

## The Trumpet and the Wolf: Noises of Battle in Old English Poetry

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Battle and warfare are prominent topics in Old English poetry, reflecting their importance to the self-conception as well as the practical concerns of the warrior class who governed Anglo-Saxon England. The representation of warfare in poetry constitutes both a codification of experience, a means of reflecting on contemporary events such as Scandinavian raiding and invasion,<sup>1</sup> and at the same time an idealization, part of a shared imaginary centered on the heroic, migration-age past, lordship and comitatus bonds, courage and violence, and the material culture of treasure, weaponry, and the hall (Howe 1989; Niles 2007; Tyler 2006). The poetry is traditional in its diction and themes. Old English poems portray battle and warfare in ways that are sometimes highly stylized but also have aspects of realism.

The present essay focuses on one element of battle-description in Old English poetry that is both conventional and to some extent realistic: the portrayal of battle as noisy. Noise is a very common ingredient in Old English poetic battle scenes and perhaps an unsurprising one, but it is not inevitable. Classical and medieval Latin poetry often mention noise as part of battle, but historical writings do so much less often. Moreover, as we shall see, noise emerges in Old English battle poetry in distinctive and sometimes strikingly non-naturalistic ways. A focus on noise can afford an interesting avenue into Old English battle poetry for a number of reasons, of which I here highlight two.

First, noise is a junction for the physical and psychological elements of battle. It is part of the sensory onslaught of war and can itself be regarded as a species of violence (Allen 2004:305), though it does not inflict bodily injury unless much louder than anything first-millennium technology could produce. William Ian Miller has pointed out the role of noise, along with other factors such as bloodiness, closeness, and visibility, in influencing our perceptions of actions or events as more or less “violent” (1993:65):

We tend to perceive violence when blood flows outside its normal channels. Ax murderers are thus more violent than poisoners. . . . Violence is also felt to be noisy: the victims' screams and groans and the victimizers' shouting, the crowds' cheering (as in

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<sup>1</sup> This is most obviously the case with those poems that narrate recent history (*The Battle of Maldon* and the poems of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*), but narrations of biblical, hagiographical, or migration age material could also be read in relation to contemporary events; see for example Astell 1989 on the relevance of *Judith* to the Danish invasions.

public executions), guns' reports, and bones cracking. Ax murderers are thus again more violent than poisoners. Part of the humanizing of capital punishment as it changed from public drawing and quartering to the lonely electrocution of a sedated victim or to permanent sedation by lethal injection was not only the reduction of pain but the reduction of noise and mess.

Looking at noise can help to clarify what it is that modern readers often find so violent about Old English poetry. But it also illuminates how Old English poets deal with the terror, suddenness, and power of violence (if you will, the violence of violence). Referring to terrifying, overwhelming, or, conversely, thrilling or encouraging noises is a way that poets can convey the atmosphere of the battlefield and the mood of warriors. As readers of *The Battle of Maldon* or *Beowulf* will readily acknowledge, Old English poets show a prominent concern with psychological dimensions of combat. Noise can form an element in their exploration of the relationship between interior *mod* ("mind, courage") and exterior *mægen* ("physical strength, might") (Engberg 1985).

Second, a focus on noise offers one route into complex questions of how violence relates to language. These questions are inspiringly posed by Elaine Scarry in her influential and morally committed study of torture, warfare, and creativity, *The Body in Pain* (1985). Scarry's book as a whole starts from the perception that pain is antithetical to language: that the body in extreme pain—of which the endpoint is the total silence of death—is unable to speak and shut in on itself, unable to reach out to engage with the world and creatively "make" that world through language. At the same time, nothing seems more real than the experience of one's own pain or than the materiality of the body. With respect to war, Scarry highlights the distortion of language associated with war: euphemism, propaganda, jargon, and sheer lies. The analysis is offered as a general theory, but the examples are drawn from modern state warfare. In modern warfare, as Scarry remarks, one might speak of "neutralizing" enemy soldiers but of "wounding" a gun (67); it is easy to add examples ("friendly fire," "collateral damage," "ethnic cleansing"). Scarry argues that this scrambling of language is part of a destabilizing and deconstructing of reality as the world-views of warring sides come into conflict. At the end of the war the winners claim the privilege of reconstructing (political, territorial, moral) reality in accordance with their own interests. For Scarry, there is no necessary relationship between the core activity of warfare, injuring, and the territorial, ideological, and political issues decided through war, which are external to warfare and constructed in language. Yet in war the "heartsickening reality" of dead and injured human bodies is retrospectively co-opted for the winners' position (137). Her work thus points to a fundamental but deeply problematic relationship between warfare and representation. If injuring is to be transformed into politics and ideology, there have to be powerful acts of interpretation; moreover, warfare in Scarry's account *is* a kind of representation, one in which bodies become signs for ideas. At the same time, most representations of warfare are misrepresentations because they partake in the pernicious yoking (and subordination) of human pain and death to political and ideological constructs.

