MATERIAL LITERATURE IN ANGLO-SAXON POETRY

by

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The scattered instances depicting material literature in Anglo-Saxon poetry should be regarded as a group. This phenomenon occurs in *Beowulf*, *The Dream of the Rood*, and *The Husband's Message*. Comparative examples of material literature can be found on the Ruthwell Cross and the Franks Casket. This study examines material literature in these three poems, comparing their depictions of material literature to actual examples.

Poems depicting material literature bring the relationship between man and object into dramatic play, using the object's point of view to bear witness to the truth of distant or intensely personal events. Material literature is depicted in a love poem, *The Husband's Message,* when a prosopopoeic runestick vouches for the sincerity of its master, in the heroic epic *Beowulf* when an ancient, inscribed sword is the impetus to give an account of the biblical flood, and is also implied in the devotional poem *The Dream of the Rood,* as two crosses both pre-and-post dating the poem bear texts similar to portions of the poem.

The study concludes by examining the relationship between material anxiety and the character of Weland in *Beowulf, Deor*, Alfred's *Consolation of Philosophy*, and *Waldere A & B*. Concern with materiality in Anglo-Saxon poetry manifests in myriad ways: prosopopoeic riddles, both heroic and devotional passages directly assailing the value of the material, personification of objects, and in depictions of material literature. This concern manifests as a material anxiety. Weland tames the material and twists and shapes it, re-affirming the supremacy of mankind in a material world.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION: MATERIAL LITERATURE IN ANGLO-SAXON POETRY

I. Objects in Anglo-Saxon Poetry

While generally neglected by critics, descriptions of and meditations on objects make up

a substantial portion of the Anglo-Saxon poetic record.[1] A small subset of these objects

is epigraphic. However, epigraphic objects and literary depictions of these objects have

never been examined as a group, despite the prominent placement of these objects within

the Anglo-Saxon poetic corpus. However, doing so is an effective way to approach the

complexities of Anglo-Saxon literary objects.

Objects described as carrying epigraphic inscriptions need to be evaluated as

material literature, with their own sets of literary conventions. These conventions include

inscriptions that cross linguistic lines: many epigraphic items carry inscriptions in either

Latin or in the Latin alphabet; however, examples contained within written poems are

almost always described as being written in runes. The relevant conventions are also

influenced by the object's form and function. The material used to fashion the object

plays a part in the epigraphic tradition, as does the maker or owner's desire to associate

themselves with the finished product. The current study examines inscribed objects in

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[1] There are, however, detailed studies on specific types of objects. See H.R. Ellis Davidson for a detailed examination of swords in Anglo-Saxon England, and Jolly et al. for studies of crosses in Anglo-Saxon England.

Anglo-Saxon poetry—those bearing a text within a text—in a corpus where objects, particularly finely made swords, byrnies, cups, and golden rings, are a near-constant presence.

In Anglo-Saxon literature, the depiction of writing on an object—material literature—creates a multi-valent space in which meaning is negotiated between the object and the text it carries. But this raises a question: how to interpret material objects in Old English poetry, particularly those bearing a text within a text? This study will examine the meanings created by interactions between text and object in Anglo-Saxon poetry. These interactions can best be observed when examining depictions of material literature, since text and object are inextricably linked in these objects. Depictions of material literature can be found in *The Husband's Message*, *The Dream of the Rood*, and *Beowulf*.

However, these poems descend from dissimilar traditions. They combine motifs and devices from various literary traditions but are at their cores a love poem, a devotional poem, and a heroic epic. The symbolic meanings these poems attach to objects vary according to the conventions specific to their literary traditions. For example, *Beowulf* contains many passages praising both weapons and treasure—as would be expected in a poem composed in the heroic tradition. However, *Beowulf* defies expectations by continually questioning the worth of material objects. After using interdisciplinary methods to examine material literature within the above literary traditions, the study will conclude by examining appearances of Weland the Smith in

Anglo-Saxon literature and how those appearances deepen our understanding of the relationship between man and object in Anglo-Saxon England.

II. Somethingness

Old English poetry never attempts to describe nothingness but instead does the opposite: it is obsessed with *somethingness*. Despite the diversity of modern attempts made to represent it, nothingness is a monolithic concept: it is a simple and terrible absence of *somethingness*. *Somethingness*, however, is not so easily pinned down. In Anglo-Saxon literature, it is often quite specific *swordness* or *treeness* or *whaleness* or *goldness*: objects carry dissimilar symbolic values and speak with very different voices. These voices are found as, for example, a prosopopoeic sword in the Exeter Book riddles or a preaching statue in *Andreas*. *Somethingness* is not materiality: the definition of materiality is merely having substance, or the opposite of nothingness. *Somethingness* is the potential for symbolic space within the material. It includes the body—the fingers I use to type this and the fingers you use to turn the page. Mankind, our bodies formed from physical substance or no, at the same time possesses symbolic thought and language that opens some sort of window on our interiority, an escape from our terrible, mute materiality.

In reality, the material object never shares its interiority. This has been most famously explored by Immanuel Kant in his *Critique of Pure Reason*. Kant's *Ding an sich* (thing-in-itself) is also the unknowable essence of the object. His position is that the

object is not really knowable to the subject; it cannot be tamed or understood as anything but a phenomenon—a perception of the object that is limited by our ability to comprehend it using our imperfect senses.

The materiality of our bodies colors our perception of the material object. Materiality, though easily described, cannot be *known* outside of the symbolic web meant to contain it: I can hold a sword in my hand—feel its weight, the cold, hard surface of the steel and the way it absorbs heat, see the way it reflects light; I can describe a sword; I can classify a sword according to my understanding of its uses and its relationships—as a short or long or broad sword, a Roman or Norse sword, a ceremonial or basic sword; I could even make a sword if I acquired the knowledge and skill required to do so. I can kill with a sword—the hard, sharp mass of the *Ding-an-sich* connecting with soft, frail flesh. However, there remains a total disconnect between the subject and the object. Simply put, I cannot know what it is to *be* a sword. It is outside the bounds of my ability as a subject to know the object, or for my relationship to it to be anything but one-sided.

However, the party constructing and controlling this relationship is in doubt. This point is raised by Bill Brown in one of the most notable recent works on materiality in literature, when he posits that the subject is actually created by the objects around him. Brown explores the mysteries of what he calls *thingness* in American literature—arguing that the modern emergence of the subject crowds out the object in literature— he calls for his readers to reevaluate the importance of the object and posits that the object only comes to attention when something goes wrong:

> As they circulate through our lives, we look *through* objects (to see what they disclose about history, society, nature, or culture—above all, what they disclose

about *us*), but we only catch a glimpse of things. We look through objects because there are codes by which our interpretive attention makes them meaningful, because there is a discourse of objectivity that allows us to use them as facts. A *thing*, in contrast, can hardly function as a window. We begin to confront the thingness of objects when they stop working for us: when the drill breaks, when the car stalls, when the windows get filthy, when their flow within the circuits of production and distribution, consumption and exhibition, has been arrested, however momentarily. The story of objects asserting themselves as things, then, is a story of a changed relation to a human subject and thus the story of how a thing really names less an object than a particular subject-object relation.[2]

However, his definition of the core concept in his work, while interesting in that it

shows how the ambiguity regarding the definition of the object is ensconced in the

English language, still leaves something to be desired, in that it does not apply to every

object but only those that cannot easily be classified:

And yet, the word *things* holds within it a more audacious ambiguity. It denotes a massive generality as well as particularities, even your particularly prized possessions [...]. The word designates the concrete yet ambiguous within the everyday [...]. It functions to overcome the loss of other words or as a place holder for some future specifying operation [...]. It designates an amorphous characteristic or frankly irresolvable enigma [...]. [...] *Things* is a word that tends, especially at its most banal, to index a certain limit or liminality, to hover over the threshold between the nameable and the unnamable, the figurable and the unfigurable, the identifiable and the unidentifiable [...].[3]

In this sense, *thingness* refers simultaneously to the *Ding an sich* and to the

phenomenon, or perhaps solely to the qualities of objects that resist classification, as if

classification could truly "tame" the object and render it knowable. No amount of

description can really achieve this feat. The thing that is classifiable and that which is not

are equally unknowable in their material existence, due to limits on the subject's ability

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[2] Brown 4.

[3] Ibid. 5.

to experience the world around her: the thing is always deformed and reshaped by passing through the senses of the subject. The thing itself cannot be comprehended by any means available, though things are frequently speaking subjects in Anglo-Saxon poetry.

While much of Anglo-Saxon literature may focus on heroic deeds and speeches, or gnomic wisdom, few have noted just how much focus there is on material objects, or how those same objects influence or are influenced by the more ephemeral aspects of poetry. Material objects are described using complicated kennings or references to their manufacture or function, they have personal names as if they were alive, and they even speak—prosopopoeia is a commonly found poetic device from the period. In Anglo-Saxon devotional poetry, material objects are sometimes attacked as a distraction from salvation, and sometimes, as in the case of the cross, praised as a gateway to eternity, depending on the context in which they appear. Even *Beowulf* is not entirely positive in its portrayal of swords and treasure—swords often fail to aid the hero, and treasures are associated with mortality. In any case, the material object in Anglo-Saxon England was both feared and desired—and maybe just a little feral.

III. Material Anxiety

Anglo-Saxon literature is filled with anxiety about things. Few have noted the extent to which both materialism and materiality are depicted as concerns in Old English literature. Nor is this as simple as the old pagan/Christian debate: it is multifaceted and pervades

every aspect of Anglo-Saxon literature. It can be found at the heart of the heroic epic of *Beowulf* as well as the intensely devout *Blickling Homilies*. Many of the elegies are acutely concerned with the spiritual dangers posed by material items like gold and jewels. The Exeter Book contains a large number of riddles that manifest these fears by seeking to reveal the mysterious interiority of material items in the first person—often in a humorous fashion. One thing is certain: objects are an ever-present concern.

The nature of this profound anxiety in heroic literature is avariciously acquisitive, mirroring the concerns of Anglo-Saxon secular culture. This anxiety is not especially philosophical: it is an anxiety about *possession*. The object can no more be possessed or controlled than it can be known. This anxiety begins with the body: as material beings, we do not truly possess our own bodies. The flesh does as it will: it ages, it is acted on by outside forces, it rots and deserts us, becomes a part of the material being of worms. We cannot control our materiality; we cannot alter its material properties, either. We cannot make our flesh hard and enduring like stone, eternally bright and beautiful like gold, or lethal like steel. Anglo-Saxon literary characters are surrounded with material objects selected to impart these qualities—the massive stone walls of *The Wanderer*, the twisted gold rings distributed by Hroþgar to his þegns, the heirloom swords and cunningly worked armor praised as *Welandes geweorc* throughout Germanic literature. However closely objects may rest on the bodies of heroes and queens, the materialities of flesh and treasure remain stubbornly dissimilar.

The manifestation of anxiety surrounding the possession of the material in Anglo-Saxon literature is just as diverse. This is especially apparent in heroic poetry, where a

warrior's worth is parceled out in treasures and his life depends on his sword, and yet his possessions will outlive him. References to swords and treasure in heroic poetry are extremely conflicted. In *Beowulf*, swords fail the hero again and again. Ultimately, depending on the sword Nægling against a dragon costs the hero his life. Warriors' relationships with swords are structured so that their lives are dependent on something they cannot truly know or possess, leading to a profound anxiety being expressed about swords in heroic literature.[4]

To further complicate this, both weapons and treasures are frequently described as heirlooms or as variations on the *enta geweorc* (work of giants) formula. These items are frequently described as ancient and possess histories, names, and pedigrees all their own. They have been owned by many men, not one. To possess them is an honor, but it is in turn to be possessed *by* them: the object remains, the man is transient. An example of this can be seen in *Beowulf* when a fabulous necklace is given to the hero, linked to an equally fabulous and fateful item, passed to his lord, Hygelac, and then lost to the Frisians:

> Him wæs ful boren,   ond freondlaþu
> wordum bewægned,   ond wunden gold
> estum geeawed,   earm[h]reade twa,
> hrægl ond hringas,   healsbeaga mæst
> þara þe ic on foldan   gefrægen hæbbe.
> Nænigne ic under swegle   selran hyrde
> hordmaðum hæleþa,   syþðan Hama ætwæg
> to þare byrhtan byrig   Brosinga mene,
> sigle ond sincfæt,—   searoniðas fleah
> Eormenrices,   geceas ecne ræd.—
> Þone hring hæfde   Higelac Geata,

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[4] The fallible sword is a common type-scene in Germanic literature. See Garbaty 1962 for an analysis of examples.

nefa Swertinges   nyhstan siðe,
siðþan he under segne   sinc ealgode,
wælreaf werede;   hyne wyrd fornam,
syþðan he for wlenco   wean ahsode,
fæhðe to Frysum.   He þa frætwe wæg,
eorclanstanas   ofer yða ful,
rice þeoden;   he under rande gecranc.
Gehwearf þa in Francna fæþm   feorh cyninges,
Breostgewædu,   ond se beah somod;
wyrsan wigfrecan   wæl reafedon
æfter guðsceare,   Geata leode
hreawic heoldon.[5]

(The cup was borne to him and welcome offered in friendly words to him, and twisted gold courteously bestowed on him, two arm-ornaments, a mail-shirt and rings, the largest of necklaces of those that I have heard spoken of on earth. I have heard of no better hoard-treasure under the heavens since Hama carried away to his bright city the necklace of the Brosings, chain and rich setting: he fled the treacherous hatred of Eormenric, got eternal favor. This ring Hygelac of the Geats, grandson of Swerting, had on his last venture, when beneath his battle-banner he defended his treasure, protected the spoils of war: fate took him when for pride he sought trouble, feud with the Frisians. Over the cup of the waves the mighty prince wore that treasure, precious stone. He fell beneath his shield; the body of the king came into the grasp of the Franks, his breast-armor and the neck-ring together. Lesser warriors plundered the fallen after the war-harvest: people of the Geats held the place of corpses.)[6]

In heroic poetry, the object frequently endures while the hero dies and is left with only his fame. The above example illustrates just how intimately precious objects are associated with both prestige and mortality, as the necklace changes hands as payment for great deeds and then telescopes from the joys of the hall to the field of the fallen and back again.

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[5] Klaeber ll. 1192-1214.

[6] Donaldson 21-22.

IV. Language and Objects

Anglo-Saxon heroic materialism has an obverse: poverty. The anxiety surrounding

poverty is brilliantly used as a Christian metaphor in the poems *The Wanderer* and *The*

Seafarer and as a premise for the heroic poem *Deor*. Consequently, Old English poetry

is centered on themes concerning the possession of the material and its loss or

renunciation. Even Old English gnomic (wisdom) poetry—in which the poem transmits

traditional wisdom—is surprisingly materialistic, often detailing the traditional lore that

has accumulated around material culture. Jim Earl demonstrates the Anglo-Saxon

tendency to use material metaphors to express abstract concepts very effectively using

Bede's *Parable of the Sparrow*, in which man's life is described as the short flight of a

sparrow through a hall and into the darkness outside:

> The counselor's insight is very restrained. His sublime diminution of the world in
> the image is congenial to a Christian vision, as is his sudden humility before the
> mystery of transcendence; but his corollary that *other than this we know nothing*
> *at all* effectively maintains the world, fleeting as it is, as the absolute foundation
> of man's life—it is the immanent world that constitutes his ultimate reality and
> meaning.[7]

This neatly demonstrates the way in which Old English poetry privileges material

reality as a dominant metaphorical system. Even when addressing the transcendent, the

poet chooses to couch the philosophical in terms of the material. The metaphors of the

language often prefer to stay inside the hall. Objects in Anglo-Saxon literature prove to

have extremely complex symbolic functions that are often glossed over or missed: the

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[7] Earl, 1994, 54.

sword is not just a sword—it is also a concrete manifestation of heroic ideals, a bearer of tales, and a fickle ally.

V. Literature and Objects

Anglo-Saxon ambivalence toward the material world is sometimes presented in a straightforward manner. For example, the famous section of *Beowulf* known as the *Lay of the Last Survivor* uses the same strategy as the more obscure *Riming Poem*: a blunt warning of the impermanence of the relationship between the material and mankind. However, in *Beowulf*, the living pass away; in the *Riming Poem*, it is the material that is transient. In either case, the bond between man and object is a bond that cannot be trusted. This is a reflection of a deep-seated *contemptus mundi*, or rejection of the world, found in the more explicitly religious literature, often found expressed in such formulaic phrases as *þis læned lif*. Though this concept is often taken to mean rejection of the *pleasures* of the world, in Anglo-Saxon literature it seems to mean a rejection of the *things* of the world, and even of the solidity of the world itself. Materiality is portrayed as a trap, a distraction from the true existence found in the company of God. The intangible is seen as real and the tangible as a deadly mirage.

It is difficult to divide Anglo-Saxon poetry by genre, or even into religious or secular poetry. However, we do have examples of poems that have obvious secular roots, concerns, and value systems. These poems include *Beowulf, Widsið, Deor, Waldere A* and *B* and *Wulf and Eadwacer*, though there are quite a few others, including many of the

riddles, which at least partly reflect the secular Anglo-Saxon world. These poems mainly reflect the heroic values of the lord and his retainers: the worth of the lord and his þegns is constituted via exchange of material items such as rings, swords, and land.[8] The subject and the object of desire constitute each other as the social self is constructed via exchange, leading to anxieties about materiality that are not expressed in the same fashion in overtly religious literature: treasure can be alienated and weapons can fail. When this happens, man is often alienated from society, as is seen in *Deor* and *The Wanderer*, or risks death as *Beowulf* did at the failure of Nægling. Indeed, *Beowulf* can be read as a parable of the failure of things to save mankind. As such, it mixes secular and religious perspectives on materiality: both distrust objects, but for different reasons. *Beowulf* explores the failure of the material to save man—the swords, treasures, and women exchanged in this poem all fail to aid their recipients. This is the inverse of the heroic ideal—the heroic nightmare, if you will, or at least an existential crisis. The only possible outcome of a relationship with objects is tragedy. Indeed, in several passages *Beowulf*'s attitude toward materiality comes very close to that of many of the overtly religious poems.

This distrust of the object did not prevent religious houses from acquiring material items such as bejeweled processional crosses and sumptuously decorated manuscripts. In a Christian context, materiality undergoes a symbolic transformation—the gold that is sinful in secular life becomes reflective of God's glory and the glory of the heavens. Gold does not tarnish or rust and so becomes an appropriate metaphor for the eternal

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[8] See Bazelmans for a detailed study on the anthropology of exchange and constitution of personhood in *Beowulf*.

glory of Heaven. However, the Christian ideal was still to eschew material possessions. We see these conflicting Christian views of materiality and the material at odds in the *Dream of the Rood*, where a dreamer recounts the struggle between the various symbolic forms of the cross, as it transitions from gilded reliquary to rough-hewn and blood-soaked tree.

Another common strategy for representing the material in Anglo-Saxon literature involves prosopopoeia—the granting of interiority and voice to material objects. This device is most often seen in the large collection of riddles contained in the Exeter Book. In these riddles, material objects often reveal their identities by describing both their uses and manufacture in the first person. Most of these objects are man-made rather than natural, and their relationship with mankind is usually the topic at issue in the poems. As a group, the riddles are diverse—with solutions covering everything from a humble (and lascivious) onion to the entirety of Creation. Prosopopoeia is a device attempting to tame the feral object: giving it a human voice and relationships renders it more human, and thus able to be comprehended. However, the object only partly submits to this treatment. Even with the human voice, it narrates an experience outside of human possibility: even the repeated descriptions of the experiences of the object are alien. A man's experience of being felled by an ax and a tree's are very different. A man's experience of being bound by chains and rammed headfirst into a stout door is bound to differ from a tree's as well. However, prosopopoeia comes as close as any literary device to bridging the gap between man and object.

VI. Material Literature in Anglo-Saxon Poetry

Material literature appears several times in the extant poetic corpus: the Giants' Sword episode of *Beowulf*, the short poem *The Husband's Message*, and in a more oblique manner in *The Dream of the Rood*. An inscribed heavenly cross is found in *Elene*, and a runic sword is briefly referred to in the *Second Dialogue of Solomon and Saturn*. There are also several named pieces of material literature—the Ruthwell Cross, the Brussels and Bewcastle Crosses, and the Franks Casket, as well as various inscribed weapons— that provide a paradigm through which to interpret objects in the poems discussed below.

While the medieval manuscript technically fits the description of material literature because texts are written on vellum leaves, it is also obvious that the Anglo-Saxons differentiated between literature written in manuscripts and that carved onto other things. Various crosses, swords, rune-sticks, stones, and boxes found in the Anglo-Saxon or Germanic world carry inscriptions, many of which are composed using metrical verse. These items carry messages that are traditionally matched to the form of the object upon which they are inscribed. This tendency carries over into literary depictions of these objects, but not entirely. Literary depictions of these objects also differ to some degree from the objects they represent.

Epigraphic objects usually make prosopopoeic statements, much like those in the riddles. These statements generally reference the object's creation or ownership. Most written prosopopoeic texts exhort the reader to identify the *Ding-an-sich* via its relationships with man. These items are anthropocentric and often playful. Poems

depicting material literature are less playful and more concerned with establishing the trustworthiness of the object as witness. When these items speak, they are no doubt taking on human qualities, but they also bring more of their material essence into their literary milieu: poems using this trope are moved slightly outside the realm of humanity and possess subtly alien, unknowable voices—the voices of ancient, cold steel or trees or bones—even when these voices don't speak in the first person (as is the case in *Beowulf*). This voice of the unknowable object isfeature of Anglo-Saxon poetry, contrasting with the voices of men to draw attention to the limits of human comprehension, and transgressing these limits in an attempt to show a deeper truth.

VII. Method of Transmission

Ideas, when forged into words, are not objects: while capable of terrible effect, they have no mass. Literature bearing a sword cannot of itself behead a man; the same cannot be said of a sword bearing literature. Be it the human mind, the pages of the book, or the steel of the sword, the methods used to store and transmit writing also shape the form and functionality of the writing to various degrees. This is, in itself, a simple enough concept. However, the extent of this shaping and the relationship between literary production and material philosophy is still in need of exploration. Materiality seeps into literature in two ways: the construction of literary objects, as discussed above, and the method of transmission. When evaluating material literature, it is important to acknowledge at least some of the effects manuscripts have on the literature contained within their leaves.

The method of transmission affects all literary content, and the methods of literary transmission used in the Anglo-Saxon period are diverse. There has been a great deal of attention paid to the ways that oral transmission shapes poetry. There has been considerably less attention paid to how material and written literature shapes the text. Written literature is material literature: it is silently influenced by the materiality of the codex—the effects of its form and function hover in the background, unspoken, even in works that use the oral formulaic style. The format of the codex allows literary works to decouple from the traditional alliteration and metrics of oral literature. The traditional alliterative structure of oral poetry is, in essence, a mnemonic device allowing scops to both rapidly assemble a poem and to remember one already composed. Folk literature also relies on repetition, but of motifs rather than oral formulae. While runic writings are generally fairly brief, limited by the surfaces onto which they are carved, they make use of traditional formulae that often alliterate, much like oral literature. Book writings are freed from these material constraints.

