

Old English and Arabic Panegyric Poetry

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Looking retroactively at the old English and Arabic poetry, one may be identified with the fact that a great deal of verse depended upon panegyric elements in order to adapt to the atmosphere of conflict prevailing at the time. Both English and Arab poets used poetry to commend alive or dead people: heroes, knights, holy figures and nobles. This study tries to hold a comparison between the panegyric features used in earlier English and Arabic poetry. A panegyric is defined as:

a formal... written verse, delivered in high praise of a person or thing, a generally high studied discriminating eulogy, not expected to be critical. In Athens such speeches were delivered at national festivals or games, with the object of rousing the citizens to emulate the glorious deeds of their ancestors...the Romans confined the panegyric to the living, and reserved the funeral oration exclusively for the dead... in 336, Eusebius of Caesarea gave a panegyric of Constantine the Great ... in which he broke from tradition by celebrating the piety of the emperor, rather than his secular achievements ... Qasida is panegyric poetry in Arabic (*Wikipedia*)

Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms defines the panegyric genre as:

a public speech or written composition devoted to the prolonged, effusive praise of some person, group of people, or public body... this branch of rhetoric was particularly cultivated in ancient Greece and Rome, and Middle-Ages Europe

In pre-Islamic Arabia, panegyric functioned as:

a means of extolling the virtues of the tribe and its leaders[this is called fakhr (pride)]... it was immediately adopted in the cause of Islam... Hassan ibn Thabit, often referred to as the Prophet's poet, composed panegyrics in praise of [the Prophet] recording his victories in strident tones... with the first dynasty of Caliphs, panegyric became a major propaganda device used to glorify Islam and its successes. (*Encyclopedia Britannica*)

The panegyric can be obviously realized in the heroic attitude of the old English heathen poets, and in the pride of the *Jahili* Arab poets. The old English poet believed in superstition and heroism “with a sense of endurance, of fate, and of unflinching courage revealing a spirit that is never completely recaptured in any later period”(Evans 19).The poets sang of the ceremonies dedicated to their gods, the magic properties of nature

and hymns devoted for royal sanctuaries. A lot of verses were addressed to Erce, the mother of the earth, to endow the fields with her blessings and to secure their fertility. Poems such as *Beowulf*, “The Seafarer”, “Deor”, “The Wanderer” and “The Ruin” show that the poets were interested in the adventurous life of the sea. The poems reflect the struggle between man and monsters, between sailors and the stormy weather:

For the harp he has no heart, nor for having of the rings,
Nor in woman is his weal; in the world he's no delight,
Nor in anything whatever save the tossing o'er the waves!
O for ever he has longed who is urged towards the sea.

(*The Seafarer*)

Before working the leaven of Islam in Arabia, the Arabs were scattered into conflicting clans that produced the so-called *Jahili* poetry (the poetry of the period of ignorance). The pre-Islamic poets partly focused on poems to praise figures or tribes, descriptions of battles, and the dangerous desert life. They sang of their pride of themselves and their clans who showed courage in war(Amin 69). Here are some lines from the *Mu'laqat*(old Arabic epics):

و ما الحرب الا ما علمتم، و ذقتم
و ما هو، عنها، بالحديث المرجم
متى تبعثوها تبعثوها، ذميمة
و تضر، اذا ضر يئتموها، فتضرم

لدى أسد، شاكي السلاح، مفاذف
له لبد، أظفاره لم تقلم
جرىء، متى يظلم يعاقب، بظلمه
سريعا، و الا يبد بالظلم يظلم

(Diwan Zuhayr ibn Abi Sulma)

You experienced the terrors of war before.
This was previously known to you.
Launching it again is utterly rejected
It would harm you if you light it

Like a lion, we are well-armed, with arrows,
(a lion) that has sinews and fatal claws,
He is bold, and immediately punishes, those who wronged him
He only wrongs those who previously did (to him)

(*translation's mine*)