Noise helps to open up these questions of violence and language because, most obviously, language under violence degenerates into noise (speech into a scream, talk drowned out by gunfire). Specifically, in Old English battle poetry there is an ironic counterpointing of

articulate and inarticulate sounds. The first part of this essay briefly surveys the kinds of noises that appear in Old English battle poems, remarking on their associations. The second part looks more closely at a particularly noisy poem that serves to bring Scarry's terms into a distinctively Anglo-Saxon focus. This is the Old English *Exodus*, preserved in Bodleian MS Junius 11.<sup>2</sup>

### Battle Noises

In Old English poetry, the most frequently appearing battle noises are those that constitute regular though not inevitable elements in the type-scenes of the "approach to battle" (armies advance to battle, with conventional elements including, among others, the bearing of weapons and a notation about the mental state of the warriors) and the "beasts of battle" (the wolf, eagle, and raven feast or look forward to feasting on the corpses of the fallen).<sup>3</sup> Noise is also often mentioned in the description of the battle proper, especially with respect to the initial clash of lines. A compact example is *Genesis A* 1982-91, describing the advance of the five kings from the south to defend Sodom against the Elamites:

foron þa tosomne (francan wæron hlude),  
 wraðe wælherigas. Sang se wanna fugel  
 under deoreðsceaftum, deawigfeðera,  
 hræs on wenan. Hæleð onetton  
 on mægencorðrum, modum þryðge  
 oðþæt folcgetrume gefaren hæfdon  
 sid tosomne suðan and norðan,  
 helmum þeahhte. Þær wæs heard plega,  
 wælgara wrixl, wigcym micel,  
 hlud hildesweg.

They advanced together. The javelins were loud, angry the slaughter-armies. The dark bird sang under the spear-shafts, dewy-feathered, looking forward to a corpse. Warriors hastened in powerful armies, strong in mind, until they had reached the broad place together with an army from north and south, protected with helms. There was bitter play, exchange of slaughter-spears, great noise of battle, a loud war-melody [or: war-sound, war-noise].

This passage contains both type-scenes in brief form (only one beast is mentioned rather than three) plus the joining of battle, with noise a component of all three parts.

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<sup>2</sup> All poems are cited and quoted in the texts of Anglo-Saxon Poetic Records (Krapp 1931; Krapp 1932; Krapp and Dobbie 1936; Dobbie 1942; Dobbie 1953), with the exception of *Exodus*, for which I use Lucas 1994.

<sup>3</sup> Fry (1969:35) defines a type-scene as "a recurring stereotyped presentation of conventional details used to describe a certain narrative event."

As in the *Genesis* example (*francan wæron hlude*), noise in the approach to battle tends to be associated with weapons or equipment. In *Judith* 204-5, *dynedan scildas / hlude hlummon* (“shields made a din, resounded loudly”) as the Bethulians issue forth to fight the Assyrians; in *Elene* 50-51 Constantine advances as *rand dynede / campwudu clynede* (“the shield made a din, the battle-wood rang”). Earlier in *Elene*, Constantine’s barbarian enemies prepare to advance *wordum and bordum / hofon herecombol* (“with words and shields raised the standard,” 24-25); in her edition of the poem, P. O. E. Gradon links this description to the practice of armies banging shields in assent, as described by Tacitus (Tacitus 1938:11 [11.6] and 87; Tacitus 1921:306 [V.xvii.6]; Gradon 1996:26). In these sequences there is a realistic but also atmosphere-building association between noise and movement. As armies begin to move, their hubbub signals the impending threat of violence and the building of physical energy that will explode into the clash of battle. In the *Genesis A* passage quoted above, one may also note how effectively the element of noise is coupled to another ingredient in the type-scene, the interior dispositions of warriors. In lines 1982-83 the loudness of spears is directly juxtaposed to the anger of warriors; we are also told the warriors are “strong in mind” (1986). The clashing and clattering of weapons thus form an external sign of a fighting spirit. The noises of the approach to battle type-scene help to convey the psychological dimension of conflict, the gathering tension, the mounting aggression, and the mustering of resolve; they are also part of a poetic device of suspense preparing the audience for what is to come.

