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THE "FEARFUL SYMMETRY" OF *MALDON*: THE APOCALYPSE, THE POET, AND THE MILLENNIUM

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The trouble critics have had with *The Battle of Maldon* is a reflection of the poet's ambiguous attitude toward his ostensible hero, *ealdorman* Byrhtnoth. Frederick Whitehead wrote that "Le profane qui aborde pour la première fois la *Bataille de Maldon* a l'impression de lire un panégyrique de ce Byrhtnoth."¹ True—the elements of traditional Germanic heroic poetry which had been dormant for so long seem to find their revival in this poem written near the turn of the millennium.² But also true is the peculiar tone of the poem engendered by the often remarked upon phrase employed by the poet in reference to the leader of the Essex: "folc: for his ofermod."³ If *Maldon* is an occasional poem commemorating the heroic but ultimately doomed stand of the English against Scandinavian heathen invaders, the poet's posthumous criticism of the English leader seems to present us with a jarring contradiction. In the past, the fulcrum of this see-saw argument over the poem's ultimate condemnation or approbation of Byrhtnoth was the modern English gloss of *ofermod*. That *ofermod* is a term of opprobrium no longer seems to be a stance against which one can argue convincingly. Helmut Gneuss's definitive study of the word's meaning has ended all reasonable debate that

¹Frederick Whitehead, "Ofermod et desmesure," *Cahiers de Civilisation Médiévale* 3 (1960): 116.

²Early convictions that the poem must have been the composition of an observer of the battle have given way to more convincing arguments that the poet was not at Maldon and composed the poem sometime thereafter. For the argument that the poem is a *much* later composition, see John McKinnell, "On the Date of *The Battle of Maldon*," *Medium Ævum* 44 (1975): 121–36, who posits that *eorl*, the Old English rendering of the Old Norse *jarl*, can be used as a linguistic test for the date of the poem.

³*The Battle of Maldon*, ed. E.V. Gordon (Manchester: The University Press, 1976), line 89. All references to *Maldon* will be from this edition and cited parenthetically by line number in the text.

the word means anything other than "pride."⁴ Still, some critics have persisted in maintaining that *ofermod* must have some other less condemnatory connotation—the text itself, they complain, calls for a different meaning.⁵

And it certainly seems true that the nagging contradiction between the poem's heroic accoutrements and the poet's criticism of his hero may lead us to "only conclude that the poet has blundered into a logical contradiction."⁶ Generally, critics have placed themselves into one of two camps: the poet charges Byrhtnoth with *ofermod*, therefore the poem represents a highly ironic and ambivalent attitude toward the heroic past; or, *ofermod* in no way represents a criticism, and the poem extols the heroic virtues of the traditional Germanic *comitatus* and perhaps even suggests the martyrdom of a saint.⁷ This polarization has the effect, I believe, of denuding the poem of the very tone of ambivalence and sense of contradictory passions which are in question and which lie at the center of the poem's artistry. But now that the philological battle has been won by those advocating the "traditional" meaning of *ofermod*, critics should turn their attention to the question of exactly what the poet meant to impart. The dichotomy of critical opinion on the poem is largely misplaced—rather than focusing upon the question of panegyric versus ironic and condemnatory backward-gance, as so many have attempted before, we should examine the question of the historical versus the literary.

Let us consider the poem and historical realities separately. In the poem, Byrhtnoth is first seen commanding his men to drive away

⁴Helmut Gneuss, "The Battle of Maldon 89: Byrhtnoð's *Ofermod* Once Again," *Studies in Philology* 73 (1976): 117–37. In Gneuss's longer study of the poem, *Die Battle of Maldon als historisches und literarisches Zeugnis* (München: Bayerische Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1976), 13, he unequivocally states that "eine sorgfältige Prüfung der sprachlichen Evidenz macht deutlich, daß das Wort hier wie auch sonst im Altenglischen die Bedeutung von lateinisch *superbia* hat: Byrhtnoth hat in Stolz un Selbstüberschätzung gehandelt, und das geht auch aus *landes to fela* in *Ziele* 90 hervor."

⁵See, for example, George Clark, "The Battle of Maldon: A Heroic Poem," *Speculum* 43 (1968): 52–71; George Clark, "The Hero of Maldon: Vir Pius et Strenuus," *Speculum* 54 (1979): 257–82; N.F. Blake, "The Battle of Maldon," *Neophilologus* 49 (1965): 332–45; N.F. Blake, "The Genesis of *The Battle of Maldon*," *Anglo-Saxon England* 7 (1978): 119–29.

⁶George Clark, "The Hero of Maldon," 259.

