Thomas Jefferson, Anglo-Saxon Culture, and the Declaration of Independence
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When in the course of human events it becomes necessary for one people to dissolve political bonds which have connected them with another, and to assume among the powers of the earth the separate & equal station to which the laws of nature and of nature’s god entitle them, a decent respect to the opinions of mankind requires that they should declare the causes which impel them to the separation.

We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men are created equal; that they are endowed by their creator with certain inalienable rights; that among these are life, liberty & the pursuit of happiness; that to secure these rights, governments are instituted among men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed (Fliegelman 203)…

This is an early draft of the most singular document in American history. Some of the most famous words ever written, the Declaration of Independence (more accurately titled: The Unanimous Declaration of the Thirteen United States of America (Becker 4)) was conceived by a committee of men including John Adams, Benjamin Franklin, Robert R. Livingston, and Thomas Jefferson. Written mainly by Thomas Jefferson, the Declaration was “built up around a single idea, and its various parts…admirably chosen and skillfully disposed for the production of a particular effect” (Becker 203). This document contains within it the essential seeds from which America’s national identity developed.

Yet, the reality is that in modern America, this document is seldom studied in any great detail. When examined at all, it crops up in history classes alongside the American Revolutionary War. In his preface to Speaking Two Languages, Allen Frantzen points out: “The post modern challenge to traditional critical practice in medieval studies presents an opportunity for rethinking the paradigm in which innovation confronts tradition” (Frantzen 2). Studying Thomas Jefferson’s influences and his choice of language in writing what has become one of the most famous documents in history illuminates modern America’s underlying structures. This essay examines Jefferson’s Anglo-Saxonist leanings, and reflects upon what this might mean for the American citizen and modern heathen.

Thomas Jefferson considered himself an Anglo-Saxonist. Thus, along with his study of Locke, whose principles of the natural world influenced much of eighteenth-century thinking, Jefferson saw in Anglo-Saxon culture aspects of common law which, existing “while the Anglo-Saxons were yet pagan” (Frantzen 205), formed the core of what Jefferson felt were the basic rights due all mankind. In his book Desire for Origins, Frantzen states: “I submit that a reassessment of Anglo-Saxon studies in the context of language study and cultural history can help recover the value of the subject” (Frantzen x-xi). We must agree with this assessment when it comes to understanding American national underpinnings.

Indeed, Frantzen points out that “[l]iteracy and linguistic history and textual criticism are the most important practices in Anglo-Saxon studies. They have been, and continue to be, avenues to origins of many kinds, including national, spiritual, and psychological” (Frantzen 5). A document such as the Declaration of Independence serves to bring present relevance to an old, “dead” language. Beowulf rings with ancient cultural values but arguably has little in it that would interest the average American (due primarily to its language, which can be difficult to
grasp even in translation). On the other hand, applying ancient values seen in *Beowulf* and other surviving texts to a document that has formed the American national identity brings those influences forward in a way applicable to current events.

Returning to Jefferson and his Anglo-Saxon influences, from the start we see that “the typology of Anglo-Saxon culture most familiar to us...is the world of the epic, of aristocracy, of Germanic antiquity...[and] of pagan and Christian combined” (Frantzen *Speaking Two Languages* 21). King Alfred’s insistence that the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* be written in the vernacular (Old English) achieved several results. Crossley-Holland argues the fact that “English, the language everyone could understand, was used for documents such as charters and wills must have given people a new incentive to learn to read” (Crossley-Holland 252). He goes further to add that this event “must also have acted as a powerful symbol of unity, and thereby helped to develop the Anglo-Saxon’s sense of identity and nationhood” (Crossley-Holland 252). Arguably, Jefferson was aware of these reasons, and his choice to write the *Declaration of Independence* in English reflects the idea that any literate American would have access to the *Declaration* and, therefore, an ability to understand America’s national identity.

Jefferson clearly believed that “the foundation of English liberty, and of all free government, is a right in the people to participate in their legislative council” (Becker 123). This is revealed in the *Declaration of Independence* and becomes a framework “upon which Jefferson built up his finished structure of concrete oppressions [by George III of England]” (Becker 130-131). A critical analysis of the *Declaration of Independence* reveals precisely how vital the concept of a legislative government was to Jefferson and the Revolutionaries. Pointing out that a law system based upon lawsuits being heard by juries comes from our Anglo-Saxon forebears underscores the influence of the past on our present and at the same time provides a deeper context to the American Revolution; “taxation without representation” is far more than a catchphrase. Understanding how far back in time citizens took for granted the right to self-representation – further back even than the *Magna Carta* - reveals the oppression on the part of the English crown as the violation our forefathers knew it to be.

