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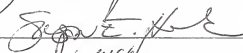
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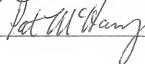
Constructing the Christian: Agency and Emulation in Old English Poetry
by
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Constructing the Christian: Agency and Emulation in Old English Poetry

Old English religious verse – born out of a productive fusion between pre-existing Germanic ideals and Christian value-systems brought to England at the end of the sixth century – grapples energetically with the question of how people ought to live morally upright lives pleasing to God. In *Beowulf*, *Judith*, *Juliana*, and *The Dream of the Rood*, a model for the believer/God relationship is constructed from a common pattern of the Germanic thane/lord relationship, but, like garments cut from the same cloth by different tailors, each poem crafts its subject differently. Still, each is constructed around a core conception of the relationship in which the heroic believer must independently merit God's favour and in which God must obtain a worthy believer in order for either to succeed in accomplishing their shared goals.

Investigating this connection provides valuable insight into the most important aspect of medieval English society: how people viewed (or wanted to view) themselves. Little is known about religious belief and practice in England before its Christianization because the churchmen who held a monopoly on writing were uninterested in preserving documents detailing the pre-Christian ideas that they were attempting to supplant. However, the evangelists of England did not attempt to convince converts to abandon their value-systems entirely, but rather to merge them with Christian teachings. This means that the clues the poems provide not only pertain to the pre-Christian and Christian eras, but also present a fascinating picture of a society in flux. As values were changing with the rise of Christianity, the most durable of the old and new ideas fused to create the model-figure who features prominently in spiritual-heroic didactic verse. As literature (supported and preserved by the church) was seen as a medium to instruct readers as

well as to entertain them, it is unsurprising that we find many tales of boldly pious warriors whose physical and spiritual courage and strength of character enable them to do literal as well as figurative battle with the forces of evil. What is surprising is the depth of the connection between the secular, heroic, physical, Germanic values and the religious, God-dependent, spiritual, Christian values that jointly inform the character of the model English believer. This figure's agency is intimately connected with God's in a mutually dependent thane/lord relationship that depends on the possibility of shared defeat as well as victory.

This imaginative and supremely active relationship is ultimately the most important aspect of Anglo-Saxon religious thought. For the present purposes, I am less interested in official church theology (particularly that which was imported from Rome) than in the interpretation of it with which its adherents lived far more intimately. The essentially active nature of a thane's duty to his lord informs the relationship between a believer and his God; rather than simply offering political and rhetorical deference to a social superior, the thane/worshipper expected to fight his lord's enemies along with him. Though a good thane remains of a lesser degree than his lord, his courage may nevertheless be matchless if he fulfills his duty. Thus, in *The Battle of Maldon*, the poet's mention of Byrhtnoth's *ofermod* may (or may not) be a criticism of him, but the strongest impression the poem produces is that of admiration for the bravery of the thanes who remained loyal to him, fulfilled their obligations to their fallen lord, and did their utmost to finish the work that he started even when faced with certain defeat. This outlook on both honour and success in lost fights indicates that, for the people of Anglo-Saxon England, the individual's imaginative interpretation of his or her actions held immense power to shape the meaning of his actual deeds, and that his intended

accomplishments are even more important than those he actually achieves. The story would not be the same at all if Byrhtnoth's loyal retainers had continued fighting because they thought they could win, had no opportunity to escape, or for any reason other than out of personal commitment to Byrhtnoth and the honor-bond into which they had entered when they undertook his service. This indicates that their firm intent to win the battle, which they pursued as far as humanly possible, earned them similar honor to that which they would have gained had they actually won the battle. Though they die, they are not totally defeated because they die bravely and on their own terms. This elevation of the idea to the level of the actual and the intended act over the result of the attempted one becomes even more important when discussing religious subjects. When God is the lord being served, spiritual warfare, taking place in the mind of the Christian, becomes an analogue for physical battle, and physical contention likewise takes on an added spiritual dimension. The ways Anglo-Saxon Christians imagined themselves in relation to God can be glimpsed in their poetic depictions of this spiritual and social bond.

In *Beowulf and the Critics*, J.R.R. Tolkien locates a key feature of pre-Christian Germanic thought that, when transfused into early English Christianity, would solidify the link between human and deity even while elevating courageous human agency to a level comparable to God's:

The monsters were the foes of the Gods, and the monsters would win; and in the heroic siege and the last defeat alike men and Gods were in the same host. And though the old Gods departed men remained, the heroes . . . fought on, or wove from splendid forms the fantastic banners of human courage, until defeat. For the monsters remained –

indeed they do remain; and a Christian was no less hemmed in by the world that is not man than the pagan. Yet the war had changed. For now there is one Lord and Dryhten . . . (66).

The Christian hero's attitude toward defeat in essence is his victory. In physical battle with a human enemy, it is therefore possible to lose the fight and yet win posthumous honor, but in spiritual combat this internal struggle to retain moral courage when confronted with evil forces becomes the only fight that matters – a distinction which helps explain how Juliana can be both victorious and dead at the end of her poem. Henry Mayr-Harting notes that, in “one of the subtlest of Professor Tolkien's points,” “the *Beowulf* poet, though removed from the direct pressure of the old despair by his confidence in the Christian God, still *feels* it with a poetical intensity” (236). Robert Boenig also notices the stunning force with which this feeling continued to impact Anglo-Saxon thought, finding that “what the church's engagement with the paganism of the past gave to Anglo-Saxon spirituality was an outlook that was at heart eschatological and heroic” (30). He therefore deems a conflation of the northern Germanic concept of Ragnarok (in which the gods are defeated) and Christian Armageddon to be “a merger amenable to the converted pagan's religious outlook” (31). He finds that “in the old gods' struggle against the forces of evil, what was important was heroism in a losing fight” (40). While it may seem strange that the Anglo-Saxons would have incorporated a mood of defeat into the Christian narrative's positive assertion of God's eventual victory over all forces that oppose him (and of God's rewards for those who have served him well) the grim undertone adds a rich layer of emotional engagement to the narrative of human/God interactions. After all, it takes a great deal more personal commitment to voluntarily die with a lord than to win

with him; likewise a lord whose enemies are his people's enemies, who is willing to die *with* his thanes while fighting for his people's safety and prosperity is infinitely more worth following than one who merely issues orders to subordinates from a safe distance, without any risk of defeat.

Guy Bourquin examines this mutually dependent relationship between God and the individual human protagonist in Old English heroic-religious poetry. He finds that the connection is rooted in

a two-way (or circular) movement: on one hand God needs a human creature (*hæleð*) to manifest his own essential truth (the selflessness of love); on the other hand, any human being who sincerely attempts to develop to the full mankind's hidden (*hæleð*-like) potentialities inevitably brings out and shines forth the divine truth of which those potentialities are made. (9)

Here, Bourquin detects an important part of the believer-God relationship – God's reliance on individual humans – but I disagree that manifesting selfless love is the ultimate goal pursued by the God depicted in these poems. While this may be a part of God's motivation (particularly in more New Testament-leaning poems), it pales in comparison to his more concrete exercise of the duties befitting the most perfect lord: protecting his people from enemies, acquiring glory for himself and his thanes, and administrating an orderly system of justice in which good service is rewarded and disloyalty – which is the definition of any wicked deed when God is the lord in question – is punished. If the “selflessness of love” that Bourquin discusses encompasses mercy toward enemies, he is mistaken to cite it as God's overarching goal in all “the Biblical and other religious poems” (9). While God may show mercy toward some enemies (as he

apparently does when he arranges for the Mermydonians to be converted to Christianity by the heroic Andreas in the Vercelli Book poem of the same name, for example), this is only applicable if those enemies cease to define themselves as such and join his side – a humiliating admission of defeat for them and one that can only increase God’s influence and renown.