⁷For the "traditional" interpretation of *ofermod* (and its implications), see J.R.R. Tolkien, "The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth, Beorhthelm's Son," *Essays and Studies by Members of the English Association* 6 (1953): 1–18. Also, see F.J. Battaglia, "Notes on 'Maldon': Toward a Definitive *Ofermod*," *ELN* 2 (1964–65): 247–9. See N.F. Blake for the position that the poem is modelled on the *vitae* of saints.

their horses and to array for battle. He then engages in a witty rhetorical duel (very nearly stichomythic) with a Viking messenger who offers peace in exchange for tribute. The opposing armies are separated by the waters of the Blackwater estuary, so Byrhtnoth sends three men—Wulfstan, Ælfhere, and Maccus—to hold the narrow causeway which connects to the opposite bank. This they easily maintain. Then the invaders ask to be granted passage over the causeway, and Byrhtnoth grants their request. The outcome is a disaster for the English: Byrhtnoth is killed; many of his men flee, and the loyal retainers are apparently slaughtered to a man. Now, we should turn to the historical. The surviving copies of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* which have entries for the battle agree in two aspects: *ealdorman* Byrhtnoth was killed at Maldon, and, in consequence of the defeat, tribute was first paid on the advice of Archbishop Sigeric. The Parker (A) manuscript tells us that "Her on ðissum gearre com Unlaf mid þrim & hund nigontigon scipum to Stane & forhergedon þæt onytan & ða ðanon to Sandwic & swa ðanon to Gipeswic & þæt eall ofereode & swa to Mældune," [In this year came Olaf with 93 ships to Folketone, and they harried that area and from thence to Sandwich and so then to Ipswich and overran all that and so to Maldon].⁸ MSS C, D, E, and F do not refer to "Unlaf" as the Scandinavian leader or to his armada of ninety-three ships. Moreover, MSS C, D, E, and F record the battle under the annal for the year AD 991, whereas the A-version places its occurrence in AD 993. It has been generally recognized that the account in MS A represents a conflation of events that occurred in the years AD 991 and AD 994.⁹ However, Byrhtferth of Ramsey—an abbey near Maldon to which Byrhtnoth donated lands—authored a nearly contemporary account of the battle in the *Vita Oswaldi*:

Transactis non plurimis mensibus, factum est et aliud fortissimum bellum, in oriente hujus inclytæ regionis, in quo primatum pugnae tenuit gloriosus dux Byrihtnodus cum commilitonibus suis. Quam gloriose, quamque viriliter, quam audacter incitavit principe belli suos ad aciem, quis urbanitate fretus potest edicere? Stabat ipse, statura procerus, eminens super cæteros, cujus manum non Aaron et Hur sustentabant, sed multimoda pietas Domini fulciebat,

⁸Janet M. Bately, "The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle," in *The Battle of Maldon, AD 991*, ed. Donald Scragg (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1991), 37.

⁹See J.B. Bessinger, "Maldon and the *Óláfsdrápa*: An Historical Caveat," in *Studies in Old English Literature in Honor of Arthur G. Brodeur*, ed. Stanley B. Greenfield (Eugene: University of Oregon Press, 1963), 24. See also Bately, 42-7.

quoniam ipse dignus erat. Percutiebat quoque a dextris, non reminiscens cigneam canitiem sui capitis, quoniam elemosinæ et sacre Missæ eum confortabant. Protegebat se a sinistris debilitationem oblitus sui corporis, quem orationes et bone actiones elevabant. Cumque pretiosus campi ductor cerneret inimicos ruere, et suos viriliter pugnare, eosque multipliciter cædere, tota virtute cœpit pro patria pugnare. Ceciderunt enim ex illis et nostris infinitus numerus, et Byrhtnothus cecidit, et reliqui fugerunt.¹⁰

[After a few months passed, another great battle was fought in the east of this great region, in which the glorious ealdorman Byrhtnoth, with his personal retainers, held command. What sophisticated writer could describe how gloriously, how bravely, how boldly the war-leader encouraged his men to the battle? He himself was tall of stature, standing above the rest. Aaron and Hur did not 'stay his hands': it was the Lord's manifold mercy which sustained them, because he was worthy of it. He struck blows from his right side, not remembering the white hair of his head, since alms and holy masses comforted him. He protected himself on the left-hand side, oblivious to the weakness of his body, for prayers and good deeds elevated him. When the great champion saw his enemies rush forward and his warriors manfully falling in great numbers, he began to fight for his country with all his might. An infinite number of them and us fell; and Byrhtnoth fell, and those remaining fled.]