By the massive expansion of surface area and durability of vellum, and the protective qualities of the covers (frequently wood or metal), literature written in books was able to free itself from the conventions imposed by harder surfaces. No longer was the alliterative style *necessary* for poetics in the Old English language. Instead the writer was free to experiment. Prose chronicles and long works of philosophy and history were now possibilities. However, books still infused writing with their materiality—it just became harder to detect. The shape of the page and its margins affect the words placed upon it in subtle ways: writers begin at the top of the page rather than the middle,

cramping lines closely to save costly materials. There is a desire to fill the page in order to avoid waste. Words are combined with pictorial art to create a complex interplay between text and ornament. Written literature is influenced by the material on which it is composed, a situation that often goes unnoticed by critics. For example, even when composing in the oral-formulaic style, the use of a codex allows the author to be more inventive—to experiment with new formulae, for example.

Composing on surfaces that have to be carved also influences the content of literature. Brevity is the most important way in which the material literature usually differs written literature: the size of the object and the skill required to incise hard surfaces are factors influencing the length of epigraphic inscriptions. Poems depicting material literature are quite expansive when compared to actual material literature: even the Franks Casket riddle, a comparatively lengthy inscription, is short compared to most of the written riddles; the Ruthwell Cross poem is far shorter than *The Dream of the Rood.*

Many inscriptions from this period assert possession, either by ownership or craftsmanship, mirroring the anxiety about possession seen in written literature, but in a much more direct manner, as the owner is directly asserting his control over a specific object. Inscriptions on objects are frequently prosopopoeic, showing the object's acquiescence to its servitude. Written depictions of material literature bring the *Ding-an-sich* into the literary world, giving objects strident and detailed voices, using themes and devices from multiple literary traditions. The material properties of the object determine the content of the text. It is against this background, where several distinct systems are in

use to record thought, that material literature is used to draw attention to the variety of available methods of expression and their symbolic possibilities.

VIII. Runic Objects

All of the poems discussed below are associated with runes: *The Husband's Message* explicitly uses runes to convey its message; the prosopopoeic cross of *The Dream of the Rood* is associated with a monument bearing both runic and Latinate inscriptions, and the Giants' Sword from *Beowulf* delivers its message *þurh runstafas rihte gemearcod*. Traditionally, runes were used for composing public memorials on massive runestones or private messages on runesticks or prosopopoeic statements indicating ownership or craftsmanship of various objects—though there are many examples of all of these items inscribed in Latin letters as well. These items were usually marked using traditional formulae. There are also examples of English runic talismans.[9] From these examples, it can be seen that the uses to which runes were put were both public and private, temporary and permanent, mystical and mundane.

Again, the form of the object, its materiality, is a major, if silent, contributor to the literary content. For example, let us here examine runestones: these are large objects meant to make very public proclamations memorializing the fallen. The object and the words are both vital in creating the meaning of the text and subtexts inscribed upon it. The runestone is placed in a conspicuous place. Upon it is usually carved a memorial and

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[9] See R.I. Page, An Introduction to English Runes for examples of talimans and associated objects.

the name of the next of kin and often the carver. The weight of the stone lends weight to the words, along with its qualities of immobility and near immunity from passing time, to some degree granting the dead the immortality of stone. No other material would have been as suitable for the early medieval Germanic peoples to both claim inheritance and to commemorate a life lost to the rapid decay of the flesh.

In contrast, the runestick was used to deliver private messages. Though there are no known English examples of runesticks due to adverse conditions for the preservation of wooden objects, it can be assumed that English runesticks would have been of a comparable size to their Scandinavian counterparts. Runes were designed to be carved on wooden objects—hence the lack of curved characters—and the existence of a distinct Anglo-Saxon *fuþorc* in all probability guarantees that runes at some point made their way onto wooden objects. Writings on these objects partook in the materiality of the wood used to convey them: they were meant to be read and discarded. Wood, unlike stone, decays—or can be hastily burned. It can be carved quickly and easily with a knife, and can also be erased and re-used. Sticks are small and portable. The writings on these runesticks all partake of these qualities: they may have been brief, private, disposable, or urgent messages, hence the private nature of the poem *The Husband's Message*.

Writings on metals and other luxury goods, like whalebone combs, partake in yet another set of material qualities: they are frequently small, meant to be permanent, and involve displays of pride—in ownership or craftsmanship. Because the objects they are inscribed on are often status symbols, swords and coins alike often bear names of either the owner or the carver. The smith may also use a "smith mark," a symbol denoting the

origins of the item. Scandinavian swords also sometimes bore religious symbols, possibly as talismans to increase the efficacy of the weapon on which they were carved.[10]

Two of the poems discussed below specifically mention or use runic characters: the Giants' Sword in *Beowulf* is described as having *runstafas rihte gemearcod* (runes correctly written), and while the runestick's message in *The Husband's Message* is mostly written in Latin letters, the ending makes explicit use of five runic characters. However, the intended meaning of those characters is the subject of many disputed readings, with no real agreement among critics. The prosopopoeic cross of *The Dream of the Rood* is a harder case to argue: it never explicitly mentions either runes or writing. However, when read against the background of material literature, it is clear that this is the context in which the poem is meant to be read: there are two extant examples of crosses with lines echoing the poem. The first, the massive Ruthwell Cross monument, contains a version of the poem carved in runic letters. Most contemporary critics assume the monument predates the written version of the poem.[11] The reliquary known as the Brussels Cross probably post-dates the written version of the poem by less than a century, but still demonstrates that the association between the poem and actual crosses spans several centuries.

There are other occurrences of runes in Anglo-Saxon written literature, mainly in riddles found in the Exeter Book, but those poems to not attempt do represent the runes in

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[10] Ellis Davidson 67.

[11] Though there are critics who argue for a later date for both the runic carving and the monument itself. Opinion on dating the crosses is quite diverse. O'Carragain devotes some space to the topic. Also see Mac Lean and Orton. Recent arguments seem to agree on a date somewhere in the eighth century, but there are still detractors.

their epigraphical context. The depiction of epigraphic literature within written literature is a device that unravels ingrained literary conventions. It is a signal that boundaries are about to be crossed and rules are about to be broken. The poems where this conceit is used display a complex knotwork of literary traditions and styles. These poems mix styles in a way that is not seen elsewhere in the corpus, and they use the materiality of inscribed objects to achieve this effect.

IX. Material Literature and Literary Conventions

The Giants' Sword episode of *Beowulf* and the section often referred to as Hroþgar's Sermon clearly demonstrate the combining of literary conventions that occurs when material literature is depicted in a poem: when Beowulf discovers an ancient sword in the Grendelkin's lair and brings the inscribed hilt to Hroþgar, the poem displays multiple literary traditions in something of a chronological order. First it blends motifs taken from folktales (the Bear's Son and Two-Troll motifs) into a poem using the oral-formulaic style. It then uses the runes on the hilt of the sword to encapsulate the "origin of ancient strife" in a biblical style. From here Hroþgar launches into a speech that borrows both from gnomic and homiletic traditions. This speech specifically condemns placing one's trust in material treasures, much like *The Wanderer, The Seafarer,* and *The Riming Poem.* There is nothing else quite like this episode in Anglo-Saxon literature. It is a journey through Anglo-Saxon literary history, as the redactor struggles to control an unruly text that is clinging to the literary traditions and motifs that originally shaped it.

The Husband's Message also partakes of multiple traditions: the riddle, the secular love poem, and the charm. Though damaged by fire and in places unreadable, the extant material is clear enough to show that this short love poem is encapsulated by a riddle and a runic charm. The motifs associated with the riddling tradition often explore materiality, attempting to show the inner life of the object. This poem engages in the same activity, but for different ends. The material and the human are not clearly delineated in the poem, showing that the messenger/object has something of the human and the recipient/reader is something of an object.

The prosopopoeic cross of *The Dream of the Rood* also mingles traditions when it incorporates the riddle into the metrical vita to give an alternate account of the Crucifixion. The poem integrates material from both the Germanic and Latin traditions to create its talking cross. The materiality of the cross is also a main topic of the poem, as the cross describes both its origins and manufacture, much like a riddle, before giving its account of the crucifixion and subsequent status as spiritual mediator. In this case, rather than leading to spiritual death via avarice or luxuria, the material becomes a gateway to eternal life. While the poem explores the many material, spiritual, and symbolic aspects of the cross, it essentially ends with the cross depicted as a saint and the poem as a *vita*.

The Franks Casket is an extremely interesting example of material literature: it is a small whalebone box carved with a series of scenes from legends (some now lost), both Latin and Germanic. This box is also curiously self-referential—it is encircled by a runic riddle the solution of which is usually assumed to be "whale". The material reality of the

box shapes the poetry carved upon it, much like the above examples, but unlike the genre-crossing described above, the box has an *anthologizing* function: it aggregates various stories, such as Weland's rape of Beaduhild and the gifts of the Magi. Several of the panels evince common themes—that of great treasure or a strong fortress—which is probably a clue to the intended contents of the box.

Within these poems, the materiality of the subject is used to push the boundaries of Anglo-Saxon literary traditions. Literature is a strange medium for the exploration of materiality: it is pure phenomenon. However, the lack of substance frees material literature from the physical constraints enforced by its media, allowing the Anglo-Saxons to create new symbolic valences and to combine traditional forms and subjects in creative ways.

CHAPTER II

GIF HE ÞIN BENEAH: DESIRE AND THE OBJECT IN *THE HUSBAND'S MESSAGE*

I. The Poem and its Problems

One particularly interesting example of material literature in an Old English poem is found in a short poem conventionally titled *The Husband's Message*. It appears in the anthology of Old English poems known as the Exeter Book (*c*. 1000). The book is a loose compendium of Old English poems from many traditions, including riddles, Christian poems cast in the heroic mode, homilies, wisdom poetry, and elegiac lyrics. The speaker of the poem is most likely a runestick, an object that was oblong and narrow like crosses and sword blades, but unlike these objects, the runestick is perishable and small, created without much trouble or specialized knowledge—and easily hidden. It is a plain, homely item not likely to attract the alliterative formulae of heroic poetry. The poem also contains an additional encoded runic message in its conclusion, a device often used in riddles.

Unfortunately, the state of the poem makes analyzing it challenging: the leaf on which it is written is burned through in two places, leaving the meanings of two sections ambiguous; all attempts at reconstructing the damage have been met with detractors. If that weren't enough, critics are divided on where the poem begins, arguing for and against the inclusion of the preceding lines which are sometimes considered to be a

separate riddle on a similar topic (runestick or reed pen). Some read the poem as allegory, others as a secular love poem. There is not even scholarly consensus on the identity of the poem's speaker, some preferring a human messenger and others a prosopopoeic runestick. The manner in which the poem is edited greatly influences the manner in which it can be read.[1]

The tone of the opening lines of the poem is somewhat riddling, the speaking object is in turns earnest and playful, but there is no overt call to guess the object's identity, frequently a feature of riddles. The lines blend too seamlessly with *The Husband's Message* to be so easily dismissed, yet many readers have done so. The speaker is probably an object—specifically, a runestick. Using a material object as a speaker—or prosopopoeia—is a common feature of Anglo-Saxon poetry, and this chapter will examine how and why the inanimate voice of the runestick is the most appropriate literary convention for framing the poem.

Though Anne Klinck and others have chosen to read the poem's speaker as a human messenger, the combined evidence from the manuscript, material culture, and the Anglo-Saxon poetic tradition make the runestick reader more likely. Anglo-Saxon poetry has a noticeable tendency toward prosopopoeia that cannot be denied. Prosopopoeia is apt for the purposes of this poem: the main message of the poem is quite intimate, yet needs to convey a sense of distance. Though runes were often carved on marker tags used to conduct business, runesticks were also used to convey messages that were supposed to be private, and the use of this device lends the poem its touching intimacy—

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[1] Relevant editions are by Krapp and Dobbie, Klinck, Leslie, and Pope.

as well as its formality, as the poem seems to imply some legal language regarding the marital contract between the speaker and the (intended) reader, his betrothed. The conceit is also quite apt for this poem because the poem lists promised material objects to mediate the relationship between the man and the woman—a bride price—an occurrence not seen in any other Old English poem.

Analysis of the poem suggests that it depicts material literature and should therefore be examined at least partly in the context of material practice. In order to do this, however, some of the critical issues associated with this poem must also be addressed, including its boundaries and reconstructions, its inclusion among the elegies, its use of literary conventions taken from the riddling genre, and the identification of the poem's speaker—along with a discussion of relevant information on the use of runesticks in the Germanic world.

II. *Ic Wæs Be Sonde*

The first problem with the poem that needs to be addressed is determining its starting point. Few of the interpretations of *The Husband's Message* agree on any facet of the work. The reading below is predicated on the inclusion of the lines frequently titled *Ic wæs be sonde* or *Riddle 60*, making the total length of the poem seventy lines. This is based both on sense and the appearance of the manuscript. The other two stanzaic short poems, *Deor* and *Wulf and Eadwacer*, appear earlier in the same manuscript and are also marked with stanza breaks. The rest of the poems in the manuscript do not show stanza

breaks. Therefore, the inclusion of stanza breaks can be assumed to be a deliberate stylistic device in the poem, making the inclusion of the first stanza, sometimes marked as a separate poem, much more likely.

The Husband's Message, as it is frequently edited, has three stanzas clearly marked by words like *nu, hwæt,* and *ongin.* However, it is unlikely that the poem would begin with the word *nu.* Starting with *nu* implies a past to the speaker's message—and this makes a continuation from the previous stanza much more likely. The inclusion of the opening lines creates four stanzas, all marked with large capital letters and all roughly equal in length, at 17, 13, 12, and 17 lines respectively. The four stanzas impart a symmetry that hardly seems accidental. Stanzaic poems in Old English appear to have been something of a rarity, with only three examples in the Exeter Book and none found elsewhere. The other two examples are marked with an obvious refrain, so that the stanzas are impossible to ignore. *The Husband's Message* is unique in being both broken into stanzas and yet not using a refrain, leading to possible misinterpretation of the placement of its opening sequence.

There is no working edition of the poem that satisfactorily addresses all of the textual problems posed by the poem. The base text used below combines Roy Leslie's edition (beginning at line 18) with Anne Klinck's edition of the opening lines (marked as Ic wæs be sonde), with additional reference to John C. Pope's 1978 paleographic reconstruction of the poem. While some of his reconstructions cannot be verified beyond

doubt, they are deserving of more weight than they generally receive.[2] Using this

construction, the first twenty lines of the poem read as follows:

1   Ic wæs be sonde,   sæwalle neah,
      æt merefaroþe, minum   gewunade
      frumstaþole fæst.   Fea ænig wæs
      monna cynnes   þæt minne þær
5   on anæde   eard beheolde;
      ac mec uhtna gehwam   yð sio brune
      lagufæðme beleolc.   Lyt ic wende
      þæt ic ær oþþe sið   æfre sceolde
      ofer meodu[bence]   muðleas sprecan,
10   wordum wrixlan.   Ðæt is wundres dæl,
      on sefan searolic,   þam þe swylc ne conn,
      hu mec seaxes ord   one seo swiþre hond,
      eorles ingeþonc   ond ord somod,
      þingum geþydan   þæt ic wiþ þe sceolde
15   for unc anum twa[m]   ærendspræce
      abeodan bealdlice,   swa hit beorna ma
      uncre wordcwidas   widdor ne mænden.

      Nu ic onsundran þe   secgan wille
      [of hwylcum] treocyn[ne]   ic tudre aweox.
20   I[w] mec æld[e hatað].

      (I was by sound, near seawall
      at seashore; securely I dwelt
      in my first place. Few of mankind
      beheld there my dwelling alone,
      but each dawn the dark wave
      in sea's embrace closed me. Little I thought
      that I, ere or since, ever should
      over mead-bench mouthless speak,
      weave words. A wondrous lot,
      in mind amazing to uncunning one,
      how knife's point and right hand,
      man's thought together with point,
      purposely cut me, so that I with thee
      for us two alone errand-speech

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[2] Unfortunately, his voice has been lessened by the inertia of earlier editions of the poem, including those by Krapp and Dobbie, Leslie, and now Klinck. While these editions may be authoritative in many respects, this case is not one where the majority opinion, no matter how erudite, holds up to either the textual evidence or the weight of Anglo-Saxon poetic tradition.

should boldly announce, so that no more of men
the words of us two more widely might tell.

Now I wish to tell you—alone—
From which kind of tree I grew up:
'Yew" men call me.)[3]

When these first lines are read as a riddle, the solution "reed pen" is usually

given. This is based on two pieces of evidence usually cited—that the item grew in a

watery place where it was washed by waves and that it bears some resemblance to a Latin

riddle on the same topic. However, its resemblance to the Latin poem is minimal

(especially as the solution to the Latin is "reed", not "reed pen"). Also, the wording to

this section is actually more ambiguous than most critics allow.[4]

Pope bases his reconstruction on the manuscript itself, detecting a *wynn* in the

second position of line twenty and little room following for additional letters. Evaluating

Pope's paleographic reconstruction of line twenty, Anne Klinck has been unable to

confirm or to refute the presence of a *wynn*. It should be noted that there are no surviving

Anglo-Saxon runesticks. However, there is very little in the way of wooden remains

from Anglo-Saxon England, probably due to climate. Yew wood is also mentioned in

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[3] Trans. Jonathan Glenn 1982. Ll. 18-20 my own trans.

[4] See Leslie," The Intergrity of 'Riddle 60'", and Pope, "Paleography and Poetry", 54-55. Klinck gives a summary of the scholarship, both for and against reading the opening lines of the poem as beginning with "Ic Wæs be sonde" or regarding this section as a separate riddle with the solution reed pen (Klinck 197-98). Upon examination, the Latin riddle by Symphosius (ca. 400) that is frequently cited as an exemplar bears only passing resemblance to the opening lines of The Husband's Message:

Dulcis amica dei, ripae vicina profundae,
Suave canens musis; nigro perfusa colore,
Nuntia sum linguae digitis signata magistri.

Furthermore, it is not uncommon in Anglo-Saxon poetry to take a Latin theme, style, or translation and Germanicize it. A riddle with the solution "reed" could easily provoke an imitation with the solution "runestick."

Riddle 55 of the Exeter Book, in close proximity to *The Husband's Message*.[5] It is also

the name of a rune expounded on in the Old English *Rune Poem*—cementing an

association between yews and runes if not runesticks:

> 'Eoh' byþ utan unsmeþetreow,
> heard, hrusan fæst, hyrde fyres,
> wyrtrumun underwreþyd, wyn on eþle.
>
> (The yew is a tree with a rough exterior, a hard wood that keeps the fire; firmly
> fixed in the ground, supported by its roots, it is a good thing to have by your
> home.)[6]

Other critics have assumed that a yew tree would be less likely to grow by salt

water than a reed, but excavations of roughly-contemporary terpins in Southern Denmark

and The Netherlands (formerly Frisia) have yielded four rune-sticks made of yew-wood.[7]

The mounds were located by the Southern shores of the North Sea, and were constructed

to elevate farm-houses above the flooding sea-waters—possibly like that described in the

introduction to the poem. Numerous objects made from yew were recovered from the

terpins, providing evidence that yew was a common and readily available material near

sea-shores in that region and that it was at least occasionally used by the Frisians to

produce runesticks.[8] While it is dangerous to conflate literary and material cultural

practices across ethnic and lingual lines, of all the Scandinavian runic traditions, the

Frisian runic alphabet most resembles the Anglo-Saxons' runic alphabet. The English 28

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[5] "þær wæs hlin ond acc, ond se hearda iw," l. 9. This unsolved riddle explicitly asks the listener to name the object described, unlike the opening lines of *The Husband's Message*.

[6] Shippey ed. and trans. 80-81.

[7] Looijenga 335.

[8] Ibid. 338-39.

letter and the 26 letter Anglo-Frisian *futhorks* developed together and share many

similarities not shared by runic alphabets of other Germanic peoples.[9] There was

continual cultural interchange between the regions, so the Frisian runic tradition can be

assumed to provide the best supplemental material for epigraphic comparison. Therefore,

Pope's reconstruction of "Iw mec ælde hatað" has at least some possible corroborating

evidence in the Anglo-Saxon poetic record and the Frisian archaeological record.

III. Riddling Features of the Poem

The poem contains elements of the riddling tradition both at its beginning and end. The

opening lines of the poem establish *The Husband's Message* as a bit of an oddity: it reads

more like a riddle than a lyric. Like many of the riddles, it begins as a first person

monologue concerned with establishing the identity and credentials of the speaker. This

type of speech is also a feature of *Beowulf*, where those who *mathelaþ*, or make formal

(or public) speech must first establish their identities and credentials. Thus, a speech

made by a character may first be prefaced with his origins and even pedigree. The poems

that *The Husband's Message* is often compared to—*Deor*, *Wulf and Eadwacer*, *The*

Wife's Lament—also feature elusive speakers and storylines (though Deor eventually

names himself). They do not use a playful tone to establish themselves—their stories are

rooted in sadness; their identities are socially constructed through broken relationships.

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[9] Page 1987 17.

The runestick is trying to heal an equally troubled relationship in this poem, but it begins with a lengthy description of an object, not a human relationship.

However, the disputed lines do not end with the standard formula of a riddle calling for the reader to name the object. Of especial interest is Pope's reconstruction of line 20a: *Iw mec ælde hata∂* (yew men call me). Though Anne Klinck notes that her examination of the manuscript did not definitively reveal a *wynn*, her notes to Riddle 60 elaborate on this by stating that her research was inconclusive and that a *wynn* in the damaged area is still a possibility.[10] This line would both "solve" the riddle for the reader and continue the process of the runestick's establishment of itself as an authoritative voice. No other Anglo-Saxon poem uses the conventions of a riddle and subsequently "solves" it within the same poem, but the artistic effect of doing so is quite fresh and seems very plausible. If this is the case, the poet is showing an impressive awareness of genre and a willingness to experiment with conventions—hallmarks of Old English poems featuring material literature.

The arguments for the integrity of the opening lines as a self-reflexive riddle often ignore key elements of document use and production in the Anglo-Saxon world. The first major inconvenience is the setting: when the transformed item is in use, it is being used in a mead-hall, not a scriptorium.[11] Written documents of the type produced in Anglo-Saxon England required specialized materials and skills, making it likely that the secret missive the speaker scratches out in the middle of a mead hall is indeed a

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[10] Klinck 200 n. 3.

[11] Roy Leslie tries to explain this inconvenient fact as some sort of an error—in my view, unsuccessfully (454).

runestick—an item that can be created quickly and discreetly. It is difficult to ascertain the extant of lay literacy in the runic alphabet. Many of the runesticks recovered from excavations in Bergen are very informal by nature and reference a wide number of everyday topics—from drunkenness to flirting. The runestick in *The Husband's Message* specifically states that it is intended to hold information that only two people (*uncer*—us two) are supposed to share, despite being in a very public place. Whether the *uncer* refers to the runestick and its reader or the writer of the message and his intended reader is unclear—and that thread is confused throughout the entire poem as there are places where the voice of the runestick and its author appear to merge.

The other riddling convention used in the poem is the presence of the runes themselves:

> Ofer eald gebeot   incer twege,
> genyre ic ætsomne   .S. (sigel). R (rad). geador
> .EA. (ear[d]). W (wynn). ond .M (mon).   aþe benemnan
> þæt he þa wære   ond þa winetreowe,
> be him lifgendum   læstan wolde,
> þe git on ærdagum   oft gespræconn.

> (Over the vows you two yourselves spoke before,
> I release together sun and road, together with earth-joy and man.
> That he wished to declare by the oath, to abide by the faith and the agreement
> living by him, that you two often spoke in elder days.)