The approach to battle and beasts of battle type-scenes are closely linked: indeed, the beasts of battle are a usual component of the approach to battle (Fry 1969:36, following Ramsey), though they can also appear independently. Like the forward march and the hubbub of armies, the beasts create a sense of the mood of battle, a mood of excitement and terror. In this their noises play a key part. Mark Griffith has shown not only that the beasts’ cries are the motif that appears most consistently in Old English instances of the type-scene (1993:185), but also that the type-scene is usually triggered by mention of the noise of battle (189). Often the beasts are explicitly said to cry out in eagerness for the slaughter. In *Elene* 52-53 *Hrefen uppe gol, / wan ond wælfel* (“the raven sang above, dark and eager for slaughter”); in *Judith* 209-11 *him fleah on last / earn ætes georn, urigfeðera, / salowigpada sang hildeleoð* (“there flew in their wake the eagle eager for food, dewy-feathered, the dusky-plumed one sang a battle-song”). Similarly, in the passage given earlier from *Genesis A* the dark bird sings as it looks forward to dining on flesh (1983-85). Noise is most directly associated not so much with violence itself as with its psychological conditions: the beasts of battle are images of bloodlust. The extent to which this psychological dimension is joined to noise is indicated by a notable exception. *The Battle of Brunanburh* includes one of the few appearances of the beasts in Old English where they are seen not looking forward to a feast but actually feasting, and in the aftermath of the battle; it is also one of the few instances in which they are silent. Thomas Honegger (1998:290-93) labels this instance a “naturalistic” as opposed to “poetic” treatment of the type-scene. The placing of the beasts before the battle and the stress on anticipation are both distinctive features in Old English poetry. It is as eaters of the slain rather than heralds of war that the beasts of battle usually appear in Old Welsh and Old Norse poetry (Klausner 1993; Jesch 2002).

While the din of the advance in the approach to battle sequences is a realistic detail, the cries of the beasts are presented in a stylized fashion that highlights the issue of how violence

relates to language. Though sometimes the beasts are said to yell or scream (*giellan, hropan*), more often their cries are presented in terms of song or even speech: *singan* “to sing,” *sang ahebban* “to raise a song,” *-leoð singan* “to sing a song,” or *-leoð agalan* “to sing a song”; *secgan* and *reordian*, both meaning “to speak,” appear in *Beowulf* (3025-26).<sup>4</sup> There is heavy irony in this depiction of bestial yelling as melodious or articulate sound, especially since *leoð*, *sang*, and *singan* can refer not just to music but to poetry. The song of the beasts represents an inversion of and threat to human language; they point to the silencing of human voices and the destruction of human bodies, which they hope to dismember and eat. But they also point to the result of the battle and to its resolution into a linguistic act: the battle will have its outcome not only in a feast for the wolf but in a song by the poet, whether in celebration or lament. This aspect of the symbolism of the beasts is particularly conspicuous in *Elene*. Here the wolf not only sings (*fyrðleoð agol*, “sang an army-song,” 27), but also *wælrune ne mað*, “did not conceal the slaughter-runes” (28); the wolf is presented as a privileged interpreter of battle, one who has the skill to read the signs and reveal their meaning to others. In a coda to *Elene*, the poet discusses his own composition of the poem and uses runes riddingly to record his own name, Cynewulf. The wolf is thus a counterpart and forerunner to the poet in a poem that repeatedly uses the motif of song and, as Griffith observes, portrays the heroic song of battle being replaced by Christian hymnody (1993:193-94). The shrieking or singing of the beasts of battle stands on the one hand for the chaos and disorder of battle and on the other for battle as a story waiting to be told.

Both the realistic din of weapons and the anthropomorphized song of the carrion beasts also appear in descriptions of the battle proper, along with generalized clamor. Reference to noise forms part of a panoramic or summative view of battle, with which the poet may alternate particular incidents or close-ups of individuals. This is how the battle starts after the Vikings cross the Pante in *The Battle of Maldon* (106-14):

Þær wearð hream ahafen, hremmas wundon,  
 earn æses georn; wæs on eorþan cyrm.  
 Hi leton þa of folman feolhearde speru,  
 gegrundene garas fleogan;  
 bogan wæron bysige, bord ord onfeng.  
 Biter wæs se beaduræs, beornas feollon  
 on gehwæðere hand, hyssas lagon.  
 Wund wearð Wulfmær, wælræste geceas,  
 Byrhtnoðes mæg.

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<sup>4</sup> Griffith (1993:185) gives details, listing fourteen occurrences of the motif of “giving voice.” I have here listed all the forms Griffith has apart from *-rune ne mað* “did not conceal the runes” (*Elene* 28). *Sang, singan*, or *leoð* appears in seven of the fourteen instances. One might add a further example not included by Griffith: *Exodus* 161 *onhwæl* “cried out.” The manuscript reading is *on hwæl . hwreopon . here fugolas*, which Lucas emends to *onhwæl þa on heofonum hyrnednebbā / (hreopon herefugolas hilde grædige)* (1994:101). ASPR (Krapp 1931) has *on hwæl* as a line by itself, followed by asterisks to mark a lacuna, and starts the next line as a new sentence: *Hreopon herefugolas, hilde grædige*.

There noise was raised up, ravens circled, the eagle eager for food; there was clamor on the earth. They let fly from their hands file-hardened spears, ground javelins; bows were busy, shield received point. Bitter was the onslaught, men fell on each side, warriors lay dead. Wulfmær was wounded, Byrhtnoth's kinsman chose a slaughter-rest.