Just as the poem harmonizes with the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* in reference to the location of the battle and the death of Byrhtnoth, the *Vita Oswaldi* relates a detail also found in the poem. The poet calls Byrhtnoth a "har hilderinc" (169) [hoary battle-warrior], and the *Vita* also remarks upon the grey-haired warrior: "Percutiebat quoque a dextris, non reminiscens cigneam canitiem sui capitis." Indeed, the poem is adorned with the façade of history—it reflects what we might consider to be an "historical record." But it seems to me that much criticism has overlooked the literary aspects of the poem in an attempt to elevate its status as such a record. At one time, scholars considered the poem to be an eyewitness account of the battle.¹¹ In response to this once dominant view, George Clark raised the question, "what is our authority for the speeches and events after the

¹⁰*Vita Oswaldi*, ed. James Raine, *The Historians of the Church of York and Its Archbishops* (London: Longman & Co., 1879), 1:456.

¹¹See E.D. Laborde, *Byrhtnoth and Maldon* (London: William Heinemann, 1936), 56; and E.V. Gordon, *The Battle of Maldon* (London: Methuen, 1937), 21.

fight" if only the cowards who fled survived?¹² Moreover, it seems that "accurate knowledge of the battle faded rather quickly and was replaced by propaganda,"¹³ for example, the hyperbolic praise of Byrhtnoth in the passage from the *Vita Oswaldi* quoted above. In the last twenty-five years, perhaps Clark's voice has consistently been the loudest in decrying the attribution of the poem to the "Anglo-Saxon Associated Press."¹⁴ If we agree that the poem can be regarded as something more than a mere expression of unadorned historical fact, we can also proceed to authorial intention. And on this point, critics have been surprisingly reticent.

Scholars have often hinted at an interest in the problem of the "attitude of the author toward his subjects,"¹⁵ but their attentions have largely focused in other directions, particularly the question of lexicography. Still, Gneuss asks, "why should a poet invent a serious and even fatal mistake made by a man who—throughout the first half of the poem, apart from lines 84–90—is presented to us as a model of courage, patriotism, and leadership?"¹⁶ Gneuss posits that the explanation for this must be that the poet took this detail from eyewitness accounts or a reliable local tradition, or Byrhtnoth was woefully outnumbered by the Vikings.¹⁷ Although MS A of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* records the invasion of Olaf Tryggvason with ninety-three ships (as we noted earlier), the text of the poem makes no mention whatever of the numbers of the armies involved.¹⁸ The poet of *Maldon*, in fact, never says anything that we can reasonably interpret as an indication of the superior numbers of the Scandinavians. If we feel compelled to trust the A-version's account, then we must also be prepared to believe that Folkestone, Sandwich, and Ipswich had been attacked earlier and that the great *fyrð* of Essex would have been at a heightened state of alert, thus assuring us that Byrhtnoth would have been in a position to muster more men than the 550 which could have been conscripted from the approximately 2767 hides of Essex.¹⁹

¹²George Clark, "A Heroic Poem," 54.

¹³Michael J.B. Allen and Daniel G. Calder, *Sources and Analogues of Old English Poetry: The Major Latin Texts in Translation* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1976), 188.

¹⁴George Clark, "Maldon: History, Poetry, and Truth," in *De Gustibus: Essays for Alain Renoir*, ed. John Miles Foley (New York: Garland, 1992), 73.

¹⁵M. McG. Gatch, *Loyalties and Traditions: Man and his World in Old English Literature* (New York: Pegasus, 1971), 129.

¹⁶Gneuss, "Maldon 89," 131.

¹⁷*Ibid.*, 131, 133.

¹⁸See Clark, "The Hero of Maldon," 258–60.

¹⁹See Gneuss, "Maldon 89," 136.

That Byrhtnoth could have been greatly outnumbered at Maldon is a misconception which has tenaciously held out against convincing evidence to the contrary. Because these Scandinavians raided and plundered seaside villages making no attempt to press inland or even to confront English troops, the character of the Scandinavian party which harried England's coast in 991 had a greater affinity with the plundering raiders of the early 980s than with the more organized and larger invasions of the later 990s which eventually led to Swein Forkbeard's conquest in 1013 and Cnut's re-conquest of the island in 1015 and his subsequent ascension to the throne. That Maldon was targeted at all is an indication of the kind of force the Vikings brought: a mint was housed in Maldon at that time, which would have made it especially appealing to a hit-and-run raiding party interested in little more than easily accessible booty.²⁰ Moreover, if Byrhtnoth was, in actuality, outnumbered at Maldon, the fact that the poet calls attention to his *ofermod* (as well as the flight of the cowards) as the ostensible rationale for the English failure rather than the hopelessness of the battle should prompt us to question the poet's motivation.

