

*THE BATTLE OF MALDON*  
AND THE *ANGLO-SAXON CHRONICLE*, 979-1016:  
A WINNING COMBINATION

Jonathan Wilcox

A thousand and some years ago, on 10 or 11 August 991, a large Viking raiding army, encamped on Northey Island in the River Blackwater, Essex, fought and defeated an English army commanded by Ealdorman Byrhtnoth. The encounter was memorialized in a poem which has entered the popular imagination as much as any Old English work besides *Beowulf*. *The Battle of Maldon* is anthologized extensively in contexts which suggest that it is both a staple of medieval survey courses<sup>1</sup> and a mainstay of courses devoted to Old English.<sup>2</sup> The millennium of the battle was the occasion for extensive commemorations in and around the town of Maldon.<sup>3</sup> The anniversary also saw a flurry of critical attention directed at the poem.<sup>4</sup> Interpretations placed it beside a wide range of analogues from Tacitus to Tennyson to the Latin *Bella Parisiaca Urbis*.<sup>5</sup> In this essay, I want to return the poem to a context which is lacking from recent studies (perhaps because it is taken for granted) and is sadly lacking from the anthologies, namely, the annals of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* for the reign of King Æthelred “the Unready.”<sup>6</sup> I want to emphasize, in particular, the value of the chronicle as an aid to teaching the poem.

The relationship between history and literature is a complex one, as newly emphasized by the new historicist insistence on “the historicity of texts and the textuality of history.”<sup>7</sup> The issue is especially acute in literary representations of historical events. In the case of *The Battle of Maldon*, much critical debate has centered on how closely the poem reflects historical truth.<sup>8</sup> The rhetorical nature of the poem is obvious—the very act of versification points to its literariness, while versified and shaped speeches suggest the absurdity of any claim to historical literalness. The rhetorical nature of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, on the other hand, is masked by its veneer of reportage. An instructive recent scholarly exchange, for example, revolved around testing the reliability of the sums of Danegeld named in the chronicle for Æthelred’s reign, with the implication that it provides precise and verifiable circumstantial detail.<sup>9</sup> This may well be the case, but its narrative is also shaped by predictable elements of thematic structuring. Exploration of the narrative shaping of the chronicle provides some clue to the narrative expectations of Anglo-Saxon listeners to the poem. More importantly, it provides a

modern audience with a sense of the conventions and expectations with which to read the poem.

The *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* is textually complicated, surviving in six different manuscripts. All draw on a common stock to 892, whereupon separate and sometimes competing points of view emerge in different manuscripts.<sup>10</sup> The annals for the reign of Æthelred seem to derive from a common source which is generally best represented by the C-text; this common source is occasionally augmented with local information in specific versions. The main account was written retrospectively at one time after Æthelred's death,<sup>11</sup> composed by an unknown chronicler writing, perhaps, in London or East Anglia.<sup>12</sup> That chronicler's account has been exploited well as a source for the politics and lived reality of Æthelred's reign.<sup>13</sup> I want here to consider the rhetorical shaping of the chronicle's narrative to throw light on the overlapping and contrasting strategies employed by the *Maldon*-poet.<sup>14</sup>

Two battles in the chronicle illustrate well the narrative constructions which resonate with the poem. The annal for 993 describes a Viking army sacking Bamburgh, the principal stronghold of Northumbria, then moving on to the mouth of the river Humber:

þa gegaderede man swiðe micle fyrde, and þa hi togædere  
gan sceoldan, þa onstealdan þa heretogan ærest þone fleam,  
þæt wæs Fræna and Godwine and Fryþegyst.

Then a very large English army was collected, and when they should have joined battle, the leaders, namely Fræna, Godwine and Fryþegyst, first started the flight.<sup>15</sup>

Here, as in the poem, the issue is one of loyalty, tested in the face of a Viking army. In this case it is the leaders of the English who "onstealdan . . . ærest þone fleam" ("first started the flight"), an action the more ignominious in that the battle had not yet begun. Such a mass and premature defection by the English leaders throws into relief the options and actions of the characters named in the poem. There the sons of Odda fulfil the role, well-established throughout the chronicle's account of these years, of being "ærest on fleame" (186, "first in flight"). Those characters at Maldon who choose to stay and fight (209-324) are bucking a trend made clear by such an incident as the non-battle at the Humber.

A second key example from the chronicle is the battle of

Ringmere in East Anglia in 1010:

Her on ðissum geare com se foresprecena here ofer Eastron to Eastenglum, and wendon up æt Gypeswic, and eodon anreces þær hi geascodon Ulfcytel mid his fyrde (þis wæs on ðam dæge Prima Ascensio Dni.), and þa sona flugon Eastengle. Þa stod Grantabricscir fæstlice ongean. Þær wæs ofslagen Æpelstan ðæs cynges aþum, and Oswig and his sunu, and Wulfric Leofwines sunu, and Eadwig Æfices broðor, and feala oþera godra þegna and folces ungerim. Þone fleam ærest astealde Purcytel myranheafod. And þa Denan ahton wælstowe geweald.

