Looking for A Hero: The Development of the Christian Hero in English Literature

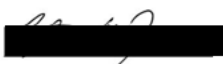Module Nine Final Capstone Project

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Abstract:

The history of English literature is a history of cultural collision, fusion, and reappropriation. When the Germanic tribes who invaded England in the 5th century were converted to Christianity, their pagan ethos was reframed through a Christian lens, and a heroic literary and cultural tradition was born that reflected their spiritual and cultural outlook. The fusion of Germanic paganism and Christianity gave birth to the body of Anglo-Saxon literature, particularly Beowulf and "The Dream of the Rood." As the Christianity of England matured, the Welsh legends of Arthur and the Round Table were appropriated to fashion a more mature heroic medieval heroic ethos, as expressed in such works as *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. Using the lens of New Historicism, this paper will trace the development of this heroic tradition, from the martial heroism of Beowulf, to the more explicitly spiritual heroism of Sir Gawain.

Looking for A Hero: The Development of the Christian Hero in English Literature

The history of the English language is a history of conquest. When Germanic tribes invaded England in the early 5th century, the literature and language that was produced is the basis of the language that has become the dominant language in the world, and the birth of English literature involves the collision and eventual fusion of cultures—the Germanic culture and traditions of the tribes who conquered England, and the Christianity that took hold as it spread through the preaching of Augustine of Canterbury in the early 6th century. As Christianity spread throughout Britain, these traditions were recast through the lens of their Christian experience, and the early Anglo-Saxon literature was born.

In fact, the evidence shows that as the Gospel spread across England, the classical Anglo-Saxon culture was subsumed by the new Christian ethos, and the emerging literature of the period was produced by Christians attempting to view their Anglo-Saxon past through a Christian lens. As St. Augustine of Canterbury set out to convert England to Christianity, the Gospel was being spread across a land with preexisting cultural traditions. As the Angles, Jutes, Saxons, and other peoples of 6th and 7th century England were converted to Christianity, their understanding of Christian theology was in several respects filtered through those traditions. The introduction of a new faith has lasting impact on a place, yet as William Chaney points out, "surely the impact of culture on cult is as important in history as the reverse, and the terms in which the newly converted Anglo-Saxons interpreted the Christian religion were shaped by the tribal culture, impregnated, as it was, by the heathenism of the old religion" (Chaney 197).

The literature of a people reflects the values and attitudes of a people. It follows then the body of literature from the Anglo-Saxon and Middle English periods would reflect the values of

those eras. **The history of English literature, from the conquest of Britain in the early 5th century, to the Middle English period of the early 14th century, is the history of the progress of Christianity. The Anglo-Saxon, Old French, Celtic, and Welsh body of literature reflects that cultural and literary progression. Using the theoretical lenses of New Historicism and formalism, to analyze the cultural themes of these works, as well as the specific Christian imagery, this paper aims to show how the major characters of *Beowulf*, "The Dream of the Rood," and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, particularly Beowulf and the knight of Camelot Sir Gawain, reflect an evolving tradition of Christian heroic virtue, in which the explicit martial heroism of the former, gives way to the spiritual strength of the latter. This is the manifestation of a cultural heroic tradition which was formed based on the collision and fusion of the native classical paganism of England, and Christianity.**

LITERATURE REVIEW

There is ample secondary research available on Christian themes in *Beowulf* and other works of Anglo-Saxon literature, as well as *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and other Middle English works. The principal argument this paper will make involves establishing these works as a part of one broad literary tradition. This heroic ethos reflected in the literature is a culmination of things—stipulating that *Beowulf* and *SGGK* are similar tentpoles in a similar literary and cultural lineage, and among other things, this project will argue that the Geatish king Beowulf and Sir Gawain are similar literary heroes who exist in different stages of the progression of Christianity through English literature.

While there has been substantial scholarship on the Christian elements in all these works, this project will directly link the Anglo-Saxon literature with the Middle English heroic works, a link that appears to be less evident in the existing research, as well as argue that the cultural

fusion that starts in the Anglo-Saxon period is effectively complete by the time of Chaucer and the Arthurian literature of the Middle English period. The cultural and literary tradition established during these eras becomes the enduring model of Christian heroic virtue in literature, that endures for successive generations.

In surveying the research on the fusion of Anglo-Saxon culture and Christianity, there are three dominant themes that are common--the idea that the fusion of the classical paganism and Christianity while at first glance seems paradoxical, is in fact cohesive; that fusion involves the repurposing and redefinition of classical pagan themes in the service of Christ; as Christianity progresses through England, medieval Christians began to approach their religious outlook through monasticism, typology, and the futility of worldly security. Their faith leads them to find prophetic significance in their literature, in order to understand their place in the world.

Concerning the fusion of paganism and Christianity, William Chaney argues that the Germanic peoples who conquered England brought their Germanic pagan traditions with them, and once they were converted to Christianity, reinterpreted their traditions through a Christian frame. The pagan warrior traditions, particularly in the case of Woden, were made subject to Christ, or replaced by Christ as an object of worship. In understanding the fusion of the two cultures, both in terms of theology and royal genealogy, Woden is important to both (Chaney 200).

Graham Holderness and Laszlo Illasics expand on this concept, using "The Dream of the Rood," and "The Wanderer" respectively, to show how the collision of worldviews and eventual triumph of Christianity is reflected in Anglo-Saxon literature. Holderness argues that "The Dream of the Rood," which was likely based on the pre-Viking Ruthwell Cross, is an ideal representation of Anglo-Saxon literature, as well as the unlikely yet harmonious fusion of pagan

and Christian. The cultural contributions that gave birth to this poem are far-reaching, and "the multi-cultural character of the literature produced from such a r*approchement* of traditions is self-evident" (Holderness, 350). Ultimately, this blend of cultures gives way to the eventual victory of Christianity.

John Mark Jones analyzes the metaphors at work in the poem, relating to the image of Christ's suffering on the Cross, and how the world-shattering power of the Cross is translated into poetic form, and ultimately redefined for Anglo-Saxon culture. That process of the domination of Christian culture is easier to understand, Illasics argues, when considering the Germanic concept of *Wyrd* that permeates the pagan traditions that are fused with Christianity. The loose translation of the term *Wyrd* is "fate," but that is inadequate. Illasics argues that "*Wyrd*" is rather a personification of a deity-like entity, something which is above the power of old Germanic gods" (Illasics 4). Also, he points out that *Wyrd* is "an entity, which has no modern correspondent, thus cannot (and will not) be translated (Illasics 4). This concept does not neatly fit into any modern language structure and is intricately tied to the cultural framework of classical Germanic paganism.

The understanding of *Wyrd* as a "destructive force" (Illasics 4) helps grasp the Anglo-Saxons belief in the impending end of the world. William Helder's *How the 'Beowulf 'Poet Employs Biblical Typology* helps in that regard as well. Helder's analysis of *Beowulf* argues that understanding the Christianity of Anglo-Saxon literature requires understanding that medieval Christianity was largely based on typology and signs. Medieval Christians were keenly aware of the impermanence of worldly things, and believed the world was ending. They saw themselves as fulfilling many Old Testament and New Testaments types in their own lifetimes and reflected

this understanding in their own literature. This is clear in the examples of Beowulf, Hrothgar, Grendel, and other key characters.