In *The Dream of the Rood*, *Beowulf*, *Judith*, and *Juliana*, failure is always a possible outcome for both humans and God. The poems portray the heroes’ and heroines’ combat against their morally decrepit enemies with a keen sense of dramatic urgency because God’s omnipotence is, paradoxically, subject to their free will. While humans are never presented as having the power to force God to something he does not wish to do, their inability or unwillingness to participate in his plans would effectively thwart them.

The Texts

While manuscript dating cannot definitively establish the time of composition for each poem, the fact that the books were probably all transcribed during the tenth and eleventh centuries indicates that their contents have one important thing in common: The ideas they express were all compelling enough to capture audiences during this time. Though the mere existence of a manuscript cannot establish whether its contents enjoyed widespread popularity, it does confirm that *someone* was interested enough in them to commission the manuscript. The variations in the shading with which each poet colours the relational landscape of devotion were, therefore, all imaginable to the tenth-to-eleventh-century English mind. While I do not suggest that any reader of one of these texts would have automatically liked the others, it is important to consider the scope of ideas that were thinkable at this time.

The fact that poems that tip the scale in favour of God's overarching control of human affairs (such as *Juliana*) also use the rhetorical elements of more secular heroic verse (such as *Beowulf*) means that structure of dynamic shared agency on which such poems are built is also inherent in those in which its presence may be less obvious.

The four poems each show a different variation on the human/God relationship that is essentially the same: In order to be able to carry out their own plans and therefore also fulfil God's will, the heroes and heroines must have some intrinsic virtue of their own if they are to be up to their tasks. This virtue may be physical or mental/spiritual strength, but it is the prerequisite for anyone who wants to gain God's favour. In other words, God can only endow humans with supernatural abilities to slay monsters, defeat militarily superior enemies, or throttle demons if they themselves inherently possess superb normal abilities. This pre-existing merit that enables them to win God's favour is figured in different ways in each poem: In *The Dream of the Rood*, the balance between internal and external manifestations of virtue is evenly weighted, matching that poem's conflation of Christ, the Rood, and the Dreamer as it encourages the reader to emulate this model of total unity with God's will; *Beowulf's* heroism is rooted primarily in his physical abilities; Judith has a much more spiritual locus of power (though her physical strength is still prominent); *Juliana's* strength is primarily spiritual. In all of these poems, physical power and spiritual power are treated as nearly the same thing, enabling the person who has one to access the advantages of the other. While I assert that the text of *The Dream of the Rood* as we have it in the Vercelli Book is considerably later than the original poem – which likely existed in an oral form before its inscription on the Ruthwell Cross (during the first half of the eighth century (Dickens & Ross 8)), all three manuscripts are from a

relatively short timespan. Each poem reveals a subtly different facet of the imagined role of the ideal believer, but the Germanic lord-thane relationship – with the mutual dependency it entails – is the common thread connecting all five.

The Vercelli Book and Analogues for *The Dream of the Rood*: There are three objects on or in which the text of *The Dream of the Rood* can be found: the Brussels Cross, the Vercelli Book, and the Ruthwell Cross. Bruce Dickens and Alan S. C. Ross address these analogues in the introduction of their edition of *The Dream of the Rood*. The Brussels Cross is a small wooden relic (which, Dickens and Ross explain, was probably once purported to contain a fragment of the True Cross) with iconographic silverwork on its back (its front plating has not survived) around the edges of which two lines “reminiscent” of *The Dream of the Rood* are inscribed (14-15). The lines in question – “Rod is min nama; geo ic ricne cyning bær byfigynde, blode bestemed” [Rood is my name; I once bore the great king, trembling, covered with blood]¹ – closely resemble lines 44 and 48 of the Vercelli text (Mitchell and Robinson 257). Dickens and Ross note the difficulty in precisely dating the Brussels Cross, and in the absence of evidence to the contrary, conclude that “the linguistic evidence renders a probable date in the late tenth or eleventh century. . . .” (15). They assert that, because “it seems to contain no more than a reminiscence of the poem,” there is no way to accurately determine “the relation of the inscription on the Brussels Cross to the other two versions” (18). This being the case, the texts of the Vercelli Book and the Ruthwell Cross provide more fruitful avenues of study. The Vercelli Book contains the longest incarnation of the poem, is neatly transcribed, and is uncontroversially dated to sometime between 950-1000 (13). The Ruthwell Cross, likely the

¹ All quotations are from “The Dream of the Rood.” *A Guide to Old English*. Eds. Bruce Mitchell and Fred C. Robinson. Oxford: Blackwell, 2001. 256-263. Print. Translations are my own.

oldest of the three objects, is a carved stone monument that now resides in the church of Ruthwell in Dumfriesshire, Scotland. Once the target of vandalism, the cross is damaged and some sections of the runic text are now missing. Dickens and Ross point out that “the text on the Ruthwell Cross is considerably shorter than the corresponding passages in the Vercelli Book, and it seems possible that the latter may represent some kind of expansion of the former” (17). This seems a plausible idea because the missing sections of the Ruthwell text are not large enough to contain all the additional material from the Vercelli text. Noting this, Dickens and Ross acknowledge the possibility that “the Vercelli text goes back to an original poem from which extracts are carved on the Ruthwell Cross” (17). The Ruthwell Cross, then, is of primary importance for determining when *The Dream of the Rood* was originally composed, while the Vercelli Book offers the most comprehensive text.

Possible dates for the Ruthwell Cross range from 670 to the 1100s, but Dickens and Ross find the later dates highly improbable, concluding that, based on the type of runes used, 750 is the latest plausible year for the Ruthwell Cross (6). In the absence of definitive evidence, a plausible working hypothesis for dating the analogues for *The Dream of the Rood* places the Ruthwell Cross at the beginning of the continuum (either as the original presentation of the poem or as the first written version of an already existing poem, which could have been inscribed as early as 670), followed by the Vercelli Book (which is a later elaboration upon the original, older poem). John C. Pope, in his edition, agrees; he asserts “that the poem was first composed before A.D. 750 (even, as some think, before 700) is attested by the presence of the central part of the rood’s speech . . . on the monumental cross at Ruthwell . . .” (60). He notes of the lines that appear on it that “the greater regularity of form suggests that the inscription

may at this point be giving us an earlier reading rather than an abridgement" (66), lending further credence to the idea that the poem itself considerably predates the version of it that appears in the Vercelli Book. As the conversion of England to Christianity began with Augustine's arrival in 597 (Fisher 69), it seems very possible that *The Dream of the Rood* was originally composed during this period and transmitted orally before the Ruthwell Cross was carved.

Cotton Vitellius A.xv: *Beowulf* and *Judith* are both preserved in this manuscript, now housed in the British Museum. The book as it now stands is comprised of two manuscripts, which were likely combined when they entered Sir Robert Cotton's collection and before the great fire his library suffered in 1731 (Dobbie ix). The earlier manuscript, which contains *Beowulf* and *Judith* was copied by two scribes; the first hand stops at line 1939 of *Beowulf*, and the second continues from there to copy the entirety of *Judith*. Elliott Van Kirk Dobbie notes that "for the place of origin of the manuscript and its early history there is no evidence whatever" (xix). Colin Chase, editor of *The Dating of Beowulf*, notes the uncertainty that surrounds any attempt to pin down precise dates. He observes that "in the long history of scholarly interest in this subject few chronological facts have been so clear and convincing as to command immediate and lasting agreement," referencing the "general scholarly consensus that the manuscript dates from near the year 1000" as one of them (8). Also in *The Dating of Beowulf*, Kevin S. Kiernan argues that the poem was composed at about the same time as the manuscript. In building his argument, Kiernan examines this date as provided by "Neil R. Ker, the acknowledged authority on Anglo-Saxon palaeography, [who] dates the *Beowulf* manuscript by its script alone at the beginning of the eleventh century" in his *Catalogue of Manuscripts*

Containing Anglo-Saxon (Oxford 1957), with which dating Kiernan concurs (10). He highlights Ker's emphasis on the approximate nature of his dating, noting that it is "best interpreted as (roughly) 975-1025 (10). Kiernan proposes a further narrowing of this window based on his assertion that "since the opening lines of *Beowulf* unabashedly celebrate the founding of the Danish Scylding line, it is difficult to imagine Anglo-Saxon scribes placidly copying the *Beowulf* manuscript during Æthelred's reign," and that "the most probable time of the manuscript, then, is sometime after 1016, when the genealogical panegyric was a compliment, rather than an insult, to the reigning king," Knut the Great, who ruled from 1016 to 1035 (10). While the exact history of *Beowulf*'s composition may never be known, the fact that someone went to the trouble of commissioning a manuscript containing the poem as we have it during the early eleventh century indicates that someone at that time wanted to read it, whether for entertainment, edification, or both.

