Depicting Cultural Construction in Old English Selected Poems

Assist. Lect. Sara Faisal Madhloom

College of Education - University of Al-Qadisyah

saraf.madhloom@qu.edu.iq

Dr. Hiba Meteab Faja

College of Education - University of Al-Qadisyah

hibam.sultan@qu.edu.iq

Abstract

The Anglo-Saxons had a notable stretch over the remarkable history of England, and the cultural aspect was so overwhelming to the extent that it spread almost over the literary works of the period. This topic of Anglo-Saxon England has attracted considerable scholarly attention due to its significance in understanding and appreciating the cultural construction of this historical period. An interesting aspect of Anglo-Saxon literature is its representation of social, political, and religious influences through the use of Old English poetry. The best way of knowing the cultural construction is by examining the pieces of literature that actually survived from that period, represented by Bede's *Ecclesiastical History of the English People* and the four remaining manuscripts, especially the *Nowell Codex* manuscript. These selected texts which include the Book of Judith, the poem of Juliana, and the epic of Beowulf provide insight into the cultural and societal norms of Anglo-Saxon England while shedding light on topics such as individual roles, religious beliefs, and the concept of heroism. Through a comprehensive analysis of these texts, we can gain a deeper understanding of the cultural nuances and values that shaped Anglo-Saxon society. Ultimately, this investigation aims to illuminate the dynamic interplay between literature and culture, highlighting the ways in which Old English poetry reflects and shapes the cultural construction of Anglo-Saxon England.

Keywords: Anglo-Saxons, Juliana, Book of Judith, Beowulf, Christianity, Paganism, Heroism, and individual's role.

تصوير البناء الثقافي في قصائد مختارة من الشعر الإنكليزي القديم

م.م. سارة فيصل مظلوم

كلية التربية ــ جامعة القادسية

saraf.madhloom@qu.edu.iq

د. هبة متعب فجه

كلية التربية ــ جامعة القادسية

hibam.sultan@qu.edu.iq

الملخص

امتد وجود الأنجلو-ساكسون و بشكل ملحوظ على جزء كبير من تاريخ إنجلترا الحافل ، و كان الجانب الثقافي ملهما و مؤثرا للغاية لدرجة أن تأثيره انتشر تقريبا على الأعمال الأدبية في تلك الفترة. جذب موضوع الأنجلو-ساكسونية في إنجلترا اهتماما علميا كبيرا نظرا لأهميته في فهم وتقدير البناء الثقافي لهذه الفترة التاريخية. كما و ان أحد اهم الجوانب المثيرة للاهتمام في الأدب الأنجلو-ساكسوني هو تمثيله للتأثيرات

الاجتماعية والسياسية و الدينية من خلال استخدام الشعر الإنجليزي القديم، لتصبح الطريقة الأمثل لمعرفة البناء الثقافي هي عن طريق فحص القطع الأدبية التي نجت من التلف و الضياع بالفعل من تلك الفترة، و التي تتمثل بما تركه التاريخ الكنسي للشعب الإنجليزي و المخطوطات الأربعة المتبقية، و خاصة مخطوطة نويل. توفر هذه النصوص المختارة و التي شملت كتاب جوديث، قصيدة جوليانا و ملحمة بيولف، نظرة ثاقبة للمعايير الثقافية و المجتمعية في إنجلترا الأنجلو-ساكسونية بينما تلقي الضوء على موضوعات مثل الأدوار الفردية و المعتقدات الدينية و مفهوم البطولة. من خلال تحليل شامل لهذه النصوص يمكننا اكتساب فهم أعمق للفروق الثقافية الدقيقة و القيم التي شكلت المجتمع الأنجلو-ساكسوني. في النهاية يهدف هذا التحقيق إلى إلقاء الضوء على التفاعل الديناميكي بين الأدب والثقافة، و تسليط الضوء على الطرق التي يعكس بها الشعر الإنجليزي القديم بما يشكل البناء الثقافي لإنجلترا الأنجلو-ساكسونية.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الأنجلو-ساكسون، جوليانا، كتاب جوديث، بيولف، المسيحية، الوثنية، البطولة، و دور الفرد.