The link between Biblical typology and Anglo-Saxon tradition is also addressed in Heather Maring's "Two Ships Passing," in which she argues that the Rood that bears the Savior to His ultimate destiny should be translated "sea-wood," rather than "forest-wood." Translating it this way allows the reader to recognize the Rood as a sea-vessel carrying the hero to his journey, fulfilling both the classical pagan and Christian traditions, as the poem combines the Christian metaphor *of Navis crucis*, drawn from patristic theology, and an oral-related type-scene, both of which portray the rood as the vehicle by which one may reach heaven (Maring 241).

The one outlier in the research was Irving's "The Nature of Christianity in *Beowulf,"* which is a "Christo-skeptic" view of the Christian influence on the poem. He is generally skeptical of how much Christianity is in Beowulf, but nonetheless concedes that the very least, that *Beowulf* has Christian themes, and speculates whether the unnamed narrator of the poem possesses an understanding of Christian revelation that the characters (except maybe Hrothgar) do not, and thus the poem is a Christian repurposing of pre-Christian and pagan themes.

Shifting to the Middle English period, and concerning the Christian themes in the Arthurian epic *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, Corey Owen in "Patient Endurance in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*" argues that "the question of late medieval heroism is a central one" (Owen 177). Gawain is tested in all manners of martial prowess, including a journey through the forest, and the eventual engagement with the Green Knight. Owen points out however that "Gawain's opportunities to prove himself in battle are far outnumbered by the humiliations that he suffers during his adventure. Camelot's code of conduct compels him to accept the Green Knight's challenge" (Owen 177). It is in fact that code of conduct, and the

humiliations that manifest the distinct Christian ethos that Gawain represents. It is the concern of

the paper to argue that Gawain's heroism represents a distinct evolution of a medieval ethos, that

begins with Beowulf, and by the time the collision of cultures in complete, culminates in the late

medieval traditions reflected in Gawain's heroism.

Greg Walker, in his essay "The Green Knight's Challenge," goes beyond the established

analysis of Gawain's heroic nature and delves deeper into the very specific nature of his heroism,

as reflected by the Green Knight's challenge. What is distinct in his analysis is the reality that the

Knight aims to test the very courtly credibility of Camelot, ad this is a test that Gawain seems

uniquely suited to endure:

> It will suggest that the Knight's enigmatic appearance serves to alert readers to the subtle
>
> nature of the test which he poses to the court. Just as his very being disrupts accepted
>
> notions of knightliness, so his explicit challenge to Arthur and the language he employs
>
> to issue it also pose a very specific challenge to Camelot's courtly identity, a challenge
>
> which Gawain alone among Arthur's knights seems capable of comprehending, and to
>
> which he responds, not simply with exemplary courtesy, but with a studied and effective
>
> defense of Camelot, its king, and the shared values of the Court (Walker 111).

Gawain's test is a spiritual and moral test, and a test of the courtly and medieval values that

Camelot has come to represent. These values are the culmination of a literary and cultural

tradition that begins with the collisions of the Anglo-Saxon period and have evolved into this

fusion of the Christian virtues of courtly integrity, and martial courage. This is a contrast from

the more explicitly martial struggles of Beowulf, where the spiritual dimension is present, but

more subtle.

James Heffernan makes the link between *Beowulf* and *SGGK* explicit, arguing that despite any skepticism over the connection, the link between the two heroes and their epics is clear. While some may argue that the Christianity of *Beowulf is* more referential, and the Christianity in *SGGK* is explicit in the text, Heffernan points out that both heroes are linked by a common martial struggle (they both cut off a head), by their fall is linked by a common weakness, and "each of its protagonists not only cuts off a head and proves himself a hero by the code of his time but also discovers how treacherous hospitality can be—especially when the reciprocal exchange of hospitable comforts gives way to deadly games of assault, retaliation, and seduction" (Heffernan 82).

Both heroes represent different ends of a similar struggle, at different stages of development. It's no coincidence that the Anglo-Norman epics of the period were part of the so-called alliterative revival, which south to restore the poetic traditions of the Anglo-Saxon past. These two heroes' struggles are aspects of a martial and spiritual struggle that manifests the collision and fusion of classical and Christian worldviews, into an evolving heroic tradition.

A NOTE ON THEORY: NEW HISTORICISM AND FORMALISM

This paper's essential argument supposes the existence of a broad, overarching literary, cultural, and religious tradition that developed in England in the early 6th century, and over the course of the Middle Ages developed into the enduring model of Christian chivalric heroic virtue, that inspires the English-speaking world unto this day. The thesis also supposes that the body of literature produced during this period is not only composed of individual artifacts of literary art, unique and distinct in their own right, but was influenced by, and is an expression of the cultural collisions and fusions taking place in the broader society. It is in this vein that the

paper applies the lenses of New Historicism, and to a lesser extent, formalism. The latter, to analyze the specific literary imagery common in *Beowulf*, *SGGK*, and the other works, and the former, to understand the role culture and history play in the development of a body of literature.

Literary theory is a set of tools with to understand and interpret literature, and one can appreciate the usefulness of individual theories, without accepting all its premises. It is nevertheless quite appropriate for this paper to recognize, in this case at least, that often "literature is not the record of a single mind, but the end product of a particular cultural moment. New Historicists look at literature alongside other cultural products of a particular historical period to illustrate how concepts, attitudes, and ideologies operated across a broader cultural spectrum that is not exclusively literary" (Poetry Foundation 1). The moment is the fusion of classical paganism and Christianity in England, and the end product is the body of Anglo-Saxon and medieval literature.

THE FUSION OF THE CLASSICAL AND CHRISTIAN IN ANGLO-SAXON LITERATURE

This triumph of Christianity over the previous paganism is reflected in the Anglo-Saxon literature of the period. Rather than all traces of the old traditions being destroyed, the cultural traditions are repurposed for the glory of God—as the major works of Anglo-Saxon literature were written down, *Beowulf* and "The Dream of the Rood" for example, they were written down by Christians aiming to express their past traditions as a vehicle for God's revealed truth. The bulk of Anglo-Saxon poetry was written down after England's effective conversion. As Graham Holderness argues, "all the Anglo-Saxon poetry we have was documented, if not actually produced, in the environment of a Christian culture" (Holderness 325).

The German concept of *Wyrd* is again a key concept in understanding how this collision and fusion takes place. First off, it's important to understand that the shift from paganism to Christianity requires a shift in worldview. As the Gospel spread, the people of Anglo-Saxon England began to view their place in the world differently, and this change was reflected in their literature. As Illasics points out:

> To understand why this shift was necessary, we must note that the adaptation or accommodation of religious elements into a religion is always motivated by some sort of discontent with the present religion. In poetry this need for a change is depicted as being triggered by the futility of the world that is dying around the speakers. As Germanic paganism was a dominantly worldly, community-centered worldview, opposed to the world-rejecting, individualistic worldview of Christianity it is not hard to imagine why the latter was more appealing to the lonely outcast of the elegies (Illasics 2).

This shift might seem strange, but as the elements of paganism and Christian contended with each other, those elements of Christianity that the Anglo-Saxons found compatible with their previous traditions were preserved—"the old religion provided so many parallelisms that the tribal culture could absorb the conquering God without disrupting many of its basic preconceptions; therefore, a violent conversion to the new religion was even unnecessary" (Illasics 3).