In this year the afore-mentioned army came to East Anglia after Easter and landed at Ipswich, and went straightway to where they had heard that Ulfcetel was with his army. That was on Ascension day, and at once the East Angles fled. The men of Cambridgeshire stood firm against them. The king's son-in-law Athelstan was killed there, and Oswig and his son, and Wulfric, Leofwine's son, and Eadwig, Æfic's brother, and many other good thegns and a countless number of the people. It was Thurcetel Mare's Head who first started that flight. The Danes had control of the field.

This account contains in miniature much of the shaping of events seen in the poem. Again at issue is whether to stand and fight or to run away. This time the fault lines are more complex than in the battle on the Humber and more reminiscent of the poem. The division of loyalty is partly regional—East Anglia fled, Cambridgeshire stayed—giving point to the cross-regional loyalty stressed in *The Battle of Maldon*.<sup>16</sup> A role call of honor in the chronicle is organized around the naming of the individuals who died—implicitly those heroes who stayed loyal and fought valiantly only to be overcome by impossible odds. The loyal dead range in rank from relatives of the king (Athelstan and Oswig) to unnamed but countless members of the *folc*, just as the loyal warriors of *The Battle of Maldon* range across rank from a relative of the fallen ealdorman (224) to an “unorne ceorl” (256, “simple freeman”). The differentiating epithet applied to the thanes who stayed and fought at Ringmere (“feala oþera godra þegna,” “many other good thanes”) implies that others of their rank ran away and survived (the “bad thanes”), further emphasizing the

essential polarity. A named leader is again awarded the badge of dishonor for first starting the rout (Thurcetel “þone fleam ærest astealde”). An account such as this suggests that an audience was primed to contemplate issues of loyalty and disloyalty expressed through death in battle or retreat when listening to a story of English engagement with the Vikings.

The chronicler repeatedly presents a picture of English mealy-mouthedness and lack of backbone which sets the events of the poem in high relief. In *The Battle of Maldon*, the English leader decisively engages the Viking attackers and some (at least) of the English forces stay to fight. Portrayal of the following years in the chronicle demonstrates that this is not the way it has to be. The chronicler suggests a repeated readiness on the part of the English to run away. In 998, the chronicler comments of the Viking army which ravages Dorset:

And man oft fyrde ongean hi gaderede, ac sona swa hi  
togædere gan sceoldan, þonne wearð þær æfre ðuruh sum  
þing fleam astiht, and æfre hi æt ende sige ahton.

and the English army was often assembled against them, but  
as soon as they were to have joined battle, a flight was  
always instigated by some means, and always the enemy had  
the victory in the end.

In 999, the point is made of the Kentish levy:

Ac wala þæt hi to raðe bugon and flugon! And þa Deniscan  
ahton wælstowe geweald.

but, alas! they too soon turned and fled, and the Danes had  
control of the field.

In Somerset in 1001:

And sona swa hi togædere coman, þa beah þæt folc, and hi  
ðær mycel wæll ofslogan.

and as soon as they joined battle the people [or English  
army] gave way and the Danes made a great slaughter there.

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By 1010 the chronicler can sum up the lack of English defenses:

Æt nextan næs nan heafodman þæt fyrde gaderian wolde, ac ælc fleah swa he mæst mihte; ne furðon nan scir nolde oþre gelæstan æt nextan.

Finally there was no leader who would collect an army, but each fled as best he could, and in the end no shire would even help the next.

The unity and resistance suggested by the poet looks positively idealistic in contrast with the anarchy suggested by the chronicler, even if the eventual outcome at Maldon was the same as in the encounters recounted by the chronicler.

Instead of the noble dichotomy facing the warriors at Maldon, the chronicler stresses incompetence and oppression as the anticipated modes of the English army. The ineffectual English army is seen as a cause of woe on a par with the Viking army in the account of events in 1006:

And þa ofer þone midne sumor com þa se micla flota to Sandwic, and dydon eal swa hi ær gewuna wæron, heregodon and bærndon and slogon swa swa hi ferdon. . . . Ac hit naht ne beheold þe ma ðe hit oftor ær dide, ac for eallum þissum se here ferde swa he sylf wolde, and seo fyrding dyde þære landleode ælcne hearm, þæt him naðer ne dohte ne inghere ne uthere.

Then after midsummer the great fleet came to Sandwich, and did just as they were accustomed, ravaged, burnt and slew as they went. . . . [The English army is levied by the king], yet it availed no whit more than it had often done before; for in spite of it all, the Danish army went about as it pleased, and the English levy caused the people of the country every sort of harm, so that they profited neither from the native army nor the foreign army.

The four grammatically rhyming verbs describing the activity of the Viking army here (*heregodon*, *bærndon*, *slogon*, *ferdon*) are a cynical comment on the way things were accustomed to be ("eal swa hi ær gewuna wæron"). More cynical still is the equation of

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“inghere” and “uthere” as forces which bring the people “ælcne hearm.” The word *in(g)here* is unique to this passage: such a term for the English army is an oxymoron in that it combines a prefix which should denote security and national identity (*in-*) with the word customarily applied throughout this narrative to the ravaging Viking army (*here*).

