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Man and Landscape in Old English Literature

Elisa Ramazzina

The purpose of this paper is to study the relationship between man and landscape in Old English literature starting from the assumption that, during the Middle Ages, landscape was not merely a physical space, but it was rather a complex dimension involving religious and moral aspects. Examples from poetic and prose texts will show how the natural world was usually hostile and inhospitable. *Mappae mundi* will help determine how the Anglo-Saxons considered themselves in relation to the environment.

Keywords: Old English literature, landscape, *mappae mundi*, monsters, ecocriticism

1. *Introduction: the Anglo-Saxons and their environment*[1]

The relationship between man and natural world in Anglo-Saxon literature is described through a series of *topoi* and clichéd imagery due to the formulaic nature of Old English poetry[2]. Its study is interesting, however, as the recurrence of certain expressions referring to the environment was not merely due to stylistic reasons but was certainly meaningful, for it created a web of intertextual cross-references[3]. Therefore, a brief survey of descriptions of the landscape from an ecocritical perspective will undoubtedly enrich our understanding of Old English texts and shed new light on the Anglo-Saxons' perception of and interaction with their environment, for, as Siewers pointed out, "environmental literary studies or 'ecocriticism' seeks to highlight attitudes toward the physical environment in literary texts, in order to analyze implicit cultural attitudes toward nature"[4].

The landscape in medieval England was not merely a geographical space but rather a complex dimension that included physical aspects, religious and moral issues, and supernatural elements. Consequently, it was not possible to separate natural phenomena from supernatural ones: terrestrial and sea monsters, dragons, huge snakes, elves, demons, blood-thirsty creatures, partly human and partly animal hybrids, and cannibals inhabited the same landscape as mankind[5]. Monsters were thus considered part of the natural world,

[1] This paper outlines the premises of a broader research work which is still in progress.
[2] J. Neville, *Representations of the Natural World in Old English Poetry*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2004, pp. 94-95.
[3] S.B. Greenfield, *Hero and Exile. The Art of Old English Poetry,* The Hambledon Press, London – Ronceverte 1989, p. 130.
[4] A.K. Siewers, *Strange Beauty. Ecocritical approaches to early medieval landscape*, Palgrave MacMillan, New York 2009, p. 147.
[5] J. Neville, *Representations of the Natural World*, p. 2.

and even though they were separated from human society and confined to specific geographic areas, as world maps demonstrate, sometimes interacted with human beings. As confirmed by Neville,

> the modern definition of natural world as all that is external to humanity can be applied to Old English poetry, for the Anglo-Saxons did represent many entities defined as strange, frightening and alien to humanity – things that modern critics would collectively call 'the Other'[6].

In addition, the interpretation of the landscape and its relationship with man was always mediated by religion. As argued by Raiswell, the realms of the spiritual and the eternal were more important than transitory things, therefore the Bible conditioned geographical thought so that "much of the spatial intelligence of the Middle Ages was conceived through the lens of the sacred"[7]. Therefore, the landscape also entailed moral and didactic aspects; for example mountains, caves, woods and seas had a negative connotation in the Middle Ages[8]. It is not a coincidence that in the poem known as *Guthlac A*, Saint Guthlac's hermitage is placed on a mountain, where he is tormented by devils, and, as noted by Paroli[9], the Old English poet insists on darkness, which is directly connected with both the presence of woods and demons, and clearly has a negative meaning. Guthlac lives indeed in a "beorg seþel" ("mountainous dwelling", l. 102a), a "dygle stow" ("dark place", l. 160a). Moreover, as Friedman asserted, "monstrous men were placed on the mountains because these features of the landscape [...] were considered hostile and frightening. [...] especially mountains inspired great fear and distaste in medieval men"[10]. Hence the contraposition, well exemplified by *Beowulf*[11], between space devoted to social relationships, namely the hall, and wilderness, which was uninhabited, uncultivated, often haunted by demons and full of dangerous things[12]. Thus monsters, which usually represented evil forces, were habitually depicted as dwelling in secluded, inaccessible, dark and frequently remote places. *Mappae mundi* confirm and illustrate such worldview, as, according to Edson, they sought to reconcile a Christian theological vision of the world with physical reality, placing the

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[6] *Ibid.* p. 3.

