

TWO ANGLO-SAXON BATTLE POEMS

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INTRODUCTION

The Battle of Brunanburh and *The Battle of Maldon* were written at the close of Anglo-Saxon days. Not more than a century elapsed before the Anglo-Norman power came into predominance in England.

The Battle of Brunanburh was composed around the middle of the tenth century, in which stage we find that the power of the English ruling family of Wessex reached its zenith. The poem appeared in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* under the date 937 to honour the memory of the nation's hero, King Æthelstan and his brother Edmund who were victorious over the invading Viking forces composed of Norse, Scots, and Britons from Strathclyde. Though the poetry is of later historical narrative, in its meter and style, we recognize its careful adherence to earlier Old English heroic poetry.

If the *Brunanburh* poem recorded the glorious English power at its height, *The Battle of Maldon* written at the close of the century was a record suggesting the rapid decline of the Anglo-Saxon monarchy from power, although the battle was only a local defeat. The ealdorman of Essex, Byrhtnoth and his troops met the attack of combined Norwegian forces near Maldon in 991. In its vigor of style, which shows a development from the earlier meter and diction of alliterative Old English verses, the poet gives us short accounts of the deeds of prowess of one warrior after another in the West Saxon army.

Facing the increasingly tragic circumstances, the English warriors displayed their utmost heroic valour in the feeling of loyalty to their lord. This feeling of loyalty is a most favoured theme throughout Teutonic literature. Scholars generally concur to the opinion that the traditional heroic spirit is fully expressed in the *Maldon* poem. And it is perhaps the last expression of heroic spirit so reminiscently Teutonic which has been handed down to us.

In studying these two poems, the attempt will be made to clarify the extent to which those endearing characters appearing in the battle scenes in *Brunanburh* and *Maldon* were prototypes from Anglo-Saxon society, and secondly to ascertain whether the philosophy of life of common people is reflected in the descriptive technique of the poetry. Then finally, to find out the reason why these poems are still very appealing to us vaulting over the boundaries of time and age both by way of descriptive technique and by way of philosophy expressed.

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Two Battle Poems

A brief discussion will suffice to familiarize the reader with the history and background of the poetry concerned. We find in two battle poems, representative works of the heroic poetry of the time, how the manners and the tradition of the time were expressed, and how they are reflected in the images of the warriors described in the poems.

The Battle of Brunanburh is a dignified historical narrative composed in 73 lines of alliterative verse. As indicated, it celebrated the great achievement of the nation's heroes, King Æthelstan and Prince Edmund who guarded their land, homes and property against all enemies, honorably assuming their role as descendants of noble kinsmen: (*wip laþra gehwh æne land ealgodon, / hord and hamas*, 9-10, B.)⁽¹⁾

It was in an age of much strife that warrior groups were the central figures in the social structure. The king's authority extended to the highest level and uncompromising allegiance was exacted from all. To maintain the social equilibrium, the king in turn, had the duty of protecting his people and their homes against all invaders.⁽²⁾

In the beginning of the poem, the poet describes Æthelstan and his brother with greatest respect and immediately they are revealed as heroes who live up fully to their subjects' expectation.

Her Æþelstan cyning, eorla dryhten,
beorna beahgifa, and his broþor eac,
Eadmund æþeling, ealdorlangne tir
geslogon æt sæcce sweorda ecgum
ymbe Brunanburh.

1-, B.

The expression, *eorla dryhten* means the king was the people's lord and *beahgifa*, generous bestower of the ring. For this supreme lord his subjects needed to feel obligation and loyalty as their first duty to him. However, the expressions in kennings are, those of convention. We note similar kennings in *Beowulf* and *Judith* as follows: (*leof leodcyning* 54, *hyra sincgyfan* 1012, Beo.); (*sinces brytta* 30, *byrnwigena brego* 39, J.).

As leaders of the military force, the king and his brother were expected to be strong and brave, and excelled in the handling of weapons, and so they were, two brothers leading the troops:

Bordweal clufan,
heowan heaþolinde, hamora lafan,
afaran Eadweardes, swa him geæþele wæs
from cneomægum,

5-8, B.

They penetrated the wall of shields with hewing spears, and cut down the heavy

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linden shield with a blow of the hammers. It was a hard and enduring battle. The clashing of handaxes, swords and the splitting of shields continued on and on. The battle field became slippery with the blood of the slain. When many of the enemies began to retreat and took to flight, West Saxon troops hewed the fugitives sorely from behind with sword ground sharp. (*heowan herefleman hindan pearle / mecum mylen sceanpan*. 23-24, B.). But they were not all weak-hearted, for there were many valiant warriors among the enemies with whom the brave kinsmen of Mercian fought.

Myrce ne wyrndon
 heardes hondplegan hæleþa nanum
 þæra þe mid Anlafe ofer æra gebland
 on lides bosme land gesohtun,
 fæge to gefeohte.

24-28, B.

And many of those among the enemy who fought bravely lay dead in the field. There were five young kings, seven earls of Anlaf, many thousands of Norsemen, and seamen beyond counting. On the other side, a great multitude of Saxons also fell. Those brave ones doomed, faced their *wyrd* (fate) in a manner befitting a warrior.

In contrast to the picture of these gallant ones, the Norsemen's chief Anlaf, with a little troop, escaped by ship to seek Dublin. And the skilled battle-man (*har hilderinc* 39, B.), Constantinus II, forsook his son and relatives in the battle field and escaped to save his own life. The picture is outlined in a tone of contempt. Here we perceive the personal feeling of the poet representing the general sentiment on the true valour of a soldier's conduct.

Ðær geflemed wearð
 Norðmanna bregu, hede gebeded,
 to lides stefne litle weorode,
 Cread cneor on flot, cyning ut gewat
 on fealene flod feorh generede.
 Swilce þær eac se froda mid fleame com
 on his cyppe norð Costontinus,
 har hilderinc. Hreman ne porfte
 mæcan gemanan, He wæs his mæga sceard,
 freonda gefylled on folcstede,
 beslagen æt sæcce, and his sunu forlet
 on wælstow wundun forgrunden,
 giungne æt guoe.

32-44, B.

They despised the act of cowardice above everything. For bravery had long been a tradition of Germanic people.