Introduction

Around the fifth and sixth centuries, there happened a change regarding the Roman Empire in their conquered place of settlement, which is Britain, that resulted in a radical change in their current place of residence and in different levels of economic, political, and cultural. The structure of the state was hence changing, not only the economy of the Roman state collapse but the language itself witnessed, rather, an abandonment change. Thus, as the Latin language was gradually being abandoned a new age began, it is that which marks what is known as the "Dark Ages".[1]

This unstable state of Britain resulted in it being under the pressure of many different invasions. Such invaders were resembled by the Germanic tribes, who as a place of their settlement took the south and the east, thus settling not only as invader tribes but bringing with them their language and their culture which was different from those who had been invaded, in that, it was a pagan culture. While those of the land, known as the Celts, were driven to the highland areas and the west. Both of these territories, however, formed a kingdom of their own though small in number yet they strived to survive both in body and in spirit even if it meant expanding at the expense of the much weaker neighboring territories. [2]

The country was a mixture of those who descended with great numbers who were the Jutes, the Saxons, and the Angles. Yet, each held the limits of their territories as being distant and different from the other. As a matter of fact, Essex, Wessex, and Sussex were the settlement places of the invaders, while East Anglia, Northumbria, and Mercia were the settlement places of the Angles. Hence, resulting in disunity but at the same time remarkable unity. The invaders are having unity in being pagan but they are having disunity so as to their individual characteristics. Their disunity is "reflected in the cultural differences that continued throughout the Anglo-Saxon and Middle English periods". [3]

Nevertheless, these differences are to be settled with the passing of time, resulting in one of the greatest nations. The England nation was therefore formed by those Germanic tribes, that once had their separate kingdoms but later on, around the eleventh century, "the kingdom of England had been born".[4]

Not to mention that one of the reasons for this later unity was due to them being under the wing of one religion, which is Christianity. All kingdoms one by one converted to the religion of Christianity as it was spreading over the island from Canterbury. That movement of converting one's religion was initially done by missionaries in Kent in 597, who were sent by Pope Gregory the Great as St. Augustine.[5]

Despite their differences there happened to be a harmony in a kind that is much relative to their own culture, which is found much in the literature they provided, the oral one, represented by the genre of poetry. Though untitled and anonymous, medieval poetry had special characteristics of its own. The poet had richness, mastered difficulty in language, preserved a perfect harmony between what was considered to be strange and what was familiar, and maintained the well-ordering of lines in the verse and effects according to certain structures and principles. One of the best representations of the briefly mentioned mastery is the heroic epic of *Beowulf* which is written in the form of Old English poetry. [6]

Old English poetry is the literary form of expression of the Anglo-Saxon culture in England during the period from the 5th to the 11th centuries. It is characterized by its rich oral tradition and the extensive use of alliteration. The subject matters of Old English poetry vary largely, ranging from heroic and epic narratives to the inclusion of religious and moralistic themes. Such poems were often recited and narrated at the court or certain gatherings, and some were even intended for the performance of religious rituals. In fact, the form and structure of Old English poetry were highly influenced by Germanic and Scandinavian traditions. Moreover, it was affected by the Christian ideology which gradually became prominent in England during the period. Additionally, Old English poetry played a crucial role in preserving the history and cultural identity of the Anglo-Saxon people, providing valuable insights into their beliefs, values, and social structures.

The Cultural Construction of Anglo-Saxon

Judging the English race by its wondering nature and earliest forms of primitive culture, it is proper to say that the kind of literature that the race presented was mostly oral, which had a tendency of being easily memorized. And "[l]ike oral poetry in general, it is essentially an art of preservation rather than of innovation", thus focusing on preserving all aspects of culture as they are, was mostly based on the "using and re-using [of] traditional materials".[7]

In fact, Old English poetry had distinctive features of its own. Though it reflected aspects of the Anglo-Saxon culture but at the same time it maintained its own distinctive aspect which is that of being deductive. People were called upon to hear a poem narrated and would put in mind the expectation that if they were to follow the same steps as the hero of the poem they would get what he would get. Fame, for instance, was sought by people who believed to achieve it if they were to follow the same steps of *Beowulf*. Though narrating the adventures of its hero, who bears the same name as the title of the poem, the poem as well reflects the cultural aspects of religion stressing both "Christian and pagan moralizing". [8]