[7] R. Raiswell, *Geography is better than Divinity: the Bible and medieval geographical thought*, "Canadian Journal of History", 45, 2010, 2, pp. 210-211.

[8] J. Neville, *Representations of the Natural World*, p. 38.

[9] T. Paroli, *L'acqua come elemento tra vita e morte nella cultura germanica medievale*, in Aa.Vv., *L'acqua nei secoli altomedievali: Settimane di studio della Fondazione Centro italiano di studi sull'alto Medioevo, 55: Spoleto, 12-17 aprile 2007*, Spoleto, 2008, pp. 1283-1284.

[10] J.B. Friedman, *The Monstrous Races in Medieval Art and Thought*, Syracuse University Press, Syracuse and New York 2000, pp. 148-149.

[11] It is contained in the *Cotton Vitellius AXV* ms. together with *The Letter of Alexander to Aristotle* and a version of *The Wonders of the East.*

[12] J. Harte, *Hell on Earth: Encountering Devils in the Medieval Landscape*, in *The Monstrous Middle Ages,* B. Bildhauer ed., University of Wales Press, Cardiff 2003, p. 186.

earth in both its cosmic and historical contexts[13], showing what Michelet has defined as an "allegorization of spatial organisation"[14]. Maps also demonstrate how the Anglo-Saxons sought to estrange, confine and control their anxieties, represented by monstrous races, by depicting them as dwelling far away from England, at the edges of the world[15].

On the other hand, exposure to particularly rough weather worsened the Anglo-Saxons' health, and since they could not understand the causes of illness, they felt attacked by mysterious invisible weapons and could do little to protect themselves[16]. They also had to face abundant precipitation and strong wind hitting precarious structures and ruining cultivations[17]. It was thus inevitable that they perceived the natural world as hostile and experienced fearfulness and helplessness before it.

2. *Man on earth: different visions of landscape*

Approaching Old English literature, the ambivalence in the descriptions of the natural world is soon evident: some are positive, others give the landscape a negative connotation. In both cases, however, representations of the environment help define the human condition and usually precede or introduce invitations to readers, either explicit or alluded to, to live their lives seeking divine grace and eternal salvation.

Positive descriptions are found where God's Creation is praised as the most precious gift to man which has turned emptiness into abundance and fullness. In these texts, God's generosity is celebrated and each element of Creation is considered as God's benevolent bestowal to Man, who enjoys an evergreen and luxuriant nature and abundance of food.

For example, *Cædmon's Hymn*, embedded in *Bede's Historia Ecclesiastica Gentis Anglorum*, describes Creation in a stereotyped and concise way, as the poet devotes half of the text to praising God, reiterating His epithets in each line. Furthermore, the poem provides evidence for how Germanic pre-Christian cosmography coexisted and mingled with Christian elements; therefore, among the wonders that God created, heaven is compared to a roof sheltering all living creatures and the middle-earth is mentioned as their dwelling place (ll.6-7). Similarly, a Creation song is reported in *Beowulf* (ll.92-8), counterpointing the deeds of Grendel, the monster sieging king Hrothgar's mansion, who is described throughout the poem as a lonely blood-thirsty exile slaughtering the king's subjects. He overhears melodies and voices coming from Heorot's hall, where the king and his retinue are feasting together, and, accompanied by his harp, the *scop* narrates how God created

[13] E. Edson, *Mapping time and space: how medieval mapmakers viewed their world*, British Library, London 1997, p. 163.
[14] F. Michelet, *Creation, Migration, and Conquest. Imaginary Geography and Sense of Space in Old English Literature*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2006, p. 16.
[15] See also P. Lendinara, *The Letter of Fermes: not only Marvels*, in *The World of Travellers: Exploration and Imagination*, K. Dekker – K.E. Olsen – T. Hofstra ed., Peeters, Leuven 2009, p. 58.
[16] J. Neville, *Representations of the Natural World*, pp. 4-5.
[17] *Ibid.* pp. 6-7.

the world. He describes the fruitful earth as "wlitebeorhtne wang" ("shining plan", l.93)[18] where Sun and Moon act as lamps illuminating its inhabitants (ll.94-5), highlighting the contrast between the darkness where Grendel dwells (l.87) and the hall's brightness.