Both Englishmen and their opponents, the Vikings as well, throughout their long

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history of constant fighting, have gradually formulated ideals as to the accepted conduct of fightingmen, both leaders and followers. Their standard of morality was a natural result of the law of self-preservation of the earlier primitive community.

The enemies were indeed, in their early origin, related to the primitive Germanic tribes about which Roman historian Tacitus wrote as early as in the first century, and whose ideal heroic code found its way throughout the long lapse of time in the societies of both the Anglo-Saxon and Vikings.⁽⁵⁾

We shall now see what impressed Tacitus in the Germanic way of life, about the strength of bond between a man and his chieftain.

He writes:⁽⁶⁾

In the field of action, it is disgraceful to the prince to be surpassed in valour by his companions: and not to vie with him in martial deeds, is equally a reproach to his followers. If he dies in the field, he who survives him survives to live in infamy. All are bound to defend their leader, to succour him in the heat of action, and to make even their own actions subservient to his renown. This is the bond of union, the most sacred obligation. The chief fights for victory; the followers for their chief.

The character of the general is this:⁽⁷⁾

To be of a prompt and daring spirit in battle, and to attack in the front for the lines, is the popular character of the chieftain; when admired for his bravery, he is sure to be obeyed.

and, in time of action, the followers behave as follows:⁽⁸⁾

... They depend altogether on their valour; and, ... they place their confidence, not in the strength of their armies, but entirely in their general.

It is no wonder that the English troops led by King Æthelstan had placed their confidence in these two courageous leaders.

In *Brunanburh*, there being no allusion to religion, we can not say how much the Christian religion had permeated the religious beliefs and heathern customs of the Teutonic race in the stage in which this poem was written, but curious allusions are found in the poem, *Judith*. This is said to have been written about 918 to do honour to the valiant deeds of Ethelfræd, King Alfred's daughter, the Lady of Mercian who helped her brother King Edward, to build fortresses to withstand Danish attack.⁽⁹⁾

The epic of *Judith* using the apocryphal heroine is said to have encouraged patriotic sentiments in the fight for the fatherland. But here in *Judith*, what we find most interesting is the deep religious overtone successfully intermingled with the traditional heathen custom of war. The battle is justified because it is a fight for God and fatherland. Judith prayed ardently to God to help her to act bravely and for victory. The Almighty is invoked with great frequency.

Traditionnal Teutonic devotion to one's lord blended into the Christian devotion

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to God. Indeed, in *Judith*, the Christian God assumes the position of the Teutonic lord 'master of warriors'. The 'variation's for God is as follows: (⁽⁹⁾*dugeða Waldend* 61, J.), (⁽¹⁰⁾*mihtig Dryhten* 92, J.), (*pearlmid þeoden gumena* 91, J.), (*torhtmod tires brytta* 93, J.). In this description one sees the character of the Germanic war lord obscured under a veil of Christianity.

To Anglo-Saxon readers of *Judith*, the idea of God must have been no less remote than their own lord, leader of the warriors. The word for beloved chieftain (*leofan Dryhtne* 347, J.) is synonymous with God. Bold-hearted *Judith* (*ellenpriste* 133, J.) and her Hebrew troops gained confidence and fought dauntlessly with the Assyrian army because they believed that the almighty Lord (*mihtih Dryhten* 198, J.) was at their side. And the Assyrians were doomed to perish (*slegefæge hæleð* 247, J.) because, from the beginning, they had no lord in whom to 'place their confidence' in battle.⁽¹¹⁾

From the previous study concerning the nature of the poetry of *Brunanburh* we recognize the strong patriotic sentiment of the English people expressed through the elaborate images of English princes as D. Daiches pointed out.⁽¹²⁾ We see that the description of the English hero is impressively reinforced by contrasting his virtue with the cowardice of his opponent. So we know now what Anglo-Saxon mind accepted or rejected. The heroic morality which their hero reflects is the naive and straightforward loyalty to one's belief no matter what the odds are.

This idea of simple and unwavering devotion is itself appealing to the human heart.

We have seen so far, in the symbolic pictures of the two opposing virtues presented in *Brunanburh*, the concept of a hero which the English people in the tenth century possessed. We shall then examine further into the relation among heroic companions depicted in *Maldon*.

The leading character of the poem is Byrhtnoth, the earl of Essex who fought gallantly against the host of Vikings mainly Norwegian, whose leader was presumably Olaf Tryggvason or Josteinn, Olaf's maternal uncle, on the Essex shore near Maldon. According to the widely accepted hypothesis of E. D. Laborde, the Vikings had sailed up the broad estuary of the Blackwater (*Pantan* 68, M.) to the island of Northey at its western extremity and confronted the host of Byrhtnoth on a causeway (*bricg* 74, M.) to the mainland⁽¹³⁾

The poem was generally recognized to have been composed soon after the battle while the memory of all that happened was still fresh in the poet well acquainted with all the events and detailed accounts of the battle.

The event of the battle itself had no great historical importance for the English side, compared to the battle in *Brunanburh*, but the poet composed in 325 alliterative lines in which 22 warriors in the English army are mentioned by name, and 9 speeches of the individual warriors are included.

Of the poem *Maldon* the first and last part are missing, so we do not know the

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exact length of the actual poem. But scholars agree to the opinion that the missing parts do not alter much the unity of the poetry.

Since the writer was not taking a general historical view, the names of the Vikings were not what mattered to him. E. V. Gordon suggests that the Vikings were only the agent of destruction. The poet was mainly concerned with the description of his fellow English men, and their heroic defeat

We shall then proceed from the character of Byrhtnoth, to discover what picture of a hero he represents and how he, as a military leader fared with the Vikings and, what his relation was, to his retainers who died a heroic death together with their lord on the battlefield at Maldon.

In the beginning of the poem, before the Anglo-Saxon troops engaged in pitched battle with the invading troops, Byrhtnoth, the leader of the day rode among his troops and incited them to fighting fury.

Da þær Byrhtnoð ongan beonas trymian,
rad and rædde, rincum tæhte
hu hi sceoldon standan and þone stede healdan,
and bæd þæt hyra randas rihte heoldon
fæste mid folman, and ne forhtedon na.

17-21, M.