The poet charges Byrhtnoth with *ofermod* at what can only be regarded as one of two crucial points in the course of the battle—the other being the flight of Godric on his slain leader's horse, which leads to the desertion of so many men. Despite the incongruities between the poem's heroic demeanor and a gloss of *ofermod* as something like "pride," we must not be tempted to hold out the possibility of a non-pejorative term in the face of all of the lexical evidence to the contrary. Though "one would prefer to think, if possible, that *ofermod* also has a favorable connotation,"²¹ all of the instances in which *ofermod* occurs as a noun may be glossed as *superbia*, pride.²² Whitehead found the traditional gloss of *ofermod*—promulgated by J.R.R. Tolkien—"difficile et troublante."²³ Although a positive meaning for *ofermod* would go a long way toward making the poem a traditional heroic lay, the lexical evidence clearly supports the traditional gloss.

²⁰See Mark Blackburn, "Æthelred's Coinage and the Payment of Tribute," in *Maldon, AD 991*, 156–69.

²¹O.D. Macrae-Gibson, "How Historical is *The Battle of Maldon*?" *Medium Ævum* 39 (1970): 105.

²²Gneuss, "Maldon 89," 126.

²³Whitehead, 116.

Could Byrhtnoth's granting of *landes to fela* ("lands too much"), to the Vikings have been an act of *ofermod* in reality? Perhaps, but not necessarily. Let us try to reconstruct (as much as is possible) something like the historical situation. A sizeable Viking raiding party was harrying the eastern coast of England. Two or three raids occurred, and the English were watchful of more. For Byrhtnoth to have arrived at Maldon in time to block any Viking incursions inland suggests that he began assembling his forces well ahead of time—perhaps as soon as he first heard of the Viking attacks. This would lend credence to the idea that the English *were not* hopelessly outnumbered. Advanced scouts and lookouts informed Byrhtnoth of encamped Vikings near the town of Maldon. Byrhtnoth hurried to meet them only to find that the tide prevented him from immediately engaging in battle. Given this possible scenario, I think that the best supposition for why Byrhtnoth allowed the Vikings to cross is that he felt the exigencies of forcing them into a pitched battle on ground of his own choosing. The Vikings, safely encamped on the opposite bank, could have simply refused to engage and sailed away to harry another day, leaving Byrhtnoth to give chase and maintain his *fyrð* (a difficult task in itself). The historical reality is that Byrhtnoth's position, while being impregnable to a Viking assault across the causeway, also presented him with a serious limitation of mobility and a difficult question: to face the Scandinavian raiders and destroy them there, or to run the risk of losing possibly the only opportunity to defeat them. The author of the poem is careful to point out that Byrhtnoth is defending "*Æþelredes eard*" (53) [Aethelred's land]. As a retainer of the king, it was incumbent upon him to protect the kingdom from hostiles. And it was apparently his intention to rid the country of them while the opportunity existed.²⁴

It is very possible to argue that Byrhtnoth's surrender of the causeway was part of a deliberate strategy to bring the Vikings into open combat with the hopes of defeating them before they could withdraw to attack a less well-defended target. Byrhtnoth's great limitation of mobility—his lack of a naval force that could have destroyed the Viking ships as well as their prerogative to escape—seems to be borne out in later entries of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*. The

²⁴See Macrae-Gibson for a discussion of Byrhtnoth's *deliberate* plan of attack, which included allowing the Vikings to cross. Also see Warren A. Samouce, "General Byrhtnoth," *JEGP* 62 (1963): 129–35; and A.D. Mills, "Byrhtnoth's Mistake in Generalship," *Neuphilologische Mitteilungen* 67 (1966): 14–27 for divergent views of Byrhtnoth's plan of battle and culpability for the loss.

entry immediately after the defeat at Maldon, AD 992, records the decree of Æthelred calling for all the ships of value to be gathered at London²⁵—perhaps in response to the Viking penchant for swift amphibious assaults and withdrawal to the safe havens of islands, swamps, and seas. Again in 1008 and 1009, Æthelred calls for an assemblage of ships. And the chronicle entry for 1009 notes that “*Ða sumne siðe hæfde se cyning hi [the Vikings] forne forgan mid ealre fyrde, þa hi to scypan woldan,*” [Then at a certain time the king had intercepted them with all the army, when they would flee to their ships],²⁶ which, once again, suggests that, even when the Danish invasions had become relatively well organized and sustained, the Vikings preferred to withdraw to their ships as rapidly as they attacked rather than engage in open combat. We might call it amphibious guerrilla tactics.

