"LESS EPIC THAN IT SEEMS": *DEOR'S* HISTORICAL APPROACH AS A NARRATIVE DEVICE FOR PSYCHOLOGICAL EXPRESSION*

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ABSTRACT

Historical references work in a very peculiar way in *Deor*. This poem presents historical facts from the Germanic tradition in such a way that they are turned into a narrative tool whose function is to highlight the psychological component. This psychological element is the real thematic core of the poem, and a feature that ascribes *Deor* to the elegiac poetic discourse, rather than to the epic genre. In this article we'll try to justify these assertions, describing how the poet decided to adopt a historical approach to express the psychological component by depicting history as a background subject to a higher thematic aim: i.e., to introduce the reference to individual misfortune through an exemplary depiction of historical suffering.

KEY WORDS: Old English poetry, elegiac discourse, epic genre, poetic narrative tools.

RESUMEN

Las referencias históricas funcionan de un modo peculiar en *Deor*. Este poema no solo presenta hechos históricos pertenecientes a la tradición germánica, sino que lo hace de tal modo que se convierten en un mero vehículo narrativo para la exposición del componente psicológico, verdadero eje temático del texto y rasgo que lo adscribe más al discurso poético elegíaco que al épico. En el presente trabajo intentaremos justificar estas afirmaciones, viendo cómo el poeta decidió adoptar un enfoque histórico para expresar lo psicológico, y cómo la historia actúa como trasfondo introductorio que sirve a otro objetivo temático mayor: introducir la referencia al infortunio personal a través de la ejemplificación histórica del sufrimiento.

PALABRAS CLAVE: poesía del inglés antiguo, discurso elegíaco, poesía épica, herramientas poéticas narrativas.

1. INTRODUCTORY REMARKS

The presence of historical events used as a suitable narrative background constitutes one of the most easily recognizable thematic units that can be found in *Deor*. Its first five stanzas deal with the misfortunes of specific historical *personae* we can ascribe to the Germanic heroic-legendary world, very well known to *Deor*'s

author. This fact allows the poem to be labelled as belonging to both epic-heroic and elegiac poetic discourses, in spite of the problems presented by the term "elegy" in Old English criticism. The use of history as an appropriate poetic background to narrate all kind of stories has a long-standing tradition in the Germanic world (Frank 1991), even since Tacitus described in his *Germania* the customary habit —held by all Germanic tribes— of remembering past events through the singing of certain songs.[1] In Anglo-Saxon literature, poems such as *Widsið* or *Waldere* are also framed within this heroic tradition (Muir 1989: 27) and frequently compared with *Deor* or arranged in the same thematic classification.[2] However, historical references work in a very peculiar way in *Deor*. The poem is presenting historical facts from the Germanic tradition in such a way that they are turned into a narrative tool whose function is to highlight the psychological component. This psychological element is the real thematic core of the poem, and a feature that ascribes *Deor* to the elegiac poetic discourse, rather than to the epic genre (Bueno 2001).

In this article we'll try to justify the aforementioned assertions, describing how the poet decided to adopt a historical approach to express the psychological component by depicting history as a background subject to a higher thematic aim: i.e., to introduce the reference to individual misfortune through an exemplary depiction of historical suffering.

2. The personal/psychological expression as a classification of misfortune. History as a background?

The first two stanzas (1-7, 8-13) contain the revenge story of Weland, Nithhad and Beadohild, whose main sources (Calder et al 1983: 65-69) are located in the Scandinavian sagas *Völundkarviða* and *Þiðrikssaga*, where the three characters bear the names of Völundr, Böðvildr and Niðuðr.[3]

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[1] "Celebrant carminibus antiquis, quod unum apud illos memoriae et annalium genus est, Tuistonem deum terra editum (Koesterman 1964: 6)". Trans: "Their ancient hymns —the only style of record of history which they posses— celebrate a god Tuisto, a scion of the soil (Hutton *et al* 1970: 131)".