Five runes appear embedded in the last lines of the poem, a cryptic device like that found in the signatures of the poet Cynewulf and also in seven riddles in the Exeter Book—#s 6, 7, 19, 24, 42, 64, and 75. The runes in question are those for S, R, EA, W and M—though the M rune is badly drawn and resembles a D rune. However, the same scribe drew an M rune in the same way and in unmistakable context in the following

poem in the manuscript (*The Ruin*), making interpretation somewhat easier. The runes are embedded within the poem in such a way that they form alliterative lines, though the alliteration in this section of the poem is faulty.   As for how to interpret these runes— that is the topic receiving most of the critical effort directed toward the poem.

Unfortunately, most of the work done on deciphering the runes has been lacking in thoroughness and has been (perhaps correctly) driven by the sense of the poem rather than the runes themselves. Almost all critics working on the problem, however, agree that the solution lies in pronouncing the names of the runes rather than using their phonetic values and unscrambling them.[12] Klinck evaluates several solutions before settling on that proposed by Ernst Kock (1920) as "doing the least violence to the sense or meter of the poem." Solutions have also been proposed by Kaske, Elliot, Goldsmith, Nicholson, and most recently, by John Niles. Oddly enough, R.I. Page, the most prolific runologist in the field, has not commented extensively on the poem.[13] All of the solutions proposed are plagued by flaws in methodology and frequently twist the runes to suit their interpretation while dismissing traditional evidence.[14] However, they all add valuable insights to the discussion as well.

Kock's solution sees the runes as an oath taken by the betrothed, sworn on sigel-rad (sun's road), together with ear-wynn (the lovely earth) and man. As evidence, he cites an anti-example from the fifth chapter of *Matthew*—in which one is told to *not*

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[12] For example, Riddle 19 in the Exeter Book contains a runic solution that reads "horse" when unscrambled. Niles 222.

[13] Though who is to say that if this is because he recognized the problem as unsolvable? (Conversation with Jim Earl, 12/08).

[14] Mostly that supplied by the Old English Rune Poem.

swear by heaven and earth or by one's own head.[15] Notorious for his brief notes, one cannot help but wish he had gone into more detail or provided some examples of swearing oaths by heaven and earth. However, when the question was recently put to the scholarly community, it was suggested that the heaven and earth construction is a common pan-Germanic expression.[16] Indeed, heaven and earth is a stock-phrase in Anglo-Saxon literature, generally referencing the Creation, and found in some type of conjunction two hundred and fifty-four times. However, none of these occurrences are oaths, *per se*, though they seem to have some force beyond common speech as sacral language. However, the phrase's use in Scandinavian literature is much more ambiguous.

According to Constance B. Hieatt, the phrase—generally used in a construction resembling upheofon/eorðan (uphimmin/iorð in Old Norse)—is used of the creation of the earth in a Germanic context as well, such as the example in the *Voluspa* where Odin (the creator) has challenged the Sibyl to tell the story of the creation. Hieatt also notes the presence of the phrase on two surviving items used for popular mysticism—the Old English charm *For an Unfruitful Land* and a runic Danish healing stick from the 13th Century. She cites Lars Lonnroth on the topic: "… this 'magic' usage of the same formula is related to the others in that they are 'intended to repeat the original act of creation' and 'may also … be regarded as a way of postponing Ragnarok,' or Judgment

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[15] Kock 123.

[16] By Jim Earl via AnSaxNet.

Day".[17] The wide distribution of this phrase over time and space is intriguing, especially as the runes S and R (as *sigel-rad* or sun-road) could easily be an *upheofon* construction, and when combined with EA (earth) would seem to fit the pattern. However, that leaves the question as to what to do with the W (wynn—joy) and the M rune (mon). If *wynn* is understood as an adjective, "joyous earth" does not sound so far from the bounds of the formula, especially as there is no rune for *beautiful*.

While solutions involving popular religion or porous areas where popular religion has syncretized with pan-Germanic customs have fallen out of favor of late (mainly due to serious excesses within the critical community), the context surrounding the *upheofon/eorðan* construction should not be ignored: it invokes either creation or destruction, and in some instances does so with the intent of causing a mirroring of those events. The overall message of the poem itself is quite hopeful, so the likelihood is that if the runes are to be read this way, they are some attempt to create the union—either by persuasion or by utilizing some inherent properties of either the runes or the *upheofon/eorðan* construction—that the man so desires. However, despite Kock and Klinck's adoption of the basic tenets of this reading, there is no guarantee that this is how the runes are meant to be read.

Ralph Elliott tackled the runes in the poem in 1955, noting that the punctuating of the runes made it likely that they were meant to be read as their names and that, as a message on a runestick rather than a poem in a book, they were unlikely to be scrambled

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[17] Hieatt 487.

or particularly cryptic.[18] He bases this on examination of actual messages carved on Germanic runesticks, of which surviving examples are straightforward. He accepts the reading of the runes *sigel-rad*, *wynn*, and is willing to accept *mon*, but contests the meaning of ear as earth, preferring *eār*, or sea.[19] This yields the reading "follow the sun's path across the sea to find joy with the man who is waiting for you".[20] However, this reading ignores the fact that the poem dictates that *wynn* and *ear* are to be read together (*geador*), which would result in the compound sea-joy—and this does not fit the reading he offers. R.I. Page dismisses Elliott's reading as lacking in corroborating evidence.[21] Also, the dismissal of the direct evidence provided by the *Rune Poem* is rather hasty. The *Rune Poem* very clearly names the EA rune *ear*—earth—and goes in to elaborate details of the earth used to cover a grave, even possibly changing the order of the *futhork* to end with the symbolic end of life.[22] So, while *eār* may be the more common word in the Anglo-Saxon language, in the runic context, the less common usage is indicated[23]. Therefore, based on the evidence at hand, the reading of *ear-wynn* should be retained.

Margaret Goldsmith sees an allegorical reading of the poem and the runes, seeing the object speaking as a reed pen, finding a lettered staff in Psalm 44, and pulling from

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[18] Elliott 2.

[19] Ibid. 4-5.

[20] Ibid. 7.

[21] Page 1995 74.

[22] Elliott 4.

[23] Though R.I. Page notes that there is another possibility that is usually overlooked: *ear* in Anglo-Saxon can also mean ear of corn—leading to the possible contruction *corn-joy* (Page 1995 72 n. 8). On this note, *eard*, or land or earth, would also fit the bill while retaining its association with soil. Perhaps the scribe of the Rune Poem dropped the final *d*?

disparate ecclesiastical images. She briefly flirts with the reading of *gecycre* for line sixty-seven in the sense that the reed pen "converts" the heathen runes to God's service, before settling on *gehyre* as the likely word.[24] Her reading of the runes is as follows:

> On the literal level, the reed-messenger tells us that he will hear *heaven* and *earth* (and *sea*) and the *man* declaring the oath that the living lord will fulfill his promises. Allegorically, the runes *sigel-rad* and *ear-wynn* proclaim that the oath involves the *sun's journey*, the *joy* beyond the *sea* and the *joy* beyond the *grave*, in allusion to the Passion and the Resurrection of Christ. Speaking to the reader and the church (nobis, id est Ecclesia sua [to us, that is, his Church]), the runes declare the message of joy awaiting those who take the *southward journey* to the *happy land*.

Goldsmith is quick to see allegories, and this reading is full of problems, as she cannot agree on a base text for her allegory, instead opting to see a solution drawing on multiple patristic and biblical texts from both the new and old testaments.[25] She wants to have both the reed pen and the rune staff, and her reading of the runes leaves out the *mon* rune and would use *wynn* twice. However, it does bring an opportunity to examine some odd associations in the runic message that would contradict the hopeful message of the text. Kaske's allegorical reading suffers from the same problem—the lack of a base text and the inclusion of material from a wide swath of Christian writings. However, his solution, joining *sigel-rad* as heaven, *ear-wynn* as earth, and *mon* as mankind illustrating the symbolic function of the cross is interesting.

While Goldsmith concentrates on *sigel-rad* as a journey to the south, it has been noted elsewhere that this would have to be a journey to the south-west: the sun's *rad*, or path, moves from east to west. There are several ways to interpret this. The easiest

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[24] Goldsmith 259.

[25] Ibid. 253-54.

would be a literal interpretation: that a sea-voyage to the south-west in a Germanic context would either occur when the betrothed would embark from Scandinavia to England or from northern England or Scotland to Ireland. This raises some suspicions that perhaps Joseph Harris's ideas on the origins of some of the lyric poems is correct— that some of these poems are parts of or are associated with larger poetic cycles much like the *Poetic Edda*, and that the background situation would have been known to the audience. *Deor*, *The Wife's Lament*, and *Wulf and Eadwacer* all hint toward independent poetic traditions. Any specific directions to take a journey to the south-west in *The Husband's Message* would also suggest that this tale had an independent life outside of the poem. However, Jim Earl also pointed out in conversation that "to go west" was a common euphemism for death. Combined with the associations of the rune EA with the grave in the Rune Poem, this perhaps gives a more sinister flavor to the poem than one might otherwise expect from its sunny promises of various joys. The phrase *grave-joy* seems like an odd contradiction, but one that should at least be considered.

Peter Nicholson would like to emend *sigel* to *segl*, or sail, but his reading depends on dismissing the evidence of all of the various *futharks* that use some word for the sun for the S rune.[26] He bases this on a grammatical problem in the *Rune Poem* where the S rune stanza contains the pronoun *hine* without an obvious referent.[27] However, it is easier to note that there is a grammar error in the poem than it is to go against the traditional meaning of the name of the S rune, even though *segl-rad* is just as coherent a

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[26] See R.I Page, *Runes*, chapter two for a discussion of the futharks and the names of the runes.

[27] Nicholson 313.

reading of the compound as *sigel-rad.* He also claims, based on a study by Tolkien, that *sigel* became a rare word early in the history of the Old English language.[28] However, a simple search of the Old English Corpus proves that the word was fairly common. In this case, *sigel* should be considered the correct reading.

The most recent attempt to solve the runic message in the poem comes from John Niles and builds on Nicholson's arguments that it is all right to depart from the accepted reading found in the *Rune Poem* and various *futharks* because he believes the poem has been runified—or uses runes solely for their cryptic value, and traditional rune lore does not therefore apply to its interpretation.[29] Freed from the constraints of received interpretations, he would read *eadig* (happy) for EA and *wif* for W.

Niles would see the poem as including the contested lines, as most critics who have attempted the runes also do, but he sees the object in question as a ship's mast bearing a runic message. He bases this on the interpretation of the word *beam* as a large piece of wood rather than the much smaller runestick. While beam *is* usually used to describe a much larger object, it can also be used to describe a piece of wood, and in this case *beam* alliterates with *biddan*, perhaps providing artistic justification for the less-common usage. Niles gives an example of a runic inscription being carved on a ship's mast for luck, but that use doesn't fit the strictures of the poem—namely that whatever wooden object is carrying the message is giving it to the reader *onsundran*, or in private, and a ship's mast would be a very public display for a message meant to be read by two

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[28] Ibid. 315.

[29] Niles 242-47.

people (*uncer*) alone. Niles's solution to the runes reads "happy wife and man", retaining the traditional *man* as the value for the M rune while departing on the meanings for the other four runes.[30]

It is not clear from these various solutions what the poet intended to convey. The riddle-like device of placing the runes at the end of the poem suggests that the poet was familiar with the conventions of literary (written as opposed to oral) riddles, though this poem is not, in the usual sense, a riddle. If the runic passage of the poem is, as Niles and Elliott have suggested, meant to represent the actual message carved on the message-bearing object, its meaning is still unclear.

I feel that the instinct to seek the answer in the poem itself is the right one. Perhaps the solution is as simple as "take the sun's road (go south-west) (to find) joy of (or from) the earth (read: treasure and earthly delights along the lines of *mondreama*)(with your) man". However, this poet has shown a sensitivity to genre and to the riddling conceit of the poem that is very astute. Therefore, I think that he would have been aware of all of the possible associations of these runes presented in this sequence, and those associations include both creation (*upheofon/eorðan*) and death (*sigel-rad*), providing a symbolically rich backdrop for what has often been called a straightforward poem.

The runes are joined together with a word containing an erasure—the n in the center of *genyre*—often emended to *gecyre* or *gehyre*. Much effort has been spent trying to identify and argue the meaning of the word. R.E. Kaske attempted to settle the

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[30] Ibid. 241.

question by observing the text under ultraviolet light, coming to the conclusion that *genyre* is the correct reading, and that the word is a form of *genyrwan* (*genierwan*) "to contract or constrain".[31] However, this did not settle the question, and the debate has continued. *Genyrwan*'s full range of known meanings is a bit more perplexing: "to confine, repress, beset, rebuke, or chasten".[32] Those who adopt the *genyre* reading generally see a runestick as the speaker and those who adopt the *gehyre* reading favor a human messenger. Klinck believes that the erasure was meant to be a correction that was never completed, and adopts the *gehyre* reading on the grounds that *genyrwan* cannot be used with an infinitive of purpose.[33] *Genieran*, to release, also remains a possibility.

IV. Identifying the Speaker in the Poem

One of the major critical points of contention concerns the identity of the poem's speaker. Most critics argue that the speaker is either a human messenger or a prosopopoeic object of some sort. Critics arguing for a human messenger include Roy Leslie and Stanley Greenfield. Klinck declines to examine the issue, though she does not believe that Riddle 60 is the opening stanza of the poem, a view shared by most of those who see a human speaker. Earl Anderson first sees two speakers, both a human messenger and a personified runestick, and argues against Leslie's reasons for rejecting the runestaff as speaker. He then reverses himself several years later and argues the bulk of the poem is

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[31] Kaske 44-45.

[32] Clark Hall 249.

[33] Klinck 207.

narrated by a human speaker with only the introductory stanza narrated by an object. He

bases this reading mainly on his interpretation of *genyre* with *ætsomne ofer* as

"superimpose" and therefore a plausible statement to be made by a human messenger.

While many of the critics approaching this poem have decided that the speaker's

voice is that of a messenger bearing a runestick, both internal evidence and Anglo-Saxon

poetic tradition weigh heavily against this interpretation. Prosopopoeia—the literary

device of speaking objects—is a very well-established feature of Anglo-Saxon poetry. Its

use should not be considered surprising or outside of the norm by any critic, regardless of

their opinion of the aesthetics of the device. From the large number of surviving

prosopopoeic riddles to the archaeological evidence provided by large numbers of

prosopopoeic epigraphic objects, it is not understatement that this was one of the most

widespread literary conventions used in the Anglo-Saxon corpus.

The main evidence given against the speaker being a runestick are lines 5-9, in

which the runestick refers to many voyages made over the sea:

> Ful oft ic on bates   gesohte
> þær mec mondryhten   min ......
> ofer heah hofu;   eom nu her cumen
> on ceolþele,
>
> (Very often in a boat I ------   ----------- sought
> where my lord -------- me
> over high seas.   Now I am come here
> on the deck of a ship[.])[34]

Critics arguing for a human speaker often cite these lines as being incompatible

with the uses of runesticks because runesticks are supposedly disposable and not meant to

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[34] Trans. Jack Watson.

be reused. Janet Schrunk Ericksen, however, has refuted this. In her article on the topic, she assembles both literary and physical evidence for the reuse of runesticks. Peter Orton also notes that prosopopoeic objects in the riddles often seem to share in the collective experience of similar objects, blurring the line between individual and collective experience, and this passage may indulge in just that type of collective identity.

Peter Orton's article provides the best refutations of Leslie's four main objections to a prosopopoeic speaker: 1. the runestick makes many journeys but runesticks were meant for a single use; 2. a runestick wouldn't address itself in the third person as in line 13b "*se þisne beam agrof*"; 3., a runestick would not describe itself in the context of a lord/retainer relationship; and 4., that a runestick would not use the verb sægde (said).[35] Orton dismisses these arguments by pointing out that prosopopoeia often involves personifying an object to a remarkable degree, leaving an object that paradoxically foregrounds its essential otherness while displaying traits that are remarkably human. There is no doubt that the speaker of the poem has many human traits—establishing verbal authority and attempting to persuade the addressee, and also shows the extreme loyalty that characterizes the lord/retainer relationship. This however, does not necessarily make the speaker human. Rather, it highlights the sense of otherness surrounding the speaker, adding an air of mystery and mysticism to what would otherwise be a straightforward missive better suited to prose. Prosopopoeia fascinates the Anglo-Saxon poet and artist, perhaps as some imagined link to inner worlds that cannot

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[35] Orton 44-46.

definitively be known and can only really be described via the occluding filter of human experience—attempts to depict the *Ding-an-sich* of the object; to enlist it as an ally.

Others see the speaker as a personified object but not as a runestick. Kaske sees the speaker as the cross, Bragg and Goldsmith as a reed pen, and Niles sees the personified mast of a ship. All of these interpretations have problems. Kaske would like to see the speaker as the cross, his main piece of evidence being the interpretation of the runes as a symbolic joining of heaven, earth, and mankind via the cross.[36] While this is an ingenious interpretation of the runes, the allegorical implications are complicated by the blatant materialism of the poem. Though the allegorical interpretation is possible, the poem can also be read at face value with no loss of meaning. Like Goldsmith, who also sees both prosopopoeia and allegory, Kaske mines the unlimited symbolism of Christian religious writings in a piecemeal fashion without settling on a specific text on which the poem is supposed to be based. Basically, if one goes hunting for allegorical meanings, they are bound to turn up somewhere. Due to the traditional heroic thematics of this poem and its materialistic and romantic foci, an allegorical interpretation is unlikely.

My grounds for rejecting Goldsmith, Bragg, and Niles's theories on the poem's speaker mainly stem from the opening line of the second stanza: *Nu ic onsundran þe secgan wille* (Now I wish to tell you, alone). *Onsundran*, from which descends the modern English 'sundered', means apart from or alone. The communication in question is meant to be private. Niles's explanation of a ship's mast as speaker provides too

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[36] Kaske 46-48.

public a display to be *onsundran*. Also, his main piece of evidence, the phrase *þis beam agrof* referring to a larger piece of wood than a runestick, can be explained by the alliterative scheme of the line, *beam* alliterating with *biddan*.

Ultimately, none of the alternatives to a runestick fit the scenario described in the opening lines of the poem. Reed pens, crosses, and ship's masts would not have been compatible with writing the missive in a crowded public place: as I mentioned above, early medieval document production was a highly specialized, expensive, and messy affair—not something done with the point of a knife in a mead-hall. Medieval documents were generally drafted in scriptoria and involved the use of expensive parchment and iron-gall ink. Parchment was a precious material, prompting the erasure of outdated texts via scraping for re-use. It was not necessarily disposable. Most Anglo-Saxon documents survive in large books drafted by monasteries called cartularies—these are very public documents meant to be used as reference and proof in legal disputes. The ink also required some time to dry, making the scenario described in the opening stanza of the poem most likely to have been a hastily carved runestick.

V. Runic Literature and Runesticks

The material properties of runesticks and written documents differed, and these material properties determined the general types of use to which they were put—runesticks were more useful for quickly produced, disposable messages, and charters were more useful for presenting official and enduring public documents. This difference in material

properties and probable usage also creates one of the most intriguing features of material literature—vellum codices can hold much more written content than a runestick. There are examples of Scandinavian *runakefli* containing short poems and letters, but the vast majority of surviving examples are simple tags declaring ownership of an object.[37] There are literary examples, like that depicted in *Grettir's Saga*, of a runestick being carved with an extended account of events, but no surviving examples contain that kind of extensive detail. As *Grettir's Saga* is also written literature, it uses the same material literature conventions as the Anglo-Saxon poems, conflating the properties of books and runesticks and imagining far mare content than would have been likely carved onto a single runestick.

Runesticks have been discovered throughout the Germanic world, with the notable exception of the British Isles. Before one uses this to argue that the English did not use runesticks, however, it should be noted that there was widespread cultural interchange throughout the Germanic world, as evidenced by the wealth of pan-Germanic material in Anglo-Saxon literature and art. Runes are thought to have been in use by the Germanic peoples since around the beginning of the first millennium, inspired by cultural interchange with the Roman Empire.[38] This would have meant that the Angles and Saxons were likely using runes before the invasion of the British Isles, and there is no reason to assume that these runes were never carved on wood—the material with which they were designed to be used. Also, Viking settlements and the Danish invasion of

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[37] Liestol 1966.

[38] Moltke 23-24.

England were events contemporary with both the Exeter Book and the Vercelli Book, and would have practically guaranteed some knowledge of runesticks and their uses. The lack of physical evidence can probably be traced to soil conditions in the British Isles, as there is a paucity of surviving wooden objects of any type. Epigraphic objects abound, however, mostly consisting of stones, bone items like combs, and metal objects like knives, swords, rings, and coins.

Runesticks regularly appear in Scandinavian literature, but *The Husband's Message* appears to be the only literary mention of one in the Anglo-Saxon corpus. Unfortunately, it can only be assumed that the Anglo-Saxon poetic record is the pitiful remnant of what was probably a vast poetic tradition. We cannot know what has been lost, and so we must work with what we have. However, an absence in the record cannot be taken for evidence that an item, concept, or technology was unknown to the Anglo-Saxon people.

Two sets of finds are particularly relevant to the topic: the recovery of the Bergen *runakefli* and the excavation of Frisian runesticks in the modern Netherlands. One theory concerning the origin of the runic alphabet is that it, like the Sumerian alphabet millennia before, began as a method of record-keeping for merchants. The alphabet was designed to be carved on wood, not stone, as can be seen by its lack of rounded lines which do not cut well on wood. It is believed to have been in use by the First Century A.D. and was still used well into the Middle Ages. Differences in *futharks*, or runic alphabets, existed between ethnic groups, with different forms and names of runes. Amounts of characters in the alphabets range from 16 in later Scandinavian use to the 28 letter *futhork* used in

England. The Anglo-Saxon and the Frisian runic alphabets showed considerable overlap, leading to the theory of influence on the development of runes between the two peoples.

Though they were produced at a later date than *The Husband's Message*, the Bergen runesticks are interesting for different reasons: they contain a wide cross-section of runic use, use that appears to have been widespread and also seems to indicate some competence among the general population in producing and consuming runic messages. They are also almost entirely incised on wooden objects, some of which were deliberately broken. Aslak Liestol has done the majority of the work on recovering and cataloging the runic finds in Bergen. There was a fire in the Bryggen district of Bergen in 1955. The same area had burned multiple times over the centuries, leaving a rich deposit of items. 550 runic inscriptions, dating from the late twelfth century into the fourteenth, were recovered—mostly incised on wooden objects.[39] Of these inscriptions, several were correspondence, poetry, or centered on domestic or romantic concerns. Liestol includes several brief letters, mainly on political or business topics, and all seem like they were rather private in nature. Two of them would have provoked somewhat dire results had their contents fallen into the wrong hands.

Anglo-Saxon poems depicting material literature, however, are usually quite long. Seventy lines of verse simply would not fit on your average runestick. Both Niles and Elliott posit that the contents of the actual runestick in this poem are limited to the runes alone or the alliterating lines containing the runes, and this is an assumption I share. A large part of the artistic effect of the conceit involves highlighting the contrasts between

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[39] Liestol 1968 17.

the two available modes of literacy while enjambing them. Thus we get the destruction of the giants inscribed on a sword in Beowulf, the massive expansion of the runic core of *The Dream of the Rood*, and a seventy line love poem carved on a runestick in *The Husband's Message*. The conceit, when moved into a codicological context, is characterized by excessive length of sentiment ascribed to an object that should not, under normal circumstances, be able to hold it. Rather than the terse runic messages, these objects are freed to be as loquacious as they wish, to elaborate their pedigrees, to reach across from the gulf of their otherness via the mediation of a few runes (and a lot of ink).