If not downright oppression, the chronicler anticipates nothing better than incompetent bungling out of the English. After describing a particularly ignominious naval engagement in 1009, this time against a breakaway English leader, the chronicler concludes of the disintegrating force:

and leton ealles þeodscypes geswinc ðus leohtlice forwurðan.  
And næs se sige na betere, þe eal Angelcyn to hopode.

and [they] let the toil of all the nation thus lightly come to naught; and no better than this was the victory which all the English people had expected.

The victory (“se sige”) which the English nation expects and achieves in the chronicle is one brought about through the bitter irony of applying the term to its opposite, bungled defeat. The emphasis on English forces who stand and fight in the surviving fragment of the poem makes for a striking contrast with the emphasis on inevitable defeat in the chronicle. The very dilemma of staying or running away, which is at the center of the poem, contrasts with the inevitability of making the wrong choice, which the chronicler establishes as normal and expected.

The chronicler repeatedly motivates and emblemizes English defeat by focusing on the role of a specific disloyal character. Pallig makes his only appearance in the chronicle in A’s annal for 1001, where he goes over to the Danish fleet with those ships which he could collect:

he asceacen wæs fram Æðelrede cynge ofer ealle ðe ge trywða ðe he him geseald hæfde, 7 eac se cyng him wel gegifod hæfde on hamon, 7 on golde 7 seolfre.<sup>17</sup>

he had deserted King Æthelred in spite of all the pledges which he had given him. And the king had also made great gifts to him, in estates and gold and silver.

The chronicler fails to mention that Pallig is the brother-in-law of the Danish leader Swein.<sup>18</sup> Instead, he uses him to give a personal twist to the story of English defeat through disloyalty. Pallig's disloyalty is all the more emphatic in view of his failure to reciprocate the lavish gift-giving previously bestowed upon him by Æthelred. Just such a technique is used in the poem to stress the inappropriateness of the turn from battle of Odda's sons on Byrhtnoth's horse as a return for Byrhtnoth's earlier generosity, "þe him mænigne oft mear gesealde" (188, "who had often given them many a horse"). The choice of such emotive details in both narratives stresses that "hit riht ne wæs" (190, "it was not right").

Shaping the narrative through a personal focus is seen on a grander scale in the case of two English leaders prominent in the chronicle, Ælfric and Eadric. Ælfric, ealdorman of Hampshire, is first mentioned in the annal of 992. (Earlier in Æthelred's reign, in 985, Ealdorman Ælfric of Mercia was exiled and the association of like names might suggest that the later ealdorman Ælfric, although unrelated, is unlikely to come to good.) Ælfric heads an English fleet (being "one of those in whom the king trusted most," according to F), but sends warning to the enemy, absconds with the Danes, and is recaptured by the English. The following year, his son is blinded in what reads like an act of retribution. The account of Ælfric's treachery provides a personal explanation for the failure of the English fleet, even though it is historically improbable. Ælfric is unlikely to have retained his position as ealdorman if he was so clearly treacherous; a modern historian has suggested, rather, that he was abducted and that the blinding of his son is an unrelated incident.<sup>19</sup> Nevertheless, through his portrayal of Ealdorman Ælfric, the chronicler gives English disloyalty a local habitation and a name.

The chronicler exploits the identification later, in an incident in 1003:

þa sceolde se ealdorman Ælfric lædan þa fyrde, ac he teah ða forð his ealdan wrencas; sona swa hi wæron swa gehende þæt ægðer here on oþerne hawede, þa gebræd he hine seocne and ongan hine breacan to spiwenne and cwæð þæt he gesicled wære, and swa þæt folc becyrde þæt he lædan sceolde; swa hit gecweden ys: "þonne se heretoga wacað, þonne bið eall se here swiðe gehindrad."

Then Ealdorman Ælfric was to lead the army, but he was up to his old tricks. As soon as they were so close that each army looked on the other, he feigned him sick, and began retching to vomit, and said that he was taken ill, and thus betrayed the people whom he should have led. As the saying goes: "When the leader gives way, the whole army will be much hindered."

The English disperse and Swein and his Viking forces harry the surrounding country before returning, in a style heightened by victory, to their poetically-named *yðhengestas*, "wave-courers." Again Ælfric's treachery motivates English defeat and his role is seen as inevitable ("he teah ða forð his caldan wrencas," "he was up to his old tricks"). Ælfric's ignominy is emphasized through the anatomical specificity of his malingering: "ongan hine breacan to spiwenne" ("began retching to vomit"). Again the role assigned him is historically implausible: he retains his ealdormanry and makes a final appearance in the chronicle loyally dying for Æthelred's English successor at the Battle of Ashingdon in 1016.