[2] In his listing of Anglo-Saxon poetry, Bruce Mitchell (1995: 75) classifies *Deor*, *Waldere* and *Widsið* as "Poems Treating Heroic Subjects" —together with *Beowulf* and *The Battle of Finnsburh*—. When quoting the list of Anglo-Saxon elegies, Mitchell points out the possible double classificationof *Deor* as heoric or elegiac poem: "Short Elegies and Lyrics: *The Wife's Lament, The Husband's Message, The Ruin, The Wanderer, The Seafarer, Wulf and Eadwacer. Deor* might be included here as well as under 1 above". This "1 above" refers to the previously mentioned list of poems treating heroic subjects.

[3] Louis Rodrigues (1993: 103) mentions that Weland and Völundr resemble Dedalus and Vulcanus in Classical mythology.

Welund him be wurman wræces cunnade,
anhydig eorl earfoþa dreag,
hæfde him to gesiþþe sorge ond longaþ,
wintercealde wræce; wean oft onfond,
siþþan hine Niðhad on nede legde,
swoncre seonobende on syllan monn.
Þæs ofereode, þisses swa mæg!

Beadohilde ne wæs hyre broþra deaþ
on sefan swa sar swa hyre sylfre þing,
þæt heo gearolice ongieten hæfde
þæt heo eacen wæs; æfre ne meahte
þriste geþencan, hu ymb þæt sceolde.
Þæs ofereode, þisses swa mæg![4]
(1-13)

The story was very well known at a popular level, and the fact that the names of the characters involved in it show their English form may suggest that *Deor*'s poet —and his audience— knew the tale through a vernacular Anglo-Saxon version. The whole tale is longer than the story as it appears in *Deor*,[5] so it is clear that the poet was relying –and depending– on the audience's previous knowledge of the unabridged story. This fact allowed him to use this historical reference as a general background, starting thus almost immediately with the depiction of the psychological information.

This first stanza is entirely devoted to Weland's tale (1-7). He is described as a person who —from the loneliness of a presumable exile— is constantly seized by anguish, grief —"wræces"—, torments —"earfoþa"— and a terrible wintry landscape as the only environment surrounding him (3-4a). After being caught by Nithhad —the character who unleashes his ultimate suffering— Weland is severely punished by his enemy in a very humiliating manner.[6] Thus, a new debasing feature is added to all the previous psychological characterization of suffering, which will be depicted even more acutely and wounding. As the story was well known by the audience, the poet centres his narration on the description of Weland's mental and physical suffering. Clustered in such a small space as just four lines, we have

[4] All quotations from the poem have been taken from Krapp & Dobbie's edition (1936: 178-179). We offer Robert Hamer's translation in all cases (1970): "Weland among the Wermas suffered woe,/High-minded lord, he went through torments long,/Sorrow and longing were his company,/Winter-cold exile. Hardship was his lot/After Nithhad with supple sinew-bonds/Condemned him the better man to live in bondage./ That passed away, and so may this from me (op. cit: p. 91)".

[5] All the stories have been summarized by Kemp Malone (1977) in his edition.

[6] We have to remember that Weland was an elf smith, so he would be the "bound chain maker (Whitbread 1970: 168)".

received a great deal of psychological information characterizing Weland, and in the way we read the poem this is something we cannot ascribe to random.[7]

If the description of Weland's suffering had a double mental-physical angle, the second stanza is devoted to the expression of Beadohild's deep grief, which is focused more on mental-cognitive aspects than on physical ones. However, due to her being pregnant, a physical dimension is also connected with her spiritual suffering (Mandel 1977: 3). After being raped by Weland —this fact is not mentioned but constitutes a well-known key point of the legend— this pregnancy situation forces Beadohild to complain more about herself than about her brothers' death (8-9), as she doesn't know what could happen to her in the future because of her pregnancy (10-12). Thus, Beadohild's psychological expression spins around her terrible anxiety about the near future —and her deep anguish— provoked by her intense mental suffering.