VI. Materiality and Exchange in the Poem

The loquacious objects of Anglo-Saxon poetry foreground the otherness of their inanimate existence as a poetic convention. Few have ventured to try to elucidate the purpose this serves. What is the purpose of putting words in the (non-existent) mouths of things? In this poem, the material existence of the speaker serves to illustrate the complex relationships between people and things in the Anglo-Saxon world. The thing is desired because it has qualities in which man would like to share, but cannot. The untarnished rarity and beauty of gold are what makes it valuable—as if wearing it could confer immortality and beauty. The thing is desired as an exchangeable object, a commodity. Yet the thing that speaks insists on its own, inalienable experience. These

two facets of "thingness" are diametrically opposed .[40] In this poem, both are

prominently displayed.

The message that the prosopopoeic speaker delivers references vows, but it

promises commodities. Unfortunately, the two most relevant passages are those most

damaged by burns. The speaker, a thing partaking in the duties of a human messenger,

establishes its authority to speak in the opening twenty lines. The burn damage to lines

18-24 makes it difficult to establish the full extent of the speaker's relationship to his lord

and his duties, though Pope's reconstructions do help somewhat. At the center of the

poem, we find the lord's offer to his lady, and he promises her material wealth in return

for her compliance. In short, he offers a bride-price, and should she accept, she becomes

a commodity as well. *Maxims I* also describes the practice of procuring a queen by

paying a bride price, along with her separation from her lord while he is away on sea-

voyages.[41] While also speaking of vows—which carried legal weight in the Anglo-Saxon

world—the reasons given for the addressee of *The Husband's Message* to join her

betrothed mainly concern possessions: he has enough of them to guarantee her the kind of

life she is accustomed to:

> [þæt git] ætsomne   siþþan motan
> secgum ond gesiþum   s[inc gedælan]
> 35.   næglede beagas.   He genoh hafað
> fædan gol[des],   [feohgestreona
> þæt he mi]d elþeode   eþel heald,
> fægre fold[an]
>
> ([...that you two] together might afterwards

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[40] See Bill Brown's introduction in Critical Inquiry for a more detailed discussion on thingness.

[41] Ll. 81-102.

[distribute treasure], nailed rings,
to men and companions. He has enough
ornamented gold, [taken treasures,
that he] may hold fair land
in the homeland of strangers.)

The consolation for the extended absence of her lover is neither spiritual nor philosophical—it is gold and land, and the power that comes with them. She, like the prosopopoeic speaker, partakes in the world of both man and object. She has a voice yet is traded like property. This is why a talking runestick is such an effective emissary for her situation—they are akin. However, unlike the runestick, she is an object that is alienable and is subject to exchange.

She is equated with treasure throughout the poem. In line fourteen she is addressed as "þu sinchroden sylf" (you, your treasure adorned self). However, the most telling passage occurs at line 44b:

Nu se mon hafað
wean oferwunnen;   nis him wilna gad,
ne meara ne maðma   ne meodudreama,
ænges ofer eorþan   eorlgestreona,
þeodnes dohtor,   gif he þin beneah.

(Now the man has overcome misfortunes,
there is no lack of pleasures for him,
neither horses, nor treasures, nor mead-joys,
or any of the acquisitions of man over the earth,
lord's daughter, if he has use of you yourself.)

She is a pleasure and a possession—one greater than horses and jewels and mead—but a treasure nonetheless. He thinks in terms of *beneah*—to possess or to have use of. This poem is often included with the lyric poems referred to as elegies, but the *wean* (misfortunes) here are *ofercumman* (overcome) and the material symbolism of this poem

is distinctly different. Materiality here in *The Husband's Message* is infinitely more complex: objects and people overlap, speak, are exchanged. There is a blurring of the lines between horses, runesticks, and princesses. The personification of the material in this poem takes center stage and the misfortunes are pushed into the past (though the happy ending is also unrealized).

VII. Elegiac Features of the Poem

Contextualizing the poem is useful in order to understand how it makes use of literary conventions. *The Husband's Message* is often grouped with a set of shorter poems from the Exeter Book described as elegies, despite the fact that critical consensus notes this poem as the least elegiac in tone when compared to the others. The description of certain poems as elegies is longstanding in Old English literary criticism, though this classification is not without detractors. According to Anne Klink in her critical edition, the Anglo-Saxon poems that should be considered elegies are nine in number and found dispersed throughout the Exeter Book: *The Wanderer*, *The Seafarer*, *Deor*, *The Ruin*, *The Wife's Lament*, *The Husband's Message*, *The Riming Poem*, *Wulf and Eadwacer*, and *Resignation*. Though she does not believe they constitute the beginning of the poem, she includes the verses either designated as Riddle 60 or the opening lines of *The Husband's Message*, leaving the reader to decide which reading is correct. Other critics who see these poems as comprising an elegiac genre more or less agree on this grouping, though Stanley Greenfield refuses to spend time on either *Resignation* or *The Riming Poem*

because he considers them to be artistically inferior.[42] Joseph Harris argues that elegies

are a genre heavily influenced by a proto-Germanic form also evinced in the heroic

elegies of the *Poetic Edda*.[43] In his opinion, *The Ruin* and *The Husband's Message*

cannot in any way be considered elegies.

Though not presented contiguously in the manuscript, it has been frequently

argued that these poems comprise a genre. There are undeniable similarities among the

poems. And there are profound differences. These are not elegies in either of the

common formal descriptions—poetry in elegiac meter or formal laments. Instead, the

poems called elegies share some structural and thematic features, but the themes treated

within these poems are very much endemic to the entire Anglo-Saxon literary corpus. B.

J. Timmerman notes that if one defines elegy as a lament for something lost, only the

Wife's Lament and *Wulf and Eadwacer* should be considered elegies.[44] He is correct: due

to its impersonal tone, *The Ruin* appears to be a Germanic adaptation combining

conventions from the classical *ubi sunt, de excidio,* and *encomium urbis* motifs, and *The

Husband's Message* cannot under any circumstances be considered a lament. Macrae-

Gibson echoes this view, preferring to read these poems in the tradition of the *planctus*.

The more overtly homiletic poems and *Deor*, however, probably belong more to the

consolatio tradition inspired by Boethius' *Consolation of Philosophy*—only being written

in a different time and cultural framework, these poems make use of themes found

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[42] Greenfield 93-94.

[43] Harris 47, 54 n. 2.

[44] Timmerman 36-37.

longstanding in Germanic literature as a whole, such as exile, rather than relying on less personally relevant imagery generated by their Latin exempla.

The tendency to group these poems together originates with Conybeare's 1826 work describing *The Wife's Lament* as an elegy, though the other poem he applied this description to was the *Meters of Boethius*—poems not usually classed among the elegies—despite the uniquely Anglo-Saxon features of the translation.[45] However, for my purposes, I believe the comparison to the *Meters of Boethius* is particularly apt, as this shows definitively the adoption of Boethian *consolatio* into Anglo-Saxon poetry at a fairly early stage and also shows the ways in which Germanic elements made their way even into a direct translation from the Latin.

Anne Klink reviews the scholarly history of considering these poems as a group in her critical edition of the poems, *The Old English Elegies*. She does address the arbitrary nature of such a classification.[46] She adopts Stanley Greenfield's definition of elegy and the imagery generally contained within it:

> …a definition of the Old English elegy as a relatively short reflective or dramatic poem, embodying a contrastive pattern of loss and consolation, ostensibly based upon a specific personal experience or observation, and expressing an attitude towards that experience. We may further note that many of the motifs in the elegies have analogues in Old Welsh, Old Norse, or Latin literature, and in the commentaries of the Fathers; that their diction has affinities with the diction of heroic poetry on one hand and with that of Christian poetry on the other, with the diction of secular gnomes or maxims and with that of prose homiletic material; and that the verse is traditionally formulaic, ultimately of oral provenience.[47]

and further develops it thus:

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[45] Klink 63 n. 2.

[46] Ibid. 11-12.

[47] Greenfield 94.

...the concept of "elegy" in an Anglo-Saxon context provides us with a convenient locus for particular themes: exile, loss of loved ones, scenes of desolation, the transience of worldly joys. The elegiac themes are presented in a lyrical-reflective mode with characteristic features such as monologue, personal introduction, gnomic or homiletic conclusion, and the ordered repetition of words and sounds, amounting occasionally to refrain or rhyme. These structural features, like the scenic elements, are not peculiar to elegy, and no elegy contains all of them, but the conjunction of several of them in the same poem is distinctive.[48]

This definition does describe this group of poems well; however, it also describes the bulk of Anglo-Saxon poetry to some degree. It is necessary to remember that confining a study of *The Husband's Message* within the limits imposed by genre may be counterproductive. In addition, when using the elegiac classification, it is important to keep oneself open to the influences of poems outside of this limited grouping that use distinctive conventions, like riddles, gnomic poetry, and epic, and to be alert to these influences. For example, several of the elegies contain gnomic statements or are enigmatic enough to remind the reader of a riddle. The poems discussed here all share common features with the rest of the Anglo-Saxon corpus, and some of the poems share features with Celtic and Old Norse poetry and classical Latin verse, so the imposition of a genre may occlude other approaches to the poems. For example, longer poems from *Beowulf* to *Andreas* to *Judith* all feature protagonists who, while not exiles *per se*, venture out of their social milieu and have to act while under the *hrof* of a strange hall. The rood cross in *The Dream of the Rood* also undergoes a type of loss similar to the speaker of *The Wanderer* when forced to become the instrument of his lord's death, yet that poem is not generally classed as an elegy. *Widsiþ* chronicles the careers of many

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[48] Klinck 12.

great lords who have passed on. It is difficult to find an Anglo-Saxon poem, aside from the distinct genre of the riddles, which does not have some mark of loss, death, or exile about it. These were, simply put, the topics of choice.

Because there is precedent for considering these poems together, and because this gives a limited scope to the present study, no matter how artificial, I will consider *The Husband's Message* within the context of these poems—but not as an elegy. Rather, I would like to examine the attitudes towards material culture evident in this group of poems, as this group of poems constantly uses images of treasure and other physical objects to achieve its affective impact—as does the *Husband's Message*. The other poems in the grouping (excepting *the Ruin*) either lament the loss of social and material wealth or revile physicality in order to take refuge in the consolation of the immaterial power of the *Wealdend*, while the *Husband's Message* offers its *consolatio* in the form of material and social wealth. I believe this materialistic form of *consolatio* directly influences the choice to use a prosopopoeic speaker.

If the simplest definition for the elegies is a dramatic monologue (excepting *The Ruin*) in which the speaker tries to come to terms with loss and isolation, then perhaps a closer examination of loss in these poems would be the most useful way of illuminating the dramatic differences between *The Husband's Message* and the other poems. They all employ the use of a similar poetic theme, that of deprivation—both material and social— to achieve dramatic effect. The dramatic effects achieved, however, are different for each poem. *The Seafarer*, *The Wanderer*, and *The Riming Poem* all offer very similar

treatments on the theme of the exile as pilgrim.[49] The losses endured by each of the speakers are the material comforts of the hall, but these losses are shown to be gains in the quest for entrance into the heavenly kingdom. The material comforts so fondly remembered by the speakers of *The Wanderer* and *The Riming Poem* are all shown to be traps, meaningless in the light of the eternal and immaterial rewards promised, yet they are dwelt upon at great length. The tension invoked by the absence of treasure is palpable; even while denouncing the rings and cups and *mondreamas*, the desire of the speakers can still be felt. The consolation offered by heaven may be the ultimate reward, but the longing for the material and the social bonds it forges have not been fully excised from the text, and must be battled systematically all the way to the ends of both poems, where proper spiritual order is finally established. *The Seafarer* is a stark exception to this pattern: physical and material abundance evoke abjection and the urge to flee in the speaker, to push away from the solidity of land onto the fluid world of the sea. Thematically, it has the least in common with *The Husband's Message*.

The Seafarer offers the clearest example of *contemptus mundi* of the three homiletic poems, opening adrift on an ice-cold sea, far from the secular world so systematically reduced to minutiae in *The Wanderer* and *The Riming Poem*. It does not rely as heavily on imagery borrowed from heroic poetry to develop its themes. It is

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[49] The poem *Resignation* would also seem to fall into this thematic grouping, but I find myself agreeing with Bliss and Frantzen that the poem is actually comprised of two fragments, a metrical prayer and an interesting variant of the exilic theme. Their case for manuscript damage between ll. 69 and 70 is very strong, as the poem does radically shift tone at that point and also includes a non-sensical half-line at the joining point when the two pages are read together. Klinck disagrees, based on a sense of thematic unity when the two portions are combined (28-29), as do the many editors of the poem she cites. The second fragment appears to follow the general pattern of obsession with material imagery seen in the other homiletic poems, though with some interesting variations discussed by Bliss and Frantzen.

already beyond this point, and there is no real question of the speaker's desires: his entire

being is fixated on the afterlife, for which peregrination is preparation. So much so, that

he rejects not just the material trappings of secular life and the sinful attitudes that go

with them, but also the very solidity of the earth itself. The speaker of *The Seafarer* has

entrusted himself to the torments of the waves as a reflection of the heavens, all the while

insisting that the fundament is ephemeral and illusory: *for þon me hatran sind/Dryhtnes*

dreamas   þonne þis deade lif/læne on londe.[50]

However, the poem does begin by stressing the sufferings of one who takes the

path of *peregrination*:

> Hwilum ylfete song
> dyde ic me to gomene,   ganetes hleoþor
> ond huilpan sweg   fore hleahtor wera,
> mæw singendefore   medodrince. (Gordon ll. 19b-22)

> Sometimes I would take the song of the swan for my entertainment, the cry of the
> gannet and the call of the curlew in place of human laughter, the sea-mew's
> singing in place of mead-drinking. (trans. S. A. J. Bradley)

The world, with its social ties and consumables, is less substantial than the cries of

various birds. This image ties neatly to the poem's opening line—*Mæg ic be me sylfum*

soðgied wrecan; the poem is the truth, the world is an illusion.[51] This contempt for the

earth, as symbolized by the earth beneath the seafarer's feet, is the poem's dominant

theme, characterized by some of the pejorative secular imagery found in the other

homiletic poems: inhabitants of cities are referred to with the formula *wlonc ond wingal*

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[50] Gordon ll. 64b-66a.

[51] Ibid. l. 1

(proud and wine-flushed).[52] Twenty lines later, the speaker muses that no matter how

proud and well-situated the warrior, he always fears his fate in the afterlife:

> For þon nis þæs modwlonc   mon ofer eorþan,
> ne his gifena þæs god,   ne in geoguþe to þæs hwæt,
> ne in his dædum to þæs deor,   ne him his dryhten to þæs hold,
> þæt he a his sæfore   sorge næbbe,
> to hwon hine Dryhten   gedon wille.
> Ne biþ him to hearpen hyge   ne to hringþege—
> ne to wife wyn   ne to worulde hyht—
> ne ymbe owiht elles   nefne ymb yða gewealc;

> (For there is no one on earth so confident of temperament, nor so generous of his
> gifts, nor so bold in his youth, nor so courageous in his deeds, nor his lord so
> gracious to him, that he never worries about his seafaring, as to what the Lord will
> send him; he will have no thought for the harp, nor for the ring-receiving
> ceremonial, nor for the pleasure of a woman nor for trust for that which is of the
> world, nor for anything else, but only for the surging of the waves—. (trans. S. A.
> J. Bradley)

Here the speaker builds on the theme of contemptus mundi, rejecting all of the pleasures

of life in a *fyrd* by stating that even while enjoying these entertainments and while

blessed with heroic qualities, warriors never have death far from their minds.

One of the most powerful passages in the poem follows. The progressive

beautification of the earth as the seasons advance, rather than causing happiness in the

speaker, causes him to push away into the sea, though this is not understood by the man

who is blessed with comfort (*seftceadig*).[53] Material comforts are blamed for inhibiting

spiritual understanding. The poem again references material wealth in ll. 66b-67: *Ic*

gelyfe no/þæt him eorðwelan   ece stondeð (I do not believe that earth-wealth will stand

eternally for him). The poem moves repeatedly from the material symbolism of the earth

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[52] Cf. The Ruin l. 34a

[53] ll. 48-57.

itself to the specific material items praised in heroic poetry—mead, women, harping, and gold. This train of thought culminates in ll. 97-102, where gold is specifically linked to the grave, returned to the ground from which it came and useless for ensuring the well-being of the soul:

> Þeah þe græf wille   golde stregan
> boþor his geborenum,   byrgan be deadum
> maþmum mislicum,   þæt hine mid nille,
> ne æg þære sawle   þe biþ synne ful
> gold to geoce   for Godes egsan,
> þonne hit ær hydeð   þenden he her leofað.

> (Although the brother may wish to strew the grave with gold for his kinsman, to heap-up by the dead man's side various treasure that he would like to go with him, the gold he hides in advance while he lives here cannot be of help to the soul which is full of sins, in the face of God's awesomeness.)[54]

The initial metaphor of the entire world as distraction from salvation has continually narrowed until, at this point in the poem, it has been reduced to the most potent symbol of the heroic ethos: gold. This basic homiletic strategy of attacking material objects, and through them, material existence, appears also in *The Wanderer* and *The Riming Poem*, though these poems do not use the sea-metaphor as consistently.

The Wanderer's contrastive structure repeatedly pits material and social wealth against the transience of life on earth. The poem begins with a general statement about the achievement of grace through adverse conditions by the poem's wanderer, or *eardstapa* (l. 6). He has been wandering since the death of his *goldwine* (l. 22). The next passage weaves the contrasting elements even tighter:

> Wat se þe cunnað
> hu sliðen biþ   sorg to geferen

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[54] Trans. S. A. J. Bradley

þam þe him lyt hafað   leofra geholena.
Warað hine wræclast,   nalæs wunden gold,
ferðloca freorig,   nalæs foldan blæd;
gemon he selesecgas   ond sincþege,
hu hine on geoguðe   his goldwine
wenede to wiste: wyn eal gedreas.[55]

Here, exile is contrasted directly to gold, and an icy heart to treasure, and all the treasured (and frequently material) joys of youth are fallen. From this point, two sections of the poem are a lament for the former happiness of the wanderer. Losing his material and social wealth; however, he gains the necessary experience to be considered a wise man, and his voice takes on a gnomic tone that again yields to a series of *ubi sunt*-inflected observations, moving from a personal account of tragedy and loss to a more universal scope by contrasting massive ruins with the ephemeral nature of mankind. The trappings of material life in the form of *beorht bune*, *byrnwiga*, and *þeodnes þrym* are all juxtaposed with the lamenting exclamation *eala* (ll. 94-95). Near the end, *feoh*, *freond*, *mon*, and *mæg* are characterized as *læne*, or loaned—often translated as ephemeral (ll. 108-09). The last lines of the poem remind the reader that the only immutable existence is that found with the Christian god in Heaven (*þær us eal seo fæstnung stonedð*, l. 115b). All in all, we have a poem maintaining a constant tension between the tangible and the intangible; the tangible being equated with youth and ignorance, and the intangible with wisdom and grace. The final argument of the poem is that the intangible is the only true existence.

The Riming Poem also focuses on materiality. Forced by its impossibly complex form to rely heavily on the well-developed and diverse traditional poetic vocabulary, the

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[55] ll. 29b-36

material often takes center-stage. The poem, uniquely inspired by Latinate rhyming poetry in the "hisperic" style, is narrated by a leader of some sort, a man who "*hæfde ic heane had*" (l. 15a), "*staþolæhtum steald, stepegongum weold*" (l. 22), and "*ahte ic ealdorstol,/galdorwordum gol.*" (ll. 23b-24a).[56] The speaker begins with his happy childhood clad in bright clothing, details feasts and galloping horses. He then describes his ruling years, years defined by a band of proud warriors who "*þæt he in sele sæg   sinc gewæge*" (l. 17), music "*scyl was hearpe*" (l. 28b), and abundant harvests "*swylce eorþe ol*" (l. 23a). I would note here that these joys, while earthy, are not particularly material. Good weather and lasting pledges are also foregrounded, and while wealth beaconed, so did courage "*ellen eacnade,   ead beacnade*" (l. 31). While pride, happiness, and truth flourished in the kingdom and fame was had in abundance, there was also joy in wealth:

    mod mægnade,   mine fægnade,
    treow telgade,   tir welgade,
    blæd blissade,
    gold gearwade,   gim hwearfade, (ll. 33-36)

In the first half of the poem, material wealth is juxtaposed with immaterial qualities such as courage, truth, and fame. However, when the tone shifts in the poem, material riches are the pivot on which it turns.

The Poem begins to turn in the same passage described in the preceding paragraph with "*sinc searwade   sib nearwade*" (l. 37). While Klinck follows the majority in assigning a non-pejorative reading to this line, Macrae-Gibson translates it

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[56] Earl 1987 187, 189.

thus: "and treasure showed its cunning and kinship grew oppression."[57] He justifies this
by his readings of *searwade* and *nearwade*. *Searwade*, the preterite of *searwian*, means
to use craft or cunning. Macrae-Gibson gives examples that are both positive and
pejorative.[58] The pejorative examples originate in the homiletic tradition and the positive
example given hails from *Beowulf*. In other words, the word's meaning is shaded by the
tradition in which it is being used. This poem, though describing the heroic ethos, does
so from the homiletic tradition, and it does so with a didactic purpose. Therefore, the
more pejorative reading is the most likely. He cites the Bosworth-Toller dictionary as
support for his reading. The same concept applies to *nearwade*. Macrae-Gibson also
notes that the favorable sense often given to this word in translations of the poem ignores
the usual sense of the word, which would give the sense that kinship is "now diminished,
decayed, or turned to mutual oppression instead of support." The theme of betrayal of
kinsmen over treasure is not a new one in Germanic literature, and would be a
particularly apt metaphor for a homiletic poem that seeks to undermine the ethos of
heroic poetry using heroic language.

In the above sequence, the positives of the heroic life are rapidly undermined
from within, and the next metaphor concerning materiality is striking:

> Gewiteð nihtes in fleah
> se ær in dæge was dyre,   scriþeð nu deop in feore
> brondhord geblowen,   breostum in forgrowen,
> flyhtum toflowen.[59]

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[57] 33.

[58] Ibid. 47 n. 37.

[59] ll. 44b-47a

(What is precious in the day
flees away in the night; deep now, in the self,
grown, alas, in the breast, a bloom of riches has burned—
and fled, melted away.)[60]

The specifically material trappings of heroic life—the hoard of treasure to be distributed

by a lord—is usually used to cement and enhance social ties. Instead, it has become a

hoard of fiery coals burning the speaker alive from inside. The reddish color of gold, so

often commented on in heroic poems, has become fire, and the social ties it is supposed

to foster have become internalized suffering endured in isolation. Here we see the poem

again and again use the same pattern of juxtaposition used in *The Seafarer* and *The*

Wanderer: the material symbolism used in heroic poetry is co-opted and inverted and

refashioned as the dominant metaphor for the corruption and pointlessness of the heroic

life.

The poem continues with its catalog of diminishing and slaughter until it reaches

this powerful passage where the hoard and the material are reduced to bones in a grave:

Me þæt wyrd gewæf   ond gewyhrt forgeaf
þæt ic grofe græf;   ond þæt grimme scræf
flean flæsce ne mæg.   Þonne flanhred dæg
Nydgrapum nimeþ,   þonne seo neaht becymeð
seo me eðles ofonn   ond mec her eardes onconn,
þonne lichoma ligeð--   lima wyrm friteþ,
ac him wenne gewigeð   on þa wist geþygeð,
oþ þæt beoþ þa ban   an.[61]

(For me fate wove this, gave this to do,
to carve out a grave, the cruel cave
my flesh cannot escape. Arrow-hastening comes the day
to seize with inescapable grip; the night comes

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[60] Trans. Macrae-Gibson.