Here again we see the association between noise and the beasts of battle, though the beasts themselves do not cry out. The poet paints the scene in broad, impressionistic strokes, with noise (*hream*, *cyrn*) the first element in a general outline of violence within which he then details the individual fate of Wulfmær. (*The Battle of Finnsburh* exhibits a technique very like that of *Maldon*, alternating between wide-angle and close-up shots of the fighting and also between the speeches of particular warriors and general noise, *wælslihta gehlyn* "the din of slaughter," 28.) One may note the extent to which sounds, beasts, and weapons rather than warriors are grammatical subjects here and how much use is made of the verb "to be" rather than verbs of vigorous action: battle is made to seem like a hostile environment into which warriors enter as much as a set of deeds they perform. Battle is similarly impersonal in our *Genesis A* passage: *þær wæs heard plega, / wælgara wrixl, wigcyrn micel, / hlud hildesweg* ("there was bitter play, exchange of slaughter-spears, a great noise of battle, a loud war-melody," 1989-91). In this passage, as often in the beasts of battle topos, there is play between the ideas of cacophonous and melodious noise, *cyrn* versus *sweg*: in *Andreas* 1156 *cyrn* is the howling of cannibals deprived of meat; in *Guthlac* 1315 *sweg* is applied to the song of the angels. *Maldon* also ironically alludes to song at the point where Byrhtnoth's loyal thanes, having declared their resolve, plunge into the fray to their deaths: *bærst bordes lærig and seo byrne sang / gryreleoda sum* ("the shield-rim burst and the mailcoat sang a certain terrible song," 284-85).

In Old English poetry, then, noise is particularly associated with the build-up to battle, though it can also play a part in the depiction of battle proper. The presentation of noise frequently involves ironic play between harmonious or articulate and inarticulate or disordered sound. It is not simply that harmony is associated with the good and cacophony with the bad, though this is sometimes the case (Heckman 1998:58-59). Battle is depicted as simultaneously a chaotic, psychologically overwhelming environment, in which human voices are under threat in a very literal sense, and a ritualized activity already pregnant with the poems that will be made about it. The terminology of song self-reflexively indicates the poet's own role in telling the stories of battle. The prominence of battle-noises of course varies from poem to poem, as do the precise form and force given to the implications outlined above. For a closer focus on how battle-noises can function in a particular poem, the next section of this article offers a reading of noises in the Old English *Exodus*.

### **The Junius 11 *Exodus***

The *Exodus* poem of Bodleian MS Junius 11 deals with the flight of the Israelites from Egypt and the crossing of the Red Sea. Although the biblical episode on which it is based contains no battle, *Exodus* is unambiguously a battle-poem. The march of the Israelites through the desert is depicted as the march of an army, the Egyptians' pursuit in terms of an approach to

battle type-scene complete with beasts of battle; the advance of the tribe of Judah into the Red Sea is shown as a joining of battle with *heard handplega* “hard hand-fighting” (327), *bilswaðu blodige* “bloody wounds” (329), and *beadumægnes ræs* “a rush/onslaught of battle-might” (329); the death of the Egyptians is emphatically bloody (in a famous line, *flod blod gewod* “the flood was filled with blood,” 467). The battle elements in the poem serve to transmute the events of the exodus into heroic terms and to underscore its multilayered typological meaning. The passage through the Red Sea is a type of baptism, which, following patristic tradition, is understood as the scene of a spiritual struggle against sin and the devil; it is also linked to the Harrowing of Hell (Earl 1970:565-68; Vickrey 1972:119-23). The deliverance of the Israelites from their foe stands for the redemption of mankind by Christ. This connection is further highlighted by the character of Junius 11 as an anthology of biblical poems that together form an “epic of redemption” (Hall 1976, 2002); the battle-imagery of *Exodus* looks forward to Christ’s defeat of the devil in *Christ and Satan*.<sup>5</sup>

Those sequences most infused with battle imagery—the march through the desert, the pursuit of the Egyptians, and their death in the Red Sea—make extensive reference to noise. Noise is an important part of how the poet establishes the impression of battle, given that the Egyptians and Israelites do not directly fight each other. But it also plays a part in the way the poem looks beyond literal violence to something else. In *Exodus* we encounter an opposition between, on the one hand, harmonious sounds used for communication and, on the other, clamorous, disordered noise instilling or expressing fear. The noisiness of the poem helps to create a martial mood, moving from oppressive tension and fear to eager courage. This very focus on the psychological dimensions of battle enables the poet to portray the physical journey of the Israelites through the desert as an inward journey of faith: they must overcome the terror of war on their way to salvation. Moreover, the poem foregrounds the importance of being able to take control of the meanings of battle, both to control and order events that threaten to fall into chaos and to be in a position to tell the story afterwards. The contrast between meaningful and disordered noises helps to articulate this idea, as I hope to show.