Eadric, ealdorman of Mercia, is the focus for the chronicler's portrayal of English treachery throughout the later years of Æthelred's reign. His appointment as ealdorman is mentioned in 1007 followed in 1009 by a laconic reference to his hindering the king's attack on a Viking force, "swa hit gyt æfre wæs" ("then as it always was"). In 1015 the chronicler accuses him of treacherously siding with Cnut and so personalizes an English defeat.<sup>20</sup> By 1016, with Æthelred dead, the chronicler's sympathy moves to his son, now called King Edmund. Eadric spends part of the year on Cnut's side, then returns to the side of Edmund, who is more forgiving than the chronicler ("Næs nan mara unræd geræd þonne se wæs," "No greater folly was ever agreed to than that was"). Sure enough, in the crucial English defeat at Ashingdon,

Pa dyde Eadric ealdorman swa swa he ær oftor dyde, astealde þæne fleam ærest mid Magesæton, and aswac swa his cynhlaforde and ealre Angelcynnes þeode.

Then Ealdorman Eadric did as he had often done before; he was the first to start the flight with the Magonsæte, and thus betrayed his liege lord and all the people of England.

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Eadric is given the predictable position of first in flight. The chronicler constructs Eadric's role as that of the inveterate traitor, even though such a portrait contradicts historical probability. The chronicler is determined to have a named villain to personalize the issue of loyalty.

The motif of the treacherous commander is so well-established that on occasion the chronicler need only give the prompt, expecting his audience to fill in the details. Exeter was stormed and destroyed in 1003, "þuruh þone Frenciscan ceorl Huga ðe seo hlæfdige hire hæfde geset to gerefan" ("on account of the French *ceorl* Hugh, whom the queen had appointed as her reeve"). What more was to be expected of a Frenchman appointed by a Norman queen?—the English audience presumably thought.

The two cowardly ealdormen in the chronicle provide both an explanation for and an embodiment of English failure. An equivalent focus is provided in the poem by Godric and his brothers. As Offa observes:

Us Godric hæfð,  
earh Oddan bearn, ealle beswicene. (237b-8)

Godric, the cowardly son of Odda, has betrayed us  
all.

Chronicler, poet, and the audience of both works might apply Offa's imprecation to ealdormen Ælfric and Eadric: "Abreoðe his angin, þæt he her swa manigne man aflymde" (242b-3, "Cursed be his action, that he here put so many men to flight"). Treachery, like loyalty, is in starker relief when it comes attached to an identifiable character.

Such stress on the role of the individual is emphasized in the poem through the nature of the line which fortuitously (or lamentably) now ends the surviving fragment: "Næs þæt na se Godric þe ða guðe forbeah" (325, "That was not at all that Godric who fled from the battle"), the poet comments of the character who loyally goes to his death hacking and hewing at the Vikings in contradistinction with the traitor who left the battle and so started the English rout (185-201, cf. 237b-243). Such onomastic doubling highlights the personal nature of the question of loyalty. A strikingly parallel device is used in the chronicle in the siege of 1011:

hi ymbsæton Cantwareburuh, and hi into coman þuruh  
syruwrencas, forðan Ælmær hi becyrde, þe se arcebisceop

Ælfheah ær generede æt his life. And hi þær ða genaman þone arcebisceop Ælfeah, and Ælfweard cynges gerefan and Leofrune abbt. and Godwine bisceop and Ælmær abbod hi leton aweġ.

they [the Viking army] besieged Canterbury, and they got inside by treachery, for Ælfmær, whose life Archbishop Ælfheah had saved, betrayed it. Then they captured there Archbishop Ælfheah, and the king's reeve Ælfweard, and Abbess Leofrun and Bishop Godwine; and they let Abbot Ælfmær get away.

In the first sentence, Ælfmær's treachery is laid on thick. The Vikings got inside the principal *burh* of the citizens of Kent through treachery ("puruh syrwrencas") because Ælfmær betrayed *hi* ("it," i.e., Canterbury, or "them," i.e., the people in it). Ælfmær's action is the more invidious as it reflects a personal disloyalty to the leader who had saved him *æt his life* ("in respect of his life": the *æt* is awkward to translate but serves to emphasize the crucial point) and who will be martyred by his drunken captors on Easter Day of the next year. The fall of Canterbury replicates the story of treachery and resistance that is played out again and again in these annals. The scale of the calamity is spelled out in the next sentence through the cast of named ecclesiastical and secular captives—all except Abbot Ælfmær, who got away. Since these are the only two references to Ælfmær in this or surrounding annals, it is at first natural to assume that they refer to the same person. However, the formal designation of the second reference as *Ælmær abbod* ought to give pause. Florence of Worcester's Latin version of the chronicle (made in the early 12th century) differentiates the two references as *Ælmarus archidiaconus*, "Ælfmær the archdeacon" and *abbas monasterii S. Augustini*, Ælfmær "the abbot of St Augustine's."<sup>21</sup> In this differentiation, the recurring name creates a highly focused polarization of English treachery and resistance, as if the chronicler were to observe (in the style of the *Maldon*-poet), "Næs þæt na se Ælfmær þe Ælfheah becyrde."