The character of Byrhtnoth when introduced first, immediately calls to mind the virtue of the general admired in *Germaia* of Tacitus. He was the King's personal representative, the commander of his shire militia in the war. Byrhtnoth then was one of the greatest landowners in the country. ⁽¹⁰⁾ Actually he was ranked next to the two great ealdormen of his time: Elfhære of Mercia and Eoelwine of East Anglia in power. The first requisite to the image of hero is his capability as a leader. Of this Byrhtnoth has given adequate proof. His popularity as a protector and leader is lucidly depicted in the above affectionate description of him. This is not just a conventional picture of the leader. He rode amongst his troops and taught the warriors how they should hold the place with the shield fast in their grip and encouraged them not to be afraid. We remember that to lead the army at the head of the line is the first virtue admired in the image of hero. Moreover, Byrhtnoth has a character which undoubtedly could win much popularity among his followers. He was an understanding leader. His followers must have felt a profound loyalty toward him.

It was then that personal allegiance felt in reality linked the bond between leader and his follower, rather than the abstract feeling of patriotism, and this feeling in reality must have motivated the warriors to fight bravely for their respected lord.

The second quality which the image of a hero requires is his generosity toward his subjects. To this Byrhtnoth qualifies splendidly. He was regarded with proper respect and love: (*folces ealdor* 202, M.), (*min ealdor* 222, M.); (*min hlaford* 224, M.), (*min winedrihten* 248, M.), (*min wine* 250, M.), (*leofan men* 319, M.), (*god*, 315, M.).

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To the English king, Byrhtnoth was a worthy thegn (*Æpelredes þegen* 151⁽¹⁷⁾), though Ætheræd was an unreliable ruler at the time.⁽¹⁸⁾ Because of his personal virtue, Byrhtnoth was highly regarded as people's treasure giver (*sincgyfan* 278, M.), (*beahgifan* 290, M.). Though these expressions were conventional, we see these 'kennings' were used generally for those possession of the highest authority.

Thirdly, the hero had to be brave and strong. This was the *sine quanon* in the age of struggle. His bravery and skill in the use of hand weapons instilled fear in his enemies and thus he could protect his people. Tacitus's *Germania* states that abandonment of shield, which is an act of cowardice, was a flagitious crime.

Byrhtnoth replied resolutely to the messenger of the Vikings who proposed making a treaty with tribute.

Byrhtnoð maþelode, bord hafenode,
 wand wacne æsc, wordum mælde,
 yrre and anræd ageaf him andsware
 "Gehyrst þu, sælida, hwæt þis folc segeð?
 Hi willað eow to gafole garas syllan,
 ættrynne ord and ealde swurd,
 þa heregeatu þe eow æt hilde ne deah.
 brimmanna boda, abeod eft ongean,
 sege þinum leodum miccle laþre spell,
 þæt her stynt unforcuð eorl mid his werode,
 þe wile gealgean eþel þysne,
 Æpelredes eard, ealdres mines,
 folc and foldan.

42-54, M.

Byrhtnoth was (*unforcuoð* 51, M.) and (*andræd* 44, M.). He despisingly refused to offer tribute to the raiders. But he accepted the challenge and he was firmly resolute to keep hold on the land for his lord king Æthelræd and his people. The last statement is touching as we know King Æthelræd as incompetent. Though lines 42-44 might be conventional epic form one may see the same pattern of expression in *Beowulf*; more so indeed in *Beowulf* than in any other epic,⁽¹⁹⁾ (*wæpen hafenade / heard be hittum Higelaces þegn yree ond anræd*. 1573-1575, Beo.), we behold his indignant refusal to the Viking request for tribute. The Maldon poet excels in giving a vigorous, fresh impression in his narrative by the occasional use of the minor epic form blended with his own style.

Because the Anglo-Saxon battle was still fought in an uncomplicated manner, victory or defeat depended mainly on the skill of each individual's wielding of weapons. In order to portray his ability in full the picture of the hero is usually shown in a detailed account of vigorous hand to hand combat with the enemy. *Beowulf's* detailed account of his struggle with the monsters and the dragon gives us a full picture of an ideal hero, strong and brave with great skill in battle. Ealdorman

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Byrhtnoth's quality as being a great warrior is also well shown in the following line in which his capable handling of weapons is illustrated :

he mid gare stang
 wlance wicing, þe him þa wunde forgeaf.
 Erod wæs se fyrdrinc; he let his francan wadan
 þurh ðæs hysses hals, hand wisode
 þæt he on þam færscæðan feorh geræhte.
Ða he oþterne ofstlice sceat,
 þæt seo byrne tobærst; he wæs on breostum wund
 þurh ða hrdnglocan, him æt heortan stod
 ætterne ord.

138-146, M.

The wounded Byrhtnoth valiantly fought on until he was no longer able to hold his sword (*gerenod swurd* 161, M.), (*fealohilte swurd* 166, M.), (*heardne mece* 167, M.). He incited his men to advance and before he was finally slain, offered a last prayer to God.

Nu ic ah, milde metod, mæste þearfe
 þæt þu minum gaste godes geunne,
 þæt min sawul to ðe siðian mote
 no þin geweald, þeoden engla,
 mid friþe ferian. Ic eom frymði to þe
 þæt hi helsceaon hynan ne moton."

175-180, M.

Certainly, Byrhtnoth dies a heroic death but he is not at all depicted as the exaggerated figure of the hero who dies laughing to exhibit his heroism. But he thanks God, when lies mortally wounded, for the joy of his life. Further, his fear of death he frankly expresses, and appeals to God for help. Here he is not a symbol of a hero but an ordinary man akin to us. He is expressing human feelings, devoid of idealistic sentiment. Byrhtnoth suddenly transcends all boundaries of space and time and is sitting next to us. He is congenial in the common weakness of the human being. Byrhtnoth is strongly Anglo-Saxon in feeling. But every detail the poet describes is a true and real sentiment and in such sentiment we share something in common with him. Consequently, Anderson commented that the poem itself sounded almost modern, and that the poem very appealing.

The idea of Christianity expressed and understood in his prayer is no longer tinged with the Anglo-Saxon colouring of Hero-Savior. This is justly accepted Christian faith. It is interesting to compare the description applied to God in *Judith* mentioned before, and that in *Maldon*.