In the case of "The Wanderer" and the concept of *Wyrd*, one sees how this untranslatable concept-deity works in the body of Anglo-Saxon literature. Consider this from the first few lines from the poem:

> Often the lone-dweller awaits his own favor,
> the Measurer's mercy, though he must,
> mind-caring, throughout the ocean's way

> stir the rime-chilled sea with his hands
> for a long while, tread the tracks of exile—
> the way of the world is ever an open book."
> So, spoke the earth-stepper, mindful of miseries,
> slaughter of the wrathful, crumbling of kinsmen (1-7)

Aaron Hostetter translates *Wyrd* as "earth stepper," who is mindful of miseries/slaughter of the wrathful, crumbling of kinsmen" (6-7). This is the force that has killed the exile narrator's lord— who has put him in a position to reflect on what he lost, lament his present station, yet come to the realization the world is fleeting, and the only hope lies in the security of Almighty God. *Wyrd*, both in the pagan and Christian traditions, becomes in agent of divine order.

There are plenty of other major examples of how this fusion of traditions is reflected in the literature. In *Beowulf*, the epic account of the exploits of the warrior-king of the Geats is refashioned as the story of a Christian warrior whose heroic exploits are for the glory of God, and in the service of divine good against the ultimate evil. There are numerous explicit references to God in the earliest lines of the poem. When Shield Shearson's son is born, he is called "a Comfort/Sent by God to that nation" (Heaney 12-13), and that son, who would turn out to be Hrothgar's ancestor was said to have been given renown by "the glorious Almighty" (16). God is referenced in an explicitly Christian way—there are no references to any pagan gods. All the heroism of this poem is seen as furthering God's purpose in the world. Consider this portion of the poem when Beowulf sets off to fight Grendel:

> Hrothgar, protector of Shieldings, replied:
> "I used to know him when I was a young boy.
> His father before him was called Ecgtheow.
> Hershel the Greath gave Ecgtheow
> His daughter in marriage. This man is their son,
> Here to follow up an old friendship.
> A crew of seamen who sailed for me once
> With a gift-cargo across to Geatland
> Returned with marvelous tales about him:
> A thane, they declared, with the strength of thirty

In the grip of each hand. Now Holy God
Has, in His Goodness, guided him here
To the West-Danes, to defend us from Grendel.
This is my hope; and for his heroism
I will recompense him with a rich treasure" (Heaney 371-385).

Beowulf has been sent by God to deliver the Danes from the menace of Grendel. If Beowulf and Hrothgar are righteous heroes sent forth to defend the world in the name of God (381-382), then Grendel is the opposite—an archvillain of Biblical proportions. Earlier in the poem Grendel is called a demon, a "prowler in the dark," and a "fiend out of Hell":

Until finally one, a fiend out of Hell,
Began to work his evil in the world.
Grendel was the name of this grim demon
Haunting the marches, marauding round the heath
And the desolate fens; he had dwelt for a time
In misery among the banished monsters,
Cain's clan, whom the creator had outlawed
And condemned as outcasts. For the killing of Abel
The Eternal Lord had exacted a price:
Cain got no good from committing that murder
Because the Almighty made him anathema
And out of the curse of his exile there sprang
Ogres and elves and evil phantoms
And the giants too who strove with God
Time and again until He gave them their final reward (Heaney 100-114).

There are specific Biblical references to Cain and Abel, and the reference to "giants" is likely from Genesis 6:4, a reference to those fallen angels who "came in unto the daughters of men, and they bear children to them, the same became mighty men which were of old, men of renown" (Gen. 6:4). Grendel is described as the offspring of this ungodly union. It is unlikely that these references would have come unto the literature from paganism, but the idea of ancient elemental monsters certainly existed in pre-Christian England, and thus the stories of the creatures of Germanic legend could plausibly be fused with Biblical allegory.

Edward Irving is skeptical of Christianity in general, and the Christian influence on Beowulf in particular. His general position is that the Christian elements in the poem are exaggerated by critics, but he nonetheless acknowledges that *Beowulf* is a poem with clear Christian references. His theory is that that "we have in *Beowulf* a poem narrated by an unquestionably Christian poet who has created one outstandingly pious character in King Hrothgar, but nevertheless a poem about actions and characters much less closely involved with Christianity. The narrator is set apart from his cast of characters specifically because he knows the Bible as they do not" (Irving 9). One suspects Irving's biases against Christianity may have led him to dismiss Christian references as coincidence, but this theory nonetheless fits the idea that the pagan elements that this poem draw from are repurposed for Christ—whether Beowulf himself is a Christian is a legitimate point of debate—whether the author of the poem is Christian arguably, is not.

In addressing Irving's skepticism of the hero Beowulf's Christianity, it is important to keep in mind that even if we accept his theory as valid—the evidence for Beowulf as an explicitly Christian hero is rife throughout the text—the Christianization of Beowulf only reinforces the emerging Christian imperative in England. Beowulf's heroism represents the literary and cultural imperative of the times.

What Beowulf represents is a new kind of hero for the people of Anglo-Saxon England—a Christianized warrior who represents the best traditions of their classical past, and the godly humility of their Christian present. Beowulf's pride is tempered by his godly purpose; his pursuit of greatness and glory is viewed as a pursuit of justice for his nation and the glory of God. The world of *Beowulf* is one of heroic sacrifice, the fragility and impermanence of lasting peace and worldly pursuits, and the overarching struggle between good and evil.

Beowulf is a manifestation of the Christianization of the Anglo-Saxon warrior ethos that preceded their conversion. This Christianization is even more evident in the "Dream of the Rood," which both in terms of poetic style and theme represents the essence of Anglo-Saxon Christian poetry. This poem represents the shift from the collisions between the classical and the Christian, to the total subjection of the prior paganism to the Gospel.

The "Dream of the Rood' "fulfills every category of the medieval poetry of the period. It is the ideal representation of "most of the different kinds of Anglo-Saxon poetry that we know from surviving examples: the heroic (e.g., *Beowulf*), the biblical paraphrase {*Christ, Judith*), the saint's life (*Elene*), the elegy (*The Wanderer, The Seafarer*), the riddles, and the specimens of so-called 'gnomic' poetry'" (Holderness 348). In this poem, the Christianization of English literature is effectively complete, paganism both poetically and figuratively surrendering the field.

The story of the dream of the Cross that would be used to crucify Christ represents both a merging of classical and the explicitly Christian, and much more than with *Beowulf*, a redefinition of heroism. In the Cross, one sees evidence of the medieval concepts of speaking objects and personification, and in Christ, there is the reimagining of Christ as warrior-king—his humiliation on the Cross viewed as a stripping away of armor for battle. This cross, who in times past was forced to carry the worst sort of criminals, has been repurposed for the use of God:

> It happened long ago—I remember it still—
> I was hewn down at the holt's end
> stirred from my stock. Strong foes seized me there,
> worked in me an awful spectacle, ordered me to heave up their criminals.
> Those warriors bore me on their shoulders
> until they set me down upon a mountain.
> Enemies enough fastened me there.
> I saw then the Lord of Mankind
> hasten with much courage, willing to mount up upon me (28-34).
> The Cross is forced to endure having to hang criminals, a station assumed to be beneath

its true purpose, but is glorified when Christ himself, the innocent Savior, mounts the Cross to

fulfill His purpose. The Rood becomes a vessel for the glory of God-a tool in the hands of the

"young warrior" who redeems sinful mankind. The Rood collaborates with Christ, feeling the

shed blood, and even the nails.