After the advent of Christianity in England and Islam in Arabia, people ceased to be loyal to the polytheistic idols or gods. The Anglo-Saxon poets wrote religious poems in which they praised God's creations, the Christ (pbuh) and the saints, showing the

merits of converting to Christianity. According to Bede, Caedmon, the first Christian English poet, became poet after an angel visited him and ordered him to sing the “Song of Creation” (Bede IV, ch 24,10):

Now we must praise the Guardian of the kingdom of heaven,
The might of the Creator and the thought of His mind,
The work of the Father of men, as He, the Eternal Lord,
Formed the beginning of every wonder

(*Caedmon's Hymn*)

This poem panegyrically presents accounts of creation based on translations of the Old and New Testaments that are included in the Bible which is:

a composite book, consisting of two main sections– the Old Testament and the New. The Old Testament, originally written mainly in Hebrew, is a collection of poems, plays, proverbs, prophecy, philosophy, history, theology– a massive anthology of writings of the ancient Jewish people. The New Testament, originally written in Greek, contains the Gospels and the story of the spreading of Christianity by its first propagandists... The Old Testament Apocrypha consists of historical and philosophical writings. The New Testament Apocrypha gives... further details of the lives of the Apostles, the birth and resurrection of Christ, etc. (Burgess 39).

Bede reports that Caedmon “could never compose any foolish or trivial poem, but only those which were concerned with devotion” (Bede IV, ch 24,16). In *Christ and Satan*, Caedmon speaks about the terrors of the day of judgment, horrors of hell and joys of the heavenly paradise. The first part of the poem deals with the fall of the angels; the second is about the resurrection of Christ (pbuh) and the harrowing hell, together with a brief account of his ascension and coming to judgment; the third part tells about how Satan tried to tempt the Christ (pbuh). In *Genesis*, Caedmon makes a poetical paraphrase of the first of the canonical books in the Old Testament, extending to the story of Abraham’s sacrifice of his son. The poem opens with the praise of the Creator, then proceeds to relate the revolt and fall of the angels, and then the creation of the earth and the tale of the Satan who avenged himself by tempting man as a result of having fallen from his high estate. In *Exodus*, the poet tells the story of the Israelites’ passage through the Red Sea and the destruction of Pharaoh’s host. In *Daniel*, we learn about the life of St. Daniel and his attempts to inculcate moral virtues.

Cynewulf, another significant Anglo-Saxon poet, produced a great deal of verse, praising religious figures and virtues. In *Guthlac*, Cynewulf relates the life of the Mercian saint, Guthlac. The wondrous light that shines over Guthlac’s hut before he dies obviously recalls the glamorous lights of the sky. When the saint enters into the heavenly mansions, the whole English land trembles with rapture. Then the poet moves into the saint’s last great struggle with the powers of darkness and death. *The Dream of the Rood* tackles the story of crucifixion, showing the cross as a provider of confidence and help. Like his polytheist predecessors, the poet arrests the attention of his audience by: “Lo, Listenth, lordings”. The device must have been a common one in days when the

harp was struck at festive gatherings (Watts 201). In *Crist*, Cynewulf deals with the advent of Christ (pbuh) on earth, his ascension, then his second advent to judge the world. *Elene* tells the story of finding the cross by St Helena, the mother of the Roman emperor Constantine. The conversion of the emperor is carried out when he sees a vision of the cross in the sky. Thus, the cross was “transmuted from being a symbol of ignominy to a symbol of glory”, and it began to be extolled (Brown 23). In *Andreas*, we see how St Andrew converts the Mermedonians by working miracles.