The Savior in *Judith* was, as stated before, (*dugeða waldend* 61, J.), and (*þealmod þeoden guena* 91, J.). The God is (*þealmod*) stern and (*cyninga wuldor* 155, J.), (*torhtmod tires brytta* 93, J.). In *Maldon*, God was (*ðeoda waldend* 173,

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M.), the image which extended tolerance, (milde metod 175, M.), the God of love.

The *Maldon* poem, in spirit, was just as warlike as *Beowulf*. But as to the Christian sentiments, *Maldon* and *Beowulf* are not exactly the same in spirit. Though the poet of *Beowulf* treated the whole story in the light of Christian teaching, when confronted with death, *Beowulf* congratulates himself that he has not been guilty of treachery, or of having failed his people. When he sees that death is unavoidable, he becomes an overbearing, self-reliant Teutonic hero; he trusts his own strength (*strengo getruwode / anes mannes*, 2540-2541, *Beo.*) and he accepts unreservedly his destiny: (*swa unc wyrd geteoð, / Metod manna gehwæs*, 2526-2527, *Beo.*) while *Byrhtnoth* appeals to the mercy of God with no thought of his own merits. One may conclude from this episode that in the course of time the Christian teaching has penetrated the mind of Anglo-Saxon people quite deeply.

However, we see Christianity in most cases in Anglo-Saxon poems through a veil of Teutonic hero-worship. And at the instance of Arthur's death, -a hero appearing in Layamon's *Brut*, we discover no allusion to the Christian beliefs though Arthur is a later product of the Medieval age. He says to his sister's son, these dying words:

And ich wulle uaren to Aualun, to uairest alre maidene,
to Argante þere quene, aluen swiðe sceone,
and heo scal mine wunden makien alle isunde,
al hal me makien mid haleweize drenchen.
And seoðe ich cumen wulle to mine kineriche
and wunien mid Brutten mid muchelere wunne.
Æfne þan worden þere com of se wenden
þat wes an sceort bat liðen, sceouen mid vðen,
and twa wimmen perinne, wunderliche idihte,
and heo nomen Arður anan and aneouste hine uereden
and softe hine adun leiden and forð gunnen liðen. 4070-4080

These passages give an interesting parallel to Scandinavian mythology in which the Vikings believed that the dead must take a long journey over river or sea before they are received into their final resting place. Here we recall the custom of a ship funeral where the body was placed with treasures and was launched out to sea as told in the story of *Beowulf*.

In Layamon's *Brut* we find that the language differs significantly from the Old English, but the battle scene is as fierce as that which we recognize in *Brunanburh* and *Maldou*. King Arthur much resembles the hero of the Teutonic world. When he faces death, he seems not to admit his extinction. He would return, he said. And we are sure that his heroic image never died from the hearts of English people. Even now they still preserve a longing for the heroic image which had been fostered since ancient times. *Byrhtnoth* indeed was depicted as a hero who was endowed with all the characteristics of the ideal warrior of the time. Yet he is not such a mere

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symbolism as we have seen in the English kings in *Brunanburh*. Byrhtnoth, in detailed account, was depicted with much humanness.

In what light shall we see the followers of Byrhtnoth who rendered service to such an admirable lord? They were worthy retainers to a virtuous leader. They were as the proverb says, 'No cowardly soldiers under a brave general.'

Eadric made a boast before the troops engaged with the Viking army. He said :

ongan þa forð beran
gar to guþe. He hæfde god geþanc
þa hwile þe he mid handum healdan mihte
bord and bradswurd; beot he gelæste
þa he ætforan his frean feohtan sceolde. 12-16. M.

The close sense of unity expressed in his boast are reminiscent of Tacitus. All being bound to defend their leader, they fought in front of him. This act was highly regarded and it was considered a privilege to fall in battle defending one's lord.

The conduct of the soldier's fighting against Danes, under Byrhtnoth, beautifully fits into the moral code of the warrior expressed in *Germania*. Each act of valor is presented to us individually. After the death of their lord, what they considered was :

unearge men efston georne;
hi woldon þa ealle oðer twega,
lif forlætan oððe leofne gewrecan. 206-208, M.

one or the other, to avenge their beloved lord or to die. They, the bold thegns (*wlance þegenas* 205, M.) went forth. Young Leofsunu spoke with straight forwardness of the retainers :

"Ic þæt gehate, þæt ic heonon nelle
fleon fotes trym, ac wille furðor gan,
wrecan on gewine minne winedrihten.
Ne þurfon me embe Sturmere stedefæste hælæð
wordum ætwitan, nu min wine gecranc,
þæt ic hlafordleas ham siðie,
wende fram wige, ac me sceal wæpen niman,
ord and iren." 246-253, M.

In this striking words we see the exalted warrior code to which they remain true. In time of crisis, they are pressed to choose between dying bravely and living in shame. The strong feeling of loyalty to the lord made them all heroes.

This loyalty indeed was an ancient warrior tradition appearing almost hereditary when exercised in the relationship of lord and retainer. Let us hear the words young Alfwine utters and compare them with those of the young retainer of Beowulf Wiglaf,

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when Beowulf was confronted with death. Alfwine spoke :

“Gemunan þa mæla þe we oft æt meodo spræcon,
þonne we on bence beot ahofon,
hæleð on healle, ymbe heard gewinn;
nu mæg cunnian hwa cene sy. 212-215, M.

And Wiglaf :

‘Ic ðæt mæl geman, þær we medu þegun,
þonne we geheton ussum hlaforde
in biorsele, ðe us ðas beagas geaf,
þæt er him ða guðgetawa gyldan woldon,
gif him þyslicu þearf gelumpe,
helmis ond heard sword. 2633-2638, Beo.

Though there would be approximately 200 years separating the two poems. *Beowulf* and *Maldon*, what we see now is a word by word comparison of their similarity. One may notice that these phrases are conventional in battle poetry. It may be so, but what is important is, that these words spoken by the young warriors must have appealed to those living in the Anglo-Saxon days as utterances of truth by noble minded heroes. An attitude of sincerity to one's beliefs, whatever they may be, is inspiring.

So the Maldon warriors spurred each other on to the last, while the brave ones fell one by one close by the side of their respected lord.