[61] ll. 70-77.

> which grudges me my dwelling, mocks my home here;
> and then the body lies all food for worms,
> rejoicing, feasting worms,
> until there remain bone alone).[62]

The monosyllabic half-line *an* when juxtaposed with *ban* ruthlessly drives home the

metaphor: materiality is nothing but bones, and the heroic speaker is utterly and

completely alone.[63] Here the metaphor of the *hoard* has changed from the wealth of

jewels bolstering the heroic life to coals to a cache of bones buried deep in the ground.

During this progression, the *hoard* of gold and jewels remains a dominant—and ever

evolving—metaphor. The end of the poem is very similar to *The Wanderer*, with the joys

of heaven being elevated above those of the heroic life. Unlike *The Wanderer*, however,

there are no gnomic statements and the descriptions of secular life comprise the bulk of

the poem.

Three of the more secular lyrics, *The Wife's Lament*, *Wulf and Eadwacer*, and

Deor, all lament losses, both social and material, yet they do not use material metaphors

in the same ways as the homiletic lyrics. Rather, the values often symbolized by material

exchange are foregrounded. *The Wife's Lament* and *Wulf and Eadwacer* belong to the

frauenlied tradition.[64] These lyrics are presented through female speakers lamenting the

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[62] Trans. Macrae-Gibson.

[63] It should be noted that the reading of *an* as a monosyllabic half-line is contested. Macrae-Gibson edits the poem with *an* as a free-standing half-line while Klink believes the line is defective, citing Grein, Wentersdorf, Conybeare, Thorpe, Ettmüller, Sieper, Imelmann, Mackie, Krapp-Dobbie, Grein, & Grein-Wülker (88 n. 77, 157). While not the popularly accepted reading—in light of the incredible sense and beauty of the unamended half-line—I must side with Macrae-Gibson in its defense. The presentation is a concrete display of the term's meaning: it, like the speaker, is *alone* (Earl, conversation on 10/30/2008). The author of The Riming Poem has displayed a more than typical willingness to experiment with both traditional oral-poetic constructions and grammar.

[64] As first noted by Kemp Malone in 1949.

loss of love. *Deor*'s roots lie in Germanic legend. Though no references to a Deor in heroic legend survive aside from the poem, the name itself appears in Anglo-Saxon documents.

In *The Wife's Lament* and *Deor,* the longing for the comfort of the hall is still very much present, as if the rewards of heaven are a bitterly tolerated consolation for security or *landryht*. The speaker in *The Wife's Lament* is still beset by powerful longings for a husband she has come to distrust, and her *eorþscraf* under the *ac treow* is felt as a powerful absence of all of the material and social wealth that she formerly possessed. However, she does not dwell on or describe the material trappings of her former life. They are assumed, but not detailed. She describes her surroundings in some detail, but she is in a naturalistic setting, in some type of earthen dwelling under an oak tree—reduced nearly to the state of an animal.[65] She is beset by longings, but they are mainly longings for companionship—and possibly revenge.[66]

The speaker of *Deor* also tries to project hope for the recovery of his losses in terms of great figures from Germanic literature who also overcame great losses, yet it rings with the same sense of frustrated desire—that what Deor actually desires is his old place back weaving songs at the feet of the Heodining lords. What consolation he takes is taken grudgingly and would probably be traded for gold rings and mead horns. Oddly enough, however, the material trappings of the heroic life are tellingly absent from this

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[65] The exact type of dwelling and location has been the subject of much speculation.

[66] For a discussion of the scholarship reading the last lines of this poem as a curse, see Niles 2006.

poem. It deals in stories and abstractions for its effect.[67] The only material item mentioned in this elegy is still an abstraction: the *londryht* taken from Deor and given to Heorrenda in l. 40. The losses itemized in the poem are horrendous: Welund is maimed and enslaved, Beaduhild raped and impregnated, her brothers killed, etc., yet these situations frequently lead to better things for the people involved. This poem uses metaphor in ways quite unlike the homiletic poems discussed above, which rely on materiality and material items as metaphors for mortality and its evils.

It can be inferred that Deor has lost the material rewards that also came with his position as court scop—the same pomp and ring-giving decried in *The Wanderer*, *The Seafarer*, and *The Riming Poem*. In the homiletic poems, the materiality of these items is specifically foregrounded and condemned, while in *Deor*, the material aspects are completely ignored in favor of the sense of honor and sense of place conferred by these symbols. And while Deor seeks consolation in the legends of the past, this consolation does not at all resemble the Heavenly consolation sought by the speakers of the homiletic poems. The gnomic passage, while Christian in character, echoes the phrase from *Beowulf* "*Gæþ a wyrd   swa hio scel!*"[68]

Wulf and Eadwacer also evinces a complicated joining of the tangible and the intangible. It exceeds *The Wife's Lament* in projecting brutal and raw emotion. Where

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[67] Though it should be noted that l. 1, *Weland him be wurman wræces cunnade* (Weland, among the worms, knew misery), has generated disparate readings. Klinck surveys several of them in her endnote. Among the readings published since Klinck's edition is an article that translates this line as "among the snake-rings" by Robert Cox, who documents examples of serpentine gold rings. Sitting exiled and maimed among the wealth he was forced to generate for Niðhad would certainly increase Weland's miseries.

[68] Kevin Kiernan sees this poem as firmly grounded in the Boethian tradition of consolation, a view echoing Conybeare's views on *The Wife's Lament*. Jerome Mandel may see the refrain as a curse on Deor's rival, a treatment similar to John Niles's view of the last lines of *The Wife's Lament* (Niles 2006).

the wife's longings are for the dual loss of mate and hall, the speaker in this poem rejects the hall of her husband and longs for the very material flesh of her lover, Wulf, and she does so in an extremely visceral and curious way that is also seen in *Deor* and *The Wife's Lament*: humans are reduced to animals—mere beings of the flesh. Deor's name means wild animal, the speaker in *The Wife's Lament* has been forced to live in a hole under a tree (though this may be hyperbole), much like a forest animal, and the Speaker of *Wulf and Eadwacer* longs for Wulf, another animal name, and designates the child she has borne as a whelp.[69] Her husband, Eadwacer—a name meaning property-watcher and therefore an apt name for a guard dog, fares even worse—he is stripped of his material presence in the last line of the poem and reduced to a song. The flesh is the sole materiality of this poem, and the flesh, much like the ocean in *The Seafarer*, is a material metaphor signaling impermanence and fluidity. Though capable of mighty acts, it is elastic and mutable in life and dissolves very easily in death.

Ultimately, there is no consolation at all for either the Wife or Wulf's lover, and the consolation taken by Deor is tempered by metaphors taken from heroic literature and the cruelties and atrocities in it. Unfortunately for those who have lived a heroic life and now seek consolation, there is little comfort to be had, as they are framing their consolations in terms of relationships that have vanished and are sorely missed. In Anglo-Saxon secular lyric, the loss of social and material wealth leads the sufferer to a state akin to beasts in the forest. For the homiletic poems, while consolation from the

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[69] It is not clear from the grammar whether Wulf or Eadwacer should be considered the child's father— each reading dramatically alters the trajectory of the poem.

heavens is attainable, the metaphorical juxtaposition of material and intangible makes for a conflicted text that describes the spiritual life entirely in terms of what it is not.

While the first six elegies break down comfortably into two distinct groupings—homiletic poems heavily reliant on material metaphors for effect and more secular poems relying on immaterial relationships for their effect—there are still two poems in this group to deal with. Firstly there is *The Ruin*, a curious poem with no direct antecedents. The poem is mainly concerned with *things*—shedding tiles, crumbling walls. The reconstructed civilization is projected entirely through the lens of the physical remains left behind by those made of mutable flesh. The last readable lines describe the wonders of the hot springs themselves, not any kind of consolation like that of the homiletic poems. If there is consolation here, it is that man was capable of creating such wonders in the first place.

Various critics have tried to inject morality into *The Ruin* with allegorical readings, most notably Hugh Keenan's reading of the poem as an adaptation of Book XV of St. Augustine's *City of God*. While imaginative, this reading cannot be reconciled with the tone of the poem, which is both wondering and enthusiastic. His major piece of evidence is the formula "*wlonc ond wingal*" (proud and wine-flushed) which is used in a pejorative sense in *The Seafarer*.[70] However, in this poem, the phrase does not seem at all pejorative. In fact, the poet seems to express nothing but admiration for the ruins he observes, and the society he invents to inhabit them: while vulnerable to pestilence and long gone to dust, is impressive nonetheless.

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[70] Keenan 113.

The poet invokes this sense by the thoroughness of his descriptions—the things of the past are everywhere elevated, detailed, and colored. So much so that the poet's native language shows the strain of describing things it was never meant to describe. The traditional material descriptors of the Anglo-Saxon language were not well-equipped to deal with Roman ruins like those described in the poem.[71] The poem is loaded with *hapax legomena* and rare words, making any reading of the poem difficult and fraught with ambiguities.[72] Anglo-Saxon buildings were generally constructed from wood, not stone, so the various tiles, iron-bracings, vaults, and plumbing systems posed a peculiar linguistic problem for the poet. However, he tackles this with joyful and reckless abandon, describing ruins and cyclically destroying and rebuilding them with words.

The poem has severe fire damage in two locations, rendering lines 12-17 and 42-49 cryptic at best. Despite the injury to the text, the poem is impressive in both is musical expressiveness and sheer audacity. It contains instances of internal rhyme (ex. *hrim on lime*; *scorene, gedrorena*; and *forweorone, geleorene*) which perhaps links it more intimately with Latin poetry. More importantly, it uses material imagery and symbolism in ways not seen in the other elegies. Though Keenan and Talentino detect moralizing and allegorical readings, the majority of critics do not. Instead, the poem is seen as a mix of awe and whimsy in which an impressive civilization is rebuilt from the

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[71] Much discussion has taken place trying to locate the actual site of the poem. This argument appears to be settled and most readers of this poem agree that the ruins described by the poet are those of Roman Bath as they appeared during the Eighth Century (Leslie 26-28, 34-36). This city had been fully excavated and the restored baths bear striking resemblance to the details of the poem.

[72] See Leslie's introductory section on dialect (34-36) and textual notes, and Karl Wentersdorf's "Observations on the Ruin." *Medium Ævum* 46.2 (1977): 171-79 for more discussion on the difficulties presented by the language of the poem.

ashes (albeit in a very Germanic manner). It appears to begin in the *Ubi Sunt* tradition, where a speaker laments the passage of a civilization, then moves into the *De Excidio* tradition in which the destruction of a civilization is described, then moves to the *encomium urbis* tradition in which a city is praised.[73] All three traditions have roots in Latin poetry, but *The Ruin* both praises and destroys the city in characteristic Germanic fashion, lingering on the joys of the prior inhabitants and the material symbols of those joys. However, unlike similar passages in the homiletic elegies discussed above, there is no overt moralizing: the city was beautiful, its people lived in luxury and then died of pestilence, and the city is still impressive in its decay.

The poem begins in the fashion expected for a homiletic poem: chronicling the decay of a city. The first section piles up material images in a litany of destruction:

> Wrætlic is þes wealstan! Wyrde gebræcon;
> burgstede burston, brosnað enta geweorc;
> hrofas sind gehrorene, hreorge torras,
> hringeat berofen, hrim on lime;
> scearde scurbeorge, scorene, gedrorene,
> ældo undereotone. Eorðgrap hafað
> waldenwyrhtan, forweorone, geleorene,
> heard gripe hrusan, oþ hund cnea.

> (Fine worked is this wall-stone now wyrd-broken.
> The buildings are burst open battered is the giants' work.
> The roofs are ruined, the towers wrecked,
> The runged gate unhinged, and hoar is on the mortar.
> The shelters are shattered, shorn-off, fallen
> And eaten with age. Earth now clutches
> The wall and its workers, all waste are their skills

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[73] D. R. Howlett first described *The Ruin* as an encomium urbis, along with the poem *Durham*. Karl Wentersdorf, Ann Thompson Lee, and Kathryn Hume all discuss the de excidio and encomium urbis motifs as they apply to the poem. However, it seems to me that the poem does not fall into one genre or the other, instead it appears to deliberately move from one genre to the next quite conscious of the effect this creates of decay and rebuilding, or of death and rebirth.

> Held in earth's hard grip   while a hundred ages
> Of people have passed.)[74]

The poet spends far more time on the stone than the hands that dressed it, layering

details of what he sees before him. He appears to continue to catalog the destruction in

lines 9-17, though the manuscript damage makes it difficult to assert this with absolute

certainty. From that point, he moves against the grain of what would be the expected

tone on the wages of sin and reconstructs the physical city in all of its glory:

> Mod monade   myneswiftne gebrægd;
> hwætred in hringas   hygerof gebond
> weall walanwirum   wundrum togædre.
> Beorht wæron burgræced,   burnsele monige,
> heah horngestreon,   heresweg micel,
> meodoheall monig,   mondreama full;
>
> (Strong in rings,   sturdy high roof
> and wall-stones worked   wondrously together.
> The buildings were bright,   the bath-houses many,
> The towers were tall   and teeming with life.
> The mead-halls were many,   filled with man-joys.)

The poet then destroys the city before the reader's eyes at the hands of wyrd and

pestilence. The walls fall down and crumble around him. However, this poem is

radically rebellious. It actually works in the opposite fashion of the three homiletic lyrics

discussed above—rather than resigning the former inhabitants to a transitory vision of

dust, he resurrects them yet again, and this time it is the people he raises from the dead,

along with the material symbolism so roundly condemned in *The Seafarer*, *The*

Wanderer, and *The Riming Poem*:

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[74] Trans. Gwendolyn Morgan and Brian McAllister.

> Þær iu beorn monig,
> glædmod ond goldbeorht,   gleoma gefrætwed,
> wlonc ond wingal,   wighyrstum scan;
> seah on sinc, on sylfor,   on searogimmas,
> on ead, on æht,   on eorcanstan,
> on þas beorhtan burg   bradan rices.

> (There, once, many a man,
> Glad-hearted and gold-bright,   in glory dressed,
> War-proud and wine-flushed,   his weapons shining,
> Looked on glory, on gold,   on carved gems,
> On wealth, on war-spoils,   on worked stone,
> On that bright bulwark   and its broad realm.)

The poem seems to end on a positive note—though this cannot be established with certainty due to the manuscript damage—discussing the wonder of the baths, among the last legible words are "*þæt is cynelic þing*" (l. 48b) and "*burg*" (l. 49b). The poem, while dealing with those who are no longer present, is almost defiant in tone, not elegiac. It takes the metaphorical methodology of the homiletic poems and systematically inverts it by rebuilding the material, and by extension, the heroic, all the while appearing that it, too, will shift into the homiletic mode. But the shift never comes. *The Ruin* stands alone among Anglo-Saxon lyrics in that it is actively subverting the material symbolism used in homiletic poetry. Here, those who are *wlonc ond wingal* retain their glory, even in death.

In contrast to the other poems, the loss in *The Husband's Message* has apparently passed, and the exile once again has a hall and all of the *mondreamas* that come with it. Indeed, this poem is unrepentantly materialistic even when compared to the others: the joys promised to the betrothed are those deliberately eschewed by the narrator of *The Seafarer*. In return for honoring her vow, she is promised a seat by her lord distributing

mead and rings. It is no wonder that many critics have tried to make this poem the *consolatio* for the near-unbearable suffering of the speaker of the *Wife's Lament*.

The Husband's Message also lacks the emotiveness of the other poems. It, like the others, is a dramatic monologue, but the words of the husband are filtered through the speaker, producing a literal and figurative distance. The husband's message, and by extension the husband himself, takes on the qualities of the runestick. This distance has the effect of dampening the raw emotions seen within the other elegiac poems, creating a distinctly different tone. Klink also notes that this poem does not truly fit into the deprivation/consolation model in quite the same ways as the preceding poems.[75] This view is echoed by Timmerman (36-37), though Greenfield disagrees somewhat (120) as does Leslie (21-22). However, the dearth of work on *The Husband's Message* in collections dedicated to the elegies speaks for itself: while the other poems in the grouping are repeatedly discussed in minute detail in works such as Martin Green's *The Old English Elegies* and Stanley Greenfield's *Hero and Exile*, *The Husband's Message* is relegated to a brief description in the introduction. It simply does not fit the model well enough to be represented in the general discussion. Its lamenting is quite limited and its consolations take a form not seen in the other poems.

VIII. Conclusions

The Husband's Message is neither an elegy nor a riddle, though it uses conventions from both traditions. There are misfortunes, but they are overcome. The material objects in

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[75] Klinck 12, 60.

the poem are neither reviled nor are they absent as in the secular lyrics. They are not objects of wonder as in *The Ruin*. Rather they are used—traded for something more valuable and yet not really an object itself. Nor is the poem a riddle, though it does use techniques borrowed from the riddling genre. Instead of asking to guess the identity of the prosopopoeic object, it declares itself and its pedigree like any good retainer, but not like any simple object. The runic signature also uses the riddling conceit, yet it mirrors actual practice.

Mostly, *The Husband's Message* is a love poem, yet love is never mentioned within it. The Anglo-Saxons had words for love and devotion, but they do not appear here. Instead the poem dwells on vows and material wealth. It is a love poem and a negotiation, a proposition between a man and a woman who is, in his mind, synonymous with treasure:

> [...] gold and silver [...] these objects play a role in all relations of exchange: [...] in the relationship between bridegivers and –takers; and in the relationship between royal families. [...] the 'worth' associated with a specific person [...] [is] convertible into these objects, or into the anonymous gold and silver that underlies these and from which new objects can be made.[76]

And the negotiation is mediated by an object, the words of the man carried over time and distance to be spoken by an utterly inhuman messenger. The runestick speaker has qualities of the human subject: it has a voice, a history, a family—a place in the world. And yet, it is a thing—a piece of wood sent to relay the words of another. The princess also partakes in the qualities of the object rather than a subject. She is seen by her betrothed as both bound by oath and therefore without true agency and as an object

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[76] Bazelmans 2000 371.

equitable with treasure. She is cataloged with treasure and horses and alcoholic beverages. And unlike the runestick, she is alienable—she can be bought. The husband, in displacing his voice into an object, also blurs the boundaries between object and subject.

This poem is unlike anything else in the Anglo-Saxon poetic corpus. Its vagaries have been the subject of much scrutiny, and yet they have lost none of their ability to mystify or infuriate. There are plenty of prosopopoeic speakers, but none of them function as an emissary in the human world quite like this. Most of them stay within their internal worlds and only ask to be acknowledged or known. They do not attempt to go out and persuade others, with the exception of the cross in *The Dream of the Rood*. Material literature in *The Husband's Message* bridges the gap between man and object and offers a proposition threatening to make the recipient into something of an alienable object herself.

CHAPTER III

IC ÞÆT EALL BEHEOLD: THE CROSS AS WITNESS IN *THE DREAM OF THE ROOD*

I. The Cross as Object and Sign

This chapter will examine material literature as depicted in Anglo-Saxon religious poetry, specifically that related to the cross. The previous chapter examined the symbolic valences of a runestick narrating a love poem. In *The Dream of the Rood*, a prosopopoeic cross narrates a poem that has features of a riddle, apostolic verse, and the metrical vita. The cross was a ubiquitous symbol in Anglo-Saxon culture. It was, simply put, everywhere. The physical cross could be found on items as diminutive as coins and as massive as the seventeen foot tall Ruthwell Cross monument. Even secular items like helmets, jewelry, and eating utensils were frequently marked with the cross.[1] The pervasiveness of the cross as a physical presence does not, however, really explain the *meanings* of the cross for the Anglo-Saxons. It was valued in some circles as a talisman against malevolent beings like elves or the devil, and figures in at least one extant charm.[2] Large sculptures like the Ruthwell Cross and the Bewcastle cross had various

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[1] For detailed discussion of the cross in Anglo-Saxon secular material culture, see Carol Neuman De Vegvar.

[2] Ibid. 98

uses, including guiding liturgical practice and memorializing their patrons.[3] Jeweled

processional crosses (*cruces gemmatae*) were used to guide religious worship and

demonstrate the wealth and power of specific religious centers.

The symbolic meaning of the cross influenced its manifestations, both literary and

material, and vice versa. The wood of the original cross led to the incorporation of the

prosopopoeic voice of a tree in the Anglo-Saxon literary tradition. Stone crosses tended

to incorporate memorial functions previously associated with runestones, but the cross

memorializes death and eternal life simultaneously. *Cruces gemmatae* were closely

associated with martial themes, and their costly decoration existed uneasily with

Christian (especially monastic) ideals concerning materiality and material wealth as

barriers to eternal life. This type of conflicted multivalency is seen in the tenth-century

poem *The Dream of the Rood*, in which a dreamer is confronted with a cross that shifts its

substance between that of a *crux gemmata* and a bleeding, talking tree. This chapter will

examine the ways in which *The Dream of the Rood*'s talking cross both overlaps with and

departs from depictions of material literature in Anglo-Saxon poetry and material

literature found on Anglo-Saxon crosses—particularly the Ruthwell Cross, a large

monument bearing a runic version of the poem.

Myriad divergent manifestations of the cross occur precisely because the cross, as

a symbol, is so simple and so malleable. It can represent a gallows (and by extension, a

sinner), Mary (as another who "bore" Christ), Christ himself, the *arbor vitae* (tree of life),

the *navis crucis* ferrying sinners to salvation, and the entirety of creation as seen as being

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[3] See Eamonn O'Carraigain's *Ritual and the Rood* for an in-depth study of the liturgical uses of crosses and for more information on the *crux gemmata* and *navis cruces*.

encompassed by its extended arms as the cosmological cross.[4] In at least one early

Christian text, the apocryphal *Acts of John*, the cross was viewed as a mystery—the

meditative contemplation of which would lead to spiritual enlightenment or gnosis. To

complicate things further, the supposed "true cross" was an object, splinters of which

were tightly controlled, yet widely disbursed. These splinters were thought to be capable

of changing the properties of their reliquaries using the law of contagion, and performing

miracles in the same manner as a saint's relics. We know that at least two pieces of the

True Cross were sent to England during the Ninth Century.[5] The cross was singled out

by St. Augustine in *De doctrina Christiana* as a thing that is also a sign (OE *beacen*).[6]

This sign becomes a speaking subject in the Ruthwell Cross poem, the Brussels Cross,

and in *The Dream of the Rood*.

II. Epigraphic Influences on the Poem

The Dream of the Rood is the longest and most detailed extant example of a prosopopoeic

cross in Anglo-Saxon literature. It survives in a single tenth-century manuscript known

as the Vercelli Book. Notably, *Elene*—a poem by Cynewulf detailing St. Helena's

discovery of the True Cross in Jerusalem—is also contained in this manuscript, separated

from *The Dream of the Rood* by several homilies. However, there are several other texts

relevant to the interpretation of the poem: the Exeter Book contains several riddles that

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[4] Sandra McEntire 349-51.

[5] McEntire 346.