If we can agree that the exigencies of the situation that August day in 991 virtually forced Byrhtnoth to give up his advantageous defensive position, we should naturally wonder why the poet chose to criticize him. Let us not forget that for the many elements of the poem which obviously bear the mark of historical fact, such as the battle and the death of the Essex *ealdorman*, many more are obviously the poet's contrivances—for instance, the exceedingly well-wrought exchange between Byrhtnoth and the Viking messenger (29–61), the foreboding appearance of the *brænas* (106), Byrhtnoth's death-speech (173–80), the speeches of the loyal (and presumably slaughtered) Ælfwine and Dunnere (212–24, 258–59), and the resolve of Byrhtwold to die with his *blaford* (312–19). So, too, would I suggest that the *ofermod* of Byrhtnoth is a poetic contrivance. No tradition, either written or oral, has come down to us which might suggest that Byrhtnoth was anything less than a competent leader and a generous benefactor of the church—with the exception of our poem. Allen and Calder note that “Not long after the slaughter at Maldon in 991, the notices pay less attention to the battle than to Byrhtnoth's reputation for holiness.”²⁷ The twelfth-century *Liber Eliensis* includes a long (and highly idealized) account of Byrhtnoth at Maldon. Ely was the primary beneficiary of the generosity of Byrhtnoth, “*qui dedit sancte Æðeldreðe Spaldewich, et Trumpintune, Ratendune, et Hesberi, Seham, Fuulburne, Theversham, Impentune,*

²⁵Margaret Ashdown, *English and Norse Documents Relating to the Reign of Ethelred the Unready* (New York: Russell & Russell, 1930), 40.

²⁶*Ibid.*, 54.

²⁷Allen and Calder, 187.

Pampewrðe, Crochestune, et Fineberge, Tripelaue, Herdewich, et Sumeresham, cum appendiciis eius," [who gave to Saint Æthelthryth Spaldwich, and Trumpington, Rettendon, and Hesberi, Soham, Fulbourn, Teversham, Impington, Pampisford, Croxton, and Fimbrough, Thriplow, Hardwick, and Somersham with their dependencies].²⁸ The *Liber Eliensis* flatteringly describes Byrhtnoth as someone who "Erat sermone facundus, viribus robustus, corpore maximus, militie et bellis contra hostes regni assiduus et ultra modum sine respectu et timore mortis animosus," [was eloquent of speech, robust in power, the greatest in size, assiduous in war and battles against the enemies of the kingdom and very bold without respect and fear for death].²⁹ It also records the impetus to battle at Maldon: "Quibus nuntiis Brithnodus in audaciam concitatus, pristinos socios ad hoc negotium convocavit et cum paucis bellatoribus, spe victoriae et nimia ductus animositate, iter ad bellum suscepit et precavens et properans, ne hostilis exercitus saltem unum passum pedis se absente occuparet," [Byrhtnoth was moved to boldness by the messengers; he called his comrades together and with a few warriors, led by the hope of victory and excessive military boldness, he went forth on the road to battle, both taking precautions and making haste, lest the enemy might occupy so much as a foot of land in his absence].³⁰ The *nimia animositate* of the *Liber Eliensis* may recall the *ofermod* of the poem, but, as Gneuss has pointed out, "*nimia animositate* refers not to a leader who opens up to the enemy a ford or bridge, but to one who hurriedly marches to the battlefield."³¹ Moreover, the author of the *Liber Eliensis* may have known the poem, and, having found *ofermod* to be as discomfiting as modern critics have found it, perhaps sought to diminish the pejorative sense of the word. Indeed, the Byrhtnoth of the *Liber Eliensis*, who is aroused *quibus nuntiis*, has a great affinity with the Byrhtnoth of the poem who demonstrates his rhetorical prowess against the Viking messenger.

Let us return to an earlier record, the *Vita Oswaldi*, which, as we noted before, is almost contemporary with the battle and perhaps precisely so with the poem. Following its account of Byrhtnoth's death, the *Vita* continues:

²⁸*Liber Eliensis*, ed. E.O. Blake, Camden 3d series, vol. 92 (London: Historical Society of Great Britain, 1962), 133.

²⁹*Ibid.*, 134.

³⁰*Ibid.*, 135.

³¹Gneuss, "*Maldon 89*," 129.

Talis enim olim comminatio Judæis promissa est quam nostrates tunc et nunc sustinebant et sustinent; dicit enim comminans Propheta: "Pro eo quod non audistis verba mea, ecce ego mittam et assumam universas cognationes aquilonis, ait Dominus, et adducam eas super terram istam, et super habitatores ejus, et super omnes nationes que in circuitu ejus sunt; et interficiam illos."³²

[A threat was once given to the Jews such as to our people then and now endured and are enduring; the Prophet said in reproach: "Because you have not heard my words, behold I will send and take all the peoples of the north, said the Lord, and bring them upon this land, and upon its inhabitants, and upon all the nations which are near them, and destroy them."]