A distinctive element in the battle-noises of *Exodus* is the prominence of trumpets or horns. These instruments are not otherwise especially frequent elements in battle scenes in Old English poetry. This is despite the fact that horns and trumpets have powerful martial associations going back to the Bible: one need only think of Joshua’s men bringing down the walls of Jericho with a trumpet blast (Joshua 6). The approach-to-battle sequences in *Elene* include mention of horn-blowers (*hornboran*, 54) and trumpets (*byman*, 109); in *Beowulf* Hygelac’s arrival to rescue his men from Ongentheow is announced by the sounding of horn and trumpet (*horn ond byman*, 2943), and horns are sounded as the Danes and Geats reach the mere before Beowulf’s combat against Grendel’s mother (*horn stundum song*, 1423; *guðhorn galan*, 1432) (neither of these episodes is a full-blown battle scene, however). By contrast, the concentration of references in *Exodus* is striking, with six occurrences of *byme* or compounds thereof (99, 132, 159, 216, 222, 566) and one of *horn* (192). The trumpets of *Exodus* would thus

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<sup>5</sup> Hall rejects the argument that links *Exodus* to the liturgy of Easter Saturday and the baptism of catechumens, but his remarks on the manuscript context of *Exodus* remain relevant, as indeed do his comments on the Augustinian context; *Exodus* is a poem that concentrates an exceptionally rich and complex range of patristic and biblical references.

seem to be the product of the poet's creative choice rather than simply part of the traditional diction of battle poetry.<sup>6</sup>

The trumpets appear for the most part in the portion of the poem devoted to journeying and pursuit and have a similar effect to the weapon-noises more commonly heard as part of the approach to battle. They establish a martial mood and a sense of energy building towards the fight. After their third camp, the Israelites are roused by trumpet signals. This is the first mention of trumpets in the poem (98-100):

Þa ic on morgen gefrægn modes rofan  
 hebban herebyman hludan stefnum,  
 wuldres woman. Werod eall aras.

Then I have heard that in the morning the ones bold in heart raised up trumpets with loud voices, a noise of glory. The host all arose.

Here the trumpet is associated with movement, decision, courage, and glory. In this scene the Israelites are imagined as *sæmen* ("seamen," 105) voyaging under the *segl* ("sail," 105) of the God-sent cloud-pillar that guides them through the desert (Lucas 1994:92); the noise of their progress reinforces the sense of energy and optimism: *Folc wæs on salum, / hlud herges cyrm* ("the folk was joyful, loud the clamor of the army," 106-7). Trumpets in this poem belong to those who are bold and have the moral initiative. At the point when the Egyptians appear in pursuit, trumpets are part of their war-equipment as they advance in terrifying strength (154-60):

Þa him eorla mod ortrywe wearð,  
 siððan hie gesawon of suðwegum  
 fyrd Faraonis forð onangan,  
 eoferholt wegán, eored lixan –  
 garas trymedon, guð hwearfode,  
 blicon bordhreoðan, byman sungon –  
 þufas þenian, þeod mearc tredan.

Then the mood of warriors became distrustful against him [Moses], when they saw the army of Pharaoh coming forth from the southern ways, bearing boar-spears, cavalry gleaming—spears were arrayed, war approached, shields shone, trumpets sang—standards being lifted up, the nation treading the borderland.

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<sup>6</sup> The difference between a horn and a trumpet is that a trumpet has a cylindrical bore with a bell on the end and a horn a conical bore tapering gradually to its bell (Galpin 1965:134-36). Though no Anglo-Saxon horns have been found intact owing to the perishable materials from which they were made, there have been finds of horn-fittings (Graham-Campbell 1973), while wooden horns have been preserved in waterlogged conditions from contemporary Ireland (Waterman 1969). However, it is not clear the Anglo-Saxons had trumpets, though both trumpets and horns are identified in manuscript illustrations (Ohlgren 1992:117). Galpin associates the word *byrne* with "the instruments of horn or metal used for directing the movements of men in battle or in the chase" (1965:138), discussed in his chapter on the horn. The distinction does not seem crucial within the poetry.

This is a classic approach-to-battle sequence including the elements of advance, flashing lights, and an array of weapons as well as noise. The scene creates narrative suspense. The Israelites are cowed and waver in their trust of their leader.

Trumpets thus help to portray psychological dimensions of boldness and initiative and are associated with the forward surge of both armies and the narrative. However, the sound of the trumpet is also a meaningful sound deliberately produced. Trumpet signals are used to direct the armies, as in lines 98-100 quoted above. Edward B. Irving links this passage to Numbers 10.1-10, which gives instructions for different kinds of trumpet notes to direct different parts of the host to shift camp and for trumpets to be sounded at going to war and at feasts and religious sacrifices (1970:75). *Exodus* does not mention different signal types, but the range of functions associated with trumpets is in fact wider than in Numbers, including signaling to set up camp (lines 132-33) (Lucas 1994:192). Trumpets function as an extension of the human voice. The association with the voice is explicit in the phrase *hludum stefnum* (“with loud voices,” 99); at 276 Moses *hof* . . . *hlude stefne* (“raised up a loud voice”) and at 575 the troops *hofon* . . . *hlude stefne* (“raised up a loud voice”) as they praise God. (The combination of adjective plus *stefn* in the dative or accusative singular or plural also occurs at 257 and 463, and the angel speaks to Abraham as a *stefne of heofonum*, “a voice from heaven,” at 417.) In Anglo-Saxon art the image of the trumpet or horn can stand for the voice of God (Karkov 2001:107; Ohlgren 1992:28, on the illustration to Psalm 45 in British Library, Harley 603, f. 26v). The association between trumpets, courage, and speech is important to the developing conflict, crisis, and triumph in *Exodus*.