Christ establishes Himself as the triumphant hero of this poem, his debasement and

humiliation presented as an active, aggressive struggle, much like Beowulf before Grendel or the

dragon:

> The young warrior stripped himself then—that was God Almighty—
> strong and firm of purpose—he climbed up onto the high gallows,
> magnificent in the sight of many. Then he wished to redeem mankind.
> I quaked when the warrior embraced me—
> yet I dared not bow to the ground, collapse
> to earthly regions, but I had to stand there firm.
> The rood was reared. I heaved the mighty king,
> the Lord of Heaven—I dared not topple or reel. (39-45).

Christ strips Himself bare of all trappings to wage war against the Devil, laying down His life to

redeem mankind. The Cross supports the Savior, much as Beowulf's companions aided him in

his battles. Christ has become the Anglo-Saxon hero—in the model of the warrior kings of their

past. Much as the classical Greco-Roman literature was repurposed as a part of God's divine

plan, so have the traditions of Anglo-Saxon culture—Christ as their Eternal King, in many

respects replacing Woden, who was the common link from which much of their Germanic

paganism, as well as their semi-legendary royal genealogy drew from (Chaney 200).

"Dream" is a poem that fully expresses, as much as was possible in late Anglo-Saxon

England, the transformative power of the Gospel message in poetic form. It is a testament to the

triumph of Christianity over paganism, both in terms of the content of the poem itself, as the

pagan, speaking, wooden Cross is gloriously commissioned to serve the Christian Savior, and in

terms of poetic style. John Mark Jones argues that the power of the metaphor of the Cross as

Christian suffering was world-changing in the English-speaking world: "The cross uses language

to describe its identity and purpose, both of which undergo radical revision when the Master of

mankind enters the world and transforms the cross from a torturous tool of death to the sacred

intermediary of life. The cross's change of purpose and identity produces an inversion of world-

order, which is achieved by means of what Paul Ricoeur calls the "metaphoric discourse of

poetry" (Jones 64).

In terms of Biblical typology and classic Anglo-Saxon poetic motifs, the "Dream of the

Rood" achieves a fusion of the classical and the Christian in both the representation of Jesus, as

well as the Cross that bears Him. The fusion of classical Anglo-Saxon and Christian is made

even clearer when the Cross is not just viewed as a tree, but as a sea-vessel, or ship that carries

the Savior to His destiny, and carries believers to Heaven. This is the thesis of Heather Maring's

"Two Ships Crossing," which argues that despite many modern translations, the word describing

the wood of the Rood should be left as *holmwudu*, which is translated "sea-wood, rather than

amended to *holtwudu*, which is translated "forest-wood." Seeing the Cross as a ship both fulfills

the mediaeval tradition of the heroic sea-voyage, as well as the theological framework that

medieval Christians were operating under:

> I argue not only that *holmwudu* should remain unamended because it resonates with
>
> patristic imagery, but also that the epithet ''sea-wood'' arises because The Dream of the
>
> Rood employs the Sea Voyage type-scene. The *lignum maris* concept and the Sea
>
> Voyage type-scene complement each other, both supporting the idea that the Holy Cross
>
> transports its hero (or Hero) and his followers from mortality to immortal life" (Maring
>
> 242).

Maring argues that the Rood, which has already been repurposed from a means for executing

lowly criminals, to a vehicle for Christ's salvific plan, is in fact a genuine vehicle—a vessel that

both carries the hero to His destiny, and both poetically and theologically facilitates the plan of redemption for Christians going forward. Viewing the Cross as anything other than a tree may seem problematic for many believers—the Bible is replete with references to the Cross of Calvary as a tree (Galatians 3:13, Deut. 21:23), yet as medieval Christians learned to view their theology through the lens of their classical traditions, the same collision of traditions is happening here—the Cross is both the wood that lifts up the Savior, as well as the medieval sea vessel that carries the hero to his next destination, much like Beowulf, or the reflective warrior of "The Wanderer."

It is entirely possible to see the Cross as both a tree (spiritual and literal), and as a vessel or ship that carries the hero forth. In terms of Anglo-Saxon Christianity, the latter understanding is most prevalent, and in fact the whole concept of the fusion of classical and Christian in "Dream" hinges on the understanding of the Crucifixion as a sea-voyage. The poem is an ideal representation of late Anglo-Saxon poetry largely because of the merging of cultures, and the sea voyage motif is the crux of the whole poetic operation. This work is essential to the poem, yet not immediately obvious, as there is no explicit record of an actual sea-voyage in the poem.

There are two poetic motifs at work in "Dream," both in service of the recasting of the suffering Savior as conquering hero. On the surface, one sees the Cross being repurposed to hold up Christ and being hoisting up on Calvary. Beneath the surface, specific sea imagery is used, to present the Crucifixion as a heroic sea-voyage. In line with Maring's thesis, the "Dream of the Rood" is held together by a sea-voyage scene narrative that is like other Anglo-Saxon poems. Christ and the Rood fulfill the scene in the poem. Christ "mounts" the Cross (28), and after the Resurrection he "mounts up into Heaven" (89), the journey complete.

In fact, not only does the poem implement a sea-voyage narrative, "Dream" repurposes the Anglo-Saxon sea-voyage narrative for Christ's unique purpose. Under the traditional motif, the hero and his men travel to the ship, as the ship waits, moored. The hero and his men board the ship with treasures, travel to their destination, and unload their treasures as the ship waits for the next journey (Maring 244). In this case, Christ alters the motif, which makes sense. If we recognize that "the Sea Voyage type-scene may be molded to different purposes in the hands of a skillful poet, as it was for Scyld's sea-burial, then we may more readily accept the possibility of its presence in such an unusual context as the crucifixion narrative" (Maring 246). Each poet crafts the sea-voyage to his specific poetic purpose, and that is what is at work here.

Christ has fully subjugated the full range of poetic tradition that is drawn from classical paganism. The classical hero has been redefined, and one of the major poetic motifs has been redefined for the Savior's purpose:

> In "The Dream of the Rood's" inflection of the Sea Voyage type-scene, the hero Christ mounts the rood-as-ship, and upon this *holmwudu* Christ transcends the seas of mortality. His journey is both intransitive and transitive: while upon the cross, he frees mankind in this life; after leaving the cross, he will continue toward the heroic task of Harrowing Hell" (Maring 246).

Christ having completed His journey, finishing his voyage across the spiritual seas to the blessed Heavenly shore, he not only fulfills the heroic example that the poet intended, but the Cross shares in that purpose as well. Christ having achieved victory of sin and death, all believers are now able to make the same journey, with the Rood as the seafaring vessel:

> "Now you could hear, my dear man,
> that I have outlasted the deeds of the baleful,
> of painful sorrows. Now the time has come

> that men across the earth, broad and wide,
> and all this famous creation worthy me,
> praying to this beacon. On me the Child of God
> suffered awhile. Therefore, I triumphant
> now tower under the heavens, able to heal
> any one of them, those who stand in terror of me" (78-86).

The Cross has become the vehicle by which followers of Christ can cross the seas of this fallible world into the safety of God's kingdom. The concept of the redemptive plan being likened to a sea vessel in fact predates the Germanic pagan traditions, and has clear Biblical support, as Noah's Ark is considered a type of Salvation, as Jesus Himself says "as the days of Noah were, so shall the coming of the Son of Man be" (Matt. 24:37). Maring in fact argues that medieval Christians used Noah's Ark as a basis for linking the images of ship and Cross (Maring 242).