The Anglo-Saxons consistently demonstrated the habit of interpreting their history—particularly the more disastrous episodes—in terms of the history of the Hebrews. They saw in their migration from the continent a literal exodus to the Promised Land and in their calamities the *judicium dei*. The calamity at Maldon is no different in this respect. How the Anglo-Saxons reacted to and interpreted the repeated violent incursions of the Scandinavians—many of whom, as the poem tells us, were *hæpene*—as well as the slaughter of a prominent *ealdorman* and his loyal retainers is, I believe, central to an adequate understanding of the poem. We must probe the connotations of the suffering of the Christian English inflicted by pagan Scandinavians.

Bernard Huppé felt that Byrhtnoth's slaughter was a "saintly death," that Byrhtnoth "dies like a Christian martyr."³³ Morton Bloomfield believed that Byrhtnoth's death-speech "would suggest a consciousness of his martyrdom."³⁴ Elsewhere, Bloomfield has written—more convincingly, I think—that "the *Maldon* poet is well aware of the religious dimension of his hero's life. To treat him as a religious martyr may not have been his only purpose, but it is certainly there."³⁵ More recently, N.F. Blake has explored the possibility that the poem has much in common with saints' lives.³⁶ On the surface,

³²*Vita Oswaldi*, 456.

³³Bernard Huppé, *Doctrine and Poetry: Augustine's Influence on Old English Poetry* (New York: State University of New York, 1959), 237.

³⁴Morton Bloomfield, "Patristics and Old English Literature: Some Notes on Some Poems," *Comparative Literature* 14 (1962): 38.

³⁵Morton Bloomfield, "Beowulf, Byrhtnoth, and the Judgement of God: Trial by Combat in Anglo-Saxon England," *Speculum* 44 (1969): 548.

³⁶See Blake, "The Battle of Maldon," 332-54, and "The Genesis," 119-29.

the poem does seem to reflect an oblique similarity to the conventions of the *vitae* of saints. But the nagging contradiction that upsets the poem's comparison with strictly heroic panegyric also upsets its comparison with aretology: what hagiographer would charge his subject with a fault like *ofermod*? To this, Blake only weakly insists that Byrhtnoth's surrender of the causeway to the Vikings was the poet's emphasis of the *ealdorman's* heroism and that the poet "could have meant it as a criticism is inconceivable."³⁷ J.E. Cross has written, much more convincingly, of the distinction that is to be made between the Byrhtnoth of the poem and a figure like King Oswald in Ælfric's *Natale S. Oswaldi Regis et Martyris*.³⁸ Cross points out in reference to lines 103–104a of the poem ("Ða wæs feohte neh, / tir æt getohte" [The battle was near / glory in combat]) that "no hagiographer would ever speak of the possibility of earthly glory (as here) in battle and that he is most pleased when an active leader is to gain heavenly glory by not fighting, as does St. Edmund in imitation of the model of non-resistance, Jesus Christ."³⁹ Thus, a comparison of *The Battle of Maldon* with saints' lives breaks down with the failure of the text to match the conventions of hagiography.

I believe that putting *The Battle of Maldon* into its context is aided by comparison with the well-known *Sermo Lupi Ad Anglos* of Wulfstan: "Leofan men gecnawað þæt soð is: ðeos worolde is in ofste & hit nealæcð þam ende," [Dear men, know that which is true: this world is in haste and it nears the end].⁴⁰ And, at the time of the battle, the millennium was near its end, and so, too, were there fears of impending catastrophe, of the Antichrist, of God's *dom*. To the Anglo-Saxons, these fears were seemingly substantiated by all that was happening—particularly the ongoing incursions of hostile, pagan Scandinavians. Orthodoxy demanded that the inexorable cause of punishment—divine punishment as the Anglo-Saxons believed—was transgression, and Wulfstan articulated it bluntly: "Forþam mid miclan earnungan we geearnedan þa yrmða þe us on sittað & mid swyþe micelan earnungan we þa bote motan æt Gode geræcan, gif hit sceal heonanforð godiende weorðan," [Therefore with great earnings we have earned the misery which sits upon us, and so with great

³⁷Blake, "The Genesis," 124.

³⁸J.E. Cross, "Oswald and Byrhtnoth: A Christian Saint and a Hero Who is Christian," *English Studies* 46 (1965): 93–109.

³⁹*Ibid.*, 99–100.