The Exeter Book: The manuscript containing *Juliana* resides at Exeter Cathedral, where it is believed to have arrived as donation from the cathedral's first bishop, Leofric, who made numerous donations to its library and who died in 1072 (Krapp & Dobbie ix). Krapp and Dobbie are confident that "the date of the handwriting of the Exeter Book is evidently to be placed in the second half of the tenth century" (xiii). Furthermore, they note that "Cynewulf's authorship of the poem has been universally accepted on the evidence of the runic signature in ll. 703-709" (xxxvi). His source was likely the saint's life "Acta auctore anonymo ex xi veteribus MSS." which is in the Bollandist *Acta sanctorum* (Krapp and Dobbie xxxvi).

The Dream of the Rood

Perhaps the clearest example of poetic fusion of Christian and pre-Christian worldviews is *The Dream of the Rood*. Partaking equally of secular and spiritual modes of heroism, the anthropomorphized Rood has full and immediate access to Christ, and yet it comes to the encounter as an ordinary tree who gains agency only by means of its union with Christ. Just as there is no such thing as a lord who has no thanes, the experience of gaining Christ as a lord can *make* a thane out of any entity that desires to serve bravely. In determining how best to portray the crucifixion story, the conversion-era poet crafts an exciting adventure-story because the image of Jesus as a meek and patient sufferer accepting a passive role in his execution would not have appealed to the English people of this time. The Anglo-Saxons held a Germanic worldview in which bravery and strength in battle were highly valued and meekness when confronted by enemies would have been seen as weakness. Accordingly, the poet of *The Dream of the Rood* chose to de-emphasize the aspects of the crucifixion story least likely to commend it to his audience in favor of those they would be more likely to appreciate. He emphasizes Jesus' courage and strength, giving him agency in his heroic battle with death while casting him in the mold of a Germanic warrior-king. The speaker of the poem recounts a vision in which the Rood tells him its first-person account of the crucifixion, itself taking on the role of Jesus' loyal thane in an example of the comitatus upheld and in which the dreamer (and, by extension, the audience) is invited to participate. Jesus and the Rood share a powerfully intimate lord/thane bond that serves as a prime exemplum of the ideal relationship between an individual Christian and his God. The controlling metaphor of Jesus and the Rood as Germanic

lord and thane is best seen in lines 39-43, which, in a “partially preserved and somewhat abridged” form, also appear on the Ruthwell Cross (Pope 66):

Ongyrede hine þa geong hæleð – þæt wæs God ælmihtig!

strang and stiðmod; gestah he on gealgan heanne,

modig on manigra gesyhðe, þa he wolde mancyn lisan.

Bifode ic þa me se beorn ymbclypte; ne dorste ic hwæðre bugan to eorðan,

feallan to foldan sceatum, ac ic sceolde fæste standan.

[The young hero stripped himself – that was God almighty –

strong and resolute; he began to climb,

brave in the sight of many, when he wished to redeem mankind.

I trembled when the warrior embraced me; but I dared not bow down to earth,

nor fall to the surface of the fields, but I must stand fast.]

The Germanic concept of a hero was that of a good warrior; a good thane was one who served his lord unswervingly; a good lord protected his thanes and rewarded them for faithful service.

The poet casts Jesus as the best and bravest of warrior-heroes, defeating the ultimate foe,

Death itself. Though it “bifode” [trembled] before the crucifixion (42), the Rood faithfully

upholds its lord in battle so that they are injured together, leaving it metaphorically “mid

strælum forwundod” [sorely wounded with arrows] representing the nails (62), in a section

which also appears on the Ruthwell Cross. The poet who elaborates upon the Ruthwell version

of the poem in the Vercelli Book picks up the Germanic threads and carries on in a similar style:

When the faithful Rood is buried in a pit, Jesus’ agents come to its aid (illustrating that it is

under his protection) and give it adornments of “golde and seolfre” [gold and silver] (77), a

reward noticeably similar to the Anglo-Saxon custom of ring-giving (as exemplified in such works as *Beowulf*).

Beginning in line 95, the Rood exhorts the dreamer, calling him “hæleð min se leofa” [my dear warrior] to spread the word of what it has told him. Those who heed the message and emulate the Rood’s service to Christ will likewise be rewarded with honor and glory in Heaven. Referring to both Jesus and the dreamer with the word “hæleð” underscores Jesus’ relatable humanity while elevating the lowly dreamer to a level on which he can aspire to become like Christ. As Jesus is the best warrior, by being a good warrior and a faithful thane to him like the Rood was, so can the dreamer (and the listener) also achieve a state of spiritual purity and blessedness. By using the Rood as an intermediary between Christ and the dreamer, the poet humanizes the story while avoiding the controversy that might have been stirred had he chosen to attribute thoughts or speech to a Christ fully subject to human suffering. Michael Swanton explains that there was “significant controversy” in the early English church over depictions of the crucifixion, noting that the contention “derived from fifth- and sixth-century disputes as to the corporeal substance of Christ” (55-6). By allowing the Rood to speak for itself, the poet deftly avoids taking a stance on the issue of whether Jesus’ nature was wholly divine, wholly human, or a combination of the two. Because – as the Rood tells the dreamer – Christ and it were insulted “unc butu ætgædere” [both of us together] (48), it has the authority to speak about the crucifixion. By choosing a speaker who is the only entity other than Christ to have fully experienced this event, the poet produces a narrative of dramatic immediacy in which the dreamer (and, by extension, the listener) are invited to participate imaginatively.

Not only does the poem depict Christ as a war leader who succeeds in his battle with death because of the brave support of the Rood, its encouragement that the reader emulate the extremely intimate relationship the Rood and Christ enjoy goes a step beyond the models offered in the other poems. The Dreamer (an everyman figure with whom the reader can identify), the Rood (an inanimate object mystically endowed with the agency to decide its loyalties as soon as it becomes associated with Christ), and Christ himself are each described as the sort of *hæleþ* who is able to individually choose to act in concert. Christ chooses to embrace death on the Rood, the Rood resolves to support its Lord at whatever cost, the Dreamer decides to emulate the Rood and thus share its role of upholding Christ, and the reader is exhorted to do likewise. In this system, anyone who reads or hears the poem is able to imaginatively merge his or her own identity – via that of the intermediary Dreamer and Rood – with Christ himself.

Beowulf

By determining the manner in which the *Beowulf* poet handles his Christian and pre-Christian secular heroic material in this, the most physically and secularly oriented of the texts under present consideration, we can locate it within the spectrum of ideas that were co-existing in England at this time. As Klaeber points out, “it is not far removed in time from the three other great collections containing Old English poems, viz. the Exeter Book, the Vercelli Codex, and the so-called Cædmon Manuscript” (xcvi). That *Beowulf* was certainly being read (whatever its date of composition) in a time not distant from the other more religious, more internally active poems demonstrates that tales at all points on the continuum were able to

appeal to audiences on the merit of their own idiosyncratic variations on the relationship between God and hero. Curiously, in *Beowulf*, the hero is living in pre-Christian times and may not fully comprehend the nature of the relationship in which he participates with God. Though Beowulf frequently makes references to God and gives thanks to God for his own successes, his knowledge of the deity with whom he collaborates is only partial.