þa hwile þe he wæpen mæge
habban and healdan, heardne mece,
gar and godswurd. 235-237, M

They fought fiercely avenging ; so Eadward the tall :

He bræc þone bordweall and wið þa beornas feaht,
oðþæt he his sincgyfan on þam sæmannum
wurolice wrec, ær he on wæle læge. 277-279, M.

They went on till they had avenged the death of lord, before they too fell among the slain.

and begen þa beornas þe him big stodon,
Ælfnōð and Wulmær begen lagon,
ða onemn hyra frean feorh gesealdon. 182-184, M.

To conquer the fear of death, which is the soldier's greatest enemy, meant to preserve his honour and to face his fate bravely.

The heroic attitude in facing a most tragic situation we find in *Byrhwold's*

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famous speech, which is said to be exemplary of the most exalted heroic spirit.⁽⁶³⁾

Byrhtwold maþelode, bord hafenode
(se wæs eald geneat), æsc acwehte ;
he ful baldlice beornas lærde :
“Hige sceal þe heardra, heorte þe cenre,
mod sceal þe mare, þe ure mægen lytlað

309-313, M.

I feel that this very powerful and moving exhortation by Byrhtwold very highly lauds the hero of the age. And it is in the same key that the eulogy to *the Battle of Brunanburh* is sung.

Opinions have been quite varied as to the order of classification of these poems in categories of poetic pattern. E. E. Wardale classifies them as historical lays and George Anderson, as heroic epics. H. H. Chadwick, put them under the classification of court poetry because of the aristocratic quality of art and sentiment they contained. However, Chadwick insists that *Maldon* is worthy of claiming the title of epic and to that opinion E. P. Ker concurs. Ker and Jean de Vries, seem to hold the opinion that the epic could be developed out of short lays and that the transition is smooth.⁽⁶⁴⁾

I recognize that the poems of *Maldon* and *Brunanburh* certainly possess many of the qualities of the epic though they could not sufficiently meet the strictest epic requirements as defined by M. M. Tillyard.

The poems communicate the feeling of a multitude of men whose most profound convictions and virtuous action might serve as an ideal by which people could shape their lives. These are some of the epic qualities which Tillyard asked for.⁽⁶⁵⁾

The *Brunanburh* poem emphasized the magnanimity of the victorious hero while the *Maldon* poet portrayed the defiant hero, who, in the face of surmounting adversity, exhibited ever more genuine devotion to the warriors' creed. And although these warriors represented the ideals of the people, we discover that they were also real personages in the society of Anglo-Saxony. The beliefs and actions of the Anglo-Saxon hero were a reflection of the life of the individual. It is a reflection that seems to transcend time and space for we find the thread of heroic spirit in the poetry of all ages.

The heroes of these Old English battle poems were sincere but naive. In the following passages, we should like to ascertain whether this simplicity has found a mode of expression in the form and content of the poetry.

Notes on Descriptive Technique

In the course of the preceding chapters, we have come to recognize that what these poems under analysis express is the representative feeling of a large group of people ; in *Brunanburh*, the feeling of English people as a nation, and in *Maldon*, of a warrior group, a nucleus of the society who lived in the age of war.

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Their living conditions must have given them the habit of looking into the phenomena of their limited world as hanging in the balance of two opposing forces. They saw things in a pattern of contrast such as war and peace, youth and old age, life and death, and good opposed to evil. People's beliefs were always in strict conformity to the custom of the community. Each person behaved and thought according to the standard recognized in the world. There was as yet no expression of the individuality of a man, but they were rather all part of their idea of the common world.

A. G. Brodeur, a celebrated scholar has commented on the structural unity of *Beowulf* and says that the use of repetition, anticipation and contrast is the traditional technique in Old English. And that the balance between the contrasting types, the hero as retainer and as king, between heroic youth and heroic old age gives the essential unity to the entire poem of *Beowulf*.

We have come to believe that this use of contrast for poetic expression was the natural outcome of the way of looking at life in Anglo-Saxon days.

Throughout the ages each nation has found a suitable form of expression to convey its outlook on life, and the Anglo-Saxons, we believe, found the technique of contrast an appropriate theme for the poetic sentiment originating in their spiritual life.

In *Brunanburh*, we believe by the use of this 'contrast', descriptive technique, the balance and unity of the whole poetic structure is beautifully maintained. And the device of contrast is employed also for many minor effects.

First, in the main themes of this poem, which describes the exalted feelings of patriotism, the contrasting technique found its fullest expression. The glorious figures of the king of England and his brother were contrasted with the debased Constantine and Anlaf, defeated invaders. And to make these black and white pictures more clearly effective, the poet used a variation which was the traditional diction and style of the Old English poetry. A. G. Brodeur defines 'variation' as a double or multiple statement of the same concept in different words and this comes under the technique of repetition of sentences, phrases, and words, in various degrees.

This is used to add force and eloquence to the expression of emotion, and, according to Brodeur, "it is used to emphasize the moments of feeling most productive of action or those emotions or situations in themselves most dramatic.

To give emphasis to the stateliness of the character, the heavy appositional variation is used to denote the figures of kings. (*Her Æpelstan cyning, eorla dryhten, / beorna beahgifa, and his broþor eac, / Eadmund æpeling, 1-3, B.*). They fought nobly as befitted their famous kinsmen. After the struggle, they made a triumphal return to their home country. It is denoted in a dignified variation. (*Swilce þa gebroþer begen ætsamne, / cyning and æpeling, cyþþ sohton, / Wesseaxena land, wiges hremige, 57-59 B.*).

To give a weighty contrast to the victorious kings, the defeated ones were

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described with debasing emphasis. Here we note the threefold repetition of the statement to denote the inability of the enemy. The technique here applied is ever to increase the effect of contrasting. It helps to make the image of the victorious English king and prince particularly impressive.

hreman ne þorfte
mæca gemanan; he wæs his mæga sceard,
freonda gefylled on folcstede,
beslagen æt sæcce, and his sunu forlet
on wælstowe wundun forgrunde,
giungne æt guoe. Gelpan ne þorfte
beorn blandenfeax bilgeslehtes.
eald inwidda, ne Anlaf þy ma;
mid heora hrelafum hlehhan ne þorftun
þæt heo beaduweorca beteran wurdun
on campstede cumbolgehnates.
garmittinge, gumena gemotes.
wæpengewrixles, þæs hi on wælfelda
wiþ Eadweardes afaran plegodan.