A similar positive connotation is found in texts describing Paradise (e.g. *Phoenix*[19] among others) which is traditionally depicted as *locus amoenus*, where soil is fertile, mountains and hills are absent and the landscape is completely flat. For example, in the poetic rewriting of *Genesis*[20] the description of Eden before the Original Sin (ll.206-215a) consists of a list of God's gifts to Man: the earth is prosperous, full of living creatures and the seas are full of fish, so that the first parents can enjoy plenty of food. The beauty of Creation, its fullness and abundance are extolled and Eden is depicted as "gifena gefylled" ("filled with blessings", l.209) and characterised by absence of precipitation.

The natural world is depicted as hostile and negative in relation to humankind, as the Fall of Man has left him at the mercy of bad weather. Such descriptions are also related to exile, which, at an allegorical level, represents man's life on earth. As a matter of fact, the banishment of Adam and Eve from Eden makes them the first exiles, as they have lost God's favour; similarly, the protagonists of the so-called Old English elegies[21], who have lost their lords, their retinue and their relatives, are forced to live far from their homelands looking for another lord and to endure extreme weather conditions.

Descriptions of bad weather consist of recurrent *topoi* and in particular of imagery related to frost, rain, hail, sharp wind, desolation and loneliness, conditions actually experienced by the Anglo-Saxons. Indeed, the poetic *Genesis* clearly shows the sharp contrast between the positive connotation of edenic landscape and the negative description of postlapsarian earth, especially in Adam's speech to Eve (ll.799b-815a), where he complains about his new condition. In Eden they enjoyed plenty of food, absence of precipitation and God's protection, whereas they now have to endure hunger and thirst, mist, hail storms, extreme cold and wind coming from everywhere. In particular, Adam expresses his concern about bad weather:

> Hu sculon wit nu libban oððe on þys lande wesan
> gif her wind cymð westan oððe eastan,
> suðan oððe norðan? Gesweorc up færeð,
> cymeð hægles scur hefone getenge,
> færeð forst on gemang se byð fyrnum ceald (ll.805-9)[22].

[18] All the quotations are taken from Brunetti's web edition of Old English Poetry: http://www.maldura.unipd.it/dllags/brunetti/OE/begin.htm, last accessed November 18, 2015.

[19] It is contained in the *Exeter Book*.

[20] It is contained in the *Junius 11* ms.

[21] The Old English elegies are contained in the *Exeter Book* and include *The Wanderer* and *The Seafarer* among other texts.

[22] "How shall we two now live or should we be in this land / if here wind comes, west or east, / south or north? Darkness advances, / hail shower comes down from heaven. / Frost comes with it; it is fiercely cold".

Soon after the list of climate agents, Adam claims that their new condition is worsened by their nakedness, as they "her baru standað, /unwered wædo" ("stand here bare, / unprotected by clothes", ll.811-2).

Also the *Wanderer* has to face similar weather conditions in his exile, with only seabirds as companions (ll.45-8). During his both actual and spiritual journey[23] in search of a new retinue, he has to face storms battering cliffs, hail and snow (ll.99-107). The frozen landscape is thus a metaphor for the wanderer's sorrow and physical pain, so that he states that "all is suffering in this earthly realm" (l.106). *The Seafarer* contains the greatest number of *topoi* related to bad weather, as the protagonist describes his tribulations during his journey through "atol yþa gewealc" ("the terrible tossing of sea waves" l.6). Once again, apart from a list of violent precipitations (ll.17-35), the only companions of the man, who is "bihongen hrimgicelum" ("hung about with icicles", l.17), are birds, whose voices are substitutes for men's laughter (ll.19-26) and symbols of his present condition[24] of sorrow and loneliness.

