

HAROLD OF ENGLAND: THE ROMANTIC REVISION OF THE LAST ANGLOSAXON KING

The Anglo-Saxon past has exerted an alluring attraction on the Romantic mind, and both the interest for the legendary and the nationalistic search for the connections with a Germanic and Scandinavian heritage drew some authors into this age. By especially focusing on the vindication of the figure of King Harold Godwinson as a tragic national hero in Tennyson's and Lytton's *Harolds*, this paper studies the nineteenth century version of the eve of the Conquest.

The fact that the Romantics felt a fascination for antiquity, especially for the Middle Ages, comes proven by the many works whose interests, topics, and settings deal with this "enchanted ground" as Johnston called it (Johnston, 1964). In literature, medievalism was in fashion for a long time; the works range from Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* (1765) or Walter Scott's famous historical novels as *Ivanhoe* (1819), to those of the late 1880s, like G. A. Henty's *Wulf the Saxon*, when collections of historical fiction -- sometimes even by the same prolific author-- were common in the libraries of young middle-class boys. Most oftently these novels, tales and stories stressed the adventurous and chivalric aspects of the so-called dark ages; fantasy and mystery coloured the approach to medieval times to such an extent that it developed into the particular subgenre of the Gothic novel. The emphasis on the magical, however, was gradually superseded by other interests through the nineteenth century. As a consequence of the nationalistic trend pervading Romanticism and Victorian chauvinism, authors began to focus on historical subjects as an exertion of patriotism beyond just fancying the alluring gloom of the medieval atmosphere.

From the Renaissance research in early medieval England had been fostered by different groups of antiquarians. Old English sermons and legal documents had been translated and edited. The ancient Anglo-Saxon law had been

invoked to support religious and political arguments during the Anglican Reform, the Civil War and the Revolution. In the end, the political rhetoric had coined the Anglo-Saxon myth, which regarded pre-Conquest England as the golden age of freedom most unhappily overthrown by the tyrannical Norman Yoke. According to this theory, 1066 was a crucial turning point in history whose sad consequences were still endured by the English people.

At a popular level, however, the knowledge of those "merry old days" was fairly inconsistent. The references to the Anglo-Saxons appearing in political debates were somehow familiar but inaccurately understood by common people, whose ideas about the Middle Ages was a mess of folkish topics. As the 17th century pamphlets prove, some semilegendary figures as king Alfred the Great or Canute had already entered popular imagery, but it is not until Romanticism that Anglo-Saxonism spread out of elitist groups.

Nineteenth century people in general and the Victorian middle-class in particular began to pay much attention to medieval history. Literary works, specially fiction, contributed enormously to the popularisation of Anglo-Saxon history. In many cases, these novels were oriented towards the young with the didactic purpose of educating them in history of the English people. As Christopher Hill argues in his influential article "The Norman Yoke" (Hill, 1958: 111) "[...] for the middle class the free Anglo-Saxons were not dead. Indeed, the years 1820-80, the years of the Gothic revival, were in a sense their heyday".

In Victorian England, and after Walter Scott's example, many authors move away from the Gothic and the excessively fantastic to offer their readers a more accurate and realistic rendering of life in Anglo-Saxon times. Anglo-Saxon scholarship developed rapidly, so that, as modern historians claim "The achievement of British history in the midnineteenth century is the historiography of the early Middle Ages" (Melman, 1991: 577). Among the medieval topics, the Romantics found the the Conquest particularly appealing and devoted themselves to research in order to document their works properly. Historical works by Camden, Freeman, Sharon Turner, Palgrave and Kemble were thoroughly consulted. These works, in turn, relied on medieval texts as the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle and the twelve century accounts by William of Mamelbury and Henry of Huntingdon. The Romantics also read the Norman historians: they knew eleventh century works such as William of

Poitiers, *Gesta Guillelmi Ducis Normannorum Regis Anglorum*, William de Jumiéges' *Gesta Normannorum Ducum*; together with the Bayeux Tapestry that echoed Poitier's *Gesta*. Indeed, the Norman versions of the Conquest were frequently quoted, but most ofently disregarded by the Victorian English writers.

This vindication of the Anglo-Saxon past brought back its old heroes. As it was pointed above, some of them had not been not completely forgotten as for example, Alfred and Saint Edward. But the Romantic taste for lost causes could not fail to find in king Harold II, the last Anglo-Saxon king, a true tragic hero.

In fact, there are several novels devoted to Harold and the eve of the Conquest: Charles Macfarlane's *Camp of Refugee* (1844), about Edward the Confessor's reign, Bulwer Lytton's *Harold, the last of the Saxon Kings* (1848), Napier's novel of the same title in 1858, Crake's *Chronicle of Aescendune*, Emma Leslie's *Gytha's Message* and Henty's *Wulf the Saxon* in the 1880s. Tennyson himself was so impressed by Lytton's novel that he published *Harold* in 1876, a drama inspired by it and dedicated to the novelist's son, the second Lord Lytton, viceroy of India; curiously, Bulwer Lytton's novel had been previously dedicated to Tennyson's uncle D'Eyncourt, M.P. The Conquest, in these patriotic authors' opinion, deserved an epic treatment; as Bulwer Lytton put it, "The Norman Conquest was our Trojan War" (Lytton, 1913: ix). Lytton's *Harold* was very popular in its day; it is representative of the Victorian Saxon novel, hence the interest of studying in it the Romantic revision of the Saxon myth in nineteenth century England.