In Arabia, the earlier Muslim poets did their best to defend the new faith, support the Prophet (pbuh) and approve of the value of monotheism. Hassan ibn Thabit was the Prophet’s poet or spokesman. During the life of the Prophet, and afterwards, he composed a number of poems which advocate the new creed and expound the Islamic belief and ideology. For example, when a delegation from Tamim came to the Prophet to embrace Islam and declare their allegiance, they asked their poet to say some verses in praise of their clan. Replying to this pride, Hassan said:

قد بينوا سننا للناس تتبع	ان الذوائب من فهر و اخوتهم
تقوى الاله و با لامر الذى شرعوا	يرضى بها كل من كانت سريرته
او حاولوا النفع فى اتباعهم نفعوا	قوم اذا حاربوا ضرروا عدوهم
ان الخلاق فاعلم شرها البدع	سجية تلك فيهم غير محدثة
فكل سبق لأذى سبقهم تبع	ان كان فى الناس سباقون بعدهم
اذا تفرقت الأهواء و الشيع	أكرم بقوم رسول الله قائدهم

(Diwan Hassan ibn Thabit)

The clans of Fehr and their brothers
Showed people rules to be followed,
Satisfying only those who sincerely
Fear God and accept His orders
Those people can harm their enemy
And they are helpful to friends
They are hires of this merit,
People find new ideas unsafe
If this was done before, then
Those who did this before should follow them
Nobody is more honourable than a nation led by
Allah’s Prophet when people are scattered into sects

(translations mine)

The Muslims fought the polytheists with their swords in the battlefield, while Hassan and the other Muslim poets attacked those disbelievers with their tongues (Bakalla 136). In these lines, the poet asserts that the Muslims adhere to the instructions of Allah (Glory be to Him) and His Prophet. They teach these lessons to other people in order to get into the way of righteousness. This makes the Muslims one unified nation under the leadership of the Prophet to whom Allah’s guidance was revealed.

Earlier Islamic poetry (and the panegyric in particular) has been apparently dyed by the Qur'an and the Prophet's sayings:

The influence of the Qur'an on the development of Arabic literature has been incalculable, and exerted in many directions. Its ideas, its language, its rhythms pervade all subsequent literary works... though the standard of literary Arabic was in fact set not by the Qur'an but by the heathen poets, it was due to the position of the Qur'an as "Bible, prayer-book" ... that Arabic became... the common literary medium of all Muslim poets (Gibb 36).

After the great Muslim victory over the pagans in the battle of Badr, Abu-Sufian and the other pagans were filled with furiousness, so he ordered the infidel poets to lampoon the Prophet. Hassan defended the Prophet, saying:

هجوت محمدا فأجبت عنه و عند الله في ذلك الجزاء
فان أبي و والداه و عرضي لعرض محمد منكم و قاء
أتهجوه و لست له بكفاء فشركما لخيركما الفداء

You have attacked Muhammad; here is my reply
For which Allah will reward me.
I offer my father, grandfathers and family as
A shield that protects Muhammad's honour from your attack
You lampooned him though you are not as noble as him
You(the wicked) are to be sacrificed for the honour of him(the good)
(translation's mine)

The poets also praised the Prophet and believed that he worked hard and sincerely to take them away from the path leading to Hell:

أتيت رسول الله اذا جاء بالهدى و يتلو كتابا كمالجرة نيرا
أقيم على التقوى و أوصى بفعلها و كنت من النار المخوفة أحرزا
(Diwan Al-Nabigha Al-Ja'di)

Accompanying Allah's Messenger who came with guidance,
Reciting a book that is as illuminating as the sun,
I stuck to righteousness, and advise others to do so
Also, I became away from what lead to the harrowing hell
(translation's mine)

When the Prophet died, Abu-Sufian ibn Al-Harith lamented his death in lines that show sorrow and strong faith in fate and Allah's will:

فقدنا الوحي و التنزيل فينا يروح به و يغدو جبرئيل
و ذلك أحق ما سألت عليه نفوس الناس أو كادت تسيل
.....
فلم نر مثله في الناس حيا و ليس له من الموتى بديل

(Diwan Abu Sufian ibn Al Harith)
We lost Allah's revelation to us,
Of which Gabriel was a messenger

No other ordeal deserves that people' souls
Are really(or almost) tormented by
.....
For he has no living peer
And no dead alternative

(translation's mine)

Beowulf, The Wanderer, and the Battle of Maldon best exemplify the use of heroism in old English pagan poetry:

This heroic spirit manifested itself most strongly in the desire for fame and glory... the code of conduct stressed the reciprocal obligations of lord and thanes... a mutuality that was the core of the comitatus relationship described as early as A.D.98 (Greenfield 80).

