back his father's debt to Hrothgar, thus fighting against Grendel and his mother on behalf of that Danish king. It is the generator of Beowulf's men's decision to risk their lives for the sake of their lord and his glory, thus accompanying him in his fatal journey to the Danes land. Also, it is what causes the Danish coastguard to speak on behalf of his defeated king and stay obedient to him despite the political turmoil at the time. Moreover, it is what causes Grendel's mother's sadness and empowers her revenge for her son. In addition, it is the motive of Beowulf's revenge for the death of Hengulac and the motive of Wiglaf's insistence to help Beowulf in his fight against the Dragon. In short, loyalty is presented as the motive that causes the main actions of Beowulf, and it is the foundation of the existence of such a heroic lifestyle. Without it, there will not be Beowulf the hero, his comitatus, his friends, or his enemies, and there will not be vengeance, courage, self-denial, or heroism in the Anglo-Saxon culture at all.

In contrast, loyalty in the modern sense is not generative; rather, it is socially descriptive. For instance, patriotic loyalty in modern societies demands that the citizens of a certain country are willfully ready to serve their nations and sacrifice themselves and whatever they have on its behalf. Nonetheless, the lack of that readiness does not annihilate the concept of citizenship. Regardless of the reasons of why we have such a case in modern societies, patriotic loyalty for Anglo-Saxon people has potentially never been separable from citizenship or one's existence. In the Wanderer, the Anglo-Saxon warrior cries: "Wretched, I tie my heart with ropes / Far from my home, far from my kinsmen / Since a hole in the ground hid my

chief / Long ago."\* The loss of the lord causes the loyal Anglo-Saxon warrior to cry out of pain, suffer loneliness, and experience a level of madness as he tries to find his lord, whom he has already buried, somewhere else. He knows that such a task is impossible except in dreams; therefore, he falls asleep and

It seems in his heart that he holds and kisses  
The lord of the troop and lays on his knee  
His head and hands as he had before  
In times gone by at the gift-giver's throne.  
When the friendless warrior awakens again  
He sees before him the black waves,  
Sea birds bathing, feathers spreading,  
Frost and snow falling with hail.  
The wounds of his heart are heavier,  
Sore after his friends. Sorrow is renewed  
When the mind ponders the memory of kinsmen;  
He greets them with joy; he anxiously grasps  
For something to say. They swim away again.

While this seems similar to our emotional response to the loss of a dear person, the poem shows the Wanderer's sorrow as an existentially permanent rather than an emotionally temporal case. The Wanderer poet reports, "The way of fate changes the world under heaven. / Here is treasure lent, here is a friend lent, / Here is a man lent, here is a kinsman lent. / All of the earth will be empty!" The speaker thinks of the earth as an empty place that has no value without his lord and companion warriors. But why is all this? Basically, it is because the speaker considers the death of his lord and companion warriors a form of self-effacement as well as a loss of personal value, identity, and existence. The Wanderer declares,

Laden with cares,  
Weary, I crossed the confine of waves,  
Sought the troop of a dispenser of treasure,

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\* The modern translation of "The Wanderer" throughout this paper is Jeffrey Hopkins' (1977), which is found in *VQR: a National Journal of Literature and Discussion*, Spring 1977.



Far or near to find the man  
Who knew my merits in the mead hall,  
Who would foster a friendless man,  
Treat me to joys. He who has put it to a test  
Knows how cruel a companion is sorrow  
For one who has few friendly protectors.  
Exile guards him, not wrought gold,  
A freezing heart, not the fullness of the earth.  
He remembers warriors, the hall, rewards,  
How, as a youth, his friend honored him at feasts,  
The gold-giving prince. Joy has perished

In short, the Wanderer's loyalty to his lord and comitatus causes him to cry and wander like a mad person looking for people whom he has buried with his own bare hands. From a modern perspective, the Wanderer is mad for behaving in such a way, but from a medieval perspective, he is crying for losing what used to form his own identity and make his existence valuable. This difference of perspective between the medieval and modern societies makes reconstructing the medieval understanding and usage of patriotic loyalty hard, if not impossible, for modern readers.