To begin with, Lytton sided with the anti-Gothic, late Romantic novelists of Scott's school. Even if accused of pedantry, Lytton declares himself faithful to historical records: unlike those others who, as he said, "rest contented to turn history into flagrant romance" he chooses the historicist task of "extracting its natural romance from the actual history" (Lytton: x). This eagerness for historicity had led Lytton to fill the novel with notes and references to historians and to use words of the "Saxon forefathers" such as "weregeld" or "ceorls". The question of language as the direct manifestation of the character of a people, and the purity and authenticity of English before being defiled by Norman French were also very appealing to the nineteenth century interest in Philology. Lytton justifies himself, wondering: "Would

any word from the modern vocabulary suggest the same idea, or embody the same feeling?" (xx). In the third edition of the novel and as his response to the general criticism for the excessive erudition in *Harold*, Lytton just argued: "I contented myself with the humbler task to employ Romance in the aid of History" (xviii).

The selection of the Conquest as the topic for a novel also suited the racial nationalism of the Victorians. The Saxon resistance to the foreign invader found immediate sympathy; Harold had ultimately died in the battlefield pierced in the eye by a Norman arrow while fighting against the alien enemy. The last Saxon king had therefore won the reputation of great hero of the nation. Lytton portrays him as a virtuous and dedicated king. Unlike William of Normandy, he was always moved by his love for England and never by his personal ambition. Nevertheless, the contemporary chronicles that Lytton claimed to follow so accurately provide evidence of Harold's misdemeanors and perjury, and present them as the cause of his defeat at Hastings. They record how Harold had promised William of Normandy his help to obtain the throne of England, and had sworn it on the relics of the Saints. As Harold did not keep his sacred oath, he was excommunicated by the Pope.

Here Romantic chauvinism rewrites history and correct the chronicles: Harold is still presented as the unquestionable hero because he was deceived and forced by the cunning Normans. According to this explanation, William extracted the oath from Harold while he was kept prisoner at the Norman court. Harold swore because he knew William would not let him go back to England, where he was needed, without having his promise. Also, Harold accepted because William threatened the lives of Harold's brother and nephew whom he had as hostages in Rouan. Thirdly, when Harold swore he did not know he was doing it on the saints' bones. As we can see, the nineteenth century version of Anglo-Saxon history rested then on the manichean opposition of races: the noble Saxons versus the wicked Normans represented by their leaders Harold and William.

Harold the novel portrays England on the eve of the Conquest as a free, natural, agrarian society where good vassals and lords were a happy family. This harmonious order seems to be disrupted by "the others", the Normans usurping the position of the unfairly banished Saxons. In the novel the racial

tension is established only between Saxon and Norman; Lytton does not dwell on the conflicts between the Danish settlers and the Anglo-Saxons, and as for the Celts, these were kept at a safe distance in the Welsh and Scottish borders. The Scandinavians are equals and the Danelaw contributes to the Saxon state, while Normans and Celts are inferior peoples who attack it.

The reason why Lytton presented this racial division may have depended more on Romantic than on medieval ideas. The old enmity with the French had been recently intensified by the Napoleonic menace. The racial discourse of Romanticism establishes the differences between England and France, as it associates the true English, that is, the descendant of the Anglo-Saxons, to the Teutonic stock. Among these peoples, Saxons are likened to the Scandinavians, "A magnificent race of men were those war sons of the old North" (17) as Lytton said. Right in the opening chapters of the novel, he celebrates the mixing of the Germanic Scandinavian and Saxons, and at the same time rebukes the uncouth Celts:

[The Scandinavians] had the same prodigious energy, the same passion for freedom, individual and civil, the same splendid errors in the thirst for fame and the "point of honour". And above all, as a main cause of civilisation, they were wonderfully pliant and malleable in their admixtures with the people they overran. This is their true distinction from the stubborn Celt, who refuses to mingle, and disdains to improve. (17)

Harold's ascendancy is then the best, coming as he does from two castes of heroes: son of Godwin, the most powerful Saxon Earl, his mother Githa was the sister of king Swein of Denmark. From Lytton's perspective, Saxons and Scandinavians are brethren, and the fact that Harold Hardrada of Norway attacked England at the same time as William the Norman advanced in the South did not make these Scandinavians enemies as villanous as the Normans. Furthermore, Lytton's only good remark about the Normans was their Scandinavian origin. But since they were baptised they forgot their old customs and turned into frenchified fanatic papists:

Those terrible heathens who spared neither priest nor altar, were the most redoubtable defenders of the Christian Church; their old language forgotten (save by a few in the town of Bayeux), their ancestral names (save a few among the noblest) changed into

