

THE FIGURE OF THE ARCHER IN *BEOWULF* AND THE ANGLO-SAXON PSALTER

The figure of the archer in *Beowulf* is often taken to be a traditional image for the devil and his arrows and, as commentators on Hroðgar's speech (*Beowulf* 1700-84¹) remind us,² may allude to St. Paul's injunctions to wear spiritual armour against the fiery darts of the evil one (Ephesians vi. 13-18). The poet may have been influenced here by the homiletic tradition. An alternative source which has not received due recognition is the psalter, for the figure of the archer also occurs in the psalms. It should be remembered that the text of the psalms was much more widely available and influential than that of Ephesians, being the basis of both the liturgy and elementary education.³ It was intensely studied and glossed in Old English, and in the later period was the most commonly owned book, often provided with marginal and full page illustrations.⁴

This article will examine the possibility of connections between the figure of the archer of vernacular poetry and that of the Anglo-Saxon psalter. I will also look at psalter illustrations for the light they may throw on how the figure of the archer was conceived and understood in the late Anglo-Saxon period.

In the Latin psalms, the image of the archer can have two possible referents, depending on the context. In psalm xvii. 14-15,⁵ the image is one of divine judgement:

Et intonuit de caelo Dominus et altissimus dedit vocem suam. Misit sagittas suas et dissipavit eos et fulgura multiplicavit et conturbavit eos.

According to Bede, this passage made a particularly strong impression on St. Chad, who meditated on it during a storm because it reminded him that the Lord sends out his arrows of lightning onto the earth 'ut corda eorum in memoriam futuri iudicii revocet' ('that he may call back their hearts to the memory of future judgement').⁶ The other figure of the archer in the psalms is that of the enemy, or sinner, as in psalm x.3:

Quoniam ecce peccatores tetenderunt arcum, paraverunt sagittas suas in faretra ut sagittent in obscuro rectos corde.

'For behold the sinners have bent their bow and have prepared their arrows in the quiver so that they may, in the dark, shoot the upright in heart.'⁷

It is this image of the enemy with his arrows which appears to have links with that of the devil as archer.

In the Harley Psalter, the miniature for psalm x depicts two evil-looking archers who aim their arrows at the unsuspecting psalmist above them.⁷ In a similar picture to psalm xxii (AV 23), an archer stands with other armed men in a dark cave and fires an arrow towards the psalmist.

There is no mention of an archer in the text of this psalm: the figure is being used to refer to the enemies in the verse ‘parasti in conspectu meo mensam adversos eos qui tribulant me’ (‘thou preparest a table in my sight in the presence of mine enemies’). It is possible that the dark cave of the picture is a cross-reference to the verse of psalm x quoted above, where the archers are *in obscuro*.

The ambiguous phrase *in obscuro* requires further comment. In psalm xc. 5-6 the threat of the arrow is again associated with darkness, ‘the terror by night’:

...non timebis a timore nocturno, a sagitta volante, per diem, a negotio perambulante in tenebris, a ruina et daemonio meridiano.

Darkness could be associated with hell – it is no accident that the psalmist’s enemies are depicted in Harley 603 with taloned feet, like devils. In the Bury St. Edmunds psalter, the illustration to psalm x shows a devil with taloned feet drawing arrows from a quiver.⁸ We are reminded of Grendel’s talons (‘Grendles grape’) and the fact that Grendel is also described as the devil *in obscuro*:

se ellengæst...se þe in þystrum bad.
(*Beowulf*, 86-7)

Like the archer depicted in Harley 603 psalm xxii, separated from the psalmist and his feast by a river, Grendel is waiting outside in the darkness, excluded from the ‘hearpan sweg swutul sang scopes’ (‘the music of the harp, the sweet song of the poet’ – *Beowulf*, 90). On the one hand, Grendel is Beowulf’s physical enemy, like the physical enemies of the psalmist David. On the other hand, both David and Beowulf have spiritual enemies associated with the devil.