"The Dream of the Rood" is an exceptional representation of all the various facets of Anglo-Saxon poetry, as well as the progression from paganism to Christianity. By the end of tenth century, the Anglo-Saxon literary tradition exists as a near-total, mostly harmonious fusion of the classical warrior ethos, and a new Christian ethos. This tradition produces hero whose epic martial struggles are recast and reinterpreted through a Christian lens. This repurposing serves a cultural and artistic purpose, meeting the needs of the times. The tradition reaches its full and complete form in the person of Gawain, in whom Christianity is not only harmoniously fused but thoroughly dominant. In fact, the late medieval epic *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* reflects a refining of the Christian ethos, in which the spiritual dimension is more explicit, and Gawain's primary struggle is a test of his godly virtue, rather than his earthly prowess.

The progress of English literature is inexorably bound to the progress of Christianity. The progress of Christianity in England (and Britain at large) involves the collision and eventual fusion of cultures—the classical paganism of the native tribes, and Christianity. As the people began to reorient themselves through the prism of the Gospel, their cultural, political, and literary

outlook changed. The body of Anglo-Saxon literature is the evidence of the early shift, with classical Germanic pagan heroic culture being reinterpreted through a Christian lens. As the Christianity of the people matured, the fusion of cultures becomes even stronger, and a more mature Christian literature develops, reflecting the spiritual and political outlook of the later period. This maturity is manifested in the Arthurian legends of Wales and the North of Britain, and particularly those of the Arthurian hero Sir Gawain.

PROPHECY AND REDEMPTION: THE MEDIEVAL CHRISTIAN OUTLOOK

In understanding the overarching cultural significance of this body of literature and its role in the progress of Christianity, it is important to keep in mind the concept of prophecy. The English people were living in a time in which the end of the world was a constant thought. Even the classical paganism dealt with themes of fate and judgment, particularly with the concept of *Wyrd*, and the themes of fate and judgment that relate to it. The English people sought to craft heroic figures to express their cultural outlook on their present age.

The idea of prophecy and judgment line up with the heroic sense of destiny and purpose. The heroes of Anglo-Saxon literature saw themselves are fulfilling a higher purpose. In the pagan context, this was duty to one's house, one's lord, one's oath. This is a concept of hospitality and reciprocity that anchors a great deal of the classical pagan ethos and is discussed further later in the paper. Ultimately, this classical ethic is reframed in a Christian context, and one's purpose and destiny is to fulfill God's divine purpose. This divine purpose anchors the hopes of these heroes to a higher redemptive purpose, and therefore anchored the hopes of the medieval Christians who produced the epic accounts of these heroes.

Regarding the last point, it helps to understand that medieval Christians approached much of their Biblical understanding through typology and allegory. Biblical prophecy, and various literary references were all used to further their current condition—a pessimistic realization of the fallen state of the world, the resulting lack of faith in worldly things, and the eventual hope of redemption from evil by God. As Christianity expanded throughout England, people increasingly saw themselves as the ones who would witness the end of the world. In understanding how *Beowulf* furthers this typology of good versus evil, it helps to notice this point made by Alvin Lee, in his Foreword to William Helder's *How the* Beowulf *Poet Employs Biblical Typology:*

> The typological imagination pervaded the liturgy that was experienced daily in Anglo-Saxon churches and monasteries. The sacraments were shaped and informed by the principles of typology. The readings of Scripture were organized typologically. Art and architecture were inspired by Scripture, typologically understood. This was how early medieval people saw their place in history and recognized their identities" (Lee, *I*).

Medieval Christians saw *themselves* as fulfilling Biblical prophecy, as the chosen people of Scripture had, and crafted their literature to reflect that belief. This sense of the prophetic is a key ingredient of the fuel that powers this cultural transformation—the adhesive the binds together two seemingly incompatible worldviews. The evolution from a martial warrior ethic, with its emphasis on physical and personal exploits, to a more explicitly spiritual hero who nonetheless fulfills the martial heroic category, can only be understood in this context. This fusion of cultures is fundamentally a transition from not only the classical to the Christian, but from the physical to the spiritual.

In understanding this great shift, one understands the origins of the Germanic pagan ideas that the conquerors of England carried with them, that eventually fused with Christianity. In

understanding the maturation of this medieval heroic ethic, one must look to the cultural and literary traditions of Northern England, Wales, and parts of France. The medieval heroic ethic, this ethic of chivalric virtue and martial power tempered by spiritual power, is perfected in the legends of King Arthur, and the knights of the Round Table. In fact, Beowulf and Sir Gawain are similar in many fundamental ways. Their respective epics are literary anchors of their age, and ironically, the so-called alliterative revival was an attempt to restore the poetic style of the Anglo-Saxon period. The Arthurian works of this period sought to link itself with the literature of the Anglo-Saxon past.

GAWAIN AND BEOWULF AS SIMILAR HEROIC FIGURES

Beowulf and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* are literary tentpoles of their respective eras. They stand as examples of the poetic style and cultural sensibilities of the Anglo-Saxon and Middle English periods respectively. These two narrative poems have much in common: They both draw from the semi-legendary past for inspiration—in the case of *Beowulf*, the Anglo-Saxon warrior legends that were carried over by those Germanic peoples who conquered England, and in the case of *Sir Gawain and The Green Knight*, the Arthurian legends. Both poems attempt to fuse these legendary themes with Christianity, and as Christianity progresses throughout England, that Christianity becomes more dominant. As narrative poems, they both have a similar poetic style—*SGGK* was part of the attempt to revive the alliterative verse style of the Anglo-Saxon period. This paper concerns itself with another common thread—both poems feature dominant heroes that become literary representations of the moral ideals of the prevailing culture. Beowulf and Sir Gawain have many things in common, yet they have fundamental differences in terms of their experience. Both heroes are tested in terms of their heroic qualities,

but Beowulf's test is largely physical, while Gawain's is largely spiritual. This reflects the attitude of the eras in which each poem was written.

Beowulf's heroic exploits reflect a more traditional classical heroic ethos, repurposed for a Christian context. Gawain's primarily struggles are more explicitly spiritual in dimension, and even his extraordinary martial exploits are a precursor to the bigger challenge. Both heroes achieve martial success and varying degrees of spiritual victory, but the differences are important. Concerning the distinctions between the explicit martial heroism of Beowulf, and the seemingly contradictory humiliations of Gawain. Owen elaborates, pointing out that Gawain's heroism is a test of not just martial prowess, but virtuous endurance:

> The Green Knight's pronouncement of Gawain's virtue suggests that the type of heroism that is required by Gawain has been, for the most part, different from that of other popular romance protagonists. While the authors and translators of Guy of Warwick and Bevis of Hampton, for example, celebrate the martial glory of their heroes, the Gawain-poet departs radically from this type of heroism by emphasizing the endurance that Gawain needs in order to complete his quest. The uniqueness of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight in this respect has been observed frequently (Owen 178).

Gawain's test is one of moral virtue and spiritual strength, and his endurance of the humiliations and machinations of the Green Knight, which are designed to test his moral strength, in fact prove it. In referencing the common tradition of "passive" heroes in the Romance tradition, Owen references Jill Mann's argument concerning the nature of this passive heroism, and how it differs from more modern conceptions of "active" heroism. Gawain's heroism is not as some might argue without personal agency, but in fact a deliberate commitment to this different kind of heroism, and "what makes the protagonist's behavior heroic is the volitional effort that he

must expend in order to maintain his virtue" (Owen 178). Owen and Mann make the distinction

between Gawain's passive heroism, and Beowulf's more active, physical heroism more explicit

(Owen 179), and makes clear that the proper way to understand Gawain's heroic struggle is not

one of passivity, but patience—guided by Christian virtue and spiritual strength (Owen 179).