Almost all Old English poetry survived in the manuscripts that have been documented by the monasteries at the time. And though this suggests the works to be narrated and documented from a man of religion perspective, the preserved works had their original touch of paganism, which was as well to be preserved. [9]

The matter of whether these works were originally written by men of the religious order, laymen, or noblemen is of much debate, yet the poet who is well known for his originality in mastering his piece is none other than Caedmon. Whose use of words shows him to possess exploitation of the "epic vocabulary". For instance, he uses the word "Dryhten" to refer to God, but where it was originally used, for instance as in *Beowulf* this word referred to another meaning, which was the "lord of a warband". [10]

Thus, it is mostly acknowledged that Caedmon possessed poetic skills that are mostly applicable to Christian stories. This suggested the magnificent arena that Old English poetry had among monastic life. As Caedmon entered to the arena of that religious call he offered only his poetic skill as he provided poetic representation of stories and the history he was presented to at that monastic place he belonged to. [11]

If it was to show one representative feature, the hymn of Caedmon would show dedication to God. In fact, within the whole nine lines of the poem, where the poet speaks of how now is the time to honor the "Lord Almighty", "eternal Lord", "heaven-kingdom's Ward", and " the work of the Glory-father", there exist eight epithets for God, leaving only a little space for a brief mention of a prayer of praising God, which is followed by the miracle of creation in its two stages of creating the sky first followed by the land. In fact, the poem shows the creation as a form of miracle to those "early readers" of the early race. The story of that "adult man suddenly acquiring the gift of poetry" was one of the rather modest miracles the people were acquainted with. [12]

In fact, the miracle was not only acquainted to people but it was part of the saint's religious order. There was an aim within that order to provide a "model for Christians to follow", there was also an attempt of promoting the cult of the saints "by demonstrating divine signs of his or her holiness". The holiness of a saint was

thought to continue after death as well, not only demonstrated in life. Usually, this holiness was in connection with the physical remains as hair, bones, and clothing, since

> [i]t was not merely a literary type. The abiding physical presence of the saint in his or her relics and their potential for miracles were such an essential part of a cult that religious foundations went to great – and sometimes scandalous – lengths to secure them. [13]

As a matter of fact, there were works that documented the life of the saints as drawn from Latin sources, which would show a conventional plot of a saint's life. One such work is the poem of *Juliana,* the virgin martyr, who goes against her father's wishes of marrying a wealthy man, after which she was subjected to cruel treatment as her being imprisoned and afterward executed. [14]

By exploring Old English poetry, especially the poems of Juliana, the Book of Judith, and Beowulf, one can discern the intricacies of the cultural construction of this era. For instance, on considering the portrayal of female figures and their agency in these texts, can shed light on the societal roles and expectations placed on women. Moreover, the depiction of heroes and their valor underscores the values of loyalty, courage, and honor that were highly esteemed in Anglo-Saxon culture. Therefore, a thorough understanding of the cultural construction in Anglo-Saxon England can illuminate and enrich our knowledge of this historical period.

The representation of women characters in the literary pieces is much related to the way they were actually treated and considered by the race they existed in. The role of the leading figure would be that of the family man, not the woman. Yet, her existence was not diminished altogether because acknowledgment of her existence meant as well acknowledgment of her cultural role and what she represented.

Although she was of secondary position after man she had a role in society, whether in its religious aspect or even political as being one form of peacemaker between the tribes or as being a subject herself worthy of mentioning in religious poems as the briefly mentioned or in poems kept in manuscripts as the Book of *Judith* that is found in the same *Beowulf* manuscript, which presents a "traditional Anglo-Saxon imagery" that depicts the Christian world of people at that time.[15]

Thus depicting both cultures within its lines, *Judith* represents the most idealized image of that time in reflecting the pagan and Christian cultures. This further suggests the idea of incorporating the story of *Judith,* which is considered to be written by an unknown author, into the Old Testament making the text to be "both Anglo-Saxon and Christian in nature". Thus, the poem offers an example of life as

it was lived in the rooted traditions of Anglo-Saxons and the teachings of Christianity.[16]

