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ENGL 208 / section: 46649 11 AM MWF

April 28 2023

The Re-Imagining of Christ

The divide between Paganism and Christianity within Anglo-Saxon Britain was much wider than it is perceived as today. Before the canonized notion of the all forgiving savior that is Christ, there were once other gods which ruled hearts and minds across Britain. However, these ideals and beliefs became unified through the spread of Christianity and literature. The Christian ideals exemplified throughout the reading of the poem *The Dream of the Rood* illustrate the syncretization of Christian and Pagan values during the period in which the poem was written. The heroic beliefs that eventually evolved into the accepting and peaceful beacon of hope for Christianity. Furthermore, the retelling of Christ's crucifixion, which is now known as an act of selfless suffering, was treated as an act of heroism during the period of Anglo Saxon society. The reading of *The Dream of the Rood*, created by an unknown poet, tells the oral history of the tree used to build the cross that Christ was crucified upon. The use of syncretism throughout the poem, is the earliest known example of assimilation to Christian beliefs; aided by the re-imagining of the merciful being that is Christ and giving him the qualities most valued by the warrior driven Anglo-Saxon society.

Within *The Dream of the Rood*, imagery is quickly introduced and used to influence the reader into imagining the greater being that is Christ. Most importantly, it is geared towards the Anglo-Saxon audience. The first narrator of the poem being an anonymous voice illustrates the origin of the rood in a gallant manner, "In my dream I espied the most splendid tree. Looming

aloft with light all around, the most brilliant beam. The bright tree was covered with gold; gemstones gleamed” (4-7). These lines early within the poem foreshadow the rood to be of greater importance. Through the use of anthropomorphism thus strengthening the warrior connection between Christ and the rood. Also, the rood itself is portrayed as a valiant symbol on its own. To be gleaming in light and covered with both precious metals and stones is something that once was only done to honor those of high heroic standing; an act that was only saved for those who had earned both the honor and glory of the community. Within this example, these actions are metaphorical because despite the tree being an inanimate object, it demonstrates how syncretism is being used by Christianity to combine with Paganism.

Anglo-Saxon pagans had their own gods of worship when they first made their way into Britain. Similarly the blooming rise of Christianity was on its embarking journey in becoming a widespread religion. The main method of expansion was by combining religions gradually, therefore, creating a narrative that appealed to the new community it was attempting to convert. Adding to the Anglo-Saxon society being known for their brave people and heroic standard, these morals were paved by their Pagan Gods. When Christ first made an appearance within their mythology, his entrance was one that mimicked their current Gods; “I saw the lord of mankind coming with great haste” (33-34). This line is narrated by the rood, the second narrator of the poem and arguably the most important. Adding onto the importance of the rood, is necessary to the Anglo-Saxon society was one that was very much in tune with their surroundings and nature.

Having the rood be the central voice of the poem is a direct connection to the fact that even the Earth leans towards the Lord; therefore, his power and bravery is one unmatched to a normal human. Christ’s heroism to die for humanities sins’ is an act of valor that is one that no one can turn a cheek to even if they wish. Therefore, further solidifying the successful

assimilation of the religion. During this period of assimilation, it is important to note that Christ was an entity that was not to be challenged. Within the rood's narrative it is described as "Then I did not dare act against the Lord's word bow down or fall to pieces when I felt the surface of the earth trembling" (36 - 37). Here, the rood, an object, comes from nature acknowledges that even if it won't dare challenge Christ almighty, the Earth bends as he walks upon it because even nature knows that he is the king and savior of Earth. This description of Christ further strengthens the belief of him being a hero and one who fears nothing. Consequently, strengthening syncretism between two religions because the author of the story quickly introduces a new God and how he is similar to the already existing one's from that society.