39-52, B.

Heavy compound parallelism was employed to emphasize the feeling of contempt. The basic sentence is composed of the following concepts; I) ought not boast, II) the meeting of weapons, III) ought not laugh, IV) at the battlefield, V) where the kinsmen were slain, VI) the cunning warrior. The poet is said to pour out his feeling in this significant statement.

Another contrast we find which enriches the poetic feeling is the allusion, in the midst of battle, to the brilliance of the sun, and to the ghastly beasts of prey, at the end of the fighting. The picture of the sun and the beasts presents a balance of light and dark, activity versus inactivity. These two striking scenes are impressively enhanced with the use of parallelism.

siðþan sunne up
on morgentid, mære tungol,
glad ofer grundas, godes condel beorht,
eces drihtnes oð sio æþele gesceaft
sah to setle.

13-17, B.

Letan him behindan hræw bryttian
saluwigpadan, þone seartan hræfn,
hyrnednebban, and þane hasewanpadan,
earn æftan hwit, æses brucan,
grædigne guðhafoc and þæt græge deor,
wulf on wealde.

60-65, B.

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In the first picture, the troops of Westsaxon and the Vikings fought a fierce battle all day long until that noble creation of God, the sun, sank to rest. The image of the sun is a magnificent attribute of God. Compared to the magnitude of the work of God, how insignificant seem the works of men, even though they be matters of life and death. The words, Sun and God have substantival parallelism for sustaining dignity.

"The battlefield became slippery with men's blood during the day's struggle." This gives us the visual image of the glory scene of battle glaring under the sun. The scene of the deserted battlefield was painted with the images of the corpse-devouring beasts.

The figures of these animals form a quite conventional picture of the battle scene. The adjectival parallelism was used as graphic emphasis, employed successfully to render a gloomy panoramic view counter-balancing the activity of the battle field.

Cambell observed that in 54 half-lines out of 74 long-lines in *Brunanburh*, almost one third of the poems entirety, are found expressions similar to the older verses, and out of 54, no less than 21 half-lines were recorded in other Old English poetry. So the phraseology used here has reached a stage of the utmost conventionality. Yet, after the careful reading of the poem, we do not fully agree with the comment given by Brodeur. He said, in essence, that in Old Saxon poetry variation is so profuse that it becomes colorless. It is almost constantly and mechanically used in *Brunanburn*. It is certainly used frequently, but not, I feel, necessarily mechanically. We see their effective use giving an important accentuation both to the style and tone of the poem. It also helps to add the distinctive outline to the features of the scenes and the warriors and it adds a colorful pictorial image to the poem.

Another type of contrast is the use of one fixed metric pattern balanced with a variety of rhythm, thus the poet is able to convey the impression of intensity with the application of a single verse form.

When the poet wishes to give rapid progress to the narrative, the variation used is not a kind of parallelism, but a simpler form. For variation, the poet used poetic circumlocutions, such as (*æragebland*, 26, B.) which is the 'kenning' for sea, and (*Flotana*, 32, B.) which is the substantival variation for 'Danes'.

In the line 47-52, 'type A' verse is mostly used in the second halflines and adds strength to the narrative. This device is effective also to avoid the monotony of stressing a single idea in the prolonged lines. Such a method, one unifying a single rhythm, is used in the progressive lines of 21-25 effectively. This time it suggests the clamour of battle followed by an ominous death-like silence.

The critical remark on the battle at the very last of the poem was not thoughtlessly inserted. It is at the climax of the poem that the line 70-73, 'type A' verse is used in the second half and, in 72-73, a single 'type (D*2)' is used in the first half-lines as well, which has raised the effect of intensity to the maximum.

We have noted so far in *Brunanburh* that the simple theory of contrast in various effects has worked its way through the poem maintaining the unity.

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The poem *Brunanburh* used the technique of flashback. At the first entry, the poet immediately introduces the consequence of the battle, of its victory, and goes on to tell how these kings of noble lineage fared with their enemies. In general tone the poet is viewing his story from a great distance. And then, feel that the strength of climax is lacking in *Brunanburh*. In this respect there is no actual feeling of anticipation. It is narrated in realistic proportions with no necessity for anticipation of either a tragic or happy end.

Now that the general structure of *Brunanburh* has been pointed out we shall begin to examine how the theory of contrast, repetition, and anticipation is employed in *Maldon poem*.

As in the case of *Brunanburh* we recognize that contrast is used with various effects. However, the use of contrast is also the way to keep the unity of the poem and the sense of proportion, as this is a story of the heroes who unflinchingly faced their tragic circumstances and proved themselves worthy; the anticipation is well contrived to foretell the coming of the culminating tragedy.

The first sign which foretells the advent of great struggle for the West Saxon warriors comes at the time when their leader, brave Byrhtnoth, who championed fair play, granted too great a foothold to the enemy over the river Panta, who waded through the ford and made a landing. The second announcement to the impending tragedy is the death of a nephew of the Ealdorman Byrhtnoth, who must have been fighting close to him in the midst of a bitter struggle.

The ties of kinship were very strong in the Anglo-Saxon people particularly between uncle and nephew, which is in the tradition of the Germanic race. And therefore, the death of a young nephew of the leader suggests that the situation was already very tight for the West Saxon side. Moreover, it suggests the wrath of Byrhtnoth at witnessing the death of his beloved nephew and how he must have fought more furiously at the head of his army.

As a result of his inflamed valour, the earl was injured. He fearlessly fought on but when he could no longer hold his weapon because of the wounds, he was slain. His death becomes the turning point of the downfall of the troops of Wessex.

The fourth foreboding to the tragic defeat of the Saxon warriors was the desertion of a coward. When they saw Godric had fled on the lord's horse, many lost heart and joined in the flight. Then comes the culmination to the tragedy, when those brave warriors who held out to the last, died heroically. With this use of suspense the poetry maintains an unbroken thread of breathtaking swiftness and force, remarkably fitted to the subject of the theme of this battle poetry. To the theme of tragedy the technique of contrast is intricately interwoven.