The music of the trumpet is contrasted to the cries of the beasts of battle. The howling of the beasts banishes speech and brings a terror that leads to paralysis. The march of Pharaoh’s army, excerpted above, continues with the arrival of the carrion-eaters (161-67):

Onhwæl þa on heofonum hýrnednebbas  
 (hreoþon herefugolass hilde grædige,  
 deawigfeðere) ofer drihtneum,  
 wonn wælceasega. Wulfas sungon  
 atol æfenleoð ætes on wenan,  
 carleasan deor, cwyldrof beodan  
 on laðra last leodmægnes fyl.<sup>7</sup>

Then in the skies the horny-beaked one cried out over dead troops (the army-birds screamed, greedy for battle, dewy-feathered), the dark chooser of the slain [i.e., raven]. Wolves sang a terrible evening-song in expectation of food, reckless beasts, death-bold they awaited their fill of the people’s army in the wake of the enemies.

The beasts bring an explicit image of the horrible destruction that threatens the Israelites. As in other instances of the type-scene, their cries, specifically those of the wolf, are ironically portrayed as song. The verb *singan* provides a link back to the *byman* of line 159: while the

<sup>7</sup> Lucas’s text (1994) here diverges from ASPR (Krapp 1931), as discussed above.

trumpets, alongside the gleam of equipment and the ranks of spears, suggest the ordered strength of the Egyptian force, the wolves signal the chaos that comes in their wake.

The compound *æfenleoð* is repeated when the poet turns from the advancing might of Pharaoh to the Israelites. The Israelites keep a miserable night's watch in their camp, waiting helplessly for the arrival of the enemy force (200-3):

Forþon wæs in wicum wop up ahafen,  
 atol æfenleoð, egesan stodon,  
 weredon wælnet; þa se woma cwom,  
 flugon frecne spel.

Therefore in the camps weeping was raised up, a terrible evening-song, fears stood, mail-coats cumbered them; when the clamor came, bold speeches fled.

Lucas states that “*Æfenleoð* probably alludes ironically to Vespers” (1994:106), a suggestion taken up by S. A. J. Bradley in his translation (1982:55, 56). The wolves’ cry inverts and replaces the praises of God; the wolves accompany the evil forces of Pharaoh, at whose approach the Israelites lose faith (154) in their prophet Moses, who transmits to them the words of God. The *æfenleoð* of the wolves invades the mouths of the Israelites, and noise (*woma*) banishes courageous speech (*frecne spel*). Even as they lose their speech, the Israelites become inactive, lose courage, and lose control over their situation. Fear in this poem is static, frozen on the spot (*egesan stodon*) (Irving 1974:214-15). The mail-coats that should protect them instead weigh them down and thwart an implicit desire to flee (if we accept Lucas’s reading of *weredon wælnet*, 1994:106).

The morning, however, breaks the paralysis with a return to trumpets (215-20):

oð Moyses bebead  
 eorlas on uhttid ærnum bendum  
 folc somnigean, frecan arisan,  
 habban heora hlencan, hycgan on ellen  
 beran beorht searo, beacnum cigean  
 sweot sande near.

until Moses commanded men in the dawn-time to gather the people with brass trumpets,  
 the warriors to arise, have their mail-coats, set their minds to courage, bear bright armor,  
 summon with signals the troop near the sand.

Again trumpets are associated with directing the army and with action, movement, and courage (also, as in 154-60, with shining armor). Once more the Israelites, under the command of Moses, shape events through the use of meaningful sound. From this point they proceed to the Red Sea. Strikingly, the parting of the Red Sea is described not directly in the poet’s voice but within a speech of Moses, suggesting the power of prophetic language over events.

The sounding of the trumpets thus marks the moment at which the Israelites regain faith, initiative, and the power of speech. At the crisis of the poem it is the Egyptians who have their words undone and finally silenced. Their fall is horrifying in both its bloodiness and its cacophonous noise; John P. Hermann (1989:80) calls this scene “not a little sadistic” (449-55):

Wæron beorhhliðu blode bestemed,  
 holm heolfre spaw, hream wæs on yðum,  
 wæter wæpna ful, wælmist astah.  
 Wæron Egypte eft oncyrde,  
 flugon forhtigende, fær ongeton,  
 woldon herebleaðe hamas findan –  
 gylp wearð gnornra.

The hillsides [i.e., the waves]<sup>8</sup> were blood-spattered, the sea spewed blood, tumult was in the waves, the water full of weapons, a slaughter-mist rose up. The Egyptians were turned back, they fled in fear, they recognized sudden disaster, the cowardly ones wanted to reach their homes—their boast grew more mournful.