[6] See Calvin Kendall for more on this. His article also attempts to analyze the "thingness" of the cross, and so there is some necessary overlap with the contents of this chapter.

may be solved by "cross"; there is an eleventh-century prose version of Helena's discovery of the cross; and there is the Brussels Cross, a (damaged) reliquary that probably once held a piece of the True Cross.[7] These items comprise the immediate corpus of Anglo-Saxon literature featuring the cross as the main subject. However, the breadth of influences on the *Dream of the Rood* is far wider than this: other Anglo-Saxon high crosses bear some type of inscription; the relevant liturgical and homiletic literature is quite extensive; and there is also a large catalog of both riddles and inscribed objects.[8]

Of the high crosses still extant in the British Isles, the Ruthwell and Bewcastle crosses are the most relevant for interpreting the *Dream of the Rood*. The two crosses are located in close proximity in territory that was once the Celtic kingdom of Rheged before it passed into the hands of Northumbria. Critical opinion generally assumes the crosses were erected around the same time and probably date from the early to mid eighth century, approximately two centuries before the *Dream of the Rood* was recorded in the Vercelli Book.[9] The two crosses are very different in their iconographical contents.

The Bewcastle Cross appears to be a memorial, linking it at least symbolically with memorial runestones found throughout the Germanic world. R. I. Page considers this noteworthy, as there are very few English memorial runestones compared to the rest of the Germanic world; he numbers them at thirty-five. Though it is now headless, the

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[7] For a discussion of the Brussels Cross, see O'Carragain.

[8] For a survey of prosopopoeic inscriptions and a discussion of their relevance, see Bredehoft 1998.

[9] Opinion on dating the crosses is quite diverse. O'Carragain devotes some space to the topic. Also see Mac Lean and Orton.. Recent arguments seem to agree on a date somewhere in the Eighth Century, but there are still detractors.

cross is still an imposing monument that would have stood well over fifteen feet in

height. R. I. Page describes it thus:

> The west face has three figure panels representing (from top to bottom) St John
> the Baptist bearing the Agnus Dei, Christ in majesty, His feet resting on two
> beasts, and St John the Evangelist, an eagle on his wrist. An inhabited vegetable
> scroll occupies the full length of the east face, while the north and south faces
> each have five decorative panels of interlace, vegetable scroll and chequers, one
> of the southern vegetable scroll panels enclosing a sundial.[10]

Page's transliteration of the runes on the cross is still considered authoritative, though

there is dissent about the "Alcfriþ" inscription. He sees six inscriptions:

I.   [+]g[*e*]ssus kristtus

II.   +þis sigb[ ]c[ ][ ]sett[o or n] hwætred [ ]þ gæra[ ]w[ ] wo [ ] [ ]ft[ ]lcfri m[

]ngu [ ]ŋ [ ]cb[ ] [u or ŋ] [ ]gebid[ ] [ ]so[ ]o

III.   [ ]ss[u or s]

IV.   kynibur[ ]g

V.   Illegible. Page detects a 'c' in the second position. The first position could be

an 'l' but could just as likely be an 'o' or an 'a'

VI.   [ ]ge[ ][11]

It is posited that the cross was erected to memorialize Alcfriþ and his queen Cyniburg,

though Page asserts that this cannot be definitively established due to the damaged state

of the text. It is interesting that this cross explicitly labels itself a *sigebecn*, or 'victory

sign', linking it to the Constantinian artistic and literary traditions of the cross as a

symbol of victory.

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[10] Page 47.

[11] Ibid 49-52. I have simplified Page's notational system.

Compared to the Bewcastle Cross, the Ruthwell Cross is a remarkably complex piece of material literature. It is designed so that icon and inscription reinforce its highly organized iconographical programme. The inscriptions appear in both Anglo-Saxon and Latin; they are also written in two different scripts, runic and Latin letters. It is massive, standing over seventeen feet in height. Unfortunately, it suffered heavy damage after being singled out in a legal action as idolatrous, leading to it being pulled down and dismembered two years later. Pieces of the monument were buried in the church garden and embedded into the floor of the church where it stood. [12] These sad events greatly complicated efforts to transcribe and interpret the cross, though attempts were made to transcribe the runes on the visible portions after its dismemberment. The Rev. Henry Duncan reconstructed the cross over a period from 1802 to 1823 when the upper arm of the cross was located, preserving it for posterity. The transom arm has never been found.[13] The current arm is an artist's imaginative reconstruction.

Most of the panels are still clear enough that they can be both re-constructed and interpreted. The overall iconographic program, according to O'Carragain, follows a liturgical programme beginning with the Annunciation at the base of the first broad panel (the passion image was a later addition), and the cross was meant to be viewed in a sunwise direction.[14] The twelve Latin inscriptions are biblical, and some of them are several lines in length. Along the sides of the cross is the Anglo-Saxon poem, written in runes in the Northumbrian dialect. The cross may have been designed around the poem,

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[12] O'Carragain 15.

[13] I would think this would be a good application for ground-penetrating radar.

[14] O'Carragain, 2003 in Theorizing Anglo-Saxon Stone Sculpture and ritual, 47

as the space needed to fill the four columns has been calibrated with remarkable

precision, and the subject matter of the passion acts as both a foil to the opening depiction

of the Annunciation and also the second manifestation of the *fortitudo Dei* (Strength of

God) motif. The *fortitudo Dei* motif became linked to the courage required to both face

incarnation in the flesh and to suffer the humiliation of execution at the Crucifixion. As

these two iconographical images frame the programme of the Ruthwell Cross,

O'Carragain sees the *fortitudo Dei* motif as the dominant theme of the cross.[15]

David Howlett's reconstruction and translation of the Ruthwell Cross poem reads

as follows:

East Side
I. North border

+ Ondgeredæ Hinæ God Alme3ttig. Ða He walde on galgu gistiga
mogid fore allæ men
buga ic ni dorstæ
ac scealde fæstæ standa.

II. South border

Ahof ic riicnæ Kiniŋc.
Heafunæs Hlafard   hælda ic ni dorstæ.
Bismæradu uŋket men ba ætgadre;   ic wæs miþ blodi bistemid,
Bigoten of þæs Guman sida   siþþan He His gastæ sendæ.

West Side
III. South border

+Krist wæs on rodi.
Hweþræ þer fusæ   fearran kwomu
Æþþilæ til anum: ic þæt al biheald.
Saræ ic wæs miþ sorgum gedrœfid;   hnag ic þam secgum til handa.

IV. North border

Miþ strelum giwundad
Alegdun hiæ Hinæ limwœrignæ;   gistoddun him æt His licæs heafdum;

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[15] O'Carragain, ritual 84-85.

Bihealdun hiæ þer Heafunæs Dryctin;   ond He Hinæ þer hwilæ restæ.[16]

(I. God Almighty stripped Himself. When He wished to ascend onto the gallows, brave before all men, I dared not bow down, but had to stand fast.

II. I raised up a powerful king. I dared not tilt the lord of heaven. Men mocked us both together. I was drenched with blood issued from the Man's side after He sent forth His spirit.

III. Christ was on the Cross. But hastening nobles came together there from afar. I beheld it all. Sorely was I with arrows afflicted. I bent to the men, to their hands.

IV. Wounded with arrows they laid him down weary in limb. They stood for him at the head of His corpse. They beheld there Heaven's Lord. And he rested himself there for a time.)

Howlett's reconstruction of the poem shows just how closely this poem and the later *Dream of the Rood* are related. The lines above correspond closely with *The Dream of the Rood* 44b-45b, 56b-58b, 39a, 48a, and 63.[17] *The Dream of the Rood* appears to be a substantial expansion of the Ruthwell Cross poem, which preserves the heart of the poem: the gospel according to the cross. What is omitted in this poem is very important to the transition of the cross from witness to saint that occurs in the final sections of *The Dream of the Rood*. The cross as it is presented here does not establish its own identity, whereas in the later poem the cross brings in more and more of its own experience, its authority, and its salvific efficacy. The Ruthwell Cross poem acts as a complement to the iconographic program on the larger faces of the cross. It also provides a sense of

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[16] Howlett 88. He uses Elizabeth Okasha's reconstruction of the runes and the Dream of the Rood text to fill in gaps caused by damage to the stone.

[17] Ibid. 86-87. Howlett also provides an edition of the associated lines of the Dream of the Rood with overlapping words and ideas italicized.

legitimacy: while the monument is not the true cross, it speaks with the *voice* of the true cross, firmly establishing its relationship to the original cross.

Another relevant item, the Brussels Cross, is estimated to postdate the *Dream of the Rood* by a century or so.[18] The cross is a (badly damaged) reliquary that was probably designed to hold a splinter of the true cross. Like the cross described in *The Dream of the Rood*, it is a *crux gemmata*, or jeweled cross, much like those used as altar or processional crosses. Ian Wood posits that Anglo-Saxons tended to view stone crosses in the Constantinian tradition as *cruces gemmatae* due to a literal interpretation of accounts of large reliquaries erected on Golgotha and in the neighboring church, and that the elaborate figural carvings on Anglo-Saxon high crosses were an attempt to approximate this imagery.[19] However, the importance of gold and jewels to the Anglo-Saxon's psyche is well established, regardless of Constantinian tradition.

The Brussels Cross was vandalized in 1793 by invading French soldiers. It lost its gilt ornamentation, rubies, and diamonds clustered on the front panel in the process, though a description of these features remains. The back panel and sides, also gilt and silver plate, were not removed. The back is home to an iconographical programme containing the *Agnus Dei* flanked by zoomorphic representations of the evangelists. The inscription on the back is of interest, as it was "signed" by the artisan. It reads "Drahmal me worhte" along the horizontal span in roman letters. The sides contain the following inscription:

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[18] O'Carragain 339.

[19] Ian Wood, "Constantinian Crosses in Northumbria." *The Place of the Cross in Anglo-Saxon England.*

+Rod is min nama.   Geo ic ricne cyning
bær byfigynde   b/lode bestemed.

Đas rode het   Æþlmær/ wyrican
Ond/   Aþelwold   hys beroþo[r]/

Criste to lofe
For Ælfrices savle   hyra beroþor

(+ Cross is my name; long ago a powerful king
I bore trembling, drenched in blood;
Æþelmær ordered this cross to be made,
And Æþelwold his brother:
In Christ's honor,
For the soul of Ælfric their brother.)[20]

The fact that two prosopopoeic crosses exist alongside a prosopopoeic poem of

the cross—from a period spanning nearly half a millennium—is strong indication that the

prosopopoeic cross was an enduring and complicated symbol deeply embedded in the

Anglo-Saxon psyche. While the Brussels Cross postdates both the Ruthwell Cross and

The Dream of the Rood, its inscriptions are very interesting in that, unlike the other two

crosses, it mixes several epigraphic traditions established via numerous examples from

throughout the Anglo-Saxon world. The maker's inscription echoes the large store of

objects, mainly secular, that bear some type of mark or inscription identifying the

craftsman. The memorial inscription places this item in the same category as memorial

runestones that are found scattered widely throughout the Germanic world. The

prosopopoeic couplet strongly echoes the imagery of both the Ruthwell Cross and the

Dream of the Rood. The epigraphy of this item is an extremely complex mix of sacred

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[20] O'Carragain, 348

and secular poetic function not seen anywhere else in the catalog of Anglo-Saxon material literature.

III. Written Influences on *The Dream of the Rood*

Jill Frederick examines a group of six riddles from the Exeter Book for which "cross" has been suggested as a solution: riddles 30, 53, 55, 60, 67, and 73.[21] Riddle 66 may also belong to this group. As she explores the group in detail, it appears that only Riddle 30 has "cross" as a concrete or primary solution. For the others, "cross" is a tangential solution, coupled to imagery of weapons and trees. Frederick points out that imagery of the cross permeated Anglo-Saxon culture to the point of saturation, and that this is especially manifest in poetic images of trees and weapons.[22] Trees and the cross are linked by metonymy and the cross is frequently depicted as Christ's weapon in combat with the Devil. Riddles 53 and 73 depict innocent trees forced into service as weapons, pulling from both sets of motifs associated with the cross. Riddle 55 takes the opposite tack, invoking the cross explicitly while hiding a solution that seems much more secular—"sword rack" is often given as a solution. I do not believe that Riddle 60 is a riddle at all, but rather the opening of *The Husband's Message*, a poem that deliberately uses a conceit taken from the riddling genre. Riddle 67 is a fragment. Riddle 30, however, deserves closer study:

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[21] Cross and Culture in Anglo-Saxon England. Numbering from Krapp and Dobbie.

[22] Frederick 85-86.

Ic eom legbysig,   lace mid winde,
bewunden mid wuldre,   wedre gesomnad,
fus forðweges,   byrnende gled.
Ful oft mec gesiþas   sendað æfter hondum,
þæt mec weras ond wif   wlonce cyssað.
þonne ic mec onhæbbe,   ond hi onhnigaþ to me
monige mid miltse,   þær ic monnum sceal
ycan upcyme   eadignesse.[23]

(I am busy with flames, at play with the wind, spun about with glory, made one
with the firmament, eager for the onward way, afflicted by burning, blossoming in
the coppice, a burning ember. Very often comrades lay me across their hands so
that proud men and women may kiss me. Then I raise myself up and they bow
down to me in their multitudes of joy, since I shall increase for these people the
fount of blessedness.)[24]

This appears to be something of a composite of various forms of the cross, as the

cross in question is both large enough to the join the wind and firmament and small

enough to be passed around a congregation. Like the cross of *The Dream of the Rood*, its

substance is unstable. It repeatedly references its materiality by referring to fire. It is

quite clear because of the nature of its fears that this, in at least one manifestation, is a

large prosopopoeic wooden cross. Stone crosses simply are not concerned by or with

fire. This concern with material properties also manages to foreground the origins of this

cross: a tree. Indeed, though imagery suggestive of crosses abounds in the riddles,

imagery suggestive of trees is even more pervasive. Also like the *Dream of the Rood* is

the object's insistence that it is a pathway to salvation.

Surprisingly, Riddle 66 has been omitted from the grouping of riddles associated

with the cross. It appears to be a severe redaction of Riddle 40, a long riddle the solution

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[23] Craig Williamson.

[24] Trans. S.A.J. Bradley.

for which is generally accepted to be 'creation'. However, the cross was a symbolic

figure for creation. The theme of embracing earth and sky and the wide expanse of the

world is seen in Riddle 30 as well, and dovetails easily with the Augustinian concept of

the cross as an all-encompassing sign:

> Ic eom mare   þonne þes middangeard,
> læsse þonne hondwyrm,   leohtre þonne mona,
> swiftre þonne sunne.   Sæs me sind ealle
> flodas on fæðmum   ond þes foldan bearm,
> grene wongas.   Grundum ic hrine,
> helle underhnige,   heofonas oferstige,
> wuldres eþel,   wide ræce
> ofer engla eard,   eorþan gefylle,
> ealne middangeard   ond merestreamas
> side mid me sylfum.   Saga hwæt ic hatte.[25]

(I am greater than this world, smaller than a tick, brighter than the moon, swifter
than the sun. The seas, the ocean-floods, are all in my embrace, and this expanse
of earth, the green plains: I reach to their foundations. I stoop below Hell; I
mount above the heavens, the glorious homeland, and extend abroad over the
angels' abode. I fill the earth, the aged world, and the ocean streams, amply with
my own self. Say what I am called.)[26]

This is a manifestation of the cross as a symbolic tree of life, with its arms

continuing into infinity and its roots and crown transfixing the earth and heavens. As the

cross can easily be a symbol for creation itself, it is impossible to overestimate its

pervasiveness in Anglo-Saxon literature. However, most riddles where the cross is a

symbolic influence are concerned with a material manifestation of the cross as a tree.

These riddles overlap with others where trees are the center of focus, regardless of cross

imagery. The *Dream of the Rood* incorporates both motifs, but the focus on materiality

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[25] Craig Williamson.

[26] Trans. S.A.J. Bradley.

of *The Dream of the Rood* is not centered on revealing the identity of the speaker. Rather, it is on using the materiality of the cross to establish it as an authoritative witness. It uses associations from material literature to do this.

Among the literary devices influencing the *Dream of the Rood* are conventions taken from material literature. The cross of the *Dream of the Rood* mimics an epigraphic object. In the case of the *Dream of the Rood*, there is no mention of epigraphy in the poem. However, there are two epigraphic objects extant with borrowings from the same poem—though it is not clear that the *Dream of the Rood* borrows directly from either of them and may instead descend from an earlier text that all three utilize. However, it is not unlikely that the Ruthwell Cross was known to the author. The use of conventions associated with material crosses, though not explicit in this poem, still lends a depth to the text that it would not otherwise have, positing a kinship between material and written depictions of the cross.

IV. The Christian Object as Speaker

While many of the influences on its iconography may be either continental or liturgical, the cross in the *Dream of the Rood* also asserts its Germanic character—creating a nexus between two literary cultures. While it may not do this with runic letters like other depictions of material literature, it still borrows heavily from the heroic tradition. The Ruthwell Cross poem negotiates between native Germanic culture, Christian iconography, and political hegemony. The version of this poem known as the *Dream of*

the Rood still contains the original mixture of heroic and Christian traditions, but also incorporates conventions from the *vita* tradition. The end result is a prosopopoeic *vita*, a literary genre seen nowhere else. There is no other Anglo-Saxon example of an inanimate object cast in the role of a saint and martyr. Even in *Elene* the focus is mainly upon the deeds of St. Helena—the cross, though it contains a written message, is mute. There is a speaking statue in *Andreas* that testifies much like the cross, but it does not speak of itself as an entity, nor is it treated in the manner of a saint itself. Rather, it testifies as to the saintliness of the protagonist. The *Dream of the Rood* bears witness using a prosopopoeic speaker—and much of what the cross tells is of its own history and material being.

V. *The Dream of the Rood* as Dream Vision

The cross in the poem literally embodies the conflict between the material and the immaterial. It tells, much like the runestick from *The Husband's Message*, of its origins as a simple tree living at the edge of a forest. This directly contradicts continental accounts of the cross's origins as the *arbor vitae* planted from the seeds of a cedar, a cypress, and a pine placed under the tongue of Adam's corpse. The resultant tree firmly linked Adam to Christ in the popular imagination.[27] This version of events is found in two later English works, a poem and a vita.[28] The cross of *The Dream of the Rood*, while

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[27] Rahner 65.

[28] *Þære Halgan Rode Gemetnes* and *Þe Holi Rode* collected in *Legends of the Holy Rood*.

it may not be as distinguished as the continental cross, is still granted a pedigree. It is also granted some degree of agency—important in establishing the concept of free will that allows it to be saved. However, the cross of *The Dream of the Rood* operates within the conventions of the dream vision—a genre that was to become widespread in the later Middle Ages.[29]

The dream vision framework of the poem establishes its conflict—the constant battle between the concrete and the symbolic: between the material and immaterial worlds. Ironically, however, it is within this setting that materiality is granted a voice. In a dream vision, that which is impossible routinely becomes the norm. Material objects in dreams frequently lose the boundaries of natural law confining them in the waking world: objects become plastic, take on alien characteristics and new symbolic significance. The poem in the center of the vision is not orthodox; it is not seen anywhere else in the Christian world.

However, speech is not the only extraordinary feature of this object. We are immediately introduced to its mutability: the physicality of the cross is unstable. It routinely shifts forms to reflect its material and spiritual realities. The cross struggles to contain its vast array of iconographic possibilities: it is the jeweled cross of Constantine's sky vision; it is Marian; it is the nexus between earth and heaven; it is a simple tree; it is Christ himself. Though geometrically simple, the cross possesses the most complex makeup of any symbol from Anglo-Saxon England.

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[29] For more on the poem as a dream vision, see Harbus, Antonia. "Dream and Symbol in *The Dream of the Rood*". *Nottingham Medieval Studies* (NMS) 40. 1996, 1-15.

The introduction of the cross in *The Dream of the Rood* echoes the Constantinian

iconographic tradition, that of a wondrous cross of light:

> þuhte me þæt ic   gesawe syllicre treow
> 5   on lyft lædan   leohte bewunden,
> beama beorhtost.   Eall þæt beacen wæs
> begoten mid golde.   Gimmas stodon
> fægere æt foldan scēatum,   swylce þær fife wæron
> uppe on þam eaxlgespanne.

> (It seemed to me that I saw a very wondrous tree
> 5   lifted into the air, enveloped by light,
> the brightest of trees. That beacon was all
> covered with gold. Gems stood
> beautiful at the surface of the earth, there were five also
> up on the central joint of the cross.)[30]

The image above is the same the Constantinian vision of the cross that sparks the

action in the poem Elene:

> Geseah he frætwum beorht
> wliti wuldres treo   ofer wolcna hrof
> 90.   golde geglenged;   gimmas lixtan;
> þæs se blaca beam   bocstafum awritan
> beorhte ond leohte,   "Mid þis beacne ðu
> on þam frecnan fære   feond oferswiðesð,
> geletest lað werod";   þa þæt leoht gewat,
> 95.   up siðode   ond se ar somed
> an clænra gemang;   cyning þæs þy bliðra
> ond þe sorgleasra,   secga aldor
> on fyrhðsefan   þurh þe fægeran gesyð.

(He saw, brilliant with ornate treasures, the beautiful tree of glory in the vault of
the skies, decorated with gold, gleaming with jewels. The tree was brilliantly and
radiantly inscribed with letters: "With this emblem you will overpower the enemy
in the perilous offensive; you will halt hostile armies." Then the radiance
vanished; it went up and the messenger with it, into the company of the pure. The

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[30] Trans. Mary Rambaran-Olm.

king, the lord of men, was the happier, the less anxious at heart, for the lovely vision.)[31]

The language describing the object in question is paradoxical—both immaterial in that it is constructed from light, and material in that it is also described as being crusted in gold and gems—items that are dense and heavy. This contrast echoes that presented by *The Dream of the Rood*. There is a dichotomy here comprised of two conflicting states of being projected onto one object. This, however, is probably the result of a traditional poetic vocabulary. Anglo-Saxon poetry is highly concrete and frequently uses concrete terms to describe an immaterial item. Instead of using language portraying the cross as the gold of the sunset, we have the gold of the *hoard*.[32] Perhaps reflecting this conflict, the Anglo-Saxon processional cross was not a plain stone affair. Rather, it was a brightly painted, frequently bejeweled or gilded object—also a possible attempt to capture the Constantinian iconography of the *sigebecn* in physical form.

Evidence from surviving stone crosses indicates they were also coated not only in brightly colored paint, but also embedded with glass, jewels, and metalwork, so the *crux gemmata* imagery was not limited to the smaller processional crosses.[33] However, the *crux gemmata* here illustrates a very complicated relationship with the material. As we have seen in the previous chapter, the more overtly Christian 'elegies' and various other Christian poems make a point to disparage gold and jewels as moral waste, yet in a Christian context, the same gold and jewels are connected to the iconography of the cross. The cross of the *Dream of the Rood* moves between states, with gold representing

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[31] Trans. S.A.J. Bradley 167.
[32] Jim Earl, Thinking About Beowulf.

[33] Richard Bailey, 225-29 in Scragg.

light and victory and rubies representing Christ and the four evangelists—yet these things are still presented as impediments to understanding the splintered, bleeding truth of the cross.

The *Crux gemmata* gives way to the wounded warrior who is forced to kill its lord, giving the poem a decidedly martial tone. This tone is echoed by the similarly martial inscriptions on the visionary cross in *Elene* and on the Ruthwell Cross. The Ruthwell Cross version of the poem and the inscription on the ephemeral cross in *Elene* both concentrate on the martial iconography of the cross. This description from *Elene* concentrates on Constantine's vision of the cross as a *sigebecn* (victory sign) written in light across the sky and an omen of victory against an invading (partly Germanic) army.