The poetry is introduced first from the retainer's point of view. The poet focuses his attention upon each warrior individually and goes on to elaborate what is happening around him at close range.

From this proximity the poet makes a transition to a wider range and describes

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a scene caught in the contrasting panoramic view. Let us see how he worked in the following quotation in which the comparative points of view are presented; the first scene viewed at close range, the latter viewed from greater distance.

Het þa hyssa hwæne hors forl etan,
feor afysan, and forð gangan,
hicgan to handum and hige godum.
þa pæt Offan mæg ærest onfunde,
pæt se eorl nolde yrhðo geþolian,
he let him þa of handon leofne fleogan
hafoc wið pæs holtes, and to þære hile stop;
be þam man mihte oncnawan pæt se cniht nolde
wacian et þam wige, þa he to wærnum feng. 2-10, M.

Ne mihte þær for wætere werod to þam oðrum;
þær com flowende flod æfter ebban,
lucon lagustreamas. To lang hit him þuhte,
hwænne hi togædere garas beron.
Hi þær Pantan stream mid prasse bestodon,
Eastseaxena ord and se æschere. 64-69, M.

In the first scene, the exhorting ealdorman and his resolute follower are described in detail. Though firmly resolute for the battle, the young warrior is reluctant to liberate his favorite hawk. The situation is depicted with admirable skill with the use of variation here. (*he let him þa of handon leofne fleogan / hafoc wið pæs holtes*, 7-8, M.) Indication of (*of handon fleogan*) and adjectival parallelism (*leofne fleogan / hafoc*) shows his feeling of attachment even at the moment he sets the bird free.

In the latter scene, we see the glittering of the spear points from both the opposing armies, confronting each other over the rising waters of the River Panta. (*mia prasse bestodon*) helps us visualize the picture of the pompous gaiety of their battle dress. The emphatic parallelism is used here.

A moment's gravity in which they raise a war cry is soon contrasted with the busy motion of the fighting.

Wæs seo tid cumen
pæt p er fæge men feallan sceoldon.
þær wearð hream ahafen, hremmas wundon,
earn æses georn; wæs on eorþan cyrm. 104-107, M.

bogan wæron bysige, bord ord onfeng.
Biter wæs se beaduræs, beornas feollon
on gehwæoere hand, hyssas lagon. 110-112, M.

To emphasize the solemnity of the situation (*þær wearð hream ahafen*) and

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(*wæs on eorþaen cyrm*) the variation used here is a heavy repetition. And when the quick action of a fight is illustrated (*bord ord onfeng*), *bord* and *ord* are employed as simple synonyms, and as an occurrence of great moment was expressed in the sentence parallel as follows: (*Beornas feollon / on gehwæpere hand, hyssas lagon* 111-112, M.).

What the poet considered very grave to the situation he expressed as a compound parallelism. (*Wund wearð wulfmæer, wælræste geceas, / Byrhtonodes mæg, he mid billum wearð, / his swuster sunu, swiðe forheawen* 113-115, M.). Though the Maldon poet did not use much complicated parallelism in his descriptive passage as is seen in *Brunanburh*, when he wished, he was also capable of intricacy.

After this incident, the battle field fell into chaos. The poet here, as is the case in *Brunanburh*, utilized a unity of simple type A rhythm in the second half-lines from 122-125 in which are indicated the progress of battle. The confusion of battle is aptly stated in the following simple line of contrast: (*Eode swa anræd eorl to þacem ceorl* 132, M.) now that the class distinction of high and low was not a matter of concern.

This progressive line and the phrase, earl to the churl, provides an ample foreground for the fall of an ealdorman. Though, wounded by the seamen's spear, Byrhtnoth continued fighting with great swiftness and valour.

Then suddenly the tone of the verse drops its rapidly and becomes slow with emphatic parallelism.

Forlet þa drenga sum daroð of handa,
fleogan of folman, þæt se to forð gewat
þurh ðone æpelan Æþelredes þegen. 149-151, M.

We see the repetition of (*of handa*) and (*of folman*). In this device the poet indicates that the situation is serious. Byrhtnoth was mortally wounded. Beside the lord two brother retainers lay dead. This gives a proportionate picture to the cowardice of the brothers of Odda who fled the battle on the horse of their lord Byrhtnoth. Then the scene went on to portray the loyal retainers who vowed to avenge Byrhtnoth to the death. The poet's artfulness in presenting their speeches is admirable. The speeches are varied and individual but the theme is singular, so that to avoid monotony, the poet uses various techniques of contrast. First of all is the contrast of young and old retainers. Old retainer Offa's understanding tone, reasoning his comrades into compliance, was well balanced with the overwhelming self-persuasive tone of the young Alfwine. Leofsunu's words of devotion so incited old Ceorl that even he bravely spoke up without considering much of the difference of rank. Then the Northumbrian hostage began to help them. And we see that hostages were also obligated to the generosity of their temporary lord. To this touching scene appeared another young warrior, who must have been abnormally tall, (*Eadweard se langa* 273, M.) being his nickname. This fleeting allusion gives us a moment of relief. All

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of these preceding applications of contrast we consider admirable in making the poetry alert and lively, with an appropriate sense of proportion. The warriors struggled to the end. The last heroic speech of Byrtworld has a most beautiful lyrical strain. This streaming out of feeling was also a final contrast to the matter of fact statement concerning Godric who fought at the front line of the West Saxon troops to the end.

RESUME

The description of the battles in the poems, *Burnanburh* and *Maldon*, was realistic interpretation of the art of war in those days. We found that the poets did not use any fantastic exaggeration in portraying the battle scene in an effort to emphasize the figures of the heroes, as was often, the practice in the earlier heroic poetry.

Every character engaged in the difficult struggle revealed to us his humanness, by his depth of emotion and in his resolution. The contemptible characters, even the cowards-cowardice being an act of treason in those times-arouse our sympathy in their portrayal of human weakness.

The poets certainly knew how to make us feel congenial to the heroes of such a remote era. Inasmuch as they were real, it is regrettable that they are depicted as characters so genuinely true to their idealistic standard, that they do not remain as individuals, but becoming symbols of virtue, they are absorbed into the world of ideals.