Another example about the impact of that difference of perspective between Anglo-Saxon people, on the one hand, and modern readers, on the other, is evident in the *Wife's Lament* (Also known as the *Wife's Complaint*). In this poem, the female speaker laments the absence of her husband thus,

...my Lord forsook his kinfolk—left,  
crossed the seas' wide expanse, deserted our tribe.  
Since then, I've known only misery:  
wrenching dawn-griefs, despair in wild tides ...  
Where, oh where can he be? <sup>\*†</sup>

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\* The modern translation of the Old English *Wife's Lament* throughout this paper is Michael R. Burch's, which is found in *The HyperTexts* (2010) on <http://www.thehypertexts.com/>

These lines express the female speaker's experience of longing to her husband, which is possibly the same emotional experience of some women in the modern society when their husbands are absent for awhile or for good. The obvious universality of this experience makes it possible for modern readers to engage with the Anglo-Saxon text and be able to reconstruct the sort of emotional context of the actions that take place in the poem. The woman speaker is basically worried about her absent husband, thus asking where he can be!

While this seems promising, the sort of familiarity displayed in the first three parts (stanzas) of the poem is abruptly stopped. After stating in the last line of the third stanza that her heart seems as if it is "broke", the female speaker of the poem starts the forth stanza saying "Then my Lord spoke: / 'Take up residence here'." Interestingly ambiguous, the Old English word "hlaford", which is translated here as "Lord", can be translated into not only "my lord/husband" but also into "the Lord", "the master of servants", and "the male head of the household" (Wiktionary: the Free Dictionary). This suggests that the female speaker is talking either to her husband, the master of her servants, the male head of her household, or to God, the Lord.

Regarding the first probability, it seems that the woman is not talking to her husband simply because he is absent. Regarding the second and third probabilities, they are also impossible because the poem reveals later that the woman speaker is now alone. She says: "I was penniless, friendless; / ... I felt lost!" Thus, the last probability becomes the only possible one: she is probably addressed by the Lord, God. Regardless of why and how that woman is addressed by God the Lord, it is interesting that in the next stanzas, the woman speaker meets "a well-matched man" in that place, as decreed by her "hlaford", but finds later that man "ill-starred, unkind, / with a devious mind, / full of nefarious intentions, / plotting some crime!" Could that man be God's agent or messenger for that woman? This is impossible, in light of the Anglo-Saxons' conventional portrait of the deity as the prince of glory, the master of mankind, the glorious all-ruler, heavenly guard, and the healer, as evident in many Anglo-Saxon poems like the Dream of the Rood, Beowulf, and Cadmon's Hymn. In other words, taking in "hlaford" as God the Lord in this poem is nonsensical, as it attributes to God the act of plotting against the woman speaker, a hypothesis that collides with the

Anglo-Saxons' religiously conventional doctrine. Then the question is: who has ordered the woman speaker to stay in that place where she is found by the evil man? The poem does not say anything in this regard, the reason for which "the correct interpretation of 'the Wife's Lament' is [taken as] one of the more [sic] hotly debated subjects in medieval studies" (Ramsay, 2011, p. 51).

However, the rest of the poem heavily stresses the fact that the woman speaker's ideal loyalty to her lost husband is what generates the woman's misery as well as the vagueness of her articulated lament. The woman laments her lot thus,

How the injustice assails me—my lord's absence!  
Elsewhere on earth lovers share the same bed  
while I pass through life, half dead,  
in this dark abscess where I wilt in the heat, unable to rest  
or forget the tribulations of my life's hard lot.

Obviously, the absence of the man is defined by the woman speaker as a form of injustice and a state of death, which makes of her case an equivalent to that of the Anglo-Saxon Wanderer who depicts the death of his lord as a form of self-effacement and loss of identity and existence. In the last stanza of the poem, the woman speaker says,

Now, like a criminal exiled to a distant land,  
groaning beneath insurmountable cliffs,  
my weary-minded lover, drenched by wild storms  
and caught in the clutches of anguish, moans and mourns,  
reminded constantly of our former happiness.  
Woe be it to them who abide in longing!