The martial nature of the Ruthwell Cross poem is also foregrounded—but it is a peculiarly Germanic form of martial thought. The cross speaks as a member of a *fyrd*, a communal group of warriors sworn to protect their lord. The cross in this situation is personified, unlike the *sigebecn* of *Elene*, and its duties to its lord are in conflict with the most fundamental tenet of its culture—to survive one's lord on the battlefield. Being the instrument of his death (*bana*) is as fundamental a betrayal as is imaginable to the Anglo-Saxon psyche.[34] Yet the redemption of the most abject of things—a gallows—becomes a means of portraying salvation as within the reach of anyone: by function, the cross is a greater sinner than St. Paul was, and like him, it becomes a saint.

As a *fyrd* member, it is sworn to defend its lord, yet it must obey the direct command of its lord to cause his death. In both cases the cross is a sign of victory, but

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[34] O'Carragain, 2, quoting Tacitus.

these victories are very different—though Constantine's ends up being a victory for

Christianity, it begins as a victory for the Roman Empire. The Ruthwell Cross poem may

use martial terms, but these describe an entirely a spiritual victory. It may be pertinent

that both the Ruthwell Cross and the Bewcastle Cross (inscribed with the word *sigebecn*)

were erected in areas that had recently been conquered by the English, and that the

martial iconography displayed by both is no accident.[35]

However, the symbolism of the *sigebecn* is rapidly complicated in the poem when

Helena discovers the actual cross and has it re-fashioned into an elaborate reliquary

meant to echo the golden light with which the *sigebecn* was made:

> Heo þa rode heht
> golde beweorcean   ond gimcynnum,
> mid þam aðelestum   eorcnanstanum,
> 1025 besettan searocræftum   ond þa in seolfren fæt
> locum belucan þær   þæt kifes treo,
> selest sigebeama   siððan wunode
> aðele, unbrece;   þær bið a gearu
> wræðu wannhalum   wita gehwylces,
> 1030 sæce ond sorge;   hie sona þær
> þurh þa halgan gesceaft   helpe findaþ,
> Godcunde gife.

(Then she commanded that the Cross be encased with gold and intricately set with
gems, with the noblest precious stones, and then enclosed with locks in a silver
casket. There the tree of life, the most excellent tree of victory, has ever since
remained, unimpeachable as to its origin. There, ever ready, is a support to the
infirm in every torment, trial and sorrow. There, through that holy artifact, they
shall at once find aid and grace divine.)[36]

The metaphorical nature of Constantine's visionary cross yields to the concrete

physicality of the cross upon which Jesus was crucified. Helena transforms the cross into

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[35] O'Carragain.

[36] Trans. S.A.J. Bradley 190.

a saintly relic with all of the material trappings and rules governing commodification normally associated with relics.[37] Helena essentially commodifies the cross by placing it into the milieu of customs and traditions surrounding relics. This process leads directly to the development of a cult of the cross that becomes embedded in the liturgy. I believe the act described above is the nexus that allows the cross to find its own voice and speak centuries later and on the outskirts of the known world.

VI. The Cross as Relic

It can be argued that the cross is mainly a relic of Christ himself. There was a taboo on the breaking apart of holy bodies for relics in the early church, and many relics traded at the time were called secondary relics—items that were placed in contact with the intact bodies of saints and martyrs, absorbing holiness through the law of contagion.[38] Through this model, a piece of the true cross would operate much like any other relic in the early church, standing in for Christ—whose body was, for obvious reasons, not available to be distributed as relics.

However, the practice of breaking up the bodies of saints became increasingly common, and the most desirable relics were of human origin. The cross was also broken up and distributed, much like human remains of saints, and the power it possessed

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[37] See Geary for a detailed discussion of relics as commodities. It is also notable that the practice of wergild, or the formal codified price paid for causing the death of another in Germanic cultures also commodified all human life in AS England, not just that of slaves. Dowry and bride-price customs had a similar effect on women's lives.

[38] David Rollaso, 27.

seemed to come from the cross itself. It is thought that the Brussels Cross held a piece of the True Cross, and the presence of at least two pieces of the True Cross in Anglo-Saxon England is attested to in sources contemporary with the Ruthwell Cross. As Geary notes, human relics belonged to a rare class of commodities that were both human and objects.[39] There was a strong emphasis on the continued attachment of saints to their relics, and this allowed, when combined with a strong native tradition of literary prosopopoeia, for the cross to begin to assert its voice as a witness rather than a simple (mute) relic of Christ.

It is also noteworthy that the cross chronicles its transition from living tree to martyr, as it is in actuality killed by the *feondas* (enemies) who pull it down at the edge of the forest. Its account ranges from living presence to dead material artifact, essentially being martyred twice—once before Christ as a tree and once with him as an artifact. As a cross, its prosopopoeia is most like the fashioned objects in the riddles. These objects have some humanity in their "thingness" by virtue of having been acted on and formed by human minds and hands. The *Dream of the Rood* is a poem that captures that remarkable shift in which the cross asserts both its own materiality and its human role as saint and martyr.

This is the cross we encounter in *The Dream of the Rood*, one that is in flux between its original state and the elaborate reliquary in which it finds itself contained— and the two images appear to be in conflict. The conflict is iconographical—we have the *sigebecn* (victory sign) of Constantine inhabiting the same material space as a reliquary containing holy relics. These two iconographical materialities are at odds: one is a sign

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[39] Geary, social life of things

of victory in war and the other a relic used for relief of personal afflictions, both physical and spiritual. The poem describes a martyr struggling to cast off the mute oppression of its reliquary:

>
> Syllic wæs se sigebēam,   ond ic synnum fāh,
> forwunded mid wommum.   Geseah ic wuldres trēow,
> 15 wædum geweorðod   wynnum scīnan,
> gegyred mid golde;   gimmas hæfdon
> bewrigen weorðlīce   wealdendes trēow.
> Hwæðre ic þurh þæt   gold ongytan meahte
> earmra ærgewin,   þæt hit ærest ongan
> 20 swætan on þā swīðran healfe.   Eall ic wæs mid sorgum gedrēfed,
> forht ic wæs for þære fægran gesyhðe.   Geseah ic þæt fūse bēacen
> wendan wædum ond blēom;   hwīlum hit wæs mid wætan bestēmed,
> beswyled mid swātes gange,   hwīlum mid since gegyrwed.

>
> (Wondrous was that tree of victory, and I stained with sins
> wounded sorely with defects, I saw the tree of glory
> 15 honoured with garments, shining joyously, adorned with gold. Gems had
> splendidly covered the Lord's tree.
> I was able, however, to perceive through the gold,
> the ancient hostility of wretched ones, [that] it first began
> 20 to bleed on the right side. I was all troubled with grief,
> I was afraid in the presence of that beautiful sight. I saw that noble beacon
> change its coverings and color; sometimes it was drenched with moisture,
> soaked with the flow of blood, sometimes adorned with treasure.)[40]

This cross—the speaking cross of the poem—begins by stripping away the symbolic veneer to reveal that, underneath all of these layers of meanings—it is a tree:

>
> Hwæðre ic þær licgende   lange hwile
> 25 beheold hreowcearig   hælendes treow,
> oð ðæt ic gehyrde þæt   hit hleoðrode.
> Ongan þa word sprecan   wudu selesta:
> 'Þæt wæs geara iu,   (ic þæt gyta geman),
> þæt ic wæs aheawen   holtes on ende,
> 30 astyred of stefne minum.   Genaman me ðær strange feondas,
> geworhton him þær to wæfersyne,   heton me heora wergas hebban.
> Bæron me þær beornas on eaxlum,   oððæt hie me on beorg asetton,

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[40] Trans. Mary Rambaran-Olm.

gefæstnodon me þær feondas genoge.

(Nevertheless, I, lying a long time there,
25 gazed troubled at the Savior's tree,
until I heard it speak.
The most excellent tree then began to speak the words:
It was years ago (that, I still remember),
that I was cut down from the edge of the forest,
30 removed from my foundation. Strong enemies seized me there,
they made me into a spectacle for themselves, commanded me to lift up their
criminals.
Men carried me there on their shoulders, until they set me on a hill,
many enemies secured me there.)[41]

Here, much like the prosopopoeic runestick of *The Husband's Message*, the cross

discusses its origins—though not with anywhere near the same level of detail. Still, the

establishment of an independent identity seems to be crucial to the material poetry trope.

The voice of the cross cannot come from a void, or it has no authority. Here its authority

stems from its being a part of a community—the forest (*holtes on ende*). It establishes its

membership in a group before speaking, just like Beowulf and the runestick of *The*

Husband's Message. In order for prosopopoeia to occur in Anglo-Saxon literature, the

speaking object must first establish some kind of kinship or relationship, either to man or

the natural world.[42] Though the speaker may be an object, it usually speaks according to

existing cultural norms.

However, as B.K. Braswell notes, sacred prosopopoeia also stands beside the

native English tradition. Braswell points to this text by Aldhelm that shows the topic was

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[41] Ibid.

[42] Though exile and isolation from the group is also a major trope in Anglo-Saxon poetry, mainly explored in the elegies (thanks to Jim Earl for this insight).

very much in the consciousness of members of the Anglo-Saxon literati. Aldhelm writes

a Latin treatise on prosopopoeia in which biblical examples are discussed:

> Porro, quod eadem muta insensibilium rerum natura, de qua enigma clanculum et latens proposition componitur, quasi loqui et sermocinari fingitur, hoc et in sacris litterarum apicibus insertum legitur, quia nonnunquam rationabilis creatura irrationabilium gestu et personis utitur et e diverso irrationablilis sensusque vivaquitate carens intellectualium gestu et voce fungitur: quemadmodem in libro Iudicum diversa lignorum genera articulate hominis voce loquentia monarchum quaesisse referuntur (*ierunt*, inquit, *ligna ungere super se regem*) [Iud 9:8], ubi et singillatim, sicut supra iam diximus, ficus et vitis simulque olivia et ad extremum ramnus igne proprio flammisque voracibus Libani cedros consumpturus iuxta ritum humanae locutionis profari perhibentur [Iud 9:15]. Huius etiam tropi figuram in quarto Regum volumine Ioas Israeliticae plebis gubernaculo potitus ad Amasiam regalibus imperii sceptris fulgentem cum furibundo cavillationis ludibrio et proboso gannaturae subsannitis elogio crudeliter componens *Carduus*, inquit, *Libani misit ad cedrum, quae est in Libano, dicens: Da filiam tuam filio meo uxorem!* Et reliqua [4 Reg 14:9]; et psalmista *omnia ligna silvarum exultasse* [Ps 95:12] et *flumina manuum plausibus lusisse camposque gratulabundos extitisse* [Ps 97:8] ab animali ad inanimali metaforice retulit, et illud poeticum

> Mater me genuit, eadem mox gignitur ex me;

> Et quod de mutis aut brutis ratiocinationis argumenta requiruntur, cum etiam sapientissimus cunctorum retro regum et deinceps nasciturorum in Ecclesiaste frequenter stolidissimorum personis utatur dicens: *Quid habit homo amplius iumento* [Eccl 3:19] aut *sapiens stulto?* [Eccl 6:8] et cetera similia. Haec idcirco diximus, ne quis forte novo nos et inusitato dicendi argumento et quasi nullis priorum vestigiis trito praedicta enigmata cecinisse arbitretur.

> (Moreover, the device of representing inanimate objects devoid of speech, which are the subject of dark riddles and statements with hidden meanings, as talking and speaking is found employed in sacred scripture. For sometimes a rational creature adopts the pose and character of irrational objects and, on the other hand, a creature that is irrational and lacking the power of sense perception is endowed with the pose and voice of creatures with the voice and capacity of understanding. For instance, in the book of Judges, various kinds of trees speaking with a distinct, human voice are stated to have sought a ruler: 'The trees went to anoint a king to rule over them' [Jud 9:8]. There also one by one, as I have already said above, the fig-tree, the vine, the olive, and, last of all, the bramble, which was prepared to devour the cedars of Lebanon with fire and consuming flames from itself, are said to have spoken after the fashion of human speech [Jud 9:15]. Also in the fourth book of King Joas, who ruled over the people of Israel, cruelly

employed a form of this trope with inspired mockery and an abusive expression of snarling derision against Amasias, who had the illustrious honor of bearing the royal scepter of authority, when he said: 'The thistle of Lebanon sent to the cedar, which is in Lebanon, and said, "Give your daughter to my son to be his wife"', and so forth [4 Kings 14:9]. And the psalmist metaphorically ascribed to an inanimate object: 'All the trees of the woods rejoiced' [Ps 95:12] and 'The rivers made music with the clapping of their hands and the fields expressed their joy'[Ps 97:8]. The same is true in the verse 'My mother bore me, afterwards she is born from me', and in all the examples of reasoning drawn from dumb beasts and unintelligent men, since even the wisest of all the kings who lived in the past and of those who will be born afterwards often uses in Ecclesiastes very stupid people as examples when he says: 'What man has more than beast?' [Eccl 3:19] or "A wise man more than a fool?' [Eccl 6:8], and other such things. I have made this point so that no one may think that I have composed the metrical riddles in a new and unusual way and, as it were, one untrod by the footsteps of any predecessor.[43]

Aldhelm here takes steps to defend himself against those who would see the use of prosopopoeia as somehow irreligious or heretical. While his biblical examples broaden the milieu in which *The Dream of the Rood* stands, they do not really achieve their purpose of defending him against charges of making dark riddles or statements with hidden meanings, because none of the items he cites are similar to those in the riddles— items of manufacture. It is also telling that he uses examples comparing the sentience of beasts and unintelligent men, indicating that sentience was, for him, a plastic concept, and extended out of the realm of the human. In addition, four of his examples involve speech from trees. Aldhelm's words make it plain that both native and biblical examples of prosopopoeia were known to be influences on Anglo-Saxon poetry.

Other suggested prosopopoeic influences on Anglo-Saxon poetry include Latin models. The most frequently cited study of Latin sources is Margaret Schlauch's seminal article on prosopopoeia in *The Dream of the Rood*, where she notes that prosopopoeia,

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[43] Aldhelm's *De metris et enigmatibus ac pedum regulis*, ch. 7, quoted in and translated by Braswell, 462-63.

especially when pertaining to trees and items manufactured from wood, was a common

Roman literary device. She cites several examples of complaining trees, including one

from Ovid, *De Nuce*, in which a nut tree complains at length of the painful indignities it

is subjected to by hungry travelers.[44] Within another set of poems dedicated to Priapus,

Schlauch finds statues of the god recounting their transformation from tree to statue and

lamenting the painful indignity of manufacture.[45] It is not known how much each

tradition influenced the composition of the poem that eventually became *The Dream of

the Rood*. What is certain is that there is an Anglo-Saxon poetic tradition of speaking

trees, both holy and secular, documented from the Eighth Century to the Tenth, and that it

exists alongside homiletic literature prohibiting the worship of trees and other continental

literary influences.

The cross in the *Dream of the Rood* uses its origins as a tree to establish more

than its membership in a group; it establishes its innocence. Taken unwilling from the

forest by strong enemies, the cross shows that, being a tree, it cannot be complicit in

murder. Objects are equated with innocence here, and flesh with sin. Wood is free from

the sins of the flesh and therefore able to perceive events free from human frailties.

When the cross speaks, however, the authority it has established with regards to its

origins is used to bear witness to the most monumental of events—the crucifixion. There

is biblical precedent for identifying trees with innocence. O'Carragain quotes Bede's

commentary on the green tree of Luke 23:3. Bede also creates an image of the tree of life

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[44] Schlauch 26-27.

[45] Ibid, 28, esp. n. 15.

that is both guiltless and prosopopoeic[46]. But rather than linking the innocence of the prosopopoeic speaker of *The Dream of the Rood* to the liturgy of Ash Wednesday, it seems more likely that this imagery mainly descends from the riddling tradition, in which manufactured objects frequently lament the guiltlessness of their former, unfettered state. It just happens that the motif of a guiltless tree has parallels in both native Anglo-Saxon culture and also in biblical imagery, making the motif extremely plastic and appropriate for the speech of the cross.

Bearing witness is also a function of material literature. The Giants' Sword episode of *Beowulf* contains an ancient account of the flood—an account that has remained constant because it is not subjected to the distortions and loose constructions of oral literature. The cross here bears a direct and unmediated witness to Christ. The purpose of the speaking cross, like that of a runestone, is to *remember*, not to act. This is a purpose perfectly suited to a poem etched onto a runic monument, to bear witness and to do it in a public manner and in a way that is likely to stand for a very long time. A witness made of flesh will eventually die and decompose. A witness made of wood, or stone in the case of the Ruthwell Cross, will stand for a thousand years or more. Here materiality and longevity merge in the poem. Even the apostles lived short human lifespans; the witnessing of an ancient event by a tree, however, has a kind of first-hand veracity that cannot be found in any human witness. Here prosopopoeia serves an artistic

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[46] Ritual and the Rood 313-14

function that cannot be had anywhere else—it brings you a living account of events that passed long, long ago. [47]

VII. The Cross as Riddle

At this point, however, it is necessary to examine just how the cross bears witness to events. It does so by using conventions from two traditions: the vita and the riddle. Peter Orton has shown in his investigation of prosopopoeia in the poem that the Rood speaks much like many of the prosopopoeic artifacts in the Exeter Book. Like prosopopoeic objects from the riddles (the biting onion, etc.), the cross also claims agency, allowing it to take the role of actively aiding Christ in the salvation of mankind.[48] This active participation sets the cross up as both *fyrd* member and saint.

The cross states repeatedly that it has the ability to crush its enemies and to refuse to participate in the murder of its lord:

35   Þær ic þa ne dorste   ofer dryhtnes word
         būgan oððe berstan,   þa ic bifian geseah
         eorðan sceatas.   Ealle ic mihte
         feondas gefyllan,   hwæðre ic fæste stod.

35   There, I did not dare break to pieces or bow down
         against the Lord's words, when I saw the surface
         of the earth tremble. I was able to destroy
         all the enemies, nevertheless, I stood firmly.[49]

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[47] The poem Widsið has an interesting variant on this—a bard with first hand knowledge of what would have seemed (to the contemporary audience) like a nearly complete cosmological history. The speaker of that poem could either be considered extremely long lived and well-traveled, or else the poem incorporates a personified abstraction as a speaker (poetry itself), a device similar to prosopopoeia.

[48] Orton goes on to show the careful construction of these claims of agency in great detail, esp. pgs. 2-5.

[49] Trans. Mary Rambaran-Olm

After it is made clear that Christ is on a heroic mission, the cross's challenge is to go

against its Germanic cultural mores and support its lord, even though it means allowing

him to die—anathema in heroic culture.

> Bifode ic þa me se beorn ymbclypte.   Ne dorste ic hwæðre bugan to eorðan,
> feallan to foldan sceatum,   ac ic sceolde fæste standan.
> Rod wæs ic aræred.   Ahof ic ricne cyning,
> 45   heofona hlaford,   hyldan me ne dorste.

> I trembled when the man embraced me. However, I dared not bow down to the earth,
> fall to the surface of the earth, but I had to stand fast.
> I was raised [as a] cross. I lifted up the mighty king,
> 45   the lord of the heavens; I dared not bend down.[50]

Of course, after Christ is killed, the cross does indeed claim to assert its agency by

bowing with the corpse to Christ's supporters:

> Sare ic wæs sorgum gedrefed,   hnag ic hwæðre þam secgum to handa,
> 60   eaðmod elne mycle.

> Grievously I was afflicted with sorrow, yet I bowed to the hands of the men,
> 60   humble, with great zeal.

Orton notes that this false claim of agency is a common feature of Anglo-Saxon

riddles, particularly those claiming to be manufactured objects. In the riddles, it is as if

the act of manufacture or domestication imbues an object with a certain human affinity—

gives it a human voice. There is little in the way of speech coming from naturally

occurring objects. The hand of man seems to lend more than shape to these items, though

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[50] Ibid.

their natural materiality—iron ore, etc., is never in question. [51] Orton notes that both

these particular riddles and the rood tree describe a master/servant relationship that

allows the reader to reconstruct the objects' daily lives and, conversely, to veil its

identity. [52] He goes on to apply the conventions of the riddles to the rood cross:

> The narrative of the personified cross is constructed according to similar principles. But whereas the *Riddles* challenge the reader to pierce the surface-meaning to discover the underlying base object, in the *Dream* it is the significance of the object which is veiled rather than its actual identity. The cross is fully described by the visionary; but it clearly means more to him than a mere description of its appearance can convey, and the function of the cross's narrative is to make this meaning clear, not to conceal its identity. The naming of the cross as cross at a fairly late stage in its narrative (44 Rod) does not represent a "solution" to earlier clues to its identity, but rather a particular stage in the object's history which is reflected in the two images it presents to the visionary, and which is important for an understanding of its total significance[53].

The genre-crossing genius of the poem becomes clear as the cross uses the

riddling technique to establish its inhuman identity, and once that identity is firmly

established, to essentially canonize itself through its unique ability to bear witness to the

crucifixion. The riddling technique is the most appropriate starting point, as it establishes

a literary milieu in which it is perfectly acceptable for trees to speak. Once this threshold

has been crossed, the cross uses its materiality to establish its efficacy as a path to

personal salvation, much like any other vita but with one crucial difference—the cross,

free from the decay of the flesh—is able to testify to its own potency long after events

have transpired.

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[51] Orton 5-7, 10-12. Here Orton catalogs particular features, such as motion, rigidity, violent manufacture, wounding, servant/master relationship with a lord, and faulty interpretation of human actions and motivations, that are common to both the Riddles and DR.

[52] Ibid. 5.

[53] Ibid. 5.

The act of transitioning between material object and material culture—the process of making during which human traits are imbued—is invariably portrayed as painful. In this sense, the rood tree is closely akin to the battering ram of Riddle 53 that is taken from its idyllic existence and forced into painful servitude:

> It is clear, however, that in general the poets of *Dream* and *Riddles* followed similar procedures [...]. In some cases this provided an opportunity to exploit such themes as the extraction of a subject from a natural habitat, its carving, cutting or other shaping to its manufactured form and its new, enforced role in the service of man; these are often presented enigmatically by images of binding or abduction, mutilation or wounding or enslavement or control, respectively, as, for example, in 53 "Battering Ram" or 93 "Inkwell" [...]. Only in the latter riddle are these ideas employed in the service of a fuller characterization as they are in the *Dream*. On the other hand, the *Dream* poet exercises a firm control over the extent of the cross's characterization. For example, the idea of an object's unhealable wounds [...] is not over-emphasized: it would be unfortunate if the cross as an insentient object were seen to complain too much of wounds shared and actually suffered by its sentient lord. In contrast, the uprooting and subsequent violence suffered by the cross is given considerable emphasis: as Christ is not dramatically present during these incidents, the cross may do double duty as retainer and symbolic representative of its lord who suffers comparable violence and degradation elsewhere.[54]

Though insightful on the whole, there are some caveats here: Orton notes that the unique position of the cross as an inanimate object with a specific historical narrative is part of the reason the cross's characterization is so tightly controlled, as the poet's artistic freedom was limited by scriptural history; however, the parallel narrative of the cross's existence before Christ in the *Dream of the Rood* bears no resemblance to the continental traditions surrounding its origins. Also, Orton repeatedly refers to a poet shaping this characterization, yet the genesis of this poem is unknown, as is the extent of the characterization of the cross actually originating in the *Dream of the Rood*. The

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[54] Orton 7-8.

prosopopoeia in the Ruthwell Cross version of the poem is already well established. And the originality of that version cannot be definitively established, either. And finally, the open wounds of the cross are instrumental in establishing both the independence and authority of the cross as witness to the Crucifixion—providing proof to reinforce its version of events.