⁴⁰Wulfstan, *Sermo Lupi Ad Anglos*, ed. Dorothy Whitelock, 3rd ed. (London: Methuen, 1963), 47.

earning we must from God obtain the cure, if it shall henceforth become improved].⁴¹ Fred Robinson has written that the persuasiveness of the argument that the suffering of England was God's punishment for sin was lost on the Anglo-Saxons in Wulfstan's time.⁴² Robinson also points out that the Peterborough Chronicle and the chronicles of Henry of Huntingdon and William of Newburgh refer to a God who is "asleep" during the period of the *incurtio paganorum* and that "the entries in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* from the time of the battle of Maldon to the end of the twelfth century make surprisingly few references to God working through history, and such allusions as do occur often carry a tone of bewilderment at the Deity's permitting the horrors which seem to prevail throughout that period."⁴³ However, we should remember that the clerical authors, copyists, and interpolators of medieval chronicles often seem to have had much more secular purposes in mind (often political) than those writing sermons. It is, of course, impossible to precisely determine what the tone or general consensus of opinion of late Anglo-Saxon England was with regard to the idea that transgression brought on divine punishment. But, at any rate, dogma was certainly on the side of those who, like Wulfstan, saw a direct correlation.

But Robinson is right—as he is much more often than not—in sensing the uneasiness of the poem. He points out that Byrhtnoth's death-speech is an allusion to the *judicium particulare*—"a literal, physical struggle between devils and angels for possession of the soul as it leaves the body of a dying man."⁴⁴ Rather than dying the felix mors of a saint, Byrhtnoth's "last words are a pathetic plea to God not to let the demons prevail in the contest."⁴⁵ And the tone of the apocalyptic is nowhere more evident than the death-blow Byrhtnoth receives immediately following his blood-curdling offer of thanks to God for his success in battle:

⁴¹Ibid., 49.

⁴²Fred C. Robinson, "God, Death, and Loyalty in *The Battle of Maldon*," in *J.R.R. Tolkien, Scholar and Storyteller: Essays in Memoriam*, ed. Mary Salu and Robert T. Farrell (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1979), 88.

⁴³Ibid., 87, 88.

⁴⁴Ibid., 80. Also, see Bloomfield, "Patristics and Old English Literature," 38, who says that "What is in Byrhtnoth's mind at this moment is the widespread belief that a struggle between the minions of the Devil and angels takes place for the soul as it leaves the body."

⁴⁵Robinson, 85.

Se eorl wæs þe bliþra:
 hloh þa modi man, sæde Metode þanc
 ðæs dægweorces þe him Drihten forgeaf.
 Forlet þa drenga sum daroð of handa,
 fleogan of folman, þæt se to forð gewat
 þurh ðone æþelan, Æþelredes þegn. (146-51)

[The earl was the happier: the brave man laughed and said thanks to the Lord for the day's work which the Lord gave him. Then a certain Viking let fly a spear from his hands, a soldier from the sea, that it went too far through the nobleman, Æthelred's thane.]

The stark juxtaposition of Byrhtnoth's thanksgiving with his being struck down (as if in reply) is evidence of the kind of unevenness that, I feel, characterizes the entire poem. Byrhtnoth is exalted as a model of heroism, yet accused of *ofermod*; the theme of loyalty is exemplified by the same English *fyrð* that also demonstrates the ignominy of cowardice; the justness of the English cause is severely undermined by their defeat. This unevenness is not the contradiction some have felt it to be but the poet's direct reflection of the situation—political and spiritual—of Anglo-Saxon England at the millennium.⁴⁶ D. G. Scragg notes,

that an artistic purpose is at work here comes from the fact that, for the experienced listener in the medieval audience, the hero's response to his success contains the seeds of his downfall: Byrhtnoth's homicidal roar and the reference to a God who controls all things (including the life of a man), are signals for a sophisticated audience that the end is near.⁴⁷

The tone of the poem is not so much uncertain as it is apocalyptic, eschatological, disturbing. As Clark has written, "That a good man should lie dead on the gravel, cut to pieces, harrows our sensibilities: is there no better end for the good than this? Or should we, like Tolkien, soften or distance the shock by reflecting that Byrhtnoth brought disaster on himself?"⁴⁸ Whether or not we "distance the shock" is irrelevant to the fact that the poet certainly felt the need to do so—the lexical evidence (as we have already noted) is clear: *ofer-*

⁴⁶See Aldo Ricci, "The Anglo-Saxon Eleventh-Century Crisis," *Review of English Studies* 5 (1929): 1-11.

⁴⁷D.G. Scragg, "The Battle of Maldon: Fact or Fiction," in *The Battle of Maldon: Fiction and Fact*, ed. Janet Cooper (London: Hambledon, 1993), 22.