Many scholars regard the compositional method in old English religious poems (Caedmon's Hymn and the *Dream of the Rood*, for instance) as an adoption of panegyric epithets to the praise of God and the Christ(pbuh). The heroic descriptions in these poems have derived their inspiration from the psalms (Lapidge 65).

Akiko Motoyoshi Sumi thinks that:

The Arabic panegyric genre potentially contains both a literary portrait of the patron[or the object being praised] and a poet's self-portrait[fakhr] in one and same ode: a double portrait. Portraiture is a representation or description of a human subject, and it can be visual, verbal or musical (155).

In *Doctrine and Poetry: Augustine's Influence on Old English Poetry*, Bernard F. Huppe outlines the influence of Christian doctrine upon old English poetry. The poets paraphrased stories from the Bible, aiming at advocating the new Christian beliefs ,and the promotion of charity to the end that God may be pleased; the true basis for eloquence is the truth in the meaning of words, not in the words themselves. This was felt not only in the interpretation of poetry but in its creation as well (29-64).

In *Al-sh'ir fi Mawkeb Al-Da'wa* (Poetry in the Procession of Islam's Call), Sadeq Abdel-Halim Mohamed shows that the early Muslim poets started a tradition of supporting the new faith by highlighting the merits of embracing Islam, the Prophet(pbuh) and his companions. He believes that only righteous and faithful figures could produce poetry. He considers some poets who defended the Islamic call and its Messenger (35-134).

Sung-II Lee claims that the theme of mutability (inspired by heroic spirit) recurs in many old English poems: *Beowulf, The Wanderer, The Ruin....* etc. (Lee, 1999). He thinks that the Anglo-Saxon poets strongly believed in the transience of life and in the power of fate that turns whatever man can attain. They courageously believed that there are things worse than death, and that "Death is better for every knight than ignominious life"

David Lyle Jeffrey views the Bible as a source book for many English literary works. He asserts that "Biblical aesthetics is really another form of bibliolatry (i.e., we must study the Bible because of its supposed superior literary beauty)". He urges

literary scholars to “adjust their approaches and goals... where the Bible competes in a highly diversified global textual market”. He sees that the history of the Bible as literature started with St. Augustine who paved the way for the Anglo-Saxon poets to create verse interpretations of the holy book. (540-44).

The impact of the Qur’an on Arabic poetry has been examined by E.M.H. Omran in “Islam, the Qur’an and the Arabic Literature”. He points to the linguistic influence of the Qur’an on Arabic language and poetry, which appears to be unique in its extent and durability. The Qur’an has undoubtedly provided poets with an unparalleled level of linguistic excellence and eloquence. It helped reinforce and deepen the Arab poets’ awareness of the richness and grandeur of their tongue (1-5).

In *Beowulf*, the hero battles three antagonists and beats two, but in the final battle, he is fatally wounded, dies and buried in a tumulus in Geatland:

High oer his head they hoist the standard,
A gold-wove banner; let billows take him,
Gave him to ocean. Grave were their spirits,

.....
No hero ‘neath heaven, - who harbored that freight!

The heroic virtues in the poem are evidently the Anglo-Saxon’s as “the majority view appears to be that people... in *Beowulf* are based on real people in the 6th century Scandinavia, and that the poem is contextually based on folktale type” (Anderson 115). Although Hrothgar and Beowulf are portrayed as:

morally upright pagans, they fully espouse and frequently affirm values of Germanic heroic poetry... depicting warrior society, the most important of human relationships was that which existed between the warrior and his lord, a relationship based less on subordination of one man’s will to another’s than on mutual trust and respect (Abrams 30).