The other meaning of *in obscuro* is ‘in secret’ or ‘hidden’ and we find it translated accordingly in the Vespasian Psalter as ‘in degelnisse’. This is how the translator of the Paris Psalter takes it:

lc wat þeah for þe þa synfullan bendað heora bogan and fyllað heora coceras mid fl anum to þam þæt hi magon sceotan þa unscyldigan heortan, dygollice þonan hi læst wenað.
(psalm x:2)⁹

Here *in obscuro* is translated ‘secretly when they least expect it’. In other words, the archer lays an ambush and shoots the ‘innocent hearts’ unexpectedly. This theme of the ambush, a recurrent theme in the psalms along with that of persecution and pursuit, also occurs in lines 747-82 of the poem *Christ II*.¹⁰ Here, in a homiletic passage, Cynewulf describes how the archer, the *wrohtbora* (‘bearer of destruction’), can attack the righteous even when they have reached the heights of spiritual development. He urges his audience to be always on their guard against unexpected attacks:

Forþon we fæste sculon wið þam færscyte
 symle wærlice wearde healdan.
 (lines 766-7)

In *Beowulf*, Hroðgar makes a similar homiletic speech to Beowulf (lines 1700-84), also stressing that the attack of the archer comes unexpectedly when the *weard* (see *Christ II* above), the watchman of the soul, is asleep:

þonne se weard swefeð
 sawele hyrde: bið se slæp to fæst
 bisgum gebunden; bona swiðe neah
 se þe of flan-bogan fyrenum sceoteð (1741b-1744)

At this point we should consider exactly what is meant by the bow and arrows which the spiritual enemy is armed. In his commentary on the psalm x.3, Augustine sees the bow as representing the scriptures, and the arrows as poisonous heresies which can harm the unwary, particularly in times of darkness and ignorance (this is his interpretation of 'in obscuro').¹¹ Augustine's interpretation may have had some influence on Anglo-Saxon poets, but in general they seem to be more concerned about moral implications than heresies. For them, the arrows represent sins or the temptation to sin. In the passage quoted above, Hroðgar calls the arrows *fyrenum*, which could be translated 'crimes' (but see Wrenn¹²). The whole phrase 'se þe of flan-bogan fyrenum sceoteð' is echoed in the Paris Psalter translation of psalm vii, verse 12:

se deofol...gedeð his flan firena þæt he mæge mid sceotan

This must be an addition by the translator, for the Latin reads:

arcum suum tetendit et paravit illum.

As well as employing the same formulaic phrase as the Beowulf poet, the Alfredian translator also interprets the subject of the sentence as 'the devil', although this is by no means clear from the Latin. Here we must postulate some knowledge of Ephesians, either direct or indirect through a homily or commentary such as that of Jerome (see below).

According to Cynewulf, the arrows fired from this bow are 'deofla strælas' (the arrows of the devils) tipped with poison ('se attres ord', *Christ II*, 768), a phrase which recalls Augustine's commentary. These arrows cause 'synwunde' (line 757), an idea taken up in the *Dream of the Rood*, where the cross is 'mid straelum forwundod' (line 62) and in parallel the Dreamer says he was 'forwundod mid wommun' ('wounded with sins').¹³

In his commentary on psalm vii, Jerome considers the possibility of interpreting the subject of verse 13 'sagittas suas ardentibus effecit' as being God but in the end decides that context requires 'the devil' as the

subject. He compares the verse with the Ephesians passage referred to above:

Sagittas suas ardentibus affecit. Pulchre dixit, ardentibus: quorum enim corda ardent libidine et passionibus, isti uicti sunt a diabolo. ...sed quorumcumque corda ardere uiderit, illos percutit.

‘The phrase *for those burning* is well said, for the people whose hearts are burning with desire and passion are overcome by the devil...the hearts of those already burning, no matter whose they are, are his target.’

This explains the picture on facing pages (folios 24v and 25r) of the Bury St. Edmunds Psalter where the artist also interprets the archer of psalm vii.13 as the devil. In the illustration, a devil fires his arrows from bottom left across the pages to an evil woman, clearly a personification, who nurses the vices of *iniustia*, *dolor* and *iniquitas*, which she clasps as little children to her bosom (verse 14).¹⁵ In her other hand she holds a flaming *vasa mortis* (verse 13). Presumably, her heart is ‘already burning’ with sin and this is why the attack comes. In a similar picture in the Paris Psalter (folio 6r), the devil fires his arrows at an embracing couple – the ‘burning’ here must be, as in Jerome’s commentary, one of sexual desire. In *Beowulf*, it is the sin of pride. Hroðgar tells Beowulf that it is when pride is already flourishing in his heart that the attack of the slayer comes. He urges Beowulf to repudiate pride ‘oferhyda ne gym’ (1760) and learn from the fate of Heremod. Such a fate almost befell Hroðgar for similar reasons. During his long reign he had achieved prosperity and counted no one his enemy until the sudden unexpected attack of the *eald-gewinna* – a phrase meaning ‘old adversary’, which ostensibly refers to Grendel, but could also imply ‘the devil’. Likewise, warns Hroðgar, when Beowulf achieves the prosperity of ‘eorþan wyne’ (1730), he must not allow this prosperity to cloud his wise judgement:

