

Andrea Nagy

Eötvös Loránd University, Budapest

THE GEOGRAPHY OF ALTERITY: THE ROLE OF WATER IN OLD ENGLISH ELEGIES

Most of us today would associate water with something positive: a cool glass of liquid to quench our thirst, a refreshing shower, or a sandy beach where we can relax. In our modern world, threatened by climate change and pollution, we all know that water is precious, we have been taught that it is where life first developed and we are constantly reminded of the importance of staying hydrated. The Anglo-Saxons, living on an island, could not have escaped the significance of water. However, what is for us the source of life became in their poetry the symbol of the vulnerability of human existence. In the poetry of the Anglo-Saxons, water represents the beginning of a journey into the unknown, the boundary between human experience and a hostile other-world. In the poems of the so-called elegies group, the exile-speakers move in a dead, isolated space, outside the context of community and society. In their attempts to (re)construct their identity, their surroundings become the external manifestation of their inner turmoil, a geography of the mind. Water, a significant element of this geography, represents the force separating the speakers from their former existence, the embodiment of the alterity of their world.

In the elegies, water is closely associated with negative emotions; it becomes a symbol for loneliness and isolation, and a means for revealing and reflecting the speaker's state of mind. Loise Bragg suggests that "since the fictive speaker of these poems must be given a character in 120 lines or fewer without recourse to dialogue [...], the poet has called on the natural setting to fill in the mood he wishes to convey" (Bragg 86). In the present paper, I have chosen to analyse passages involving water-scenes from three elegies, *The Wanderer*, *The Wife's Lament* and *Wulf and Eadwacer*. These scenes illustrate the isolating and threatening force of water, as well as its associations with death and separation.