The narrative technique of the chronicle parallels that of the poem in more than the embodiment of characters. The doomed outcome of the stand near Maldon is subtly anticipated by choices in the poet's narrative. Early in the poem as we have it, the kinsman of Offa

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let him þa of handon      leofne fleogan,  
hafoc wið þæs holtes,      and to þære hilde stop.  
(7-8)

caused then the dear one to fly from his hand, the  
hawk towards the wood, and advanced to the battle.

The poet comments on this action: "Be þam man mihte oncnawan þæt se cniht nolde / wacian æt þam wige" (9-10a, "by that one might tell that the young man would not weaken at the battle"). Indeed, the line of flight of the bird anticipates the line of flight of the cowardly sons of Odda, and a hawk released in this manner will not be returning just as the kinsman of Offa will not be returning.<sup>22</sup> The symbolic significance of the action is understated and just such a level of understated symbolic significance is common in the chronicle, suggesting that an Anglo-Saxon audience would be attuned to pick up the hint. C's account of the first Viking raiding in 980 is preceded in 979 first by a description of the coronation of Æthelred, then by the repeated sighting of "blodig wolcen . . . on fyres gelicnesse" ("a bloody cloud . . . in the likeness of fire"). No further comment is made, although the meteorological phenomenon probably carries the same import as the fiery dragons seen flying in the air as terrible portents prior to the first Viking raid on Lindisfarne in 793.<sup>23</sup> Similarly, the annal for 995, in the midst of the Viking attacks, simply collocates the death of Archbishop Sigeric (misplaced by a year) with the appearance of a comet, a sight which presumably carries the weight of the comet described as a portent in 1066 and significant enough to be included in the Bayeux Tapestry.<sup>24</sup>

Consciousness of the power of such symbols is attributed to the Viking army in one incident which illustrates well the chronicler's portrayal of English ignominy. The marauding army of 1006 defiantly cocks a snook at a prophecy of their doom. The chronicler's tone in describing the incident is revealing:

And þa to ðam middan wintran eodan him to heora gearwan feorme ut þuruh Hamtunscire into Bearrucscire to Readingon, and hi a dydon heora ealdan gewunan, atendon hiora herebeacen swa hi ferdon. Wendon þa to Wealingaforda and þæt eall forswældon, and wæron him ða ane niht æt Ceolesige, and wendon him þa andlang

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*Æscedune to Cwicelmeshlæwe, and þær onbidedon beotra gylpa, forðon oft man cwæð, gif hi Cwicelmeshlæw gesohton, þæt hi næfre to sæ gan ne scoldon. Wendon him þa oðres wegese hamwerd. . . .*

and then towards Christmas they betook themselves to the entertainment waiting them, out through Hampshire into Berkshire to Reading; and always they observed their ancient custom, lighting their beacons as they went. They then turned to Wallingford and burnt it all, and were one night at Cholsey, and then turned along Ashdown to Cuckhamsley Barrow, and waited there for what had been proudly threatened, for it had often been said that if they went to Cuckhamsley, they would never get to the sea. They then went home another way. . . .

In the course of this latter journey they defeat the English army (again) and defiantly pass by within sight of the English capital, Winchester. Here the chronicler's cynicism is established through a cryptic and desperate joke. The degree of Viking control is seen as habitual and inevitable ("eodan him to heora gearwan feorme" might more literally be translated "betook themselves to their customary hospitality," an activity which ironically parallels that of the king in Shropshire later in the same annal, who "nam þær his feorme"). As it travelled, the Viking army always maintained its traditional custom ("hi a dydon heora ealdan gewunan")—even though the chronicler and his audience might object to a Viking army having any habitude in England ("heora . . . gewunan"), let alone an ancient one ("ealdan")—namely, the lighting of war-beacons as they went ("atendon hiora herebeacen swa hi ferdon"). The *here*, the chronicler's word of choice for the ravaging Viking army, might be expected to light *here-beacen*, hinting that this is not the innocent kindling of illuminated markers. The next sentence effectively amplifies on the activity as the Vikings entirely burn down the town of Wallingford. The traditional markers of the Viking army's route through England, then, are a trail of devastated and burning towns.

Such sensitivity to symbolism by the Vikings and by the chronicler continues throughout this excursion. The raiding trip to Cuckhamsley is apparently undertaken in explicit defiance of proud boasts ("beotra gylpa") often spoken ("oft man cwæð"). Superiority to any prophecy of doom having been established, the Viking army

continues its gestures of defiance in undertaking a Winchester by-pass, allowing the citizens to see the “rancne here and unearhne” (“proud and undaunted army”). Defiant irony from the Viking aggressors is seen in *The Battle of Maldon* in the poet’s portrayal of the Viking messenger.<sup>25</sup> In the poem, such Viking arrogance seems uncalled for since it is not followed by an easy victory. On the other hand, defiant Viking arrogance is spectacularly appropriate to the political and military circumstances of the chronicle.