Human experience was summed up as a juxtaposition of two opposing forces. To live was to be confronted with the choice between the two just as the daring heroes were confronted at Maldon: (*hi woldon þa ealle oðer twega, / lif forlætān oððr leofne gewreca*n 207-208, M.). And in their thought and action they followed unwaveringly the narrow standards recognized in their society, with little or no individual initiative. Thus they were a naive and simple people. The warriors' speeches concerning the struggle were varied and personal, but all contained the recurrent theme of loyalty, ever conforming to their code of the supremacy of will over the weakness of the body.

These warriors indeed embodied the heroic ideals of the world. And these heroic ideals we could trace back to their ancestors whose heroic ideal Tacitus mentioned almost nine hundred years before.

And however the heroes in these poems remain ideals, their symbol has not perished with the Anglo-Saxon society. They have found an irresistible appeal in the modern heart, which still preserves the ancient yearning for the heroic image.

As might be expected their philosophy of life is expressed in the descriptive technique of the poetry. The use of contrast, variation, and repetition suggests to us that the common people of that day saw life in extremes of dark and light with no

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intermediate shadings. We can notice the tension and charm of the poems cleverly maintained by the use of contrasting poetic techniques appropriate to the situation described by the poems. The employment of an epic form of narrative, requiring a solemn tone, is not done for mere convention. We see it is successful in maintaining the necessary atmosphere of magnitude and wholeness.

The grand epic form is best suited to express the traditional, fearless, dignified heroic spirit which grew out of a period of spiritual innocence, when men, hardened by a rugged life, were capable of standing up to all lifes' vicissitudes.

1. Dorothy Whitelock, *The Beginning of English Society*, 1963, p. 34.
2. A. Campbell, ed., *The Battle of Brunaburh*, 1938, *The Batte of Brunanburh* is referred to as B. hereafter.
3. Verse lines from *Beowulf* are cited from F. R. Klaeber, ed., *Beowulf and The Eight at Finnsburg*, 1950. Hereafter *Beowulf* is referred to as Beo.
4. Verse lines from *Judith* are cited from Sweet's *Anglo Saxon Reader*, 1962. Hereafter *Judith* referred to as J.
5. The evidence of the similar tradition in the Viking side can be found in N. Kershaw's edition of *Angol-Saxon and Norse Poems*, 1922.
6. E. H. Blakeney, ed., *Tacitus: Historical Works. The History, Gemanica and Agricola*, tr. by Arthur Murphy, vol. II., p. 320.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 316.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 331.
9. Plummer and J. Earl, ed., *Two of the Saxon Chronicles Parallel*, 1952. Hereafter *Two of the Saxon Chronicles* will be referred to as *Chronicle*.
10. For this technical term see The discussion in A. C. Brodeur, *The Art of Beowulf* pp. 39-70. and E. D. Laborde, "The style of 'The Battle of Maldon'", *Modern Language Review* XIX, Oct., 1924, pp. 401-417.
11. This word reminds us of the judicial authority of the King or the nobleman in the Anglo-Saxon Society.
12. Judith even invokes 'the Giver of glory' to help her avenge: (*gewrec nu, mihfig Dryhten./ torhtmod tires brytta, pæt me ye þus Torne on mode*, 92-93, J.).
13. David Daiches, *A Critical History of English Literature*, 1963, vol. I., p. 22.
14. E. D. Laborde, "The Site of the Battle of Maldon", *The English Historical Review*, vol. XL., No. CLVIII., April, 1925, pp. 161-173.
15. E. V. Gordon, ed., *The Battle of Maldon*, 1964, p. 22.
16. Gordon, *op. cit.*, p. 17.
17. For the use of the term *pegen*, see F. M. Stenton, *Anglo-Saxon England*, 1947, p. 481 ff., and G. M. Trevelyan, *Illustrated History of England*, 1956, p. 88. *pegenas* originally meant 'companions' (*comitatus*). It marked a personal relationship rather than a social distinction and the standing of the individual thegn was largely determined by the rank of the man to whom his service was done therefore, the leading members of this class were naturally those retainers who served the king himself. Personal loyalty rather than abstract patriotism was the motive for his service.
18. 'Æolræd Unræd' was a nickname. See P. H. Blair, *An Introduction to Anglo-Saxon England*, 1962, p. 91.
19. Gordon, *op. cit.*, p. 23.
20. C. W. C. Oman, *A History of the Art of War*, 1898, p. 71 ff.
21. G. K. Anderson *The Literature of the Anglo Saxons*, 1962, p. 91.
22. Verse lines from *Layaman's Brut* are cited from G. L. Brook, ed., *Selections from Layamon's Brut*, 1963.
23. See *Beowulf*, lines 25-54.
24. Whitelock, *op. cit.*, p. 35.

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26. Jean de Vries, *Heroic Song and Heroic Legend*, 1963, pp.259-269. W. P. Ker, *Epic, and Romance: Essays on Medieval Literature*, 1959, p.91.
27. E. M. W. Tillyard, *The English Epic and Its Background*, 1954, p.120 ff.
28. Junzaburo Nishiwaki, *Kodai Bungaku Josetsu*, 1948, p.42.
29. A. G. Brodeur, *The Art of Beowulf*, 1959, p.223.
30. Brodeur, *op. cit.*, p.221, and also see Fumio Kuriyagawa, "Beowulf", *Eibeibungakushi Koza*, vol. I., p.17-33.
31. Brodeur, *op. cit.*, p.40 ff.
23. *Ibid.*, p.68.
33. Cambell, *op. cit.*, p.11.
34. The terms, 'adjectival' and 'substantival' parallelism are used by E. D. Laborde in his article "The Style of 'The Battle of Maldon'", *M. L. R.* XIX, 1924.
35. Cambell, *op. cit.*, p.38.
36. Brodeur, *op. cit.*, pp.68-69.
37. For the explanation of O. E. Meter, see see A. Campbell, *op. cit.*, pp.16-32. There are five measure types of half-verse according to Sievers' classification:
 Type A: $\angle x | \angle x$ C: $x \angle | \angle x$ E: $\angle xx | \angle$
 B: $x \angle | x \angle$ D: $\angle | \angle xx$