Just as bold speech deserted the Israelites, now the vaunting words (*gylp*) of the Egyptians leave them, replaced by terrified weeping and clamor. At the last, they are silenced to the extent that they have no one to tell their story (508-10 and 513-14):

forðam þæs heriges ham eft ne com  
 ealles ungrundes ænig to lafe,  
 þætte sið heora secgan moste,  
 ...  
 ac þa mægenþreatas meredeað geswealh,  
 eac þon spelbodan.

for none came home as a remnant of the whole measureless army who could tell their journey [...] but sea-death swallowed the powerful troops, even the messenger.

As Richard Marsden contends, the loss of the *spelboda* reflects the importance of the relationship between hero and poet: “the bereaved Egyptians will have no means to recreate the defeat, no chance to rewrite it and thus to overcome it and reassert their national identity” (1995:163). The Israelites have the last word. Moses delivers a speech in which the victory over the Egyptians is collapsed into the conquest of the Promised Land and the future victories that God promises to his people (556-57, 562-64):

Hafað us on Cananea cyn gelyfed  
 burh ond beagas, brade rice

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<sup>8</sup> This is the interpretation argued by Hall (1984).

...ge feonda gehwone forð ofergangað,  
 gesittað sigerice be sǣm tweonum,  
 beorselas beorna; bið eower blæd micel.

He has granted us a city and rings in the race of the Canaanites, a broad realm... you will overcome each of your enemies, occupy a victorious kingdom between the seas, beer-halls of men; your glory will be great.

The trumpets sound once more: *sungon sigebyman . . . / fægerne sweg* (“the victory-trumpets sang a beautiful sound,” 566-67). The troops sing a celebratory *wuldres sang* (“song of glory,” 577).

The harmonious notes of the trumpet, the extension of the leader’s voice communicating his commands, associated with courage, movement, and moral initiative, thus finally translate into the ability to take control of the meaning of battle through subsequent narration. Discordant clamor, whether the howling of the beasts, the mourning of the terrified Israelites, or the weeping of the dying Egyptians (*herewopa mæst*, “greatest of army-weepings,” 461), evokes fear and lack of faith; it drives out speech and at last brings silence. The noises of battle in *Exodus* deepen the psychological drama of the poem, especially with regard to the Israelites’ crisis of faith in the desert. They also intersect with a self-reflexive concern with the role of the poet, not merely as one who is necessary to sing the praises of heroes and turn battle into glory, but as one who in this particular poem uses heroic imagery to convey religious meanings.

From the very beginning of *Exodus* we are alerted to the poem’s allegorical dimension (1-7):

Hwæt, we feor and neah gefrigen habbað  
 ofer middangeard Moyses domas,  
 wræclico wordriht, wera cneorissum –  
 in uprodor eadigra gehwam  
 æfter bealusiðe bote lifes,  
 lifigendra gehwam langsumne ræd –  
 hæleðum secgan. Gehyre se ðe wille!

Lo, we have heard far and near throughout the world that Moses declared wonderful laws to generations of men—life’s reward after the terrible journey for each of the blessed in heaven, long-enduring teaching for each of the living. Let him hear who will!

The *bealusið* is plainly both the journey of the Israelites and the metaphorical journey of the Christian soul (Earl 1970:544; Lucas 1994:75). Further, the poet echoes Christ’s injunction that “he that hath ears to hear, let him hear” (*Qui habet aures audiendi, audiat*, Mark 4.9) (Irving 1974:211), words specifically associated with Christ’s use of parables in which ordinary people

and situations stand for God and his kingdom.<sup>9</sup> We may note also the focus here not on Moses' deeds but on his words, *domas* or *wordriht*, and the poet's boldness in mapping his own voice onto that of Moses—whose scriptural teaching he is about to transmit—and even that of Christ. The effect of this opening passage is not only to emphasize that *Exodus* has more than one layer of meaning but also to foreground the poet's role in weaving those meanings together. Toward the end, the poet once again draws explicit attention to the allegorical level. Scripture needs to be unlocked with the “keys of the Spirit” (*Gastes cægon*, 525) through the agency of *lifes wealhstod* (“the interpreter of life,” 523: Christ, according to Dorothy Haines [1999:483-87]). In the present life we, like the Israelites, are *eðellease* (“without a homeland,” 534), but at the Day of Judgment the Lord will lead faithful souls into heaven (544-45).

The emphasis within the battle sequences on taking control of the meanings of battle, using trumpets to proclaim order and sing the victory-story serves to amplify this framing concern with allegory and meaning-making. The theme is further sustained by the poem's obsession with signs and symbols. The pillars of cloud by day and fire by night that guide the Israelites through the desert are elaborated as a sail, a veil and a tent, a candle, and a leader with fiery hair.<sup>10</sup> Both Pharaoh's army and that of Moses march under banners, which are repeatedly mentioned. Just as the trumpets are caught up in the theme of speech and speechlessness, so they are also part of a web of signs, auditory and visual, that ultimately work to reveal the power of God. In lines 215-20 the poetic figure of variation aligns *bemum* (“trumpets” [dative]) with *beacnum* (“signs/signals” [dative]); *beacnum cigean / sweot sande near* (“summon with signals the troop near the sand,” 219-20) is grammatically parallel to *ærnum bemum / folc somnigean* (“gather the people with brass trumpets,” 216-17). The term *beacen* is also used of the fire-pillar (*heofonbeacen* “heaven-beacon,” 107), the lion standard under which the tribe of Judah marches into the Red Sea (*beacen*, 320), and the dawn, which is *Godes beacna sum* (“one of God's signs,” 345).