One further aspect of the poem might, more controversially, be read usefully in the light of the chronicle. Byrhtnoth is famously condemned by the poet for his decision to allow the Vikings to cross the river to fight, a decision made “for his ofermode” (89b, “for his pride”).<sup>26</sup> This has led to many readings of the poem as an exploration of the flawed stature of its hero.<sup>27</sup> The *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* in these years also centers on a flawed leader. The chronicler does not see Æthelred’s failing as one of *ofermod*; rather, in a summary assessment in 1011, he accuses the king of *unræd*, “bad policy”:

Ealle þas ungesældā us gelumpon þuruh unrædas, þæt man nolde him a timan gafol beodon, oþþe wið gefeohtan, ac þonne hi mæst to yfele gedon hæfdon, þonne nam mon frið and grið wið hi; and nabelæs for eallum þissum griðe and gafole hi ferdon æghweder flocmælum, and heregodon ure earme folc, and hi rypton, and slogon.

All those disasters befell us through bad policy, in that they were never offered tribute in time nor fought against; but when they had done most to our injury, peace and truce were made with them; and for all this truce and tribute they journeyed none the less in bands everywhere, and harried our wretched people, and plundered and killed them.

Most readings of *The Battle of Maldon* see Byrhtnoth as ultimately praised despite his flaw.<sup>28</sup> His nobility of stature is all the clearer in contrast to the defamation of Æthelred achieved by the chronicler.

The shaping of the narrative in the chronicle for the years 978 to 1016 is far from the inevitable way of figuring the events of Æthelred’s reign. At least two alternative modes appear briefly and suggest other ways in which events might have been organized. The brutish exercise of state power can be seen in a few baldly-stated

episodes: the royal ravaging of Rochester in 986 is left entirely unmotivated in the narrative;<sup>29</sup> the royal execution of Ealdorman Ælfhelm (1006) and the blinding of Ælfgar, son of Ealdorman Ælfric (993), and of Wulfheah and Ufegeat (1006) are all dealt with briefly and unemphatically, while the execution of Sigeferth and Morcar *ungerisenlice* (“shamefully”) is put down to Ealdorman Eadric’s treachery, although it was royally commissioned (1015). The most significant example of rule by terror during this period was Æthelred’s decision to slaughter those Danes peaceably settled in England on 13 November 1002, a pogrom known as the St. Brice’s Day massacre. This is described in the briefest fashion by the chronicler. A sense of the human toll of the slaughter can only be gained from other sources, such as the survival of a charter in favor of the monastery of St. Frideswide, Oxford, whose church was burned down by the citizens in their zeal to kill the Danes who had sought sanctuary there.<sup>30</sup> The chronicler’s choice to downplay this episode is made clearer by the contrasting treatment of William of Malmesbury, whose twelfth-century history, based (in part) on the chronicle, uses the St. Brice’s Day massacre to motivate Swein’s attacks in the following year and gives a personal twist to the feud by including among the dead Gunnhild, Swein’s sister.<sup>31</sup> Whatever the historical actualities, it is significant that the chronicler presents such acts of terror as decontextualized events which do not motivate or resonate with the events of the surrounding narrative. Such a treatment contrasts strongly with his repeated explorations of personal treachery in the English leaders.

Another way of constructing the narrative of Æthelred’s reign would be to play up the king’s successes. These rarely slip through the fissures of the chronicler’s crafted narrative. In A.D. 1000 the chronicler describes two events which make little sense within his story: Æthelred attacks Cumberland, while his navy ravages the Isle of Man. Such actions were presumably motivated by Viking attacks from the west, but these are not described in the chronicle. The chronicler comments on the (presumably successful) policy only as a failed rendezvous.<sup>32</sup> Nor is anything made of Æthelred’s successful royal diplomacy in neutralizing the threat of Norman support for Viking attackers through marriage to Duke Richard’s daughter. The marriage is baldly reported in 1002, with no sense of its political ramifications.<sup>33</sup>

This examination far from exhausts the connexions or contrasts

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which can be drawn between *The Battle of Maldon* and the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* for Æthelred's reign. In presenting resonances between these works, I do not mean to suggest that the poet was influenced by the chronicler's narrative; rather, I want to suggest the value of reading the chronicle for a sense of narrative norms, a horizon of expectation, against which the poem can be read. My purpose has been to indicate the fruitfulness of the comparison in order to encourage the assignment in the classroom of these twenty-odd pages of action-packed prose beside the more-famous poem. I hope that a future anthology of Old English literature may include these prose annals beside the poem. Meanwhile, the whole chronicle is available in an inexpensive translation or in a common reference volume.<sup>34</sup>

The emphasis of the poem appears different when read beside the chronicle rather than when read in isolation. The chronicler forcefully portrays the collapse of a society which fails to live up to the ideals expressed by those characters in the poem who stay to fight to the end. Reading the chronicle beside the poem highlights the rhetorical strategies by which each work creates the opposite impression in describing the same events. Byrhtnoth and his loyal retainers may all be on the losing side and may all finally die, yet the idealism implicit in the poet's celebration of English defeat is striking beside the recurring cynicism of the chronicler. Byrhtwold's famous advice—

Hige sceal þe heardra, heorte þe cenre,  
mod sceal þe mare, þe ure mægen lytlað.  
(312-13)

Mind must be the firmer, heart the bolder,  
spirit the stronger, as our strength diminishes—

establishes a touchstone for reading both narratives which is memorably and forcefully failed by the most prominent characters in the chronicle but fulfilled by the most prominent characters in the poem.