Therefore, a form of corporation was made, a corporation between the Old Testament and the cultural aspects of Germanic society and Anglo-Saxon tradition. One such form of cooperation was the use of animal imagery, which was completely secular in nature but later adapted for religious themes as the religious writers were encouraged to incorporate animals, especially the wolf, the eagle, and the raven, into their stories, and afterward mixing it with their Christian symbols.[17]

Moreover, there is a shift from implementing pagan beliefs to the inclusion of Christianity, which was considered a significant cultural transformation in Anglo-Saxon England. In fact, before the introduction of Christianity, the Anglo-Saxons used to follow a polytheistic system of belief, meaning they worshiped various pagan gods and engaged in rituals associated with their beliefs. However, with the spread of Christianity in the area, there was a gradual, steady abandonment of these pagan practices, which are replaced by the adoption of Christian values and teachings. This transition is evident in the Old English poetry of the period, which often reflects Christian themes and ideals. The poem of Juliana, for example, portrays the eponymous saint as a symbol of Christian piety and steadfastness. Similarly, the Book of Judith illustrates the contrast between pagan beliefs and the emerging Christian worldview, emphasizing the triumph of Christian values in Anglo-Saxon society. Thus, these texts serve as literary records of the cultural construction of Anglo-Saxon England during the shift from paganism to Christianity.

The story of *Judith* is mostly taken from some Hebrew origin. The manuscript, however, had lost its opening section and what has remained is the crisis of the story and its overwhelming part, in which Judith, the beautiful Jewish widow, was called upon by Holofernes, the Assyrian general, who with his Assyrian army held the Jews as captives. As she entered his tent she had no intention of being his, which resulted in her act of beheading the general and in a pictorial description as she slit his throat with the laying sword sending that now lifeless body of his to a deep sleep. After this she escaped the camp and returned to Bethulia where she told the warriors of what happened, thus encouraging them to have their vengeance and victory fulfilled, which they do, leaving her thus to end the poem with a "prayer of submission and praise" to God.[18]

Judith thus represents a new heroic ideal which is a feminine one, which in a part shows the Anglo-Saxon thought and their ideology regarding women in history and life. Nevertheless, some readings of the text further suggest it to be more ironic than what it really presents. In the sense of considering that the main appeal of the story is the irony of having one of the fearful lords to be slain by a woman of a fragile nature who makes more prayers as she helps her people to gain a new life, and

eventually, that woman became venerable not for mere piety but for the murderous act of hers.[19]

Nevertheless, she remains one of the best examples of the Anglo-Saxon women at that time and in fact, a significant example that shows strength in the belief in God and confidence in that faith of Christianity. For these reasons and for the value *Judith* has, monasteries and religious people often found refuge in *Judith* whenever they wanted their people to have strength after a drought or an invasion, and especially they wanted the women to have some sort of solace in the figure of *Judith*, the thing that strengthens the appeal to Christianity even more, as she represents the myth of resistance, the champion of God. Thus showing the "*comiatus* bond" as being a "warrior *thane*", who seeks refuge in the high order as she prays

I bid wish, you then, God of created things and Spirit of consolation,
Son of the Lord,
Mercy of thine to me in my need,
Glory of the Trinity. Severely now in my Heart inflamed
(...) Grant me Prince of Heaven,
Victory and true faith, that I with this sword be allowed
To kill this bestower of the crime; grant me my success. [20]

In both poems Juliana and the Book of Judith, women are depicted as strong and calculating individuals who defy societal norms and expectations. In Juliana, the eponymous character is depicted as an unwavering, steadfast Christian martyr who stands up against the oppressive Roman emperor and refuses to surrender her faith. She takes the role of a preacher and spokesperson for Christian values. Similarly, in the Book of Judith, the protagonist Judith is portrayed as a brave and resourceful woman who saves her people from the impending danger of the Assyrians. She uses her beauty and intellect to seduce and ultimately decapitate the enemy general, showing her prowess and intelligence. These depictions of women as powerful figures challenge the traditional notion of women as submissive and passive, ultimately reflecting the cultural construction of Anglo-Saxon society in Old English poetry.