⁴⁸George Clark, "The Hero of Maldon," 268.

mod "means 'pride,' i.e., culpable, peccable *superbia*."⁴⁹ That is, in ascribing *ofermod* to Byrhtnoth, the poet sought to maintain the applicability of the divine *ordo* to the seeming incomprehensibility of the death and defeat of a good and Christian *ealdorman* at the hands of plundering, pagan Vikings. Very recently, Paul Szarmach has nicely articulated this probable motivation of the poet:

The Christian-Viking encounter is, if anything, a moral event requiring a moral explanation. When Christians win, their victory is moral approbation and endorsement; when they lose (or when they are attacked), the resultant punishment is punishment for sin(s). Since the *Maldon* poet cannot change the result of the battle and cannot adopt the presentation of Christian triumphalism, he has no choice but to find a fault or vice. Ultimately there can be no secular or amoral explanation of a defeat in a poem with a Christian framework: God does not allow the just to perish (or play moral dice).⁵⁰

For Wulfstan (and probably most Anglo-Saxons), the situation of England in the eleventh century was clear, and the Vikings were simply the *instrumentum dei*: "hit is on us eallum swutol & gesene þæt we ær þysan oftor bræcan þonne we bettan, & þy is þysee þeode fela onsæge," [it is clear and visible in all of us that we before more often sinned than we made better, and so much afflicts these people].⁵¹

Because one of the overt themes of the poem is loyalty to one's lord and companions, many critics have noted the poet's apparent approval of the determined self-sacrifice of the loyal retainers in the poem. "It is important to remember that, unlike Oliver in the *Chanson de Roland*," R. W. V. Elliott has written, "not one of Byrhtnoth's followers questions his actions, and the whole tenor of *Maldon* suggests that the poet shared their point of view."⁵² Whitehead also noted the willingness of the loyal retainers to give up their lives not so much for the ideal of loyalty but because of the nature of the *comitatus* relationship: "Bien que nous trouvions cette demande excessive, les 'compagnons de foyer' semblent la trouver très légitime:

⁴⁹Paul E. Szarmach, "The (Sub-) Genre of *The Battle of Maldon*," in *The Battle of Maldon: Fiction and Fact*, 59.

⁵⁰*Ibid.*, 59.

⁵¹Wulfstan, 53.

⁵²R. W. V. Elliott, "Byrhtnoth and Hildebrand: A Study in Heroic Technique," *Comparative Literature* 14 (1962): 70.

ils savent que, tôt ou tard, ils doivent mourir pour leur seigneur."⁵³ Once again we should notice the marked juxtaposition of the poet's approbation of the ideal of loyalty and the certain defeat and death which is the corollary to that loyalty. All of these oppositions of theme and imagery in the poem are the concomitant parts of what I term its "fearful symmetry" (to appropriate a Blakean term). It is the crossroads of the poet's recognition of God working through history and his realization that God's work, while divine, is often terrible in its aspect. For all of Wulfstan's emphasis upon sin and hellfire, Orthodoxy also taught that God's punishment is not simply punitive but also corrective. Fears of the millennium certainly exacerbated fears of God's *dom*. But mixed with the dreadful anticipation of the Antichrist is the expectation of a second coming. When it comes to the Deity's immanence in the affairs of man, one can neither anticipate the movements nor escape the consequences, neither resist nor run away. As the poet says in some of the most well-known lines of Old English poetry, "Hige sceal þe heardra, heorte þe cenre, / mod sceal þe mare, þe ure mægen lytlað," (312-13) [Courage shall be the harder, heart the bolder, / the spirit shall be the greater, as our strength lessens]. The poet mixes (and rather well I should think) the feelings of the doom and defeat of the battle—and, indeed, of all of England—with the virtue and *esprit de corps* of the loyal retainers. In an especially perspicuous essay, Thomas Hill calls attention to the mixed nature of the poem by suggesting that "*Maldon* is both a heroic poem and a tragedy of *ofermod*, in which the poet recognizes and delineates both the grandeur of the ancient heroic tradition and the needless waste of life which could result from the attempt to live heroic ethic within history."⁵⁴ In addition to the contrast between reality and heroic ethic that Hill points out, I would add that the overarching, controlling contrast of the poem is that between an appreciation for a glorious past and the anticipation of a future that is uncertain and ominous.

Our poet was uniquely situated in an Anglo-Saxon England that lay on its deathbed. Indeed, the end *was* near in the years following AD 991. The Scandinavian problem of the early eleventh century was merely a dress rehearsal for the Norman Conquest that relegated much of the Anglo-Saxon world to the obscurity of an ancient past. To believe that the *Maldon* poet was not sensitive to the pointedness

⁵³Whitehead, 116.

⁵⁴Thomas D. Hill, "History and Heroic Ethic in *Maldon*," *Neophilologus* 54 (1970): 295.

of the past that was dying and the future that had not yet reached fruition, robs the poem of the historical tension and literary craftsmanship which make it a work of art rather than a clumsily inaccurate record of a battle on an Essex marsh.

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