The next stanza (14-17) relates the story of Mæthhild and her lover, Geat, whose reference was enigmatic until Kemp Malone (1977: 8-9) found two oral tales transcribed in the 19th century within two Scandinavian ballads —with Norwegian and Icelandic accounts— which could be very good candidates for the lost sources of the story. In fact, the Mæthhild- Geat story narrated in *Deor* presents common points with the Norwegian version in its final part and with the Icelandic source in its initial sequence. Besides, some secondary sources —such as Snorri Sturluson's *Skaldskaparmal*, the Germanic version of *Kudrun* or a very brief tale inserted in one of the digressive episodes of *Beowulf*— have also been pointed out as being connected with *Deor*. Once more, that "We gefrugnon" (14) —"We know," "Many of us have heard"— announced by the poetic narrator is validating what we have previously stated: that is, the audience and the poet knew the whole story, and his narration could be directly centered on the psychological expression of the main characters in this stanza.

We þæt Mæðhilde monge gefrugnon
wurdon grundlease Geates frige,
þæt hi seo sorglufu slæp ealle binom.
Þæs ofereode, þisses swa mæg![8]
(14-17)

The psychological expression of a woman, Mæthhild, is being offered in these lines. She is involved in a very intense love affair that suggests the presence of

[7] We agree with Jerome Mandel (1977: 2) when he states that "Although the allusion to Welund may generate the whole familiar story in the mind of the listener, the *Deor* poet concentrates on one small point in the story (...). The audience is told five times in the first four lines nothing more than that Welund suffered misery, troubles, sorrow, severe misery and woe".

[8] "We know that Mæthhild the sad wife of Geat/Had endless cause for tears and lamentation./Unhappy love deprived her of all sleep./That passed away, and so may this from me (op. cit: p. 91)".

personal suffering connected with some slight physical pain portrayed as lack of sleep (16b). The key point of this stanza is connected with the *sorglufu*, a painful, disturbing and unhappy form of love, whose mainspring will be known by the audience through the story. The crux here is on the psychological expression of Mæthhild's *sorglufu* and all the mental agony, the suffering, and the anguish that it conveys.

Although it is brief, the fourth stanza (18-20) provides us with a vague story whose ambiguity lies precisely in that shared and assumed knowledge the audience took for granted:

> Þeodric ahte þritig wintra
> Mæringa burg; þæt wæs monegum cuþ.
> Þæs ofereode, þisses swa mæg![9]
> (18-20)

The story of Theodric and his long-lasting kingdom has forced traditional criticism to wonder about his real identity. Is this Theodric the Frank or the Ostrogoth? Sources have been identified for both of them. Theodric the Frank appears explicitly in *Widsið* (24b), and Malone (1977: 10-11) connects him with the Middle High German *Wolfdietrich* story and with later narrations such as the *Historia Francorum* written by Gregory of Tours. Theodric the Ostrogoth stems from both Latin and Germanic sources; examples from the former are seen in Alfred's introduction to his translation of Boetius' *De Consolatione Philosophiae*, or in Bishop Waerferth's Old English translation of Gregory's *Dialogues*. As an illustration of the later we could mention the Old High German *Hildebrandslied* story and the Dietrich von Bern cycle.

The mention of the ruled city, "Mæringa burg," does not clarify the matter either because in one the most frequently quoted sources —the runic engraving on Rök stone[10]— the name of Theodric shows again a double reference, although the vast majority of contemporary critics agree in using the adjective "Ostrogoth" as the proper vocative for the King Theodric appearing in the story told in *Deor* and in the inscription from Rök stone.[11] In spite of this majority reading, we should take into account that Theodric's reference in *Deor* is mentioned very incidentally, so it is almost impossible to know for sure which one of the two has been used by the poet. Once more, the story was very well known —"þæt wæs monegum cuþ" (19b)— and, probably, both legends were mixed and blended before their intro-

[9] "Theodric ruled the city of the Mearings/For thirty years. That was well-known to many! That passed away, and so may this from me (op.cit: p. 91)".

[10] Some of these engravings have been translated by D.G. Calder et al (1983: 69) and A. Delgado (1995: 77-79) offers their transcription and rendering, together with her own interpretation of the historical facts narrated there.

