How the Sword Speaks: Violence as Dialogue in Early Germanic Literature

Abstract

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Thesis submitted for the award of the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Arts

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2025

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The communicative strategies of violence made possible within the socio-cultural rubric present in Early Germanic literature occurred to me when I was writing a post-graduate conference paper on the culturally nuanced subjecthood that sword and blood, the inanimate components of violence, might occupy in the mind of the Anglo-Saxons or their Scandinavian counterparts. Such subjecthood, when coupled with narratives that speak of, and for, an eye-for-an-eye (more in the sense of being exact than literal, as this thesis hopes to show) tradition of justice, points to the function of violence as being more than an act or impulse to do harm, and, further, to violence being a dialogue that requires perception and reception. Violence, when interpreted in certain ways, yields communication strategies that speak volumes about the relation between the participants in the act of violence, and, sometimes, also of the relation between the authors of the narratives that record these acts and the intended audience of said narratives. Incorporated within such facets of a dialogue are the place, time, and the variations of injury/fatality involved in the act. This thesis tries to observe these communication strategies of violence as applied to representations of cultural networks present in Early Germanic Literature, tenuous as the connection may be when stretching across centuries to accommodate the term 'Early Germanic'. In this thesis, in particular, 'Early Germanic literature' is interpreted through the lens of linguistic and literary development, prioritising texts that fall between the beginning of written archives in a given culture (especially in the vernacular languages) and any major linguistic change to the vernacular/s spoken/written in this period, that is, texts produced in or concurrently with the written forms of Early Germanic languages, such as Old English, Old Icelandic, Old High German and so on. Given that the written archiving in these cases usually began with the coming of Christianity to the region and its people, it is expected that the aforementioned commonalities, if present at all in the communicative

strategies of violence in these cultures, would show themselves more strongly in literature produced at, or originating from, such nascent stages of development. However, this approach, as previously mentioned, broadens the scope of this thesis to an extent that is difficult to contain, as by these parameters we are made to consider literature from Migration Period Germany to 14th century Iceland. For the ease of our discussion, we have chosen to concentrate mainly on Anglo-Saxon and Scandinavian literature, more so because they offer a greater variety of samples in both Latin and the vernacular, as compared with others that fit the parameters, and partly, also, because of the bias on the author's part that stems from there being a pre-existing scholarly tradition of finding potentially analogous elements in the aforementioned literary corpuses.

We have tried to navigate through three sections the potential of violence as a communicator in relation to how it defines, and is in turn defined by, individual social and material elements and their positions within a given network/system. The first section, which is titled Defining Violence: Figures of Authority, attempts to comment on the correlation of authority and violence, or how they limit and define each other, with regard to divine figures (first chapter, titled "Gods and Monsters"), the Church (second chapter, titled "The Church, Conversion, and Crusade"), and the Law (third chapter, titled "Law and Order"). The second section, named Intangible Bonds: The Roles of Social Relationships, intends to showcase the symbiotic relationship between social networks and performative violence (or the promise thereof), through a discussion of the connection between violence and gender (in the fourth chapter, "Femininities and Masculinities"), violence and *comitatus* (in the fifth chapter, "Comitatus- The Gift-giver and the Retainer"), and violence and kinship (in the sixth chapter, "Kinship and Violence"). The third section, named Mate-realities: Material Realities, explores the possibility of meaningful exchanges between violence and material/s, through weapons (in the seventh chapter, "Weapons and Their

Wielders"), and places/ spaces (in the eighth chapter, "Places and Performers"). The argument that connects these three sections of the thesis is not linear but associative: the overlapping of the communicative capacities of violence demonstrated in the chapters of each section, and the interconnection of the three sections with regard to the meaningful exchanges violence makes with their focal matters, are meant to establish violence as an able communicator in the context of cultural networks supporting and supported by the Early Germanic social consciousness/es.