Gawain and Beowulf are different in the specific dimensions of their struggles, but they

are fundamentally similar in many ways. Both serve as representatives of their respective kings

and realms—Beowulf is called upon by Hrothgar to defend the realm, and Gawain steps up as

the representative of Camelot to defend its credibility. Both Beowulf and Gawain must defeat

imposing and almost supernatural opponents—Grendel is called "a Fiend out of Hell" (Heaney

100). The Green Knight has a supernatural and exotic appearance, and his very exotic nature

provokes the court at Camelot. Both heroes display obviously Christian traits—Gawain is a

model of Christian knighthood, and Beowulf's willingness to lay down his life for his people is

an obvious reference to Christ's sacrifice.

When Beowulf is at the moment of his death, preparing to set his house in order after

sacrificing himself to slay the dragon that threatened his people, he gives thanks to "the

everlasting Lord of All/To the King of Glory" (Heaney 2794-2795). In this is a Christian act of

giving all honor to God, and even an explicit reference to Christ Himself committing to His soul

to the Father: "Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit: and having said thus, he gave up the

ghost" (Luke 23:46). Beowulf's Christian heroism is implicit through a great portion of the text,

and here one sees one of the explicit examples of his Christian and Christ-like character.

Gawain is even more explicitly a fully formed Christian hero, whose adornments on his

armor reflect his values, including the pentangle on his shield, which the Narrator argues is

"proper to that peerless prince" (623). Returning to the theme of the prophetic, Gawain is the

fulfilment of every Christian heroic ideal, the ideal Christian servant-warrior who bears the

hallmarks of both Christ and the Arthurian court. The five points of the pentangle embody all the

personal strength and prophetic Biblical symbolism that a fully matured Christian hero ought to

have:

> And first, he was faultless in his five senses,
> Nor found ever to fail in his five fingers,
> And all his fealty was fixed upon the five wounds
> That Christ got on the cross, as the creed tells;
> And wherever this man in melee took part,
> His one thought was of this, past all things else,
> That all his force was founded on the five joys
> That the high Queen of heaven had in her child (640-648).

The "Queen of Heaven" being a reference to the Virgin Mary, and the child being of course the

Lord Jesus. Gawain is the fulfillment of every hope that was sought for in Jesus Himself, and

while Gawain is clearly not Jesus—his sin later in the poem proves that, he is the idealized

heroic figure who represents as much as possible the embodiment of humble, Christian virtue.

The pentangle is not only a symbol of his prophetic possibility, but in fact the "five fives" of his

armor are a tangible sign of his nearly-spotless character, as spotless as any of the Biblical heroes

you could name:

> The fifth of the five fives followed by this knight
> Were beneficence boundless and brotherly love
> And pure mind and manners, that none might impeach,
> And compassion most precious-these peerless five
> Were forged and made fast in him, foremost of men.
> Now all these five fives were confirmed in this knight (650-656).

Gawain is the closest possible literary and cultural expression of the ideal Christian medieval

hero, fussing traditions from all over Britain. This progression is established in these two

tentpole heroes, similar in importance, style, and heroic temperament.

The similarities are evident and numerous, but there are substantive differences. The Green Knight's characteristics highlight one of the fundamental differences between the two heroes' struggles. His giant green frame is startling, and frightening, yet as Walker points out, the contradiction is obvious:

> As critics have suggested, the Green Knight in himself represents an unsettling mixture of the monstrous and the decorous, the chivalrous and its barbarous, incomprehensible opposite. We encounter him first as a terrifying physical presence, "*aghlich*" (MED s.v. *ehelich*: awesome or dreadful, with overtones of OE *aglceca*: monster or demon) in his sheer size, as the narrative takes in the dimensions and the raw physicality of his body (Walker 112).

The contradiction between his monstrous appearance and his knightly demeanor; his humanity shining through his ostensibly monstrous frame, is a testament to the unique challenge that he presents to Gawain. While the elemental supernatural creatures that Beowulf must fight are spiritual reinterpretations of carnal foes, the Green Knight represents an explicit spiritual test, as his knightly demeanor drives him to test the knightly virtues of Arthur's court. The knightly virtues Gawain must uphold are the manifestation of the Christian heroic ethos that has developed during this period. Beowulf's martial heroism is inspired by and ultimately tempered by Christian values, but Gawain is tasked to defend the strength of those very values—within the court at Camelot, and within himself.

Both heroes display extraordinary success in their initial exploits, and thus enhance their heroic reputations. However, both Beowulf and Sir Gawain appear to underestimate the full dimensions of their struggle. After Beowulf defeats Grendel, he must eventually defeat his vengeful mother, and eventually a dragon. Gawain must pursue additional challenges after taking

off the Knight's head. The latter challenges are more pivotal than the initial ones, particularly for

Gawain.

Ultimately, both Beowulf and Gawain are both bound not just by Christian heroism but

by a common commitment to the social rules and customs of their respective eras. James

Heffernan ties these stories together with a common bond of hospitality—the customs and proper

decorum that noble heroes must respect. Heffernan argues that this hospitality drives both

heroes, in their responses to the threats of the various monsters they must face, and they come to

recognize how" treacherous hospitality can

be—especially when the reciprocal exchange of hospitable comforts gives way to deadly games

of assault, retaliation, and seduction" (Heffernan 82).

The collision of the classical and the Christian are evident in the specific request that

inspires Beowulf to his heroic actions. Beowulf is the mighty Christian knight who slays ancient,

elemental, supernatural beasts, and the Christlike serpent killer who slays the dragon. Satan

appears at the spirit animating the serpent (Genesis 3) and is called the dragon (Revelation 12).

Beowulf's heroic charge is also in line with classical conventions. Beowulf's exploits, "fighting

on behalf of a Danish king who feeds and houses him and his men, *Beowulf* recalls the soldiers

of Homer's *Iliad*, who were regularly entertained by kings such as Agamemnon in return for

their services on the battlefield" (Heffernan 81). Beowulf's exploits fulfill the Christian ethos,

and the classical heroic ethos of hospitality. As Heffernan points out, in a fundamental way,

Beowulf's deeds are transactional. He isn't exactly doing this for free:

> When Beowulf sails with fourteen thanes from the land of the Geats in southern Sweden
>
> to the land of the Danes in northeast Denmark, he is not just selflessly offering his might
>
> and mettle to a king whose realm has been terrorized by a murderous monster. Beowulf

and his men are King Hrothgar's guests, and at one point Beowulf is plainly called his

gaest (1800). For the duration of their sojourn in the land of the Danes, the king feeds and

houses them in return for their services, more precisely for Beowulf's victories over two

predators, Grendel, and Grendel's mother (Heffernan 82).

Beowulf is fulfilling his debt to Hrothgar for the kindness paid to his father Ecgtheow. Beowulf

is rewarded for his exploits with treasures, titles, and other rewards. In fact, Grendel (along with

his mother and the dragon) violates the rules of hospitality by laying siege to the great Hall of

Heorot (Heffernan 83), and Beowulf must defend and uphold those rules, along with Christian

values. Those classical and Christian values collide in the story, as Beowulf aims to defend both.