Syncretism is further demonstrated when the audience witnesses God's final act of valor for humanity. One in which he strides to with pride and holds no fear while doing so as he committed the ultimate sacrifice. The rood illustrates Christ's crucifixion, "Then this young man stripped himself -that was God Almighty- strong and courageous; he climbed up on the high gallows, brave in the sight of many, as he set out to redeem mankind" (lines 39-42). The imagery used when describing how the Lord was killed is important for Anglo-Saxon society because it helped them visualize the heroism of Christ. Thus, creating a malleable depiction of Christ's triumph over death as a concept that was new to the Anglo-Saxons; because they believed life ended at death while Christ is able to continue his legacy. During the time period that this oral myth was being told, it is important to note that both triumph and heroism were seen as the noblest way to live. To die in honor and without fear was praised, therefore, as the conversion to Christianity spread the religious figure that was meant to be worshiped had to be reworked to fit such standards. This image of Christ was further supported by the acknowledgement of nature also bowing to the Lord's immense strength.

As the story of God made its way through the Anglo-Saxon community, imagery of Christ had to evolve with it to appeal to society. For example, as the rood is introduced to Christ it acknowledges how powerful and heroic he is. Having the rood acknowledge that Christ is a powerful being is necessary to the assimilation of Christianity. The Anglo-Saxon community is one that was in tune with nature because their deities were the embodiment of nature itself. As the rood describes Christ and admits to not dare bend at his strength despite being a force created by nature, is prime for how Christ triumphs all including nature. This is because of how nature itself does not dare cower to him. The rood depicts this in lines 42 through 43; "I trembled when the man embraced me; I dared not bow down to earth, stoop to the surface of the ground, but I had to stand fast." Daring not to cower in the presence of Christ is important to the Christian myth, because the one that dares not bend is the rood: a being of nature that belongs to earth and is a symbol for humanity. As the Anglo-Saxon community are being told a myth that involves nature abiding by the strength of the Lord it is because of their values. The Anglo-Saxon community was one that believed that nature was a force of itself because their gods personified the acts of nature. Thus, when a being that does not abide by these rules and instead makes the world succumb to him and his courageous strength, strengthens the conversion of religions.

Christ, after death, still stayed all courageous and powerful through the perspective of the rood. Dying in an act of valor for humanity solidifies Christ's martyrdom, a concept which was not new to the Anglo-Saxons and instead one that they held in high regard. The rood also acknowledges how it has witnessed many deaths in the past, yet, it had never witnessed one like Christ's. Along with never before experiencing an aftermath such as the one that occurred after the lord had fallen. Through the attempt of merging the beliefs of the two religions, the moral of Christianity stayed the same. To spread the word of mankind's sin of killing the savior of

humanity stays prevalent within the myth. Yet, the noteworthy element of this act is that Christ's strength has not been terminated after death. It instead develops into an intensity that has the power to continue to spread. This is illustrated by the rood, "I saw the God of hosts direly stretched out. Shades of darkness had clouded over the corpse of the Lord, the shining radiance; shadows went forth dark under clouds" (51-55). The rood creates a depiction of a world that experiences the immediacy of humanity's sinful action towards Christ. This portrayal further implements the belief within the Lord's power; the shift within nature itself to reflect the lost spirit of Christ on earth is fundamental to the assimilation of Christianity.

Prior to the introduction of Christianity in Anglo-Saxon society, the heroic ethos was valued very highly by the Anglo-Saxons. The Anglo-Saxon pantheon reflected their natural surroundings, in which they not only lived within but also worshiped for their livelihoods. These beliefs also helped to strengthen the community's respect for the Earth and the goods it produced. Therefore, when Christianity presented a being that even nature itself could not hold to its laws, the environment reflected its disapproval. Through the use of dark clouds that loomed after Christ's passing. Demonstrating how the literal embodiment of good that was Christ was brutally murdered and the Earth's disdain is also depicted in other writings. In the footnote for the poem on page 35 it quotes "According to Mathews 27.51, the earth quaked at the crucifixion⁶." The two different accounts such as the rood from the oral telling of the story and the Christian proverb from Matthew, a notable figure in Christian writing, both depict an occurrence which humanity would eventually regret. This is evident because of the way that nature counteracts to human actions. Given that in the Anglo-Saxon community there was no singular entity that could control the behavior of nature. In addition to Christ's power, the Anglo-Saxon people were also being shown a being which had empathy towards the human race. Often, it is depicted that pagan

gods reacted in retaliation to humanity or to humor themselves. This is very different to Christ's action towards humanity. Instead, Christ is mourned by those around him. His presence being missed makes his spirit known as humanity's savior and king.

