

## Project title: 'The Poetics and Politics of Fear in Old English Literary Tradition'

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The project aims to study conceptualisations, manifestations, functions, and rhetorical applications of fear and attitudes to this emotional state present in Old English literary tradition, i.e., in vernacular texts produced in early medieval English kingdoms between the ninth and eleventh centuries. The period was characterised by external and internal tensions, conflicts and transformations, both socio-political and religious, that found their echoes in the emotional underpinning of Old English literature. The working hypothesis of the project is that the roles of fear exemplified chiefly in Old English poetry appear to display associations with gnomic Christian tradition and lay emphasis on its causative function understood as an opportunity for Christian development. I shall attempt to argue for a preeminent, though not always explicit, place of fear among emotional manifestations present in Old English poetry. To prove it, I shall assume a perspective combining the methodologies of literary, social, and medical studies, applying the tools associated with the history of emotions and emotionalities to analyse a wide range of extant Old English vernacular poetry: elegies, heroic poems, poems of wisdom and learning, religious poetry, poetic riddles, as well as Ælfric's homilies, and King Alfred-inspired translation of Boethius's *Consolation of Philosophy*. The correlations between social, historical, literary, and medical studies are long-established, and the emotional or affective turn is one of the noticeable movements across these disciplines. Nonetheless, the application of the history of emotions to Old English literature is still relatively new, with ground-breaking book-length studies published only in the last decade, e.g., L. Lockett's *Anglo-Saxon Psychologies in the Vernacular and Latin Traditions* (U. of Toronto Press, 2011), and A. Jorgensen et al., ed., *Anglo-Saxon Emotions* (Ashgate, 2015). Fear has not yet received a more comprehensive scrutiny within Old English studies, being analysed chiefly from linguistic perspectives (e.g., E. Stanley, "Fear, Mainly in Old English," 2009) and with a focus on its specific manifestations and uses, such as those related to monstrosity and the unfamiliar (e.g., P. Acker, "Horror and the Maternal in *Beowulf*," 2006). The preliminary research conducted so far confirms the rationale for a more comprehensive discussion of fear locating, along with its cognate states of shame and trauma. The proposed project is then to tackle the theme of the manifestations and applications of fear in a twofold manner: first, as a motif that is intrinsically present in the literature of the period, but as one which requires a more profound study because of its not always apparent motivational and wisdom-oriented presence. Such will be, for instance, its proposed understanding as a component crucially present as an underpinning of the heroic outlooks observable in the representations of the protagonists stereotypically characterised by courage, such as *Beowulf*, *Judith*, *St Guthlac*, and others. The relation of fear and wisdom will be discussed as one of the Christian foundations of knowledge, ensuing from the *timor Dei*: "fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom" (Prov. 9:10). From the



perspective of biblical gnosis, Christian fear is indispensable in any cognitive act as the source of an awareness of human limits of understanding. I shall argue for the presence of this approach in Old English gnomic and apophthegmatic literature, for instance, in the Exeter Book and Cotton Tiberius "Maxims," and among Old English riddles. Secondly, the project will approach the issue of fear prescriptively, i.e., by what is described in the project's title as the Old English "politics of fear." It should be understood as a specific prescriptive model of the "practice of fear" and the strategies towards it enlightened by scriptural Christian outlooks combined with, as will be argued, the principles of Neoplatonic philosophy and apophatic theology. The project is located at the crossroads of literary studies and, to a lesser extent, social sciences. Informed by emotionology and affect theory, it is to constitute an examination of how the emotional state of fear was not only conspicuous in Old English literature but also how it influenced the literary culture of the period.