The best way of viewing the hero's role in *Beowulf* is, as Edward B. Irving, Jr. puts it, as someone who "half-consciously enlists himself in God's own war against threatening evil powers whose origins he can never fully understand" (19). Irving rightly notes that the poem's characters "seem to glimpse something of this frame of cosmic meaning, though as in a glass darkly, and in their own individual ways" (10), but that it is the narrator who possesses the full version of the story, sharing with the audience information not available to the characters. When the narrator describes Grendel, the "mære mearcstapa" (Klaeber 103) ["mighty stalker of the marches" (Liuzza 103)], he reveals to the audience that "him Scyppend forscifen hæfde / in Caines cynne" (Klaeber 106-107) ["the Creator had condemned him / among Cain's race" (Liuzza 106-107)], but the Danes and Geats inside the hall remain unaware of the source of Grendel's malevolence and therefore of their own roles in God's plan to defeat him. Marijane Osborn considers the primary conflict in the poem to be between God and God's enemies; the humans become involved in it without fully understanding the magnitude of the situation. She points out that "after twelve long years of sorrow the Danes *know* only that Grendel is openly feuding against Hrothgar and that he will not abide by their legal codes" (976). This being the case, the poem's characters have their own set of reasons for opposing Grendel that is not identical with God's set. This discrepancy between human and divine understanding of a

shared situation is perhaps more clear in this poem than in the others, but it should be unsurprising; the important thing is that both the humans and God commit fully to their mutual course of action.

Throughout *Beowulf*, the hero's agency is always firmly in his own hands. God's ability to carry out his plans is also in Beowulf's hands, for in this primarily secular poem – more clearly but not necessarily more strongly than in the more didactic religious poems – God must find a warrior who is up to the task in order for his goals to be accomplished. Grendel is a “foe of mankind” (Liuzza 165), yet also an enemy who “Godes yrre bær” (Klaeber 711) [“bore God's ire”]. As long as Grendel is alive, God (not only the Danes) has a problem. The God presented in this poem is distinctly *not* omnipotent; because neither Hrothgar nor any of his thanes is strong enough to defeat Grendel, for twelve years God must suffer the continued ascendancy of his enemy – a dishonourable marauding monster. This is an embarrassing predicament for any lord. Hrothgar seems both ashamed for Danish incompetence and hopeful that Beowulf will succeed where they have failed when he says

Sorh is me to secganne on sefan minum
 gumena ængum, hwæt me Grendel hafað
 hynðo on Heorote mid his hetepancum,
 færniða gefremed; is min fletwerod,
 wigheap gewanod; hie wyrd forsweop
 on Grendles gryre. God eape mæg
 þone dolsceaðan dæda getwæfan! (Klaeber 473-479)

[It is a sorrow to my very soul

to say to any man what Grendel has done to me—
 humiliated Heorot with his hateful thoughts,
 his sudden attacks. My hall-troop,
 my warriors, are decimated; *wyrd* has swept them away
 into Grendel's terror. God might easily
 put an end to the deeds of this mad enemy! (Liuzza 473-479)]

A couple of major points are worth noting here. Firstly, Hrothgar – of whom we are told “*þæt wæs an cyning / æghwæs orleahre, ƿop þæt hine ylđo benam / mægenes wynnum, ƿse þe ƿoft manegum scod*” (Klaeber 1885-1887) [“that king was peerless, / blameless in everything, until old age took from him / --it has injured so many—the joy of his strength” (Liuzza 1885-1887)] – believes it to be a poor reflection on the Danes that none of them has been able to stop Grendel even though God could have made this outcome happen at any time. This begs the question: so, why has God not done it already? Presumably, Hrothgar is operating with an incomplete understanding of his deity, whom he can only perceive through a glass darkly because he lives in pre-Christian times and views God as a Germanic deity, but, even so, he realizes that his own goal (Grendel's defeat) can only be reached if God also makes it his goal. Secondly, Hrothgar sees *wyrd* as a force that has facilitated (or at least declined to prevent) Grendel's victories. God and *wyrd*, both entities described as having determining power over men's lives and deaths, often appear to be treated as somewhat synonymous, but this usage casts them in clear opposition. In spite of some appearances to the contrary, God and *wyrd* are very different, and fulfil specific roles in Anglo-Saxon poetry. Both make determinations about humans, but their criteria for making their judgements is markedly dissimilar. Mary C. Wilson

Tietjen's distinction is useful in evaluating Hrothgar's statement. She characterizes wyrd as "a blind and whimsical force whose dealings with men are unrelated to their merit" and contrasts this with God, whom she sees through the narrator's eyes as a "benevolent Christian deity who affords grace and guidance to the worthy" (161). In this system, God's power has one firm limit: he *cannot* cast positive judgements (and their attendant blessings) on individuals who are unworthy. Wyrd knows no such limitation; it may render positive or negative doom on anyone irrespective of his or her personal strength. Why then does God not enable the Danish defenders of Heorot to prevail against Grendel, their common enemy? The simple answer is that none of them was strong enough to do it, despite their best intentions. God is eventually able to procure Beowulf – a man of prodigious physical strength and determination – to accomplish the task, but the Danes' shortcomings were a significant impediment to God that actually delayed the execution of his will.

This poem – told in a primarily secular rather than religious mode – tends to measure strength by physical, martial means, whereas other, more primarily religious poems conflate mental/spiritual and physical strength to a greater degree or shift the contest entirely into the spiritual realm. Perhaps in the world of *Judith* or *Juliana* Hrothgar's pious wisdom would be sufficient to enable him to secure God's endowment of supernatural prowess that the heroines of those tales – like Beowulf – enjoy. Yet, Irving identifies the otherwise blameless Hrothgar's fault: he is a "passive person, one who depends on God to rescue him and who even grumbles at one point that God could easily have done so earlier if he had had a mind to" (14). Irving highlights the fact that "this kind of passivity . . . registers as negative on the assessing scale of the traditional heroic poets" (15). In this sense, he is very different from Judith, though

somewhat similar to Juliana. Hrothgar commits no discernable moral sin, and he does everything he can to fulfil his obligations to his people as their lord. What makes him a good king is that he does his duty to the best of his ability at all times; no more than this can reasonably be required of anybody. However, the best of Hrothgar's ability is considerably less than the best of Beowulf's ability (at least when monster-slaying is the matter at hand) – this is what makes Beowulf, not Hrothgar, the hero of the poem and the agent by whom God is able to remove Grendel. Perhaps the old, passive Hrothgar is lacking in the mental vigour that the young, active Beowulf possesses in abundance. If this is the case, it appears that God requires potential heroes to have mental strength and the volition to exercise it in the furtherance of plans that God shares *before* he is able to confer on them the ability (physical or spiritual) to succeed.

