

Language and the heroic code: the battle of maldon



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The Battle of Maldon uses linguistic tools to glorify the military capabilities of the Saxons, who are in reality the losing side, while minimizing the victory of the invading Vikings. Through use of language the poem eternalizes both individual heroes and traitors, while also reasserting the value of kinship and the promotion of the heroic code. Through denying agency to the Vikings in favor of individual Saxon warriors, the poet glorifies the English troops highlighting the vested political interests of the piece. This is shown through the use of passive voice to describe the losses of the English forces, for example the breaking of English defenses is stated as “*Ða wearð borda gebræc* (Then shields were broken)” (295). The effect of this is that the agents of the destruction of the “*borda*” (the subject of the line) are linguistically hidden, downplaying a crucial military loss. This trend is further evidenced in the line “*Gar oft þurhwod / fæges feorhhus* (The spear often pierced the body of the fated man)” (296-7) whereby the inanimate object of the spears themselves act as the agent of the sentence, as opposed to the Vikings who threw them. Indeed, when the Vikings are referred to in this section, it is often through the use of common nouns such as “*brimmen* (seamen)” (29); denied both a formal and individual identity they simply become a negative mass. In contrast, the military victories of the English forces are given specific detail, through abundant use of proper nouns, with the heroes being almost sanctified by the poet. For example, the warrior Wistan, “*Purstanes suna*” (298), is immediately defined by his ancestral heritage, and his prowess at battle is given specific detail, stating he is the “*geprang*” of three Vikings – here the active voice provides both detail and glory to the hero. The marginalization of the Vikings alongside the appraisal of the Saxons feeds into the political purpose of the poem, which could be

described as propaganda to unite the people against the enemy. Thus, rather than an objective account of the battle, Maldon shows a prioritizing of Saxon culture and the heroic code, which stressed the importance of loyalty to clan leaders (including after death) and bravery, even in the face of military defeat. By linguistically denying the Vikings agency the poem emphasizes and glorifies the heroes of a losing battle and glosses over the typically crushing nature of military defeat. The power of language in relation to the heroic code is highlighted when brothers Oswald and Eadwold rally support from the men through their words: “ Hyra winemagas / wordon bædon (They entreated their dear kinsmen with their words)” (306). The noun “ winemagas” acts both as a term of endearment and a description of a social structure that promotes unity and comradery. Moreover, the line feeds into a reoccurring motif, crucially that the power of language can motivate those to fight – for example earlier on in the poem Byrhtnoth rallies his men through similar power of speech. In many respects, this motif reflects the purpose of the piece itself: through language the poet reasserts the importance of Saxon social structures. The use of the first person plural pronoun during Byrhtwold’s speech, such as within the line “ Her lið ure ealdor / eall forheawe (Here lies our lord all cut down)” (314), further promotes a sense of community. In contrast to the Vikings, the English forces are presented as a collective entity with a distinguishable identity, one which is formed around social structures – such as the heroic code and kinship – that the poem strives to uphold. The value of the heroic code also feeds into the lexicon, as the Saxons are described as having “ stodon fæste (stood fast)” (301) both physically through not deserting the battle and mentally through continuing to uphold the values of the code, namely to preserve

honour even after the death of an “ealdor” (314). The correlation of the mental and physical is further suggested by Byrhtwold who takes charge of the poem through his proverbial speech: “Hige sceal þe heardra, / heorte þe cenre Mod screal þe mare, / þe ure mægen lytlað (The mind must be tougher, the heart the bolder, resolve must be greater, as our strength becomes less)” (312-13). The decline of physical strength is correlated with the need for a rise in mental strength, with the poet equating the concrete nouns of “sceal” and “heorte” with the abstract nouns of “screal” and “mægen”. This reinforces the idea that this is both a physical and ideological battle., moreover, the repeated use of comparative adjectives such as “heardra” alongside an imperative reflects the necessity of upholding heroic values. The social significance of the speaker and his speech is shown through his description as an “eald geneat (old retainer)” (310) who speaks “ful baldlice (very boldly)” (311). Firstly, his label of an old retainer gives him authority within the kin social structure and secondly the use of consecutive adverbs (“ful baldlice”) demonstrate this authority. Indeed, this authority is so great that he literally takes charge of the poem a trend that is shown earlier on in the poem with the bravest warriors being granted a voice. This is in contrast to those that pervert the heroic code and desert the battle, as Byrhtwold argues, they will always regret it or “wendan þenceð” (line 316). The use of future tense acts both as a warning and a reference to the fact that those dissenters, such as Godric, will be eternalised within the poem itself for their transgressions. The Battle of Maldon is a poem that juggles with the conflicting forces of telling a story of defeat while also upholding heroic values. The language of the poem reflects this struggle between historical accuracy and “propaganda”, which ultimately results

in the glorification of the Saxons and the marginalization of the Viking forces within the narrative. The influence of the heroic code on both the message and lexis cannot be overstated, particularly the final sections of the extract which promote mental resilience in the face of physical death. Finally, the frequent use of naming in the poem acts as a promotion of the heroes of the tale but also a demonization and warning to those fail to meet the heroic expectations of the social structure.