Since “the Anglo-Saxons are our ancestors, and we owe to them something of our characteristics, attitudes, and institutions” (Crossley-Holland x) studying how Jefferson’s understanding of Anglo-Saxon culture influenced the formation of America as a nation benefits modern heathen understanding. In today’s fast-paced modern culture, focused as it is on the future rather than the past, it would seem that a study of Anglo-Saxon culture is outmoded, at best; a relic of ‘antiquarian thinking’ which should be left to the dry, dusty academic scholar. Yet, an essential component of the heathen world view is an understanding that the past, fixed as it is in the well of urdh, continually impacts our present. Thus our Anglo-Saxon past continues to shape our construction as a nation.

As a further example of his early influences, Jefferson had plans for our country’s great seal. He admired two semi-mythical Anglo-Saxon heroes, Hengst and Horsa. He saw them as “ideal leaders of a free and democratic people who were, at least in Jefferson’s imagination, ‘chosen’ to live in a free world of individual rights and communal blessing” (Frantzen, 204). John Adams claimed Jefferson’s fascination with Hengst and Horsa went further – “Jefferson saw Hengst and Horsa as representing ‘the form of government we have assumed’” (Frantzen 16). On the other side of the great seal, Jefferson wanted to supply an image of the pillar of flame which the Israelites followed out of Egypt to the “Promised Land.”

It is important to note these two images, for they were not accidental to Jefferson’s mind. Frantzen points out that, given the presence of Hengst and Horsa (warriors who invaded and later
settled in England), “the pillar of fire acquires ominous significance: not a sign of guidance or protection for safe passage, but an emblem of conquest” (Frantzen 16). In this imagery we can see the beginnings of what would later become Manifest Destiny; the ideal which shaped our continent as Americans drove toward westward expansion. While history classes teach the political ramifications of Manifest Destiny, understanding Jefferson’s intent behind the great seal, as much as his intent while drafting of the Declaration of Independence, provides deeper understanding.

Jefferson himself “regarded education as the only sure means of promoting human happiness and the freedom and democracy of which he was a life-long advocate” (Honeywell 157). He worked throughout his life to reform education, make it available to the general public, and used his understanding of Anglo-Saxon culture and achievement to organize the system he felt would be to the advantage of all citizens. Long after his more public role in the formation of America ended, he looked to ways the nation could improve itself. Jeffersonian organization of schools, based on the so-called “wards” of New England, was based on his knowledge that this system itself had Anglo-Saxon origin (Honeywell). Roy Honeywell argues effectively that Jefferson’s “high opinion of Anglo-Saxon political principles increased his faith in the system of organization through which they gained expression” (Honeywell 161).

Knowing this, we may assume that Jefferson would be in favor of critically analyzing the document he helped create. He would certainly advocate learning Anglo-Saxon as a language – he worked unsuccessfully on an Anglo-Saxon Grammar for many years. If “Anglo-Saxon studies offer scholars a chance to contemplate the roots of their institutions and to renew their sense of place in the scholarly tradition” (Frantzen 214), what place, then, does a study of the Anglo-Saxon influences in Jefferson’s creation of the Declaration of Independence offer American citizens and modern heathens?

As a starting point, American citizens would develop fuller understanding of their own nation. Heathens, specifically, would be able to apply our world view; analyzing the connections between culture and history, our Anglo-Saxon past and the dynamic present. While it may be true that “many educated Americans assume that Anglo-Saxon studies have nothing important to offer them, and, given their experience of Old English, they are, in the main, right” (Frantzen 15), this does not mean Anglo-Saxon influences should be brushed away and forgotten. In fact, ignoring these influences is in effect ignoring a central theme of our current system of government.

In the modern world of video-game mentality, shortened attention spans, and instant gratification, a study of ancient Anglo-Saxon law and culture seems the antithesis of forward progression. However, as has been shown, the Anglo-Saxons have pervaded our very national underpinnings. Jefferson’s Anglo-Saxonist tendencies formed his concepts of what our human “inalienable” rights were, and while it now seems self-evident that “all men are created equal” we must remember that in Jefferson’s day these thoughts were radical, indeed. Ignoring these Anglo-Saxon influences should be seen as a national peril; an understanding of our origins helps our nation to progress.

Works Cited