Furthermore, bad weather imagery not only contributes to define the exile's inner condition and to describe suffering but is also related to the motif of the transience of life as it usually introduces the poet's reminder to readers that nothing lasts forever, all earthly things are subject to decadence and everything ends. For example, the *Seafarer* states that he prefers "the joys of the Lord than this dead life, transitory on land" (ll.64-6) and the poem ends with an explicit invitation to look for Heaven, that is, "our real home", for eternal blessedness, and to be grateful to God (ll. 117-124). The same exhortation is shared by *The Wanderer* (ll.73-80), in which the walls and the buildings ruined by time and bad weather are symbols of transience, as explicitly mentioned at l.74 ("þonne ealre þisse worulde wela weste stondeð"[25]) to introduce an exhortation to seek God's mercy (l.112-5).

3. *Monstrous landscapes*

As stated above, monsters are part of the natural world and can also be interpreted allegorically as evil forces, as *Beowulf* explicitly demonstrates describing Grendel as one of Cain's descendants (l.107). For example, in *The Letter of Alexander to Aristotle* the contrast between the chieftain's army and Evil is evident, as the Macedonians often must fight fierce beasts such as terrible snakes, traditionally representing Satan, and a great multitude of dog-headed men assaulting them. The same view is shared by *The Wonders of the East*, another prose text describing a series of marvellous creatures, including dangerous beasts and half-human, half-animal hybrids. Here, like in *Beowulf*, monsters are treated as exiles, as they are often relegated to islands or enclosed by geographical barriers; in particular, rivers and seas prove to be the most frequent means of confinement, as they separate monstrous and dangerous creatures from mankind. Nevertheless, such barriers can be crossed and the encounter between men and monsters can have a disastrous outcome, as chapter 3 shows. Here fiery hens, if touched,

[23] M.G. Saibene, *Riscrittura e riuso delle immagini poetiche nel 'Wanderer'*, in *Riscritture del testo medievale: dialogo tra culture e tradizioni*, M.G. Cammarota ed., Bergamo Universitry Press, Bergamo 2005, p. 139.
[24] *Ibid.* p. 152.
[25] "When the goods of all this earth will perish".

burn whoever dares try to take them; similarly, the terrible Donestre described in chapter 20 destroys human beings, as they are cannibals whose bodies are half human, half those of soothsayers who, after deceiving their victims with lying words, devour them[26].

Mappae mundi are also worth mentioning, as in some of them many of the monsters described in the *Wonders of the East* are represented. Moreover, world maps confirm and share with this text the same allegorical interpretation of monsters because they were representations which, as argued by Mittman and Kim, "function to enable the viewer to read the world not only in terms of space but also in terms of time, God's time, from creation to the final reckoning"[27], thus including Biblical events such as the Last Judgment, the Flood, the liberation of the Israelites from Egypt and the Crucifixion[28]. Furthermore, in medieval *mappae mundi*, as well as in the *Wonders of the East*, distances provide a physical barrier and contribute to the removal and the estrangement of monstrous races. The geographical placement of monsters is thus significant and useful for a better understanding of the Anglo-Saxons' worldview because, as noted by Friedman, in the Middle Ages race was thought to depend on climate, and the location of monsters at the edges of the world explained their unusual habits and appearance[29]. Friedman also explained how climatic extremes had a bad influence in that they disturbed body, mind and soul, with the result that the least temperate zones corresponded to the least moral races. This means that moral deformities in torrid regions were reflected by physical appearance[30]. Consequently, monsters were usually located far away from the centre of the map, where Jerusalem (that is, the city of God) was located, thus mirroring their liminality and their condition as exiles from human society. For example, the *Cotton Map*[31], which is contained in the *Cotton Tiberius BV* manuscript together with one of the three versions of the *Wonders of the East* and dates back to ca. 1050, represents many places found in the text. Closer inspection shows that in the map the British Isles are placed at the far north-west, that is, the map's lower left corner, while most dwelling places of the marvels described in the *Wonders of the East* are positioned at the very opposite corner, thus confirming the need of the Anglo-Saxons to confine monstrous creatures in order to keep them at bay, far from their homeland.