In order to determine the nature of this causal relationship, a closer look at the three agents impacting the hero's life – God, *wyrd*, and the hero himself – is in order. That a hero must deserve God's favour is nowhere so clear as during Beowulf's fight with Grendel's mother:

Hæfde ða forsiðod sunu Ecgþeowes
 under gynne grund, Geata cempa,
 nemne him heaðobyrne helpe gefremede,
 herenet hearde, – ond halig God
 geweold wigsigor; witig Drihten,
 rodera Rædend hit on ryht gesced
 yðelice, syþðan he eft astod. (Klaeber 1550-1556)

[There the son of Ecgtheow would have ended his life

under the wide ground, the Geatish champion,
 had not his armored shirt offered him help,
 the hard battle-net, and holy God
 brought about war-victory—the wise Lord,
 Ruler of the heavens, decided it rightly,
 easily, once he stood up again. (Liuzza 1550-1556)]

The narrator wants us to know that Beowulf is able to win because God decided to aid him, but God only made this choice “syþðan” Beowulf (who could not know whether or not God would provide help) decided to get up and bravely continue fighting. (The fact that he was well-prepared and brought good armor helps too.) Beowulf’s take on this idea further emphasizes the hero’s role in determining his own success or failure:

Wyrd oft nereð
 unfægne eorl, þonne his ellen deah! (Klüber 572-573)

[Wyrd often spares
 an doomed man, when his courage endures! (Liuzza 572-573)]

The narrator provides another version of this sentiment when relating how the thief who stole the cup from the dragon’s hoard managed to survive the escapade:

Swa mæg unfæge eaðe gedigan
 wean ond wræcsið se ðe Waldendes
 hyldo gehealdeþ! (Klæber 2291-2293)

[Thus can an doomed man easily survive
 wrack and ruin, if he holds to the Ruler’s

grace and protection! (Liuzza 2291-2293)]

The implication here is that the “unfæge” human who is unafflicted by a final judgment from *wyrd* *might* (if his spiritual strength is sufficient) win the positive judgment from God that is necessary if he is to be successful. However, it is equally possible that someone with whom *wyrd* is unconcerned may fail to merit God’s protection and thus be defeated. Also implicit in these lines is the limitation that God can only protect people for whom *wyrd* has not decreed an imminent demise, yet the distinction between God and *wyrd* breaks down as their roles overlap. Furthermore, the narrator affords greater importance to God’s involvement than Beowulf does, but Beowulf’s firm will to do that which God happens to also want is sufficient to enable him to do it, in this case. The narrator’s description of Beowulf’s anti-Grendel mission is ambiguous about whose idea it is. He says that

Hæfde Kyningwuldor

Grendle togeanes, swa guman gefrungon,
 seleweard aseted; sundornytte beheold
 ymb aldor Dena, eotonweard’ abead (Klaeber 665-668).

[The glorious king

had set against Grendel a hall-guardian
 --as men had heard said—who did special service
 for the king of the Danes, kept a giant-watch. (Liuzza 665-668)]

Who is this “Kyningwuldor”? The word could easily apply to Hrothgar, who did indeed place Beowulf in charge of defending his hall, but it could also refer to God. If so, this indicates that even though Beowulf meant “*þæt ic mote ana . . . / . . . Heorot fælsian*” (Klaeber 431-432)

["that I might alone . . . cleanse Heorot" (Liuzza 431-432)] in order to win glory for himself and the Geats, his own personal course of action coincides with God's desire to put an end to Grendel, the common enemy who "Godes yrre bæŕ" (Klaeber 711) ["bore God's ire"]. The morning after the fight, the narrator reveals that Grendel was "fæge" (Klaeber 846); in this case, all the necessary conditions line up for Beowulf to have victory and for Grendel to be defeated. Note that this knowledge of *wyrd's* verdict is not available to the characters within the poem. It is the narrator who tells us that

Ne wæs þæt *wyrd* þa gen,

þæt he ma moste manna cynnes

ðicgean ofer þa niht. (Klaeber 734-736)

[But it was not his fate

to taste any more of the race of mankind

after that night. (Liuzza 734-735)]

God's human agents cannot know whether or not they are doomed before undertaking any particular fight. The fact that Grendel was doomed on the occasion when he came to Heorot after Beowulf had arrived and been stationed in the hall by the "Kýningwuldor" suggests that their actions against him caused Grendel to become doomed.

Grendel's downfall is therefore supported by a three-way agency tripod in which God, Beowulf, and *wyrd* all exercise their independent decision-making power in a manner that makes each inextricably dependent on the other two. Beowulf must decide to fight Grendel unflinchingly if God is to grant him the ability to win; God must decide to destroy Grendel if any

undoomed hero attempting to do so is to be successful; *wyrd* must allot Beowulf more life on this earth if he is to be able to win the fight he undertakes against God's enemy.

Beowulf's fight with Grendel's mother is thematically similar and her defeat brought about by the same triad of collaborating forces that ensured the death of her son. The fight between Beowulf and the dragon is significantly different; unlike Grendel and his mother, the dragon is never described as an enemy of God. Beowulf's choice to engage it in battle singlehandedly is open to both positive and negative interpretations, depending on one's view of whether Beowulf's desire for personal glory is excessive or not. The dragon poses a real threat to the Geats, so Beowulf's attempt to protect his people from it fits into the role of a good secular lord. However, the narrator tells us that, on this occasion, he was doomed "swa him *wyrd* ne *gescraf* / *hreð æt hilde*" (Klaeber 2574-2575) ["and *wyrd* did not / grant victory in battle" (Liuzza 2574-2575)]. Though the dragon dies, Beowulf is only able to kill it with considerable help from Wiglaf, and Beowulf's own death places his now-lordless people in a vulnerable position. Just as the combined support of God, *wyrd*, and the hero's own will, are necessary for the full realization of the hero's will, the absence of this collaboration ensures that the individual hero's success can be incomplete at best.

Judith

As in *Beowulf*, the model Christian is presented in *Judith* as a person who possesses bravery, strength, and ingenuity of her own, but who is also dependent upon God's favour and use of the believer for the receipt and exercise of those talents. The most striking difference between Beowulf and Judith is that the Hebrew Judith knows the God she serves. However,

even her picture of God must be partially incomplete, as she too lives in a pre-Christian time in which knowledge of Christ may only be had through mystic anachronism. The narrative (based on the apocryphal book of *Judith*), frequently praises as well as conflates the heroine's cleverness, valour, and virtue. Judith asks God for the ability to defeat her captor, the debauched (and incompetent) Assyrian king Holofernes, and is successful in killing him singlehandedly as well as in leading her people to victory over the oppressive Assyrians. By whose agency is this feat accomplished? The poet implies that it is Judith's fortitude that enables her to seek and receive God's aid, and that she is strong because God has chosen to use her as his instrument against her immoral enemies (who lack spiritual and therefore physical strength). The relationship between Judith and God is nearly – but not quite – balanced. Though Judith is dependent on God for her physical strength and position of leadership, this dependence does not diminish her agency because God also needs her loyalty and firm willingness to serve him in order to use her as his instrument. The defeat of their mutual enemy, the Assyrian force led by Holofernes, is therefore a collaborative accomplishment. Judith's active and strongminded desire to do God's will must combine with God's active decision to accomplish a goal that Judith happens to share in order for the mutually desired outcome to occur. If the believer is strong enough to want to do that which God has already decided to do, then he or she may be granted the power to do it. Conversely, God is reliant (and even dependent) on courageous believers to bring his plans to fruition.

The OE poet's retelling of Judith's story adds an additional layer of complexity to its heroine's agency. In a significant change from his Vulgate source, the OE *Judith* poet altered the timing of when the Assyrians discover that Holofernes is dead. In the Vulgate, they realize

that their lord has been beheaded *before* the battle with the Bethulians begins, and it is this demoralizing discovery that allows the Bethulians to defeat them. In the OE version, the Bethulians are already winning the battle when Holofernes' corpse is found. This change impacts Judith's role in bringing about her people's victory in battle, but the extent to which it does so is debatable. Bourquin offers some compelling thoughts on the nature of the relationship between Judith and God in the OE poem, but he seems to be arguing for multiple viewpoints at the same time. Indeed, many critics find subtly differing interpretations for Judith's actions and for the alterations from the Vulgate that the OE poet made to them – evidence perhaps of *Judith's* enduring power to fuse competing worldviews. Bourquin asserts that “the shift ought to be interpreted as a distinctive mark of the treatment of herohood in Old English Biblical and religious poetry” because he interprets the change to mean that “Judith acts as a mere link in the heroic chain: what virtues of valiance she receives from God she selflessly instils into her own people” (10). There are a couple of problems with this statement. Firstly, being a “link in the heroic chain” does not necessarily imply a decrease in personal agency, for if – as Bourquin previously argued – the agency relationship between a believer and God is “circular” (9), the linking protagonist is not less important to the production of the mutually desired outcome than is God himself. Secondly, the instillation of salutary qualities benefits the entire community, including Judith, and (like the relationship between God and Judith) is a circular action and not particularly selfless. However, a good lord would be expected to advance his people's welfare by being willing to personally engage enemies in battle (though much of the actual fighting would be accomplished by his thanes who would share his fate and on whom he would depend to protect his life). In this sense, an ideal

Germanic lord's courage is somewhat similar to the holy selflessness of an idealized saint; though the motives of each are not identical, it makes sense that poets who understood both traditions would be drawn to create tales that promote valorous virtue by layering the two paragons on each other, providing a complexly textured model for emulation.