Orton's observations on the similarities between the *Dream of the Rood* and the Exeter Book riddles are convincing. This is especially true when one examines Riddle 53 "Battering Ram", a riddle that, while it is told from a human perspective, shows a similar uprooting and enslavement suffered by a tree:

> Ic seah on bearwe   beam hlifian,
> tanum torhtne.   Þæt treow wæs on wynne,
> wudu weaxende.   Wæter hine ond eorþe
> feddan fægre,   oþþæt he frod dagum
> 5   on oþrum wearð   aglachade
> deope gedolgod,   dumb in bendum,
> wriþen ofer wunda,   wonnum hyrstum
> foran gefrætwed.   Nu he fæcnum weg
> þurh his heafdes mægen   hildegieste
> 10   oþrum rymeð.   Oft hy an yste strudon
> hord ætgædre;   hræd wæs ond unlæt
> se æftera,   gif se ærra fær
> genamnan in nearowe   neþan moste.

> (I saw a tree towering in the forest,
> Bright with branches, a blooming wood,
> Basking in joy. It was nurtured by water,
> Nursed by soil, till strong in years,
> 5   Its fate snapped, turned savage--
> It suffered slash, rip, wound
> Was stripped in misery, chained dumb,
> Its body bound, its head wrapped
> In iron trim. Now it muscles a road
> 10   With head-might for another grim warrior--
> Together they plunder the hoard in a storm

Of battle. The first warrior swings
Through dense threat, head-strong,
While the second follows, fierce and swift.)[55]

This tree, like the cross, is initially happy, established, and at peace with its

surroundings—at least it is no stranger to the reader by the time it is taken and altered,

due to the lengthy description of its former life from sapling to towering tree. Also like

the cross, it is seized by enemies, reshaped, and like so many objects in the riddles, forced

into a relationship with its oppressors. Here the battering ram is seen as one of the

warriors for whom it now works, and co-equal with them, much as swords are often

depicted as either members of the *fyrd* or retainers of their warriors. We do not have the

voice of the tree, but the circumstances are eerily similar to those suffered by the cross.

Orton follows up on his analysis with a further comparison of the hostile act of

manufacture and the designation of those who reshape raw material as *feondas*. He also

notes that the subsequent relationship between the manufactured item and its master is

more complicated than this, and that the prosopopoeic item and its master frequently

work together toward common purpose—though human masters of course appreciate

manufactured items, and by extension, the manufacturer. Only Christ is shown as

aligning with the cross against those who manufactured it.[56] Paradoxically, manufacture

gives these items voice, but it is of their former state they speak.

This process of making, of further alienating the cross from its literal and

figurative roots is continued by St. Helena when she encases the cross in a man-made

[55] Craig Williamson, Ed. and Trans.
[56] Ibid 10-11.

reliquary. Though the cross does not refer to her as a *feonde* or verbally lament its enclosure in its bejeweled prison, its attempts to escape—to make itself visible in its original state—reflect the primacy of its original and natural state over its manufactured materiality. At least in this poem, it is the wounded tree who asserts the power to heal and lead petitioners to salvation, but only when freed from its golden casing.

VIII. The *Dream of the Rood* as Vita; The Cross as Saint

While some features of the poem descend from the riddling tradition, others seem to descend from the vita tradition, specifically the metrical vita. Anglo-Saxon metrical vitae were not entirely limited either to the saints or canonical texts. *Christ I, II, & III* are biblical texts rather than true vitae. Other texts, like *Andreas*, a verse telling of the deeds of St. Andrew among the Mermedonians, are apocryphal. It is safe to say, however, that these are Christian texts. These Christian texts often make use of martial language and materialistic imagery borrowed wholesale from heroic poetry. The *Dream of the Rood* is no exception. It is awash in *feondas* (enemies), wounds, arrows, and blood. Christ's message of love and forgiveness is not mentioned in the poem, though there is a strong emphasis on piety near its end. Rather, what we see is that the genre of Christian poetry is strongly bound to the Germanic narrative traditions that preceded it, and the more abstract philosophical side of Christian thinking is rarely expressed.

One example of overlapping heroic and Christian motifs is discussed above—that of bearing witness. This motif is associated with material literature in *Beowulf* and *The*

Husband's Message; material objects carrying texts impart important truths to those who can read them. All four books of the Gospel are essentially bearing witness to the acts of Christ via his apostles; the majority of saints' lives chronicle miracles and holy teachings of saints—but these texts rely on a human witness to recall and contextualize the events described. Poems depicting material literature rely on the object to bear witness in lieu of a human presence. Even though a person can be assumed to have carved the epigraphic message carried by the object, it still speaks with the prosopopoeic voice of an object—a dispassionate voice that has nothing to gain from altering the contents of its message. The cross in the *Dream of the Rood* uses this device, but it is not the only inanimate object to bear witness in a metrical vita: the preaching statue in *Andreas* also uses this trope.

    Andreas is also found in the Vercelli Book, in which the testimony of objects becomes something of a theme. The scene below, where St. Andrew is recounting miracles performed by Christ (there is no testament to these events in the gospels), is apocryphal. As in the examples of material literature discussed throughout this work, the object speaks—not of itself; however, but of events that it has witnessed. The scene is worth quoting at length:

> Swilce he wratlice   wundor agræfene,
> anlicnesse   engla sinra
> geseh, sigora Frea,   on seles wage,
> 715   on twa healfe   torhte gefrætwed,
> wlitige geworhte.   He worde cwæð:
> 'Þis is anlicnes   engelcynne
> þæs bremestan   [þe] mid þæm burgwarum
> in þære ceastre is;   Cheruphim et Seraphim
> 720   þa on sewgeldreamum   syndon nemned;
> fore onsyne   ecan Dryhtnes

standað stiðferðe,   stefnum herigað,
halgum hleoðrum,   heofoncyninges þrym,
Meotudes mundbyrd.   Her amearcod is
725 haligra hiw,   þurh handmægen
aritan on wealle   wuldres þegnas.'
Ða gen worde cwæð   weoruda Dryhten,
hofonhalig gast,   fore þam heremægene:
'Nu ic bebeode   beacen ætywan,
730 wundor geweorðan   on wera gemange,
ðæt þeos onlicnes   eorðan sece,
wlitig of wage,   ond word sprece,
secge soðcwidum   (þy sceolon gelyfan
eorlas on cyððe)   hwæt min æleðo sien.'
735   "Ne dorste þa forhylman   Hælendes bebod
wundor fore weorodum,   ac of wealle ahleop,
frod fyrngeweorc,   þæt he on foldan stod,
stan fram stane;   stefn æfter cwom,
hlud þurh heardne,   hleoðor dynede,
740 wordum wemde   (wrætlic þuhte
stiðhycgendum   stanes ongin),
septe sacerdas   sweotolum tacnum,
witig werede   ond worde cwæð:
'Ge synd unlæde,   earmra geþohta
745 searowum beswicene,   oððe sel nyton,
mode gemyrde;   gem on cigað
Godes ece bearn,   þone þe grund ond sund,
hofon ond eorðan   ond hreo wægas,
slte sæstreamas   ond swegl uppe
750 aearcode   mundum sinum.
Ðis is se ilca   ealwalda God,
þne on fyrndagum   fæderas cuðon;
h Abrahame   one Isace
od Iocobe   gife bryttode,
755 wlum weorðode,   wordum sægde
ærest Habrahame   æðeles geþingu,
þæt of his cynne   cenned sceolde
weorðan wuldres God.   Is seo wyrd mid eow
open, orgete;   magan eagum nu
760 geseon sigores God,   swegles agend,'
      "Æfter þyssum wordum   weorud hlosnode
geond þæt side sel,   swigodon ealle.
Ða ða yldestan   eft ongunnon
secgan synfulle   (soð ne oncneowan),
765 þæt hit drycræftnum   gedon wære,

scingelacum,   þæt se scyna stan
mælde for mannum.   Man wridode
geond beorna breost,   brandhata nið
weoll on gewitte,   weorm blædum fag,
770   attor ælfæle.   Ðær orcnawe [wearð]
þurh teoncwiðe   tweogende mod,
mæcga misgehygd   morðre bewunden.
          "Ða se þeoden bebead   þryðgeweorc faran,
stan [on] stræte   of stedewange,
775   ond forð gan   foldweg treden,
grene grundas,   Godes ærendu
larum lædan   on þa leodmearce
to Channaneum,   cyninges worde
beodan Habrahame   mid his eaforum twam
780   of eorðscræfe   ærest fremman,
lætan landreste,   eoðo gadrigean,
gaste onfon   ond geogoðhade,
edniwinga   andweard cuman,
frode fyrnweotan,   folce gecyðan,
785   hwylcne hie God mihtum   ongiten hæfdon.
Gewat he þa feran,   swa him Frea mihtig,
Scyppend wera,   gescrifen hæfde,
ofer mearcpaðu,   þæt he on Mambre becom
beorhte blican,   swa him bebead Meotud,
790   þær þa lichoman   lange þrage,
Heahfædere hra,   beheald wæron.
Het þa ofstlice   up astandan
Habraham ond Issac,   æðeling þriddan
Iacob of greote   to Godes geþinge,
795   sneome of slæpe þæm fæstan;   het hie to þam siðe gyrwan,
faran to Frean dome;   sceoldon hie þam folce gecyðan,
hwa æt frumsceafte   furðum teode
eorðan eallgrene   ond upheofon,
hwæe se wealdend wære,   þe þæt weorc staðolade.

([…] Thus he, Lord of Victories, saw marvelous objects wondrously sculpted, images of his angels, on the walls of the hall on two sides, splendidly decorated and beautifully wrought. Aloud he declared: "This is an image of the most glorious of the species of angels that there is among the inhabitants of that city: these are called Cherubim and Seraphim amid the joys of heaven. They stand unflinching before the face of the eternal lord; with their voices they extol in holy tones the majesty of the heaven-King and the tutelage of the ordaining Lord. Here, by dexterity of hand, is depicted the beauty of holy beings and carved on the wall are the thanes of heaven."

727   'Then again the Lord of hosts, the celestial holy Spirit, declared aloud before that great company: "Now I shall command a sign to appear, a miracle to take place in the people's midst—that this beautiful image come down from the wall on to the ground and speak words and tell in declarations of the truth, whereby men shall come to believe in my parentage, what my lineage is."

735   'Then the marvelous thing did not dare to disregard the Savior's command in front of the crowds, but it sprang from the wall, the ancient work of antiquity, stone from stone, so that it stood on the floor. Thereupon a loud voice came out of the hard stone; the sound resonated; by its words—the stone's behavior seemed extraordinary to the obstinate people—it cajoled and lectured the priests by clear tokens; being possessed of intelligence, it held them in thrall and declared aloud: "You are renegades, seduced into the snares of despicable ideas, or else, being confused in mind, you do not know better. You call the everlasting Son of God a man, him who described with his hands land and ocean, heaven and earth and the rough waves, the salt sea-streams and the sky above. This is the same all-ruling God whom the patriarchs knew in the days of old; he bestowed grace upon Abraham and Issac and Jacob, he honored them with riches and openly declared to Abraham in the first place the noble man's destiny—that from his stock should be born the God of Glory. This fact is plain and manifest in your midst; with your eyes you may now look upon the God of victory, heaven's Lord."

761   'During these words the crowd throughout the spacious hall was listening; all were silent. The most senior ones, full of sin—they did not acknowledge the truth—began after that to say that it had been contrived by sorcery, by tricks of illusion, that the beautiful stone talked in front of people. Wickedness flourished in the men's breasts, hatred hot as fire welled in their consciousness, a deadly venom. There the skeptical mind, the men's wrongheadedness, hemmed about by mortal sin, was revealed by their blasphemous talk.

773   Then the prince commanded the splendid artifact, the stone, to go from that place into the street and to set out to walk the earth and its green plains, to carry God's news by preaching into the land of the Caananites, and by word of the King to command Abraham with his two descendants first to come forth out of the grave, to leave their earthly resting-place, to gather their limbs and to receive their spirit and their youth, and, wise witnesses from long ago alive once more, to make known to the people what God they had acknowledged for his powers. So it went journeying along the roads of that land, just as the mighty Lord, the Creator of men, had dictated to it until it reached Mamre, gleaming bright, as the ordaining Lord commanded it, where the bodies, the corpses of the patriarchs, had for a long time been concealed. Then quickly it commanded Abraham and Issac and Jacob, the third noble man, to rise up briskly from the dust out of that heavy sleep, at God's behest; it commanded them to prepare for the journey, and to set out at the

Lord's decreeing. They were to reveal to the people exactly who at the creation framed the earth all-verdant and heaven on high where the ruler was, who established that work. [...].)[57]

The statue is described as a *frod fyrngeweorc*, a wise work of the ancient ones—a formula similar to that describing the giants' sword in *Beowulf*. And, like the hilt of that sword and the runestick of *The Husband's Message*, it bears witness—though it does so with speech rather than in writing. Its speech, unlike that of the cross, is loud and public. It does not *maþelaþ* (engage in formal speech) but it is described as *hlud* (loud) and it *dynede* (resonated).

The statue provides testimony to Christ's power, and therefore provides him with authority to speak for himself. Its independence—it is not Christ's voice speaking through it—is crucial in establishing this authority. To this end, the statue is described as *witig* (possessing intelligence). The voice it speaks with is that of the stone itself, freed by the intervention of the saint. Christ essentially frees the stone to express its *thingness*, which is assumed to be free of the taint of human deception or misperception. Though nameless and not a saint by any established sense, the statue performs miracles like one, but does this as a witness for another. The cross, however, does not behave in a similarly subordinate manner: it performs a witnessing function for Christ, but then goes about establishing an independent claim to saintliness.

The cross is not expressly given the gift of speech by Christ; its ability to perceive and express appear to be innate. It also claims that its ability to perform miracles is also innate. It bears witness both with its material existence and with its narrative.

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[57] Old English from Krapp edition, trans. S.A.J. Bradley.

Narratively, the cross establishes itself by providing an alternate account of the Crucifixion. It tells Christ's story encapsulated within its own, and this witnessing grants it authority. Materially, it most clearly does this through its unhealable wounds. While not epigraphy, those "wounds" are a visual cue for memory—unspoken testimony, if you will—of the suffering of the cross alongside Christ:

46   Þurhdrifan hi me mid deorcan næglum.   On me syndon þa dolg gesiene,
        opene inwidhlemmas.

46   (They pierced me with dark nails. On me, the scars are visible,
        open malicious wounds.)

61b   Forleton me þa hilderincas
        standan steame bedrifenne;   eall ic wæs mid strælum forwundod.

61b   (The warriors abandoned me
        to stand, covered with moisture; I was wounded very badly with arrows.)

The moisture and its source are not specifically identified here; it could be Christ's blood or sap from the tree—effectively merging the two by obscuring the nature of the substance. The wounds themselves, however, function as an identifying mark just as any letters would: they tell the cross's story in a visual manner while also providing the appropriate authority for speech. Through its wounds the cross garners authority. From here, the cross uses the authority it has established to move its narrative into the vita genre: it claims the power of intercession and salvation—in its own voice.

The cross's saintliness is first established its ability to tell Christ's story. Rather than doing so in letters like a gospel book, it does so *in viva voce*. The presentation is established with the help of the encapsulating dream vision, in which the fantastic becomes the expected. This motif yields to the second encapsulated genre found in the

poem—features of the riddling tradition in which details concerning materiality and manufacture are foregrounded in order to conceal the true nature of the speaking item.

The third narrative is simpler and stems from the metrical vita tradition—it is the gospel according to the cross, or its direct witnessing of Christ's heroic deeds. From there we enter the segment above, where it would seem that the cross would move back into the riddling genre with its associated symbolism and motifs. And this is so, to some degree—instead of "solving" itself, the cross begins to pontificate. Its significance is revealed not as material reality as one would expect in a riddle, but as spiritual reality—as an intercessor for Christ, much like any other saint. The voice of the cross must be established by the witness of its materiality, but once this has occurred, the speech of the cross takes primacy over the witness of its being—blood stains and gaping nail-holes. First, it gives an extended narrative of the crucifixion, then it recites an extended monologue making very specific claims as a pathway to salvation:

75	Hwæðre me þær dryhtnes þegnas,
	freondas gefrunon,
	ond gyredon me golde ond seolfre.
	'Nu ðu miht gehyran, hæleð min se leofa,
	þæt ic bealuwara weorc gebiden hæbbe,
80	sarra sorga. Is nu sæl cumen
	þæt me weorðiað wide on side
	menn ofer moldan, ond eall þeos mære gesceaft,
	gebiddaþ him to þyssum beacne. On me bearn godes
	þrowode hwile. Forþan ic þrymfæst nu
85	hlifige under heofenum, ond ic hælan mæg
	æghwylcne anra, þara þe him bið egesa to me.
	Iu ic wæs geworden wita heardost,
	leodum laðost, ær þan ic him lifes weg
	rihtne gerymde, reordberendum.
90	Hwæt, me þa geweorðode wuldres ealdor
	ofer holtwudu, heofonrices weard!
	Swylce swa he his modor eac, Marian sylfe,

ælmihtig god   for ealle menn
geweorðode ofer eall   wifa cynn.
95 'Nu ic þe hate,   hæleð min se leofa,
þæt ðu þas gesyhðe   secge mannum,
onwreoh wordum   þæt hit is wuldres beam,
se ðe ælmihtig   god on þrowode
for mancynnes   manegum synnum
100 ond Adomes   ealdgewyrhtum.
Deað he þær byrigde,   hwæðere eft dryhten aras
mid his miclan mihte   mannum to helpe.
He ða on heofanas astag.   Hider eft fundaþ
on þysne middangeard   mancynn secan
105 on domdæge   dryhten sylfa,
ælmihtig god,   ond his englas mid,
þæt he þonne wile deman,   se ah domes geweald,
anra gehwylcum   swa he him ærur her
on þyssum lænum   līfe geearnaþ.
110 Ne mæg þær   ænig unforht wesan
for þam worde þe   se wealdend cwyð.
Frineð he for þære   mænige hwær se man sie,
se ðe for dryhtnes   naman daðes wolde
biteres onbyrigan,   swa he ær on ðam beame dyde.
115 Ac hie þonne forhtiað,   ond fea þencað
hwæt hie to Criste   cweðan onginnen.
Ne þearf ðær þonne   ænig anforht wesan
þe him ær in breostum   bereð beacna selest,
ac ðurh ða rode   sceal rice gesecan
120 of eorðwege   æghwylc sawl,
seo þe mid wealdende   wunian þenceð."

75b   However, the Lord's disciples,
friends, discovered me there,
and adorned me [with] gold and silver.
Now you can hear, my beloved hero,
what work of the evildoers that I have experienced,
80 the painful grief. The time is now come
that men over the earth and all this illustrious creation
far and wide honour me,
they pray to this sign. On me, God's son
suffered a time. Therefore, now I rise up
85 glorious under the heavens, and I am able to heal
each one of those who hold me in awe.
Formerly, I was the most fierce of torments,

       most hateful to people, before I opened the right
       path of life to them, the speech-bearers.
90   Lo, the prince of glory, the guardian of the kingdom of the heavens,
       honoured me over all the trees of the forest!
       Just as he, Almighty God, before all men,
       honoured his mother also, Mary herself,
       over all womankind.
95   Now I command you, my beloved warrior,
       that you tell this vision to men,
       reveal in words that it is the tree of glory,
       on which Almighty God suffered
       for mankind's many sins
100   and Adam's deeds of old,
       He tasted death there. However, the Lord arose again
       to help men with his great power.
       Then he ascended into the heavens. Hither again, the Lord, Himself,
       will set out into this world
105   to seek mankind on the day of judgement,
       Almighty God and His angels with Him,
       since He who has power of judgement, He then will sentence
       each one, just as he shall have earned
       for himself here in this temporary life.
110   Nor can there be any unafraid there
       because of the words which the Lord shall say:
       He shall ask before the multitude, where the man might be,
       who for the name of the Lord would taste
       bitter death, as He did before on the cross.
115   But then they fear, and few think of
       what to begin to say to Christ.
       None needs to be afraid [of]
       of [he] who already bears on his breast the best of signs,
       but through the cross, each soul must seek
120   the kingdom from the earthly way,
       those who intend to dwell with the Lord.

This passage is remarkable. The cross claims to be the most effective intercessor

for admittance to the Heavenly Kingdom. Indeed, it claims to be the *only* way to

salvation. Again and again it reinforces its ability to heal, its primacy on the path to

salvation, its position honoring it above all other trees. It is hard to gauge the orthodoxy

of these statements. Since the publication of Rosemary Woolf's article on doctrinal

influences on the *Dream of the Rood*, the view that the poem reflects a solution to the Nestorian/Monophysite controversies has become established. In other words, the cross is the only path to salvation because it is in fact Christ himself. The dispute surrounding these heresies spanned several centuries, with adherents of the Monophysite controversy holding that Christ was entirely human and the Nestorians believing that he was entirely divine in nature. Woolf's view is that Christ and the cross are one and the same in the *Dream of the Rood*, reflecting the dual divine and human natures of Christ, and thereby neatly sidestepping the theological minefield associated with depicting the passion. The divine nature of Christ is expressed in the brave hero, and the suffering, human nature of Christ is represented by the cross.

Her argument that the cross is an iconographical double for Christ is echoed by both Barbara Raw and also examined by Eamonn O'Carragain in his recent work—which definitely provides a comprehensive framework for understanding the iconographical sequence and significance of the carvings on the Ruthwell Cross. O'Carragain modifies Woolf's liturgical approach, however, and looks to the continental *foritudo Dei* motif that emphasizes the bravery of Christ in assuming the suffering of mankind during the crucifixion, rather than placing undue emphasis on the cross *as* Christ. While these approaches work well for the Ruthwell Cross, *The Dream of the Rood* appears to originate from a date far removed from the Seventh Century when these particular controversies were being debated. It is quite possible that the *fortitudo Dei* motif and the Easter liturgy were the original inspiration for the first incarnation of the poem, as the Ruthwell Cross is either sized to fit the poem or the poem was composed in such a

manner that it fit within the constricted boundaries of the monument and the monument obviously utilizes these iconographical themes, but it is not clear which scenario is more likely. However, the view that the cross is a symbolic representative of the Christ's humanity, while seductive, ignores the cross itself, aside from its sacrificing nature—which is difficult to do given its vociferousness.

The cross makes its *inhumanity* a central focus of the poem. It talks about its origins, its massive strength, its ability to resist decomposition. The voice speaking in the second layer of the narrative is very much that of a tree, not a man. There is a kind of doubling between Christ and the cross—they both undergo similar ordeals—but these ordeals seem designed to highlight the similarities between the two rather than radically different aspects of their natures. The factors that would describe Christ's humanity are lacking in both the cross and Christ: his weakness and frailty. There is little presentation of weakness in the poem. Christ is portrayed as a brave young warrior and the cross receives nearly identical treatment. The thrust of the poem is martial, and the battle is described in terms that would not seem out of place in *Beowulf*. Rather than divine, Christ comes across as a mighty warrior who endures horrible agony without any sign of weakness. Christ's words spoken while dying on the cross and recorded in the gospels, words betraying all too human weakness, are ignored, as are the parables and other words of teaching spoken in the gospels. This is something akin to a heroic gospel—one missing the human frailty and peaceable values of the originals.

Yet there is nothing of the Monophysite about this depiction of Christ as hero; rather, it is the heroic code in action. The cross describes