The speaker is madly sad because she is thinking of her lost husband's misery rather than of her own. She views her loyalty to him as a reflection of his loyalty to her and her suffering and longing as mirror images of his own. Consequently, when expressing her love and loyalty to her absent husband, the woman is unconsciously fusing the past with the present, which causes her narrative to look vague and alien.

Considering the modern concept of familial loyalty, one may understand why the experience of the woman speaker in the Wife's Lament is alien to modern readers. Undeniably, marriage in modern societies is a

social institution that requires a sort of loyalty but does not fully depend on it. Loyalty is one of the main aspects of the ideal husband-wife relationship, but its absence does not necessarily result in demolishing the entire institution of marriage or family. There are many marriage cases in which either the husbands or the wives are not loyal to their partners; nonetheless, their lack of loyalty does not cause the collapse of their families. Possibly, familial loyalty in the modern society is not a priority, which is the exact opposite of the value of loyalty in the medieval period. Therefore, to apply the modern understanding and usage of familial loyalty does not explain the Anglo-Saxon usage of such a concept. Thus, the woman's loyalty to her lord or husband in the *Wife's Lament* may seem similar to some women's hard experience when losing their husbands; nevertheless, the woman's madness in the poem makes of her loyalty to her lord a model that a few, if any, can realize and imitate.

## Conclusion

The difficulty of grasping the sense of loyalty of the woman speaker in the *Wife's Lament*, the male speaker in the *Wanderer*, and *Beowulf* and his men does not necessarily suggest that the Anglo-Saxon people used to interact with their surroundings differently from modern people. Rather, it indicates that the modern English language does not fully express the sense of its Old English equivalent. The profound usage of heavily loaded words like "hlaford", as explained above, in some Old English poetry, such as *Beowulf* and the *Wife's Lament*, complicates the narrative texture of such poetry and makes exploring their cultural reverberations and themes very alien to modern readers. Also, the Anglo-Saxons' use of undefined words, such as god and goldwine, which potentially imply Christian and non-Christian referents, makes it hard, if it is possible at all, to speak with certainty about the Anglo-Saxon culture, especially before the official advent of Christianity to Britain in the 7<sup>th</sup> century.

Still, this is not to say that the modern reader should not consider Anglo-Saxon poetry as well as other medieval literatures seriously. Instead, it is to clearly state that when reading medieval literature in general, Anglo-Saxon heroic poetry in particular, one should keep in mind that identifying and decoding the narrative as well as artistic devices of a poem like *Beowulf*

does not necessarily lead into a full understanding of its factual and cultural texture. When reading *Beowulf*, readers may successfully decipher the poem's magnificent usage of language and may consequently achieve a relatively satisfactory understanding of its artistic world. Yet, this does not necessarily help in reconstructing accurately the authentic, historical and cultural scaffold of the laments, revenges, marriages, and fights that constitute the essence of that poem in particular, Anglo-Saxon English poetry in general.

The lack of the accurate cultural and historical information about Anglo-Saxons' England as well as its medieval and continental background makes identifying the real world of *Beowulf* and other heroic poems of Old English an impossible task. In fact, the temporal and cultural distance between the past and the present constitutes a cultural gap between medieval English poetry and modern readers, which complicates Anglo-Saxons' literature and culture and makes them hard to understand. With the absence of the original medieval mind (i.e. the poet who composed the poem and the listener to whom the poem was primarily composed) and the absence of any factual, historical and cultural references, the Anglo-Saxon culture displayed in a poem like *Beowulf* will always be immune against modern readers' efforts to fully understand that culture or reconstruct it. Despite the Anglo-Saxon poet's skillful usage of Old English and its artistic devices, the Anglo-Saxon culture will always be weird (inaccessible, unimaginable, and unverifiable) to the modern reader.

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