French titles, and little else but the undomitable valour of the Scandinavian remained unaltered among the arts and manners of the Frankish-Norman. (18)

The opposition of heathenism to the Roman Catholicism is also an interesting aspect of the Romantic proTeutonism. The implications seem to be that a religion that excommunicated such a great man as Harold could be no good. Lytton could not portray Harold as the pagan hero who challenges religious oppression without contradicting historical records too openly. Then, he creates the character of Hilda the "vala", the Danish sorcerer grandmother to Harold's beloved Edith. Hilda is a worshiper of Nature and the old Germanic deities: close to the mysterious women of the Gothic novels, she cast bones, read wells and runes, and invoked the spirits of old Norse warriors. This turned out quite a controversial character for Lytton, since as the preface to the third edition of the novel says, he had been criticised on account of this Gothic slip. Surprisingly enough Lytton defends Hilda on the bases of being "as much addressed to the reason as to the fancy, in showing what large, if dim, remains of the ancient "heathenese" still kept their ground on the Saxon soil" (xii).

Other Romantic supernatural elements recur in *Harold*: there are prophetic dreams, visions, a cross that bends against Harold, and signs in the sky that predict the king's fate. The Anglo-Saxon chronicle records a comet appearing the day of the Battle of Hastings as an ill omen for the English. Lytton makes a special use of the episode to characterize Harold as the fated hero. In his version, Harold was born under a bad star the same day as William of Normandy; also, Edith has a dream in which the stars fight and Harold's is defeated. Thus, Harold's destiny is doomed by superior forces that escape human control.

The characterization of Harold as a Romantic hero is completed by Lytton's presentation of his stormy emotional life. Harold's own brother Tostig threatened the country, and he had to be eliminated him in the battlefield. A younger brother, Wulfnoth, and the unhappy nephew Haco were hostages in the Norman court and Harold's false oath was in part done to save them, as he had promised to their mother. And finally, Harold had a most tragic love; he had to renounce Edith, his betrothed, for the sake of England. Lytton praises the sacrifice of Harold's only passion as a proof of

his heroicity; the only relationship they could keep was a sublime Platonic love. It is important to notice that, contrarily, historical documents as the Domesday Book say that Harold and Edith's love was more than spiritual as she had children by him. Harold subsequently married Aldwyth, the widow of the defeated Welsh king Gryffith, in order to secure the loyalty of her troublesome brothers the earls Morcar of Northumbria and Edwin of Mercia. In a most romantic ending, Lytton dramatizes the passage of the chronicles narrating how Edith, who throughout the novel had acquired all the features of the true Saxon heroine, was the only one who could recognise Harold's maimed body on the field of Hastings. Lytton says:

Her hands bled as the mail gave way to her efforts; the tunic beneath was all dabbled with blood. She rent the folds, and on the breast, just above the silenced heart, were punctured in the old Saxon letters, the word "Edith"; and just below, in characters more fresh, the word "England". (553)

As it has been discussed above, Lytton's *Harold* recovers Anglo-Saxon history and transforms it into a canonic Romantic novel with heroes, battles, passions, and the fight for the freedom of the people against the foreigner. It influenced the subsequent approaches to the topic of Harold and the Conquest, as Tennyson himself acknowledges in his *Harold*. Nevertheless, the latter introduces an important contrast. Comparing Lytton's to Tennyson's works, we can see the modification the Anglo-Saxon myth suffered in one generation. In Tennyson, the emphasis shifts from racialism and exacerbated patriotism to the more private sphere of inner conflicts. Harold is still a national hero, and the Conquest an unhappy event; but Tennyson, instead of presenting the opposition Saxon versus Norman as the axis of his work, focuses on Harold's personal feelings as this understands he cannot fight his own fate. He is a perjurer and knows he is doomed to die, he does not love the woman he married and loves Edith who was supposed to take the veil. All these conflicts that torment Harold appear in the following scene. Harold has just rudely commanded his wife Aldwyth to leave him alone with Edith before going to the battle where he will die.

EDITH: Alas, my lord, she loved thee.

HAROLD: Never! Never!

EDITH: I saw it in her eyes!

HAROLD: I see it in thine. And not on thee --nor England--
fall God's doom!

EDITH: On thee? And thou art England! Alfred was England.
Ethelred was nothing. England is but her king, and thou
art Harold!

HAROLD: Edith, the sign in heaven--the sudden blast at
sea--my fatal oath--the dead saints--the dark dreams--the
Pope's anathema--the holy Rood that bow'd to me at
Waltham--Edith, if I, the last English King of England --
... (Tennyson, 1888: 311)

In later works Harold the national symbol becomes second to Harold the tragic hero. However, in spite of minor variations, the Anglo-Saxon past was still a mythic territory for the Romantics. Even though authors as Lytton pretended some seriousness and historical rigour in their novels and condemned Gothic works, these same writers perpetuated a false image of the Middle Ages. The nineteenth century public received therefore Anglo-Saxon myth under the pretense of Anglo-Saxon history, in a new turning of what Hobsbawm sensibly called the "invented tradition" (Hobsbawm, 1984).

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