*University of Iowa*

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### Notes

1. *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, ed. M.H. Abrams, et al., 3rd ed., vol. 1 (New York: Norton, 1974) 88-95; J.B. Trapp, *Medieval English Literature*, *The Oxford Anthology of English Literature* (New York: Oxford UP, 1973) 104-14; Michael Alexander, *The Earliest English Poems*, Penguin Classics (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1966) 111-23; Kevin Crossley-Holland, *The Anglo-Saxon World: an Anthology*, World's Classics (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1982) 11-19.

2. It is included in all the commonly-used Old English readers: *Sweet's Anglo-Saxon Reader*, 15th ed., rev. Dorothy Whitelock (Oxford: Clarendon, 1967) 116-26; *Bright's Old English Grammar and Reader*, 3rd ed., ed. Frederic G. Cassidy and Richard N. Ringler (New York: Holt, 1971) 360-71; Bruce Mitchell and Fred C. Robinson, *A Guide to Old English*, 5th ed. (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992) 225-36. The poem is edited separately by D.G. Scragg, *The Battle of Maldon* (Manchester: Manchester UP, 1981), which is the edition quoted here.

3. A record of the events is provided by *The Times* (of London), 10 August 1991: 15.

4. E.g., *The Battle of Maldon, AD 991*, ed. Donald Scragg (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991); and *The Battle of Maldon: Fiction and Fact*, ed. Janet Cooper (London: Hambledon, 1993), based on papers given at a millennial conference.

5. See, respectively, Katherine O'Brien O'Keefe, "Heroic Values and Christian Ethics" in *The Cambridge Companion to Old English Literature*, ed. Malcolm Godden and Michael Lapidge (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1991) 107-25; D.G. Scragg, "The Battle of Maldon: Fact or Fiction?" in *Fiction and Fact*, ed. Cooper 19-31; Paul E. Szarmach, "The (Sub-) Genre of *The Battle of Maldon*" in *Fiction and Fact* 43-61.

6. Such a context was forcefully established in 1930 by Margaret Ashdown, *English and Norse Documents Relating to the Reign of Ethelred the Unready* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1930), who edited and translated annals 978-1017 of the C-text of the

*Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* beside *The Battle of Maldon*. The context is explored further by John Scattergood, "The Battle of Maldon and History," in *Literature and Learning in Medieval and Renaissance England: Essays Presented to Fitzroy Pyle*, ed. John Scattergood (Dublin: Irish Academic P, 1984) 11-24. The annal for 991 alone is handsomely edited by Janet M. Bately, "The *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*," *The Battle of Maldon, AD 991*, ed. Scragg, 37-50.

7. See Louis A. Montrose, "Professing the Renaissance: the Poetics and Politics of Culture" in *The New Historicism*, ed. H. Aram Veesser (New York: Routledge, 1989) 15-36, quoted from 20.

8. See, for example, O.D. Macrae-Gibson, "How Historical is *The Battle of Maldon*?" *Medium Ævum* 39 (1970) 89-107 and W.G. Busse and R. Holtei, "The Battle of Maldon: A Historical, Heroic and Political Poem," *Neophilologus* 65 (1981): 614-21, repr. in *Old English Shorter Poems: Basic Readings*, ed. Katherine O'Brien O'Keefe (New York: Garland, 1994) 185-97. The latter expand on the historical question to consider the poem's thematic and political purpose.

9. M.K. Lawson, "The Collection of Danegeld and Heregeld in the Reigns of Æthelred II and Cnut," *English Historical Review* 99 (1984): 721-38; John Gillingham, "The Most Precious Jewel in the English Crown: Levels of Danegeld and Heregeld in the Early Eleventh Century," *English Historical Review* 104 (1989): 373-84; M.K. Lawson, "Those Stories Look True: Levels of Taxation in the Reigns of Æthelred II and Cnut," *English Historical Review* 104 (1989): 385-406; John Gillingham, "Chronicles and Coins as Evidence for Levels of Tribute and Taxation in Late Tenth- and Early Eleventh-Century England," *English Historical Review* 105 (1990): 939-50; M.K. Lawson, "Danegeld and Heregeld Once More," *English Historical Review* 105 (1990): 951-61.

10. A multi-volume collaborative edition is currently in progress: general editors David Dumville and Simon Keynes (Cambridge: Brewer, 1983-). The best edition at present is Charles Plummer (based on the edition of John Earle), *Two of the Saxon Chronicles Parallel, with supplementary extracts from the others*, 2 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1892-99), based on A and E; the best edition of C for Æthelred's reign is Ashdown, *English and Norse Documents*.