In discussing reasons for the poet's alteration of the Assyrian discovery of Holofernes' death, Christopher Fee wonders "why Judith's heroism is relegated to a *strictly* inspirational role in the Old English version" and finds that in it, "she is put on a pedestal, dehumanized – or reified, as it were – and neatly extracted from her position as the active agent of triumph and rightful recipient of glory" (405). While he is right that Judith takes on a more spiritual and less physical role in the OE version, determining whether this shift removes her agency requires further consideration. One important detail Fee overlooks is that the OE poet has removed the characters Ozias and Charmi, who are in the Vulgate source described as *principes* of the Bethulians (Judith 6:11). No Bethulian leader other than Judith appears in the OE version of the story. The shift toward a Judith whose power is more spiritually located accords with and enables this augmentation of her political standing because, as Jane Chance Nitzsche notes, "Anglo-Saxon queens and aristocratic women rarely assumed politically active roles in society, according to extant wills, charters, writs, chronicles, and other historical and legendary documents of the period" (139) but that "when queens attained a reputation for chastity and sanctity, which marked their intentions as socially and spiritually acceptable, their political power within the community increased" (140). Nitzsche further concludes that the "few women [who] are portrayed as politically active and heroic" in *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicles* are depicted as such "primarily because they shed all affinity with the female sex and sexuality by

demonstrating singular chastity and spirituality” (142). While it would be going too far to claim that the OE Judith is devoid of feminine gender – indeed, her spiritual mode of leadership allows her to honourably eschew the more aggressive attributes of masculine lordship – her supreme chastity is of great importance to the OE poet. While the Vulgate source clearly describes her as a *vidua* [widow] (8:1) and states that “vir eius fuit Manasses qui mortuus est in diebus messis hordiariae” [her man was Manasses who died in the time of the barley harvest] (8:2), and that, at the time of the events of this tale, she had been living celibately as a “vidua iam annis tribus et mensibus sex” [widow now for three years and six months] (8:4), this degree of chastity proved insufficient to the OE poet who re-cast her as a virgin, calling her a “halige meowle” (Dobbie 56) [“holy maid” (Glosecki 58)] and the “scyppendes mægeð” (Dobbie 78) [“Shaper’s maid” (Glosecki 80)] and making no mention of any former husband. This alteration contributes to the OE Judith’s shift to a more inspirational, less physical figure in motivating the Bethulian fighters; these changes increase Judith’s role within her community over that attributed to her as the wealthy and virtuous, but retired, widow in the Vulgate whose tactical support is of less importance to the OE poet than her spiritual leadership. While the poet’s changes in Judith’s role make her part in accomplishing the Assyrian downfall less physical, it does not make it less active.

Though the original beginning of *Judith* has been lost (Dobbie xiii), near the present beginning of the poem, the poet describes its contents in terms that cast Judith as a loyal thane of God, fully possessed of as much agency as any brave warrior who receives rewards from his lord:

tweode

gifena in ðys ginnan grunde. Heo ðar ða gearwe funde
 mundbyrd æt ðam mæran þeodne, þa heo ahte mæste þearfe,
 hylðo þæs hehstan deman, þæt he hie wið þæs hehstan brogan
 gefriðode, frymða waldend. Hyre ðæs fæder on roderum
 torhtmod tiðe gefremede, þe heo ahte trumne geleafan
 a to ðam ælmihtigan. (Dobbie 1-7)

[... nor ever upon earth's broad surface could she be brought to doubt
 the grace of God who gave favour—
 renowned Ruler-- when she needed it most:
 protection came from the highest Judge when our heavenly Father
 in glory bestowed an outstanding gift,
 thanks to her full belief, her faith in the Almighty forever.] {Glosecki 1-7}

By giving her the gift of strength to kill Holofernes and to inspire her people to undertake their victorious fight, God simultaneously rewards her for her good (spiritual) service to him while making further (physical) service possible. The relationship is circular in that it is mutually beneficial; God gains the defeat of his enemies (the heathen Assyrians who disrespect him) while Judith also gains the defeat of her enemies who have oppressed and threatened her people. Both also gain renown from this joint accomplishment. Judith offers thanks to God for enabling her to kill Holofernes and she credits him with having done it “mihtig dryhten þurh mine hand” (Dobbie 198) [“God in his might / through this hand of mine” (Glosecki 196-197)]. However, her modest willingness to refrain from claiming the credit for herself (a seemingly trait in

a woman or a saint) does not mean that she, in fact, does not receive glory on account of her actions. As Irving notes, “in all epic literature it is important that the hero make a generous gesture acknowledging a power greater than himself, usually a god – a gesture that for all its apparent modesty aligns the hero correctly with the universal powers” (15). When she returns to her people bearing Holofernes’ head, they greet her with great respect:

Wið þæs fæstengeates folc onette,
 weras wif somod, wornum ond heapum,
 ðreatum ond ðrymmum þrungon ond urnon
 ongean ða þeodnes mægð þusendmælum,
 ealde ge geonge. Æghwylcum wearð
 men on ðære medobyrig mod areted,
 syððan hie ongeaton þæt wæs ludith cumen
 eft to eðle, ond ða ofostlice
 hie mid eaðmedum in forleton. (Dobbie 162-170)

[To the fortress-gate all the folk hastened
 The host in hordes all hurried and thronged,
 by the thousands pressed toward the Prince’s maid—
 the young and old, each uplifted—
 all their minds hopeful in that happy city
 where they rejoiced to hear of Judith’s return
 to her own homeland. (Glosecki 161-166)]

Though Judith does not personally participate in the battle that follows – much as God was only vicariously present in Holofernes' death – the Bethulian warriors freely share the victory with Judith. They despoil the defeated Assyrians (a source of physical rather than spiritual gain, yet positively portrayed as well-earned) and they give the most prestigious treasures to Judith, as she is both the individual who killed their previous owner and the lady (here occupying the role of a lord) to whom her successful warriors wish to bring the tokens of their shared victory:

Holofernes

sweord ond swatigne helm, swylce eac side byrnan
 gerenode readum golde, ond eal þæt se rinca baldor
 swiðmod sinces ahte oððe sundryrfes,
 beaga ond beorhtra maðma, hi þæt þære beorhtan idese
 ageafon gearoþoncolre. (Dobbie 336-341)

[old Holofernes'

gory broadsword beside his byrnie so wide,
 arrayed in gold so red, with goods that the ring-warriors' prince
 in pride and power had owned: his heirlooms and riches and gems,
 all his glittering wealth and his rings: this to the radiant lady,
 to the one so ingenious they gave.] [Glosecki 336-340]

The tangible gain the Bethulian warriors obtained through their successful military venture they pass on to Judith, much as Beowulf gives the rewards he obtained in Hrothgar's hall to his own lord, Hygelac. In the same way, Judith in turn gives these treasures to her lord – God:

Ealles ðæs Iudith sægde

wuldro weroda dryhtne, þe hyre weorðmynde geaf,
 mærdæ on moldan rice, swylce eac mede on heofonum,
 sigorlean in swegles wuldre, þæs þe heo ahte soðne geleafan
 to ðam ælmihtigan. (Dobbie 341-345)

[And Judith devoted it all

to the glorious God of high hosts who'd given her honor on earth,
 renown in the worldly realm, with reward in heaven to come
 triumph in splendor on high, thanks to her true belief,
 her faith in the Almighty forever. (Glosecki 341-345)]

Offering bravely obtained treasure to one's lord is a tribute of respect, but one that raises rather than lowers the giver's status. That the warriors are powerful enough to bring back riches demonstrates both their competent martial service and their loyalty to their lady and, by extension, their commitment to their community as a cohesive whole. The victory over the Assyrians is shared between the Bethulian warriors, Judith, and God. Each of them is necessary for the outcome to occur. The differences in their prestige comes from their social identity (which is fixed) rather than their conduct (in which all, in this case, do their duties honourably and irreproachably). Though God is different from his human collaborators in that he is incapable of failing to uphold his duties as lord and in that he could choose other agents to accomplish his goals should his present servants fail to remain loyal – thus preserving the possibility (but not a guarantee) of his omnipotence – his overarching power does not diminish the renown earned by each human individual who participates in the realization of these goals.