Religion was hence the most overwhelming aspect of the Anglo-Saxon culture; their literary pieces draw on that almost at every turning point. Even in the most pagan pieces, Christianity is there to be embedded. For instance, *Beowulf* is quite a representation of that. The heroic epic poem though pagan in detail but is embedded with Christianity, and the aspect of this religious order are overwhelming through its techniques and even details. Be it in symbolism or imagery, Christianity had its place in the work and that made the most vibrant example is that of the killing of

Abel by his own brother Cain, which was used so as to enhance the monstrous nature of the Grendel monster who "bore the curse of the seed of Cain/ Whereby God punished the grievous guilt/ of Abel's murder". [21]

In the milieu of Old English poetry, Beowulf surfaces as the epitome of heroism, embodying the ideals of Anglo-Saxon society. His character possesses the physical strength that is required to defeat formidable, daunting adversaries, as Grendel and the dragon, but it is his honorable courage and a firm commitment to justice and loyalty that define him as a hero. Beowulf's heroic characteristics are evident through his willingness to risk his own life for the well-being of his people and his tenacious pursuit of the ultimate glory and reputation. Furthermore, Beowulf's interactions with other characters showcase his exceptional generosity and hospitality, traits that are highly regarded in Anglo-Saxon culture. As such, Beowulf serves as a symbol of heroism, for his actions reflect the values cherished by the society he epitomizes, cementing his place as the definitive example of heroism in Old English poetry.

In fact, the epic of Beowulf is quite a representation of the Anglo-Saxon culture, not only in reflecting aspects of religion and paganism but in reflecting people's beliefs altogether. Since the culture of people is highly connected to their place of residence, the Anglo-Saxons took most of their beliefs from their surrounding nature, the forest, and the mysteries it held within its dense trees. They believed in sacrifices offered at the alters, and they believed in the healing power of the shamans, who were "men or women who specialized in cures and rites". [22]

Yet mostly they believed in their gods, the gods that have been brought along the way with the Germanic invaders, after which the naming of the days of the week are to be held as they follow the sun, the moon, the war-god Tiw, Woden the god of divination and the dead, the storm-god Thunor, and the fertile Friya. Such documentations as mentioned by Bede were in fact, colored with "accounts of paganism in Mediterranean lands". [23]

This belief in the supernatural is widespread in the Old English poetry of the Anglo-Saxons. It was most accepted for that race to hear about Beowulf slaying a dragon and to know that one of his thanes was devoured by a Grendel. The way of narrating these killings as a matter of fact, within its layers holds the strength of representing one of the important cultural aspects which is the preparation of one to indulge in a battle which is that of weaponry and armory preparation. Best reflected in the third part where Beowulf and his thanes were welcomed at Hrothgar's court

As the troop in their wr-gear tramped to the hall.
The sea-weary sailors set down their shields,
Their wide, bright bucklers along the wall,

(...)Shod with iron and shaped of ash.
'Twas a well-armed troop! Then a stately warrior.[24]

Yet, the most important cultural aspect must be that which reflects the nature of relation that held the people together, the relation of all to one and of man to lord than to man's family. It was not only a matter of cultural custom, rather it was a matter of one's achieving the fulfillment of his identity, it was a matter of finding a belonging spot within the disjoined society at the time. *Beowulf* depicts that sort of relationship on multi-levels, yet the most striking aspect of that relation can be seen near the end of the story where his *thanes*, who are supposed to remain by his side slaying the dragon together leave him alone. In fact, they did not only leave their lord and identity, they as well left their hope for a better life since the moment those supposed followers left Beowulf's side it was the moment they held captives of their own shame and disgrace. [25]

However, there remains a mentioning of a turning point in that cultural aspect just mentioned, the aspect in which people start to seek a more heavenly Lord rather than an earthly lord. Even King Alfred was later to acknowledge the fact regarding those so-called lords and thanes, in which he stresses by himself "how kings, beneath the splendor of their royal garb, are no different from those who serve them". As if to say the moment those kings are to strip off their royal clothing one would see them to be very much similar to those working and serving under their commands, if not maybe even worse. [26]

