

Evaluation of the bachelor thesis „ *Wyrd bið ful aræd*: The Morality of Fate and Predestination in Old English Poetry“ by Jana Špániková

The submitted bachelor thesis explores the topic of fate in Old English poetry (namely on the example of the heroic epic poems *Beowulf*, *The Battle of Maldon* and shorter poems *Wanderer* and *Seafarer*) against the backdrop of heroic moral code inherent to the Anglo-Saxon society and the Christian idea of predestination as formulated in the works of St Augustine while tracing links between the two concepts.

A short summary is provided for each of the examined texts while it is explained how they relate to the topic of fate.

The notion of heroic moral code is then discussed and its chief aspects (mutual relationship between the lord and his retainers realized through the cycle of gift-giving and demonstrations of loyalty; heroic glory; revenge) are then used for interpreting the poems in greater depth. *The Battle of Maldon* is shown to revolve around the idea of loyalty of the retainers to their lord. In *Beowulf*, embracing or transgressing against heroic moral code characterizes the protagonists as heroic or immoral. The motif of Beowulf handing gifts received from Hrothgar to his true liege Hygelac is discussed in terms of maintaining social cohesion among warriors and their lords (re-establishing loyalty after absence). Demonic adversaries in *Beowulf* (Grendel, his mother, the dragon) are shown to be driven by revenge (the more justified it is, the more powerful the adversaries become). Importantly, the thesis also takes into consideration contradiction embodied in the character of the hero-turned-king Beowulf who acts upon the urge to keep carrying out heroic deeds while endangering his position of a good king whose chief concern should be to ensure a stable reign for his people.

In the poems *Wanderer* and *Seafarer*, emotional and social aspects of life without the support of one's lord are established as key motifs.

Heroic morality is then set within wider theological context of Christianity, specifically the Augustinian concept of foreknowledge (God influences human fate based on who is predestined to be saved) and predestination (God prepares chosen souls for salvation). These concepts have implications for human agency as salvation can be achieved solely through God's grace. Concerning the question whether there is such a thing as free will, St Augustine understands it more as a "moral agent", limited to either accepting God's will or rejecting what he has ordained.

Then, the relationship between popular and formal religion in Anglo-Saxon England is explored, and on the close reading of the Old English texts it is demonstrated how Augustine's notion of God governing human lives is rooted in the Anglo-Saxon poetry where God is depicted as all-powerful figure with firm control over fate which should be humbly accepted (the idea that fate has to be embraced mirrors Augustine's notion of embracing grace in order to achieve salvation).

The text then moves on to explore the relationship between fate and paganism which leads to a summary of scholarly discussions trying to solve the uneasy question whether *Beowulf* is "pagan in nature with Christian explanation written over it" or "fully Christian with pagan elements as a reference to long-gone past".

The thesis comes to a conclusion that the point where heroic morality and Christian philosophy converge is a humble acceptance of one's fate. Accepting one's ordained fate in a Christian sense bears similarity with the concept of heroic morality in terms of following one's lord even to death and offering one's self-less service.

From the point of view of how the thesis is executed, I do not see any flaws. It clearly states its methodology and research aims (including limitations due to scarcity of the extant Old English texts); it makes good use of secondary as well as primary sources; it is well structured and logically argued and explores the topic from a broad perspective. The sentences are clear and easy to follow, and the text contains no typos (save for the use of "weather" for "whether" on pp. 26 and 28).

In my opinion, the thesis meets all requirements, therefore I heartily recommend it for viva and suggest it be given the mark A (1).

Questions for the viva:

- On p. 15 when the Battle of Maldon is discussed, the text concludes: „it seems that the gifting of money, even if potentially saving the earl’s lands from [the Viking] invasion, is seen as immoral if given to the enemies instead of your own men“ – could combat be preferable to the gifting of money because it is viewed as more proper in terms of providing opportunity to achieve glory in fight?
- On p. 36: “the relationship between the lord and the retainer was seen as a reflection of the relationship between God and the Christian people, who were themselves depicted as God’s warriors in the Anglo-Saxon times” – has the depiction of Christ in Anglo-Saxon England been influenced by moral heroic code (apart from Christ signifying lord and Christians his retainers)? If it was, then how?
- Why is the motif of fate so prominent in Old English poetry, what purpose could it serve regarding its audience?
- In the poems, how is the concept of fate realized in terms of used narrative/poetic means/figures of speech? Can any overlaps be seen between the studied poems in this respect?
- One of the topics the thesis covers is a discussion whether fate is a pagan concept – does any of the studied Old English poems includes references to the notion of fate as spun, weaved (fate-as-textile metaphor) which is common e.g. in Old Norse texts (where the deities called Norns weave the cloth of fate for Odin’s warriors?)
- Why the poem *Beowulf* includes no mention of its hero’s afterlife? What possible reasons there might be for the lack thereof?

In Prague, 3rd September,
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