[11] Surprisingly enough, Malone (1977: 13) uses the same runic engravings from Rök stone to defend his reading of Theodric as King of the Franks.

duction into the Old English poetic stock. That basically explains why we cannot distinguish them in *Deor*.[12]

The most concise stanza is the only one in which the psychological component is not present in the lines and has to be inferred from the story. Depending on which one of the aforementioned Theodrics we select, we shall be provided with a very different psychological expression. As we have pointed out, the reference is made in such an indirect way that it is almost impossible to carry out a proper identification. We are faced, then, with different psychological options, as Jerome Mandel (1977: 4) states:

> 1) is Theodric's possession of Mæringaburg meant to indicate a tyrannical rule and therefore woe for the people; or 2) is the woe Theodric's because he ruled Mæringaburg for thirty years and then his rule came to an end; or 3) is the thirty year period that Theodric ruled the Mærings meant to indicate thirty years of exile during which he was separated from his own people (not the Mærings) although he was at the same time ruling the Mærings?. We cannot know whether Đeodric was meant to represent a good or a bad king.

Perhaps, the most accurate mention of Earmanric in the following stanza turns any further reference to Theodric unnecessary, as the issue was "monegum cuþ." Thus, both stanzas could be examples of tyrant kings who brought suffering to their people (Frankis 1962: 3) —this could explain why in the next stanza the psychological expression is centered on Earmanric's subjects— or accounts of opposite prototypic rulers, the tyrant facing the merciful (Mandel 1977: 5).

We believe that it is not important which one of the foregoing psychological expressions is correct. We are not facing a matter of "correctness" in this respect, but a matter of "inherentness." The only thing we know for sure is that some kind of psychological expression is hidden in Theodric's reference, so the thematic structure keeps on being fulfilled and the psychological history-grounded expression remains as the key issue in this stanza. The poet depended more than usual on the audience's assumed knowledge, and this is what makes these short lines rather peculiar if we compare them with the rest of the poem.

The fifth stanza (21-27) mentions Earmanric, king of the Goths although the emphasis is placed once more on psychological nuances. The references to his cruel behaviour and to the suffering of his subjects are more highlighted in the text than historical data. The audience's knowledge is taken for granted again —"We geascodan"— and the sources of this particular story range from the Icelandic *Eddas* and the Middle High German Würzburg Chronicle to *Widsið* and the *Getica* written by Jordanes[13] (Malone 1977:14, Conde 1996: 68).

[12] The fact that Eormanric —king of the Goths and uncle of Theodric the Ostrogoth— is clearly mentioned in the following stanza, gives more coherence to the supporters of this attribution.

[13] On Jordanes' *Getica* the article by Bodelón (1999) is very interesting and clarifiying.

We geascodan Eormanrices
wylfenne geþoht; ahte wide folc
Gotena rices. Þæt wæs grim cyning.
Sæt secg monig sorgum gebunden,
wean on wenan, wyscte geneahhe
þæt þæs cynerices ofercumen wære.
Þæs ofereode, þisses swa mæg![14]
(21-27)

In these lines, Earmanric's subjects expect nothing more than grief and torment, as they live in a permanent state of physical and mental suffering. They only wish to see the end of Earmanric's kingdom and the conclusion of its desperate times. The psychological expression is in this case derived from the cruelty of a king who is able to generate a miserable *status quo* for his subjects, and brought about through their characterization with psychological terms expressing their suffering and *angst*.

The sixth stanza (28-42) shows a very private and philosophical tone that is not offered in the rest of the poem:

Siteð sorgcearig, sælum bidæled,
on sefan sweorceð, sylfum þinceð
þæt sy endeleas earfoða dæl.
Mæg þonne geþencan, þæt geond þas woruld
witig dryhten wendeþ geneahhe,
eorle monegum are gesceawað,
wislicne blæd, sumum weana dæl.
Þæt ic bi me sylfum secgan wille,
þæt ic hwile wæs Heodeninga scop,
dryhtne dyre. Me wæs Deor noma.
Ahte ic fela wintra folgað tilne,
holdne hlaford, oþþæt Heorrenda nu,
leoðcræftig monn londryht geþah,
þæt me eorla hleo ær gesealde.
Þæs ofereode, þisses swa mæg![15]
(28-42)

[14] "We have heard much about the wolvish mind/Of King Ermanric who long controlled/ The people of the Goths: a cruel king./Many a man lived in the bonds of sorrow,/expected nought but grief, wished constantly/That this dread kingdom might be overthrown/That passed away, and so may this from me (op. cit: p. 93)".