Gawain is bound by a similar code, rooted in a more mature Christianity, and a more

developed chivalric code. This maturity reflects the evolution of the Christian ethos from

Beowulf to *SGGK*, and Gawain's fidelity to the customs of his age motivates him and ultimately

puts him in the crosshairs. Consider the Knight's challenge itself:

> "Sir Gawain," said the Green Knight, "By Gog, I rejoice
> That your fist shall fetch this favor I seek,
> And you have readily rehearsed. and in right terms,
> Each clause of my covenant with the king your lord,
> Save that you shall assure me. sir. upon oath,
> That you shall seek me yourself, wheresoever you deem
> My lodgings may lie, and look for such wages
> As you have offered me here before all this host" (390-397).

Keep in mind that the challenge entails not just committing to endure the return blow from the

Knight, but to commit to seek out the Knight alone, and without cheating, endure the blow that

the contract requires. Gawain is for obvious reasons convinced keeping the challenge is an

effective death sentence, but he is faithful, so he endures.

The term contract is important here—Christian duty and medieval hospitality compels Gawain to accept the offer and reciprocate the terms of the Knight's offer. As Heffernan argues, the tone of the situation somewhat conceals the very real risk that Gawain faces he fails:

> The punctilious tone of this exchange—word for word, favor for favor, kisses for kisses, and all according to "covenants"—masks the peril threatening Gawain if he fails in any way to keep his part of the bargain. Bertilak seems the most generous and convivial of hosts. He has welcomed a weary traveler to his castle on Christmas Eve; he has fed and lodged and clothed him luxuriously; and he has given him the company of his lovely wife, who on her first morning visit to Gawain's bedroom has told him he is "welcum to my cors" (1237), meaning, among other things, welcome to her body. But if he takes the lady up on her enticing offer or fails to give Bertilak all he has gained from her, he risks nothing less than losing his head to the axe of the giant he is bound to meet on New Year's Day (Heffernan 101).

Gawain's exploits may not seem as flashy and explicitly courageous as Beowulf's—while they both cut off heads, Gawain doesn't literally rip off the arms of his adversary as Beowulf does, or have to drag his opponent's bloody corpse, but his challenge is no less substantial. By the conduct of his age, Gawain is measured by the standards of Christian medieval chivalry, and he succeeds, until he doesn't. The unique die spiritual dimensions of the struggle, namely the sexual temptation he must endure, tests him in ways that yield mixed results.

Gawain sets off as promised, and journeys to meet the challenge of the Knight. On his way, he is met by accompanying challenges that attempt to delay him from his chosen purpose. As he nears the Green Chapel, he lodges in a nearby castle. One notices two things at work--the

lady challenging Gawain's sense of duty, and Gawain, though keeping his fidelity, *ostensibly*

being distracted from his main assignment

> The lady, with guile in heart,
> Came early where he lay;
> She was at him with all her art
> To turn his mind her way.
> She comes to the curtain and coyly peeps in;
> Gawain thought it good to greet her at once,
> And she richly repays him with her ready words (1470-1477).

She has tried to tempt Gawain to lie with her, and as he rebuffs, she continually provokes him to

kiss her, which she argues, is his duty as a chivalrous knight. Her plan is to seduce Gawain while

her husband is away, but Gawain holds back from breaking the oath to the lord of the manor,

respecting the oath of hospitality, still unaware of his host's identity.

Notice that while Gawain is resting, the men are at work hunting the boar. Gawain is

resting, awaiting the spoils, and yet not fulfilling his quest to face the Green Knight. After

consenting to the kiss, she tempts him again, questioning his worth as a knight by challenging

him to share his thoughts on love. Gawain appears to figure out what's going on, and refuses her

advance:

> Thus, she tested his temper and tried many a time,
> Whatever her true intent, to entice him to sin,
> But so fair was his defense that no fault appeared,
> Nor evil on either hand, but only bliss
> they knew.
> They linger and laugh awhile;
> She kisses the knight so true,
> Takes leave in comeliest style
> And departs without more
> ' ado (1549-1558).

Afterwards, Gawain returns to his quest for the Green Knight. It is as if the lady's temptation,

like all the prior temptations was a test of character to see if his purity of heart was still strong. It

appears that at this point at least, he passes.

It is the third temptation that proves to be the most fateful. Gawain does not lie with the wife of the Lord of the manor, and he will meet the Knight shortly after this third temptation, yet it is one pivotal decision that Gawain makes that determines his destiny:

> Then the man began to muse, and mainly he thought
> It was a pearl for his plight, the peril to come
> When he gains the Green Chapel to get his reward:
> Could he escape unscathed, the scheme were noble!
> Then he bore with her words and withstood them no more,
> And she repeated her petition and pleaded anew, 1 86o
> And he granted it, and gladly she gave him the belt,
> And besought him for her sake to conceal it well,
> Lest the noble lord should know-and the knight agrees
> That not a soul save themselves shall see it thenceforth
> with sight" (1855-1865).

Ultimately, Gawain faces the knight, and survives the eventual blow, after flinching the first time. He keeps his life, yet the Knight eventually convicts him using the girdle. Ashamed, he confesses all, and is judged as a faithful hero in all but one area—his desire to live. By taking the girdle, which as it turns out belongs to his wife, he slips slightly from his oath—he shows a bit of human weakness:

> True men pay what they owe:
> No danger then in sight.
> You failed at the third throw,
> So, take my tap, sir knight.
> "For that is my belt about you, that same braided girdle,
> My wife it was that wore it; I know well the tale,
> And the count of your kisses and your conduct too,
> And the wooing of my wife-it was all my scheme!
> She made trial of a man most faultless by far (2353-2361).

Gawain's one failure, declares the Knight, who is revealed to be Sir Bertilak, husband of Arthur's sister Morgan Le Fay, was that he "lacked a little loyalty there" (2366), and the cause "was not cunning, nor courtship either, /But that you loved your own life; the less, then, to blame" (2367-2368).   Gawain, seeing his slipping as a personal failure, repents before God, and

commits to wearing the girdle as a reminder of the sinfulness of man (2434-2435). Like Beowulf, Gawain is presented as a Christian hero, embodying both the agency of God and the character of God. Gawain's Christian character is revealed by his courage, and his humble integrity—to admit his own frailty, and to acknowledge his weakness before God. In Gawain, the medieval heroic template of the chivalrous knight tempered by godly humility is complete.

THE ARTHURIAN LEGENDS: THE TRADITION MATURES

There has been much historical discussion about the origins of King Arthur, and whether a real King Arthur existed. The historical consensus seems to have settled on a Roman-British leader who ruled sometime in the early 5th century. The often-semi-legendary history of the British throne is a fascinating topic of much discussion, but ultimately this paper does not particularly concern itself with that. On the other hand, the cultural and literary impact of the legends of Arthur are essential to the argument of this paper, that the English people, much as they did with the heroic legends of Beowulf and the talking cross of the "Dream of the Rood," used these works to develop and express their moral and cultural outlook.

If Beowulf is the heroic ideal of the early English people, then Arthur becomes the heroic ideal of the later English people. In fact, the themes of Arthur and Camelot continued to influence the English-speaking world centuries after those legends were written and spoken. The great 19th century English poet and Victorian sage Alfred, Lord Tennyson used his poetry to influence and uplift the ideals of his age. Ultimately, his argument was rooted in the examples of two Arthurs—his beloved dead friend Arthur Henry Hallam, and the ancient ideals of King Arthur, whose spirit could reach forward and calm the angst of a rapidly changing society, reckoning with the end of the world. For Tennyson, in his epic *Idylls of the King*, the Arthurian

example would guide a people unsure of their purpose through doubt and despair, as the memory

of Hallam had guided him. Arthur is an agent of God Himself, guiding our destiny:

> The old order changeth, yielding place to new,
> And God fulfils Himself in many ways,
> Lest one good custom should corrupt the world.
> Comfort thyself: what comfort is in me?
> I have lived my life, and that which I have done
> May He within Himself make pure! but thou,
> If thou shouldst never see my face again,
> Pray for my soul. More things are wrought by prayer
> Than this world dreams of (Tennyson 299).