In fact, that same thought was under the scope of later poetic works following *Beowulf* as *The Wanderer* and *The Seafarer*, where indeed the same question remains so as where are all those who have gone before us now? Where are they? And what good their belongings could possibly do to them? Actually, this last aspect of belongings to be buried with the dead lords is a quite significant aspect, one that is highly appreciated and fulfilled to the utmost sense, since it folds an important cultural, social, and religious ceremonial sense, a sense that is so appreciated to the extent that the burial ceremony to those lords is made with them being sent to the sea alongside their own ships as a sign of respect which holds within it a more elegiac sense of the most grief tone which is that of departing a king, a lord, and an identity. Where

The men of the Weder folk fashioned a mound
Broad and high on the brow of the cliff,
Seen from afar by seafaring men.
Ten days they worked on the warrior's barrow
Inclosing the ash of the funeral flame

(...) sang their dirge and spoke of the hero vaunting his valor and venturous deeds

So its proper a man should praise
His friendly lord with a loving heart
When his soul must forth from the fleeting flesh. [27]

Thus, in the Old English poems of Juliana, the Book of Judith, and Beowulf, the moral values and ideals of Anglo-Saxon England are vividly depicted. These poems reflect the cultural construction of the time, highlighting the importance of virtues such as courage, loyalty, and honor. In Beowulf, for example, the titular hero is praised for his bravery, willingness to sacrifice for his people, and commitment to upholding his moral duty. Similarly, in the Book of Judith, the eponymous character's unwavering determination and resourcefulness serve as a testimony to the Anglo-Saxon ideals of courage and wit. Juliana, on the other hand, presents a strong female protagonist who remains steadfast in her devotion to her Christian faith, demonstrating the value placed on religious devotion in Anglo-Saxon society. Overall, these poems serve as valuable historical and cultural artifacts, providing insights into the moral compass and behaviors of Anglo-Saxon England.

Conclusion

The Anglo-Saxons had a distinctive way of living, acknowledging their belonging to a collectivity of both invaders and original settlers. This collective identity was evident in their vibrant culture. The selected texts reflect certain aspects of the life people of Anglo-Saxon England, such as the social relations that exist between the lord and his thanes, and appreciation of life and death, as reflected in the way they treated their dead and the way they appreciated the belongings of the dead.

In their culture, the role of women though was of secondary importance in comparison to men, yet her role was not neglected. Aside from her having a moral stand as *Judith* or *Juliana* women were part of the court, at a time they would be mentioned in a courtesy move as Wealtheow's welcoming move where she offered Beowulf the food by her very hands, or as being mentioned in war as a peacemaker, mitigating an expected feud.

These aspects of culture were best depicted through the fragments of the texts that were reserved, most respectively Bede's *History* and the four manuscripts, that truly show the cultural construction of Anglo-Saxon England as it was and as it is best known today.

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Notes

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[4] Nigel Saul, *The Oxford Illustrated History of Medieval England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 5.

[5] Donald Scragg, "Introduction" *Literary Appropriations of the Anglo-Saxons from the Thirteenth to the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000) Ed. Donald Scragg and Carole Weinberg, 21.

[6] J. B. Trapp, *Medieval English Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973), 11.

[7] Ibid.

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[11] Daniel Donoghue, *Old English Literature A Short Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), ix.

[12] Ibid., 57-58.

[13] Ibid., 60.

[14] Ibid., 61.

[15] Sarah E. Eakin "The Synthesis of Anglo-Saxon and Christian Traditions in the Old English Judith" *MSL Academic Endeavors, ETD Archive. Paper 837.* 2013, iv.

[16] Ibid., 1-2.

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[20] Sarah E. Eakin "The Synthesis of Anglo-Saxon and Christian Traditions in the Old English Judith" *MSL Academic Endeavors, ETD Archive. Paper 837.* 2013, 51, 84.

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[23] Ibid.

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[25] R. D. Fulk and Christopher M. Cain *A History of Old English Literature* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2003), 194.

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