In Anglo-Saxon heroic poetry, the concept of bravery requires that the person exhibiting it do so freely and as a conscious choice (such as Byrhtnoth's loyal thanes made in deciding not to flee a battle that they knew they could not win). The courageous fortitude God requires of those who serve him means that the heroes through whom he operates must be able to choose to do otherwise. Choosing not to serve God would result in the hero or heroine's defeat, but would also mean that the task God wanted him or her to do would not be accomplished. Because the Assyrians are portrayed not only as oppressive secular opponents of the Bethulians but also as debauched heathen enemies of God, God would suffer from their continued existence along with the Bethulians (just as God had to endure Grendel's marauding until Beowulf could defeat him). The fact that God is immortal and able to form new plans for achieving his goals should his servants fail means that he is less vulnerable than his human thanes, but – like any human lord – bound to rise or fall with his people's successes or failures. If Judith had done anything other than pray to God for the ability to kill Holofernes in the moment when she finds herself in the drunken Assyrian leader's tent – if she had passively given up hope or had rashly attempted to kill him without divine assistance – God would have missed this chance to undo the Assyrians. While he could have devised some other death for Holofernes and found a different means of disposing of the Assyrian troops, Judith's failure would have been a real blow to God, thwarting his plans at least temporarily. Still, his eventual success and merit as a lord would depend on his ability to find someone spiritually strong enough to serve him because there can be no such thing as a lord who has no thanes. While perhaps the senses in which human heroes depend on God for the ability to be successful are

more obvious than their complements, God is no less dependent on his human thanes for the realization of his will.

Juliana

Juliana, a saint's life signed by Cynewulf and preserved in the Exeter Book, contains a heroine who, unlike Judith, is a Christian. Perhaps it is her access to knowledge of Christ that prompts her to exercise her fortitude primarily through acts of will (which God empowers to impact physical reality, as in her altercation with the demon). Her story appears from its beginning to be a heroic tale: The opening, "Hwæt! We ðæt hyrdon hæleð eahtian" (Krapp & Dobbie 1) ["Listen! we have heard heroes tell" (Bradley 302)] resonates with the first line of *Beowulf*, "Hwæt, We gar-dena in geardagum, / þeodcyniga þrym gefrunon" (Klaeber 1-2) ["Listen! We have heard of the glory in bygone days / of the folk-kings of the spear-Danes" (Liuzza 1-2)] and with the opening of *The Dream of the Rood*: "Hwæt, ic swefna cyst secgan wylle" (Dickens & Ross 1) [Listen, and I will tell the best of dreams]. In fact, Juliana has more in common with the Dreamer of *The Dream of the Rood* than with the other poems' protagonists (or with Judith, a heroine whose methods for combating her enemies are considerably different from Juliana's). Juliana's tale follows the same pattern as the others: A corrupt and repugnant enemy force attacks the protagonist, the unflappable protagonist bravely contends with it, the enemy is thwarted, and the protagonist is victorious. However, unlike Judith (who leads her people to physical victory in battle through spiritual means) Juliana's heroism is primarily individual and spiritual, and her victory is therefore unimpeded by her death.

Juliana's motives for her actions receive less discussion from the narrator than do those of the other protagonists. Instead of numerous descriptions of the working of wyrd, the protagonist's personal desires for glory, or God's decision to accomplish some task, the reader is given a few succinct statements from which the pertinent information about her actions may be inferred:

Hio in gæst bæŕ

halge treowe, hogde georne

þæt hire mægðhad mana gehwylces

fore Cristes lufan clæne geheolde. (Krapp & Dobbie 28-31).

["She in her soul kept saintly faith and firmly intended for the love of Christ to preserve her virginity pure from any sin." (Bradley 302)]

And:

Hire wæs godes egsa

mara in gemyndum, þonne eall þæt maþþungesteald

þe in þæs æþelinges æhtum wunade. (Krapp & Dobbie 35-37)

["to her mind the fear of God was greater than all the treasure which lay among the nobleman's possessions." (Bradley 303)]

These two statements provide all the exposition necessary for the reader to understand the story as a heroic tale in which the protagonist's commitment to her lord – her highest priority at all times – endows her with the spiritual fortitude that renders her untouchable by her enemies. Juliana's intention to adhere herself to God is therefore the only action that matters in this poem; the physical harm Eleusius can inflict on her is irrelevant to her mental capacity to

persist in this intention and therefore entirely ineffectual. The demon – a spiritually puny wimp compared to the uncorruptible Juliana – never stands a chance against her. The thing that makes Juliana a saint worthy of emulation is the firmness of her commitment to her divine Lord; this commitment is remarkably similar to that which is practiced by Byrhtnoth’s thanes, whose characterization as brave, honourable warriors extends only so far as they choose to remain loyal. Juliana is extraordinary only in that her execution of her decision to be a faithful servant of God is perfect and ideal, untroubled by the fear or temptations that plague those of weaker faith. Because of this internal location of Juliana’s spiritual power, God’s support of her is never in question and God’s omnipotence (affirmed in this poem because Juliana cooperates with him totally) assures her ongoing wellbeing. This enables her to proceed throughout her ordeal with apparently unshaken confidence. The fact that Juliana herself is never in any real peril helps to separate her as an individual from the larger conflict between God and his enemies, which is the subject to which Cynewulf affords primary interest in his treatment. Juliana is a woman whose individual identity does not matter to the narrative; her only defining characteristic is her unshakable loyalty to and faith in God. Because this is the case, readers are able to imaginatively insert themselves in her place, vicariously able to appropriate her victory inasmuch as they are able to emulate her firm commitment to God.

Juliana’s unwavering service to God makes no sense to the “heathen” people surrounding her. Her father’s chastisement for her rejection of Eleusius, indicates that her higher allegiance to a Lord he does not know is unfathomable to him:

Wiðsæcest þu to swiþe sylfre rædes
 þinum brydguman, se is betra þonne þu,

æþelra for eorþan, æhtspedigra
feohgestreona. (Krapp & Dobbie 99-102)

[Too strictly you refuse, upon your own advice, your bridegroom who is a better person than you, of higher birth in the world, wealthier in riches." (Bradley 304)]

If Juliana were refusing to comply with her father's instructions out of mere personal preference, the case would be distinctly different. In order to make it clear that Juliana's refusal to marry Eleusius is not a rejection of ordinary, male-centered, social norms, Cynewulf includes her assurance to him:

Gif þu soðne god

lufast ond gelyfest, ond his lof rærest,
ongietest gæsta hleo, ic beo gearo sona
unwaclice willan þines. (Krapp & Dobbie 47-50)

[If you love and believe in the true God and exalt his praise, if you acknowledge him the Refuge of souls I shall be immediately and unwaveringly at your will (Bradley 303)].