Similarly, the *Hereford Map*[32] (ca. 1285) represents many of the marvels described in the *Wonders of the East* together with Biblical episodes and references, accompanied by a pictorial frame representing the Last Judgement. Once more, the geographical placement of monsters on the map often confirms their allegorical interpretation; for example, dragons,

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[26] E. Ramazzina, *Le 'Meraviglie d'Oriente': due versioni a confronto*, in *Medioevi Moderni - Modernità del Medioevo*, M. Buzzoni – M.G. Cammarota – M. Francini ed., Edizioni Ca' Foscari, Venezia 2013, pp. 318-319.

[27] A.S. Mittman – S. Kim, *Inconceivable Beasts. The "Wonders of the East" in the "Beowulf" Manuscript*, ACMRS, Tempe, Arizona 2013, p. 198.

[28] E. Edson, *Mapping time and space*, p. 163.

[29] J.B. Friedman, *The Monstrous Races in Medieval Art and Thought*, p. 42.

[30] *Ibid.* pp. 52-54.

[31] A reproduction of the map is available on the British Library website at the following url: http://www.bl.uk/onlinegallery/onlineex/unvbrit/a/largeimage82938.html, last accessed November 18, 2015.

[32] 3D reproductions of the map are available at the dedicated website at the following url: http://www.themappamundi.co.uk/, last accessed November 18, 2015.

which are traditionally symbols of the devil, are located on an island, at the very top margin of the map underneath the representation of Hellmouth portrayed in the pictorial frame, thus directly connecting them to Hell. Monstrous human-like creatures are then grouped in different areas of the map, depending on their characteristics; for example, on the southern side of the Nile, which in *The Wonders of the East* is negatively connoted as "the prince of foul rivers", physically deformed and culturally alien peoples are found in a J-shaped chain surrounding the river's extension and representing Ethiopia. They are lined up, one above the other, individually standing on rocks, which represent frightening mountainous places[33], showing prominent sexual organs. Some species of cannibals are then grouped into Scythia, right next to the walled cage of the Antichrist. This closeness confirms the extremely negative connotation attributed to the man-eating races and consequently to the above-mentioned Donestre, for the inscription on the Antichrist involves cannibals in the Apocalypse, describing them as soldiers in Satan's army. Their monstrosity is also confirmed by the fact that the inscription describes them, like Grendel, as the progeny of Cain.

4. *Conclusion*

In conclusion, this study has led to highlighting a series of contrasts regarding the description of landscapes, depending on whether they refer to God's Creation or to Man's life on earth, and can be easily summarized in the following table.

Man's prelapsarian condition and praise of God's Creation	*Man's postlapsarian condition and exile*
Brightness	Darkness
Abundance of God's gifts	Deprivation
Joy and bliss	Sorrow and loneliness
Absence of precipitation	Abundance of precipitation
Flat landscape	Presence of mountains
Lush nature and fecundity (trees, flowers, fruits, blossoms, water, animals)	Frozen landscape (cold, ice, snow, hail) and consequently aridity
Abundance of food and spring water	Hunger and thirst

Table 1 - *Contrasts in the description of landscape*

Moreover, the study has evidenced that all the examined texts contain a moral message and an invitation to the reader: man is at the mercy of natural forces and is subject to the transience of life, therefore he has to endure exile in hostile environments shunning Evil and demonic temptations. Man should thus live his life seeking divine grace, as Heaven is the only place in which he can experience enduring comfort.

[33] N.R. Kline, *Maps of Medieval Thought. The Hereford Paradigm*, The Boydell Press, Woodbridge 2001, p. 150.

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