þæt he his selfa ne mæg
for his unsnyttrum ende geþencean (1733-4)

It is then that his pride will increase and, unexpectedly (as in the Paris Psalter x.2), the slayer will be close, ready to shoot. For Hroðgar the arrow represents the evil promptings (1747) of the devil. It is a bitter arrow (1746), reminiscent of the poisonous bitter arrow in the Cynewulf passage that recalled Augustine’s commentary on the psalter. It leads to greed, then moral and physical decline. Thus the unexpected attack of Grendel on Heorot is compared to the ambush of the devil with his arrows, an image which, while it derives from Ephesians, takes on a number of thematic resonances and verbal echoes through its association with the psalter.

Notes

1. C. L. Wrenn (ed.), *Beowulf* (London, 1958).
2. E. B. Irving Jr., *A Reading of Beowulf*, (New Haven and London, 1968), p. 152. M. Swanton (ed.), *Beowulf*, (Manchester, 1978), p. 199. D. Whitelock, *The Audience of Beowulf* (Oxford, 1951), p. 8.
3. The monastic offices are dominated by the psalms. See I. Symons (ed.), *Regularis Concordia* (London, 1953), p. xxxii and L. J. Doyle (trans.) *St. Benedict's Rule for Monasteries* (Collegeville, Minnesota, 1948), p. 40. The rule requires 'that the Psalter with its full number of 150 psalms be chanted every week and begun again every Sunday at the night office'. For the importance of the psalter in education, see P. Riché, *Ecoles et enseignement dans le haut moyen âge* (Paris, 1989), pp. 38-44.
4. Twenty-seven psalter manuscripts survive, See H. Gneuss, 'Liturgical books in Anglo-Saxon England and their old English terminology', in M. Lapidge and H. Gneuss (ed.), *Learning and Literature in Anglo-Saxon England* (Cambridge, 1985), pp. 91-141.
5. Authorised Version (AV), ps. 18, 13-14. I quote the Latin of the Vulgate psalms from the ninth-century Vespasian psalter. See H. Sweet (ed.), *The Oldest English Texts* (Oxford, 1885), pp. 183-401.
6. Bede, *Historia ecclesiastica gentis anglorum* iv.3 in C. Plummer (ed.) *Venerabilis Baedae opera historica* (Oxford, 1896), pp. 210-11.
7. London, British Library, Harley 603 (Christ Church, Canterbury s. xi), folio 6r.
8. Rome, Vatican Library, Reg. lat. 12 (?Christ Church, Canterbury: s. xi; later provenance: Bury St. Edmunds), folio 27v.
9. J. W. Bright and R. L. Ramsay (ed.), *Liber Psalmorum: The West Saxon Psalms* (Boston and London, 1907).
10. E. V. K. Dobbie and G. P. Krapp (ed.), *The Exeter Book, Anglo-Saxon Poetic Records III* (New York, 1936).
11. A. C. Coxe, *Augustine: Expositions on the Book of the Psalms* (Grand Rapids, 1983), p. 26. E. Dekkers and J. Fraipont, *Sancti Aurelii Augustini enarrationes in psalmos I - L, Corpus Christianorum Series Latina xxxviii* (Turnholt, 1956), p. 75.
12. Wrenn sees it as an adverbial, *op. cit.* p. 252. The phrase would therefore translate 'he who shoots from his bow with evil intent'.
13. M. Swanton (ed.), *The Dream of the Rood* (Manchester and New York, 1970).
14. D. G. Morin, S, *Hieronymi Presbyteri tractatus sive homiliae in psalmos*, *Corpus Christianorum Series Latina lxxviii* (Turnholt, 1958), p. 25.
15. Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale, lat. 8824 (s. xi^{med}). See the facsimile in B. Colgrave (ed.), *The Paris Psalter, Early English Manuscripts in Facsimile viii* (Copenhagen, 1958). This iconography is discussed in A. Heimann, 'Three Illustrations from the Bury St. Edmunds Psalter and their prototypes. Notes on the iconography of some Anglo-Saxon drawings', *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institute* 29 (1966), 39-59, at 56-9.