Juliana is a static character; the action of the poem is driven by other characters' responses to her determined faith. The "if" in her statement is complemented by another in her next sentence:

Swylce ic þe secge, gif þu to sæmran gode
þurh deofolgielð dæde biþencest,
hætsð hæþenweoh, ne meaht þu habban mec,
ne geþreatian þe to gesingan. (Krapp & Dobbie 51-54)

[Similarly I say to you that if in fact you put your trust, by way of devil-worship, in an inferior god, if you invoke the pagan idols, you may neither have me nor coerce me into marriage with you." (Bradley 303)]

These are statements of fact rather than efforts by Juliana to direct the course of events; Eleusius chooses the "inferior god" and reaps the consequences of his freely and foolishly made choice. In this sense, Juliana does not transcend the bounds of femininity in order to pursue active heroism; her peace of mind passively provides unwavering security for her and her antagonist is the one who engages in active decision-making and experiences moral (and therefore real) danger.

Another character who suffers peril by attempting to disturb Juliana as she minds her own (i.e. God's) business is the unlucky demon whom she throttles and forces to confess his misdeeds. Juliana is clearly able to put the demon in real physical distress, but the tone in which their fight is described indicates that her extreme spiritual virtue is what pains him. His statements include another important "if" on which God's plans and his enemies' ruin rests:

Gif ic ænigne ellenrofne
 gemete modigne metodes ceman
 wið flanþræce, nele feor þonan
 bugan from beaduwe, ac he bord ongean
 hefeð hygesnottor, haligne scyld,
 gæstlic guðreaf, nele gode swican,
 ac he beald in gebede bidsteal gifeð
 fæste on feðan, ic sceal feor þonan . . . (Krapp & Dobbie 382-389)

[But if I meet with a storm of darts any staunch soldier of the Lord, renowned for courage, who is unwilling to flee away far from the battle but, astute in his thinking, lifts up against me a targe, a holy shield and spiritual armour, and is not willing to fail God, but who, bold in prayer, makes a stand, steadfast amid the infantry, I have to retreat away from there. (Bradley 311)]

What determines the demon's fate is whether or not someone – anyone – stands up to him in God's service; if someone does, God takes care of the rest and the outcome of the contest is a foregone conclusion. Juliana does not need to be a renowned warrior possessing superior muscular ability in order to win this fight; God ensures that her spiritual strength can be translated into sufficient physical strength. Juliana's attitude toward the demon's pronouncements is indicative of the moral lesson that the reader is intended to take from the story.

Wende ic þæt þu þy wærra weorþan sceolde
 wið soðfæstum swylces gemotes
 ond þy unbealdra, þe þe oft wiðstod
 þurh wuldorcnyning willan þines. (Krapp & Dobbie 425-428).

[I had expected that you would have been warier and less impetuous over such a contest with one steadfast in truth who, through the King of glory, has often withstood your will." (Bradley 312)]

The contest, then, is not really between the demon and Juliana, but between his lord, Satan and Juliana's Lord. Furthermore, Satan is not only bad but also bad at being a lord. The narrator

tells that, when Eleusius and his thanes die and go to hell, they will not be rewarded for their service to the proprietor of that realm:

Ne þorftan þa þegnas in þam þystran ham,
 seo geneatscolu in þam neolan scræfe,
 to þam frumgare feohgestealda
 witedra wenan, þæt hy in winsele
 ofer beorsetle beagas þegon,
 æpplede gold. (Krapp & Dobbie 683-688)

["The thanes in that dark dwelling, the flock of retainers in that deep pit, had no reason to look expectantly to the overlord for the appointed treasures, or that they would receive upon the beer-bench rings and embossed gold in the wine-hall." (Bradley 318)]

This ungenerous reception contrasts sharply with God's rewards to those who serve him.

Because God provides them with impregnable protection in this life and beyond as well as with spiritual glory in Heaven, he is the ultimate good lord.

In this poem, the relationship between a lord and those who follow him is forcefully streamlined. This is most clearly seen when the demon tells Juliana that her ability to overpower him is unexcelled:

Ne wæs ænig þara
 þæt me þus þriste, swa þu nu þa,
 halig mid hondum, hrinan dorste,
 næs ænig þæs modig mon ofer eorþan
 þurh halge meahht, heahfædra nan

ne witgena. (Krapp & Dobbie 510-515)

[There was none of them who dared lay hands on me as confidently as you, a saintly woman, now do; nor was there anyone on earth so courageous by virtue of divine power, not one of the patriarchs nor of the prophets. (Bradley 314)]

The demon notes that “þeah þe him weoruda god / onwriga, wuldres cyning wisdomes gæst, / giefe unmæte, hwæpre ic gong to þam / agan moste” (Krapp & Dobbie 515-518) [Albeit the God of hosts and King of glory showed them the spirit of wisdom and grace infinite, still I might have access to them” (Bradley 314)]. Though it is possible that the demon is lying in an attempt to flatter his captor, if his compunction to tell Juliana the truth works fully (as seems to be the case), the upshot of his confession is that *anyone* – even as unlikely a hero as an otherwise nondescript woman – who claims Christ’s lordship through loyal service is spiritually invincible.

Juliana’s final speech before her death encapsulates the poem’s message to readers and its emphasis on spiritual action as an (apparently passive but truly active) form of service to God as she advises her captors:

Ge mid lufan sibbe,
 leohte geleafan, to þam lifgendan
 stane stiðhydga stapol fæstniað,
 soðe treowe ond sibbe mid eow
 healdað æt heortan, halge rune
 þurh modes myne. (Krapp & Dobbie 652-657)

[Hold in your hearts true believe and peace among you, and the holy mysteries with devotion of mind (Bradley 318)]

She tells them that, if they do this, “þonne eow miltse giefeð / fæder ælmihtig, þær ge frofre agun / æt mæгна gode, mæste þearfe / æfter sorgstafum” (Krapp & Dobbie 657-660) [Then the almighty Father will grant you grace when during troubles you have most need of help from the God of strength (Bradley 318)]. Juliana honourably fulfils the duty to her Lord that she undertook; Eleusius, the demon, and all of God’s enemies lack the requisite virtue to do anything well.

After Juliana delivers her final speech, she is killed. However, even though “ða hyre sawl wearð / alæded of lice to þam langan gefean / þurh sweordslege” (Krapp & Dobbie 669-671) [then her soul was dispatched from her body into lasting bliss by the stroke of a sword (Bradley 318)], her death is not depicted as a negative event, and certainly not as her defeat. By refusing to follow Juliana’s advice to turn to God, Eleusis seals his own doom; he is promptly shipwrecked and dies (as the narrator tells immediately after describing Juliana’s death). This chain of events is important because they clearly illustrate both the secular heroic and the religious principles advocated in the poem. From a religious viewpoint, Juliana’s charitable and faithful frame of mind at the time of her martyrdom secures her admission into “gefean” in heaven, while Eleusis’ stubborn refusal to seek redemption (or to acknowledge that he needs it) is what ensures his downfall. However, these particulars simultaneously fits into an Anglo-Saxon secular heroic value-system. Juliana’s steadfast bravery and unshakable commitment to serving her lord in a conflict against a militarily superior enemy mirrors that of Byrhtnoth’s loyal thanes in *The Battle of Maldon*. Though that poem’s concerns are primarily secular rather than

religious, Juliana's martyrdom participates in the same heroic tradition – a tradition that is particularly adept at fusing physical and spiritual bravery.

Conclusion

The individual believers in these poems bear the great responsibility of fulfilling God's will. If they succeed, they will win glory – whether the spectacular weaponry and prestige given to Beowulf, the possessions of Holofernes and the respect among her people that Judith wins, the transcendent heavenly rewards earned by Juliana, or the simultaneously literal and metaphoric silver and gold bestowed on the Rood – from their divine lord just as they would expect rings from a human lord. These poems also contain an inherent element of suspense, because if God's human thane fails, so will his plan (at least in that moment). This chink in God's omnipotence actually serves to make his service more appealing and relatable for the Anglo-Saxon audiences for whom the poems were composed. Ultimately, the agency of God and the agency of the believer are inextricably entwined in each.

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