Interestingly, in this last passage dawn is also called *dægwoma* (344). *Woma* is another word meaning “noise,” but editors of *Exodus* and *Elene* marshal contexts in which it might have more the sense of “harbinger” or “herald” (Lucas 1994:92; Gradon 1996:26). In *Elene*, Constantine's vision of the cross is called *swefnes woma* (71), which Gradon translates “revelation of a dream” (1996:26). In *Andreas* 125 and *Guthlac* 1292, *dægreðwoma* refers to the rising sun, the harbinger of day. These examples belong emphatically to the order of the visual, not the auditory; the idea of sound seems to extend naturally into the idea of a sign. In noise, we encounter not the thing itself but its rumor or correlate. J. R. R. Tolkien renders *dægwoma* in *Exodus* 344 as “the rumour of day” (1981:27). The prominence of noise in *Exodus* underpins the way the poem focuses on the signs of battle and uses battle itself as a sign, looking beyond literal to spiritual victory.

<sup>9</sup> From the parable of the sower, in which, in Matthew and Mark's versions, this admonition appears twice (Matt. 13.19 and 13.43, Mark 4.9 and 4.23; see also Luke 8.8). *Qui habet aures . . .* also appears in Matt. 11.15 (Christ compares John the Baptist and the Son of Man) and in Luke 14.35 (Christ tells parables at the house of the Pharisee, including the parable of the wedding guests). There are very minor variations of wording between these different verses.

<sup>10</sup> *Segl* “sail,” 81; *halgan nette* “holy curtain” (dative), 74; *feldhusa mæst* “greatest of tents,” 85; *heofoncandel* “heaven-candle,” 115; *hæfde foregenga fyrene loccas* “the one going in front had fiery locks,” 120.

## Conclusion

The peculiar feature of battle noise is that it is at once of the essence of violence and incidental to it, a side effect or substitute for the injuring of bodies that, according to Scarry, is the real and central activity in war. In the Old English poetic examples gathered above, noise lends a psychological depth and realism to battle-description, helping to convey elements such as excitement, courage, terror, and, in the case of the drowning of the Egyptians in *Exodus*, suffering. The prominence of noise does much to make us experience *Exodus* as a violent poem. At the same time, however, noise points to how violence is textualized, how blows are transformed into words. The terminology of song points beyond the battle itself to the activity of the poet, who completes the achievement of warriors by telling their story. In *Exodus*, literal injuring is in the end—and, indeed, from the beginning—not the focus at all. The psychological dimension of terror and courage, highlighted through the representation of noise, translates into a drama of faith. The emphasis on signs, signals, and speech, in the context of explicit encouragement to read typologically, encourages us to look past suffering bodies to striving souls. Although Old English poetry is hardly euphemistic about violence, one might accuse *Exodus* of, in Scarry's terms, subordinating the "heartsickening reality" of injured bodies to an ideological construct. Indeed, Hermann has argued that the representation of spiritual warfare in *Exodus* indulges a sadistic pleasure in the destruction of the enemy and is thus "complicitous in social violence" (1989:5; see also 81-82).

Old English battle poetry curiously anticipates some of Scarry's insights into the relationship between violence and language. It lays great emphasis on the question of who will get to tell the tale afterwards and who will be silenced by the destructive forces personified in the beasts of battle. The persistent irony of representing beast noise or weapon noise as song might be related to her perception that language is distorted in warfare and reality is "up for grabs" (137). However, while Scarry argues that the relationship between injuring and the ideological issues attached to war is essentially arbitrary, the sense we gain from Old English poetry, both secular and religious, is that war is crowded with already-present meanings. The typological view of history entails that spiritual conflict is not a meaning retrospectively imposed on the historical exodus but is understood to exist prior to it: the literal struggles of the Israelites are one historical instantiation of this transcendent reality. An examination of battle-noises suggests that battle is a testing encounter with the forces of chaos, the frightening non-human zone represented in the beasts and their howls.<sup>11</sup> Yet when the wolf or the eagle sings we are reminded that the cry of the carrion-eaters and the song of the poet are two sides of the same coin (defeat and victory). Both are characteristically evoked in the early part of a battle sequence when their realistic position is at its end; suspense is generated in Old English battle poetry through anticipation and a sense of battle pressing towards its awful, but meaningful and predictable, close.

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<sup>11</sup> Compare Jennifer Neville's comments on the way the natural world in Old English poetry "symbolises the forces . . . capable of destroying human society" (1999:55).

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