Ka’b ibn Zuhayr presents a prototypical example of the panegyric, based on pride:

فان تسأل الأقوم عني فانتى أنا ابن أبي سلمى على رغم من رغم
أنا ابن الذي قد عاش تسعين حجة فلم يخر يوما في معد و لم يلم
و أكرمه الأكفاء في كل معشر كرام، فان كذبتني فاسأل الأمم
.....
أقول شبيهاً بما قال عالماً بهن و من يشبهه أباه فما ظلم

(Diwan Ka’b ibn Zuhayr)

If you ask people , they tell you who I am
I am ibn Abi-Sulma’s son, whether you know or not
My father lived till he was ninety
He was never ridiculed or blamed
He was honoured by the leaders of every noble tribe
People may assure you that I tell the truth
.....

I follow the art of his verse(of which he was a master)
Like father, like son, no wonder

(translation’s mine)

The poet zealously praises himself and his origins as he seemed to be decisive in attacking his rivals. Stefan Sperl interprets the significance of the panegyric practice through explaining the different cultural components of the hard nomadic existence , reflected in the formulae and epithets which describe the power of individual poets and their clans. The poets ascribed heroic virtues to themselves and their tribes: resolution, equanimity, nobility, generosity and steadfastness (20-35).

In the *Dream of the Rood*, Cynewulf praises the Christ(pbu) as a Saviour of all human beings:

Then the young hero (who was God Almighty)
Got ready, resolute and strong in heart.
...the warrior embraced [the cross]

.....
He climbed onto the lofty gallows-tree
Bold in the sight of many watching men,
When He intended to redeem mankind.

.....
And then I saw the Lord of all mankind
Hasten with eager zeal that he
Might mount upon me.

Jeannette C. Brock states that the poet:

depicts Christ as a purposeful courageous warrior who boldly confronts and defeats sin... instead of simply using the word “Christ”, the poet calls Jesus “the young hero” and “mankind’s brave king”. These images create a vivid image of Christ which echoes the description of Beowulf who is praised as a “king”, “the hero”, and a “valiant warrior”... later, the poet suggests that Christ actually initiates the battle to redeem mankind. The poet emphasizes the voluntariness of Christ’s undertaking of crucifixion (1-19).

Ka’b ibn Zuhayr portrays how he had deserted his old heathen habits, and referred to the merits of embracing Islamic beliefs that stem from worshipping The One:

ان الرسول لنور يستضاء به في عصابة من قريش قال قائلهم زولوا فمزال أنكاس ولاكشف شم لعرائين أبطال لبوسهم بيض سوابغ قد شكت لها حلق ليسوا مفاريح ان نالت رماحهم	مهند من سيوف الله مسلول ببطن مكة لما أسلموا زولوا عند اللقاء ولا ميل معازيل من نسج داود في الهيجا سراويل كأنها حلق القفعاء مجدول قوما و ليسوا مجازيعا اذانيلا
..... لايقع الطعن الا في نحورهم و مالهم عن حياض الموت تهليل

(“Banat Soád” [Soád has gone away])

In these lines, the poet declares that he is guided to Allah's path by the light of the Prophet who is one of Allah's swords that fight evil. The Prophet's companions emigrated from Makkah to Madinah when they grasped the true meaning of monotheism. They show great bravery in battle even if they are not well-armed or well-shielded. Their bravery has resulted from their strong faith which is seen in their outer appearance. They are neither exaggeratingly happy when they are victorious nor horribly sad when they are defeated. But they become truly happy when they are killed in battle. These ideas are evidently inspired by the Qur'an and Hadith.

Q.A. Dandrawy reads Ka'b's poem as a panegyric of the development of the poet's self from a past indiscretion to a present righteousness:

The poem has a Jahili opening which tells about a bygone love affair. His deserting beloved is nothing but his lost self which he wants to restore by following the Prophet's way. He starts a long, tiring journey riding his camel in the desert to look for his lost self till he reaches Makkah and meets the Prophet. Then he praises the Prophets and his companions as soon as his heart is illuminated by Allah's guidance. This illustrates the old proverb: he who knows his own self can get to knowing his own God (104-54).

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