In addition to the death of Christ, the Christian assimilation of the religion ensures to note the ever looming presence of Christ's spirit. Therefore, when the rood refers to the events after Christ is crucified, it notes how he is everywhere and is one with all creation. This added detail to the power of Christ is necessary to the Anglo-Saxon society of the time, because their god's are groups of myths that make up the world around them. However, in this diction of the Christian myth it states; "So the lord of glory, guardian of Heaven, exalted me then over all forest-trees, as Almighty God before all humankind" (90-92). In addition, to the acknowledgement of the Lord being an everlasting presence amongst the mortal world, the rood also details how itself (a tree) has become a symbol of Christ. As the rood recognizes its own symbolic meaning within the religion due to its importance of partaking within the crucifixion of Christ. It has, therefore, also awakened the sense of self-awareness within the Anglo-Saxon community.

Despite the pagan gods being the manifestation of natural events, having the rood address its relevance to the Christian religion further supports the watchful eye of Christ. The rood alludes to a judgment day for humanity. This is important because the gods that the Anglo-Saxons once worshiped rarely had the occurrence of them merging with the mortal world unless it was to teach lessons. Here, the rood warns humanity that Christ will return and in order to enter Heaven's gates they will be judged by Christ himself. The rood states "He will come again to this middle-earth to seek out mankind on Judgement Day, the redeemer himself" (lines 103-105 pages 36). The return of Christ is meant to make the followers of Christianity self-aware

and to abide by the commandments set forth by the religion. Similarly, the rood's presence within the poem is used as a symbol of control from the Christian religion. Crucifixion upon a cross after the occurrence of Christ became a staple punishment for criminals. Most notably used on his disciples. To die upon the cross such as Christ did is necessary for the assimilation of the two religions. Even more so the symbol of the rood. The cross itself became a beacon of worship and protection to the Christian community while also becoming the emblem for Christianity. Readers become aware of both these elements, "Who bears the best sign on his breast. And on this earth each soul that longs to exist with its savior forevermore" (lines 118-120 page 36). Altogether, the symbolic meaning of the cross, the rood, and the foreshadowing to the return of Christ is all of heavy value. They are values that hold promise, this promise being entry to the gates of Heaven and being forgiven by Christ for one's sins.

The introduction of a higher being that is able to walk both amongst religious figures and alongside humanity is what strengthens the foundation of the Christian religion. Therefore, being reflected within one of the earliest known writings for the religion is necessary for the assimilation of the Anglo-Saxon warrior ethos of the time. The image of Christ throughout this poem is one that is much different from what devote followers are familiar with in modern times. Christ then was his own force to be reckoned with, one so in tune with nature that even nature itself would not dare waver if it was what the Lord commanded. To show bravery and strength even when faced with death, while still remaining true to the Christian belief of repentance is the factor that made this myth different from known pagan stories. Contrary to the known value of staying courageous, introducing the need to accept suffering was a value necessary for the acceptance of Heaven and explanation for Christ's death. This is because when a community is surrounded with the beliefs that their gods' are not ones susceptible to death it becomes

necessary to explain how Christ is still heroic despite those beliefs. As the rood recounts the death of Christ the imagery and detailing involved is key to the analysis of the poem. The Anglo-Saxon community held pride in being warriors; this strength was used in favor of the Christian religion. This use of prior context is recounted throughout the poem. Creating an idealized religion filled with promise for a society that once held much bloodshed. The acknowledgement of the heroic ethos, and development of Christ as a martyr provided common ground for the Anglo-Saxon assimilation.

Works Cited

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