Moby Dick in Old English: kennings, variation and alliteration in *The Whale*

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Old English literature boasts a great many intriguing and deeply symbolical stories and poems. An Anglo-Saxon poem you may have heard of is known as 'The Whale'. Of course, more has been written about these mighty creatures. Take for example another famous English literary work, of which the first line is [C]all me Ishmael – which will probably ring a bell. Of course it is Moby Dick; or The Whale by Herman Melville. Both stories feature a whale which, in neither story, is portrayed as a very likeable creature. However, whereas in the story of Moby Dick the whale is the quarry and subjected to an extensive whale hunt, in the Old English poem of *The Whale*, it is instead men and sailors who are deceived and ultimately swallowed by the "miclan hwale'' [great whale] (l. 3). In this short essay, I will discuss three different types of stylistic, poetic devices employed by the author that generally thought of as highly characteristic of Old English works of poetry. Aside from describing these three concepts, I will try to find out to what extent the author of The Whale used them in his poem. I will structure my essay as follows: firstly, I will explore the author's use of *variation*. Next, I will shift my focus to the use of *kennings*; finally, I will take a closer look at *alliteration*.

Baker defines *variation* as [t]he repetition in different words of an element of a sentences, clause or phrase. (Baker 177) Typically, the repetition follows rather quickly, often by directly the element it repeats. In *The Whale*, we encounter the line "þam is noma cenned, fyrnstreama geflotan"[to him, floater of the oceans, is the name given] (ll. 6-7). Here "floater of the oceans" appears to repeat the personal pronoun "him", which in turn refers to the whale. *Variation* is quite common in Old English poetry. The underlying idea of the concept seems to be that the author wants the reader to perceive an element as having multiple facets.

Another thing that is quite commonplace in Anglo-Saxon works of poetry is the use of *kennings*. A very well-known Old English poem that has plentiful of these riddle-like words is *Beowulf*. According to Baker, *kennings* are compounds [i]n which the first element provides a clue to

the riddle of the second. (Baker 175) In *The Whale* we are not presented with an abundance of these cleverly contrived combinations, but the ones that do occur are indeed fairly striking. For example, "yðmearas" [sea-steeds] (l. 49), referring to 'ships'. Of course the reader simple has to know that the word 'steed' is synonymous to 'horse'. But how then should one go about analyzing it further? Taken very literally, its meaning could be 'sea horse'. However, contextually, this would not make any sense. Baker further characterizes *kennings* by stating that they possess [a] metonymic reference to a gleaming word. (Baker 175) *Metonymy* can be used to explain the word 'steed' as in medieval and pre-medieval times it was a common mode of transportation. From that it becomes clear that 'steed' does not literally mean 'horse' but actually means 'ship', bearing of course in mind that, back then, people did not have any other means to cross a sea other than by boat. Another *kenning* that occurs in The Whale is "mereweard'' [sea-warden] (l. 54), here referring to the whale.

The last stylistic device I wish to discuss is that of *Alliteration.* Baker defines alliteration as [t]he repetition of a consonant sound at the beginning of a syllable. (Baker 162) Also alliteration is "any syllable that begins with a vowel alliterates with any other syllable that begins with a vowel. (Baker 162)

The Whale is an example of a poem that is riddled with alliterating syllables. Of course, alliteration is in essence a form of rhyme, which is still one of the most prominent features of poems today. As a rule, rhyme makes poems easy to remember – and basically serves as a mnemonic device – which would explain the ubiquitous usage of alliteration in a primarily oral culture such as that of the Anglo-Saxons (c. 499- c. 1066). The Whale offers excellent examples of alliteration in nearly every sentence. For example, we find "heahfyr'' [great fire] and " haeleþ" [the men] (l. 22) and one line below that we find "reonigmode" [weary] and "raeste" [rest] (l.23).

In conclusion, variation, kennings and alliterations all three occur in the poem of *The Whale*. The author makes use variation and does so in a quintessential Old English poetic manner by giving the variation shortly after the original element. Additionally, the author has made use of *kennings* as well, albeit not as pervasively as the author of Beowulf did – which is a much heftier tome anyway. Lastly, as discussed, alliteration occurs in copiously throughout the poem.

Works Cited

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