Tennyson's faith what complicated, and in ways the faith of the early English people was

complicated, but clearly these legends were used to appeal to a civic and heroic example rooted

in Christian ideals. Obviously, the purposing of the Arthurian legend wasn't a new thing when

Tennyson did it—he was appealing to a long-established tradition.

The origins of the Arthurian legends themselves are still a point of critical discussion.

The various stories that comprise the Arthuriana come from a variety of sources, particularly

Northern England and Wales. Concerning the prophetic tradition, particularly the prophetic

significance of his Christ-like return from the mystical island of Avalon, Victoria Flood points

out that one of "the most pervasive cultural associations of the legend is its connection to a

Welsh prophetic tradition in which Arthur a occupies a central position as a hero returning to

right national wrongs" (Flood 84). Of course, Flood immediately points out that the *historica*l

basis of Arthur as an explicitly prophetic leader is somewhat dubious, the broader framework is

still sound. Tracing the development of the legend particularly from the work of Geoffrey of

Monmouth, she argues that "contrary to greater weight of twentieth critical understandings of the

legend, the concept of Arthur's return from Avalon was not material that Geoffrey borrowed

ready-made from Welsh popular traditions invested in the hero's return. Rather he drew on a

wealth of source materials circulating in both oral and literary forms to create a new prophetic framework of meaning. This framework proved exceptionally influential" (Flood 85).

Arthur is a product of the Welsh traditions, and as that tradition spread, it becomes prevalent in the literary traditions of the Bretons, and elsewhere. Monmouth, one of the early developers of the semi-historical legend, drew from all of manner of sources, especially those Welsh ones. Whether there is an established historical record of Arthur as a Welsh prophetic leader is almost beside the point—the point is that the reason such myths exist is because of the impact of the Arthurian legend itself. The legend of Arthur has been interpreted and reinterpreted various times throughout history, and it was clear that various peoples of Britain found substantial cultural and moral value in the prophetic potential of Arthur to explain the world around them.

Monmouth was one of the first influential contributors to the legend in Britain, and he drew from various sources and crafted a narrative the :informed British and French perceptions of a singular British prophetic tradition centering on Arthur, common to Wales and Brittany" (Flood 85). This tradition, what Flood calls a "background tradition" (Flood 85), hovers in the background of the literature. This tradition influences Britain, but it didn't start there, much as the Germanic pagan legends that influenced Anglo-Saxon England started elsewhere.

The origins of the Arthurian legend, particularly the British origins have broad political and religious implications. One of the other established records of the legend, beside Monmouth's *Historia Regum Britanniae* was the *Historia Brittonum.* The latter book, much like the former, was semi-historical and drew from a variety of political and religious sources. This sis important, as it appears that for all the sourcing problems with the Historia Brittonum, the purpose of the work was to cast and recast the British (not necessarily English) political conflicts

in religious terms. If the origins of Anglo-Saxon literature involve the collision of classical and Christian, then these early traditions from which the Arthurian legend grew from involve the collision of Christian versus Christian, namely the conflict between the Welsh and the Roman Church, and that conflict's influential resolution.

As Nicholas Higham explains, the *Historia Brittonum* is the account of the rethinking of the British past accordingly" (Higham 177). This work serves as a part of the development of a new British cultural identity, viewed through political and prophetically Biblical terms. As the legends of *Beowulf* did, the heroic and political example of Arthur served the British people:

> In presenting his warrior- Arthur there are parallels sufficient to suggest that our author had the biblical Joshua in mind, as ever reimagining the British past through an Old Testament lens. What Arthur offered to a ninth- century audience above all else was an example of how a British war- leader might unite the disparate forces of their kings into an army capable of triumphing over their enemies. Since history was the working through of God's will, Nennius was seeking to position the Britons as the Old Testament Israelites and their leaders as types of the figures who guided their establishment in the Promised Land. Even while writing the past, therefore, he was anticipating an upturn in the fortunes of God's own British people. Just so did the Lord long ago, and at times of His own choosing, succor the Israelites and smite their enemies (Higham 215).

Just as before, the example of Arthur was expressly repurposed to help the British people orient themselves spiritually in the world. Beowulf's arguably elemental struggle against monstrous foes reflected the English people's more elemental understanding of Christianity and worldly politics. As their political and spiritual understanding grew, so did their approach to the literature—Arthur is seen as a political and spiritual leader, and the prophetic recovery from

Avalon serves to merge the classical Galfridian origins of the legend with the explicitly Christian purpose of the British people.

The interchange between British and English is not accidental--there exists a not-insignificant rift between the English and the broader British peoples at that time. It appears though, with obvious exceptions, that by the time of the Middle English period, and the creation of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, that these rifts are mostly resolved. In any event, the heroic tradition evolves over the years, with the later infusion of the Arthurian legends as the chief ingredient. This evolution is manifested in one of the major Arthurian works of the period, the epic poem *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, and ironically it is Gawain himself, not Arthur who serves as the ideal hero. Gawain is tasked to defend the Arthurian court's chivalric ideals—the very model of heroism under discussion. Gawain is the perfect model of knightly Christian virtue, the embodiment of a good Christian servant. Gawain is the spiritual hero fully revealed, whereas Beowulf is the spiritual hero concealed by typology and shadow. Gawain and Beowulf are opposite ends of a singular line.

CONCLUSION

The history of English (and British) literature is a history of a conquest—a history of collision, and conflict, and fusion. It is also at its core the history of progression of Christianity through the British Isles. The literature and language of a people reflect the values of that people, and the heroic literature of the Anglo-Saxon and Middle English periods reflect the development of a particular kind of a hero, who evolves to fir the spiritual, moral, cultural, and political needs of the times.

In Beowulf and the speaking Cross, there is an often-blunt fusion of classical Germanic paganism and the nascent Christianity of England. As the spiritual and cultural outlook expanded, the people of the British Isles began to fashion for themselves a heroic example to help them reckon with God and the prophetic outlook of the age. The British people often saw themselves as fulfilling Bible prophecy, and the broad themes evident in these works including *Beowulf*, "The Dream of the Rood," and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, helped them express their cultural outlook.

In Gawain, that which was implicit in Beowulf becomes explicit—the spiritual dimension which is imposed upon the classically martial heroic style becomes explicitly spiritual, and the model of Christian heroism changes. Gawain, even more than Arthur and the rest of his knights, fulfills the ideal characteristics for the fully defined, medieval hero—martial prowess tempered by godly humility, and an acute awareness of one's own frailty. If Arthur is the Christ-figure, with his royal presence, heroic display, and his promised redemptive prophetic resurrection from Avalon, then Gawain is the ideal servant of Christ—Arthur is never shown to fail morally in most of these stories, but his servants often do. Gawain represents the closest example of the enduring example of medieval valor that historians, cultural critics, poets, and politicians have appealed to in calling for an embrace of those heroic values to escape the confusion of an age reckoning with human frailty, and impending judgment.

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