Complete translations include G.N. Garmonsway, *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, Everyman's Library, new edition (London: Dent, 1972) and Dorothy Whitelock with David C. Douglas and Susie I. Tucker, *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle: a Revised Translation*, corrected imprint (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers UP, 1962). Translation to AD 1042 is conveniently available in *English Historical Documents I, c. 500-1042*, ed. Dorothy Whitelock, 2nd ed. (London: Eyre Methuen, 1979) 145-261.

11. Demonstrated by Simon Keynes, "The Declining Reputation of King Æthelred the Unready," in *Æthelred the Unready*, ed. David Hill, B.A.R. British Series 59 (Oxford, 1978) 227-53, esp. 229-31. The account was certainly written before the translation of Ælfheah's remains from London to Canterbury in 1023 and Keynes suggests that the most likely date of composition is 1016-17: see n. 19 on 245.

12. Keynes proposes London, "Declining Reputation," 232, noting how the defence of London is often presented as particularly noteworthy; P.A. Stafford, "The Reign of Æthelred II, A Study in the Limitations of Royal Policy and Action" in *Æthelred the Unready*, ed. Hill, 15-37, suggests East Anglia, pointing to the prominence of leaders from that region. Localizations suggested by earlier scholars are less convincing: Plummer tentatively suggested Canterbury for these annals, *Two Saxon Chronicles*, II, cxvi, while Frank Stenton, *Anglo-Saxon England*, 3rd ed. (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1971) 394, claimed Abingdon.

13. See, particularly, Stafford, "The Reign of Æthelred II," and Simon Keynes, "The Historical Context of the Battle of Maldon," in *The Battle of Maldon, AD 991*, ed. Scragg 81-113.

14. There have been few careful studies of the literary and rhetorical features of the chronicle; an outstanding exception is Cecily Clark, "The Narrative Mode of *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* Before the Conquest," in *England Before the Conquest: Studies in Primary Sources Presented to Dorothy Whitelock*, ed. Peter Clemoes and Kathleen Hughes (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1971) 215-35. Clark analyzes the annals for 978-1016 at 224-30.

15. Quotations of the chronicle are from the C-text, ed. Ashdown, *English and Norse Documents* (with length markers omitted) unless

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otherwise noted; translations are those of Whitelock, *English Historical Documents*.

16. Note the references to Mercian and Northumbrian family at lines 217 and 266 in addition to East Anglian localizations; see, further, Margaret A.L. Locherbie-Cameron, "The Men Named in the Poem," in *The Battle of Maldon, AD 991*, ed. Scragg 238-49.

17. The A-text is cited from Plummer, *Two Saxon Chronicles*.

18. See Plummer, *Two Saxon Chronicles II*: 181.

19. See Keynes, "Declining Reputation" 235, and, for an alternative explanation for the punishment of the son, Simon Keynes, *The Diplomas of King Æthelred 'the Unready' 978-1016: A Study in their Use as Historical Evidence* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1980) 182-4.

20. See Stafford, "The Reign of Æthelred II" 36-7.

21. See Plummer, *Two Saxon Chronicles II*: 188-9.

22. For a more explicit acknowledgement of the implications of such a release, cf. Othello's use of a hawking image:

If I do prove her haggard,  
Though that her jesses were my dear heart-strings,  
I'd whistle her off, and let her down the wind  
To prey at fortune.

*Othello*, 3.3.260-3, *The Riverside Shakespeare*, ed. G. Blakemore Evans, et al. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1974) 1222-3.

23. Keynes explores the metaphorical and literal significance of the cloud, "Declining Reputation" n. 11 (244).

24. See David M. Wilson, *The Bayeux Tapestry* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1985).

25. See Fred C. Robinson, "Some Aspects of the *Maldon* Poet's Artistry," *JEGP* 75 (1976): 25-40 at 25-8.

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26. See Helmut Gneuss, "The Battle of Maldon 89: Byrhtnoð's *ofermod* Once Again," *Studies in Philology* 73 (1976): 117-37; repr. in *Basic Readings*, ed. O'Keefe, 149-72.
27. For an early and influential example of this line of reading, see J.R.R. Tolkien, "The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth, Beorhthelm's Son," *Essays and Studies* n.s. 6 (1953): 1-18.
28. See, for example, George Clark, "The Battle of Maldon: A Heroic Poem," *Speculum* 43 (1968): 52-71.
29. Some sense of the purpose and manner of this royal harrying can be gained by comparison with the ravaging of Worcester on the orders of King Harthacnut in 1041, which is documented more fully in the chronicle of Florence of Worcester. This raid is in revenge for the death of two of the king's tax collectors and is a bloody and destructive affair; see, further, Emma Mason, *St Wulfstan of Worcester* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990) 57-8.
30. Edited as *English Historical Documents*, # 127.
31. See Ashdown, *English and Norse Documents* 97.
32. The success of Æthelred's policy in this case is suggested by Stafford, "Reign of Æthelred II" 30.
33. On which, see Stafford, "Reign of Æthelred II."
34. Garmonsway's translation (see n. 10) is currently in print and relatively inexpensive; *English Historical Documents* (see n. 10) ought to be present in any serious research library.