[15] "The anxious, grieving man, deprived of joy/Lives with a darkened mind; it seems to him/His share of sorrows will be everlasting;/But he can think that in this world wise God/Brings him change continually: to many a man/He offers grace, assured prosperity,/But others he assigns a share of woe./About my own plight now I wish to speak:/Once I was a misntrel of the Heodenings./ Dear to my patron, and my name was Deor./I held for many years a fine position/And a loyal lord, until Heorrenda now,/That skillful poet, has received my lands,/Which once my lord and master gave to me./That passed away, and so may this from me (op. cit: p. 93)".

However, to be coherent with the overall structure of the text and to keep on linking the audience with the poet's aims, several historical/legendary elements are introduced in Deor's private story. The interpolation of Heorrenda —the well-known legendary poet from Germanic folklore[16]— as Deor's poetic vanquisher is a very clear example of these historical additions. The sources of Heoden's poet portrait are manyfold —e.g *Widsið*, Saxo Grammaticus' *Gesta Danorum*, the Scandinavian poem *Guðrúnarkviða* or the previously quoted Germanic version of *Kudrun*[17]—, but the purpose of its introduction in the text is obvious: this reference highlights what the poetic narrator is telling about himself, just because the audience will be gladly listening to the one who was forerunner and challenger of such a legendary figure as Heorrenda.

After offering these five examples of heroic-legendary misfortune, characterized by psychological features overtly expressed —anguish, grief, suffering, etc.— and attributed to the main characters of the stories, the poetic narrator moves a step forward in the building of his text to provide us —in the first part of this stanza (28-34) —with a list of universal reflections on adversity. Now that the poetic narrator has carefully described five specific cases of misfortune, he ventures to ponder —in a philosophical way, almost imitating the *Maxims* tradition from the classics[18]— on the mutable condition of fate, the suffering inherent to it, etc. Thus, he states that human beings psychologically characterized with those features mentioned all along the particular cases —i.e, "sorgcearig," "sælum bidæled," etc.— live distressed and consider their suffering to be everlasting. Nevertheless, they have to perceive the transcience of life, they have to realize not only that everything is subject to change but also that suffering is liable to random. Fortune or misfortune are accidentally assigned to human beings, and both situtations are mutable and changeable as some transcendental power from above thinks fit.

The reference to a superior spiritual power or divinity —"Drihten"— doesn't make the poem particularly religious. In *Deor,* unlike in *The Seafarer* and *The Wanderer* (Bueno 2001: 32-36, 63-67) —poems with a greater load of religious items—, the key point is not religion in itself. The crux here is the depiction of other concepts such as the mutability of suffering, the unexpectedness of its sudden ending, or the reflections we could make on the psychological expression of people's mutable suffer-

[16] The legendary figure of Heorrenda as the most famous minstrel of Old Germanic stories is very well explained by Kemp Malone (1977: 16, 40): "The heroic setting which the *Deor* poet gives to his own fictitious career was evidently chosen in order that his last example of misfortune outlived might harmonize in tone and general atmosphere with his other five examples. He had a brilliant inspiration when he represented himself as the defeated rival of Heorrenda. A poet who was Heorrenda's predecessor and rival must be worth hearing!"

[17] In some very well known oral sources (Malone 1977: 40) Heorrenda is identified as the very god of song himself. This fact helps us to understand better the "brilliant inspiration" the *Deor* poet had when comparing his narrator to Heorrenda.

[18] Some connections could also be established with the contents of Boece's *De Consolatione Philosophiae*.

ing and their attitudes to it. It is true that these topics could be tinged with a Christian hue, but the poem mentions religion —or spiritual transcience, rather— as much as it refers to a superior power, and that is the only thing concerning religion that is clear in the text: the existence of a supernatural force, placed well above human beings (Clemoes 1995: 91), which is able to modify fate and could very well have received the name of "Wyrd."[19]

The second part of this stanza (35-42) finally provides us with the personal/individual sphere. The poetic narrator gives himself a name, Deor, and changes the scope of his discourse by talking about the expression of his own psychological distress and suffering. After five episodes that mentioned different instances of the psychological expression of misfortune, Deor complains about his particular case describing it as a very good example of reversed fortune. From being an appreciated poet who served his master well, he moved to a situation of total loss —esteem, friendship, spiritual values, commodities, lands, etc.— A new poet better than him, a man who was remembered by heroic tradition in its tales and legends, receives Deor's former possessions at all levels. By mentioning Heorrenda and the Heodenings, Deor himself includes his own past within the historical and legendary context[20] which served him as the proper background of his previous *exempla* of human misfortune. His own case is thus included in his heroic and legendary story-telling, being a mirror image of the different psychological expressions narrated before his own. In a certain way, these final lines —filled with sadness and anxiety, though— in which we hear the clear voice of the poetic narrator's "Ic" are softened by the restless sense of future hope hidden in the appealing and disturbing refrain: "Þæs ofereode, þisses swa mæg"

3. FINAL REMARKS

This question about the function of historical/legendary facts in *Deor* could be summed up with two very interesting statements. Firstly, quoting —and totally agreeing with— the comments by J. C. Conde (1996: 69), we could say that:

> the poem relied on the expectation that the audience was able to make use of Germanic history and traditional legends in order to fill the gaps which mere hints in the text leave open (...) In other words, *Deor*'s significance could only be grasped

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[19] As we mentioned before, this expresses a philosophical concept of the Anglo-saxon *weltanschauung*, the belief in steadfast fate. As it happens in some other elegiac poems, in *Deor* this is something more connected with a certain sense of human-distressing fatalism than with a purely christian/religious concept. However, this sense of fatalism is smoothed by the positive hope that the refrain leaves open.

[20] In fact, the poetic narrator is not telling us that his name is Deor. He states that it *was* Deor —"Me wæs Deor noma" (37b)—. Thus, he is giving a historical/legendary condition to his own situation (Malone 1977: 17), being merged as an individual with the rest of human beings.

if those addressed understood that they were required to stimulate their knowledge of other texts, and to activate the mechanisms of intertextuality.

In this way, that shared knowledge of history we have been referring to all through the article not only permitted the poet to define the contextual background very briefly, but also allowed him to deal with the psychological content directly, being this topic his main concern.

Secondly, the use of previously assumed historical and/or legendary references as a background for personal/philosophical reflections is a classical resource of Germanic poetry —what Conybeare (1826: 239) described as "Infortuniis illustrium virorum"— that is perfectly exemplified in *Deor*. This fact highlights what we have also described in the previous sections of this article: the historical, heroic, legendary references are used just as a mere background, as a useful and known context to describe the psychological expression of misfortune. Although the facts depicted in this poem —exile, rape, tyranny, etc.— could bear the "social" label, it is not their social condition which is highlighted in the poem but the suffering narrated in it, the psychological expressions described in its lines, the universal/personal reflections made on adversity and its mutable condition throughout the text.

Finally, using this historical background as a narrative device, *Deor* offers all through its narration what we could describe as a "misfortune catalogue," being this catalogue built with a thorough psychological description of the main characters leading those background historical references. The emphasis is placed on the expression of the mental and psychological distress of the main historical characters —a catalogue of "historical misfortunes," where the "misfortune" is more relevant than the "historical"— by means of a gradual depiction, moving slowly from a general overview of *exempla* to the more personal sphere of the last stanza. This feature not only distinguishes *Deor* from other heroic-legendary catalogues of the same tradition but also links it very strongly with some other elegiac poems (Bueno 2001), making its membership to this Anglo-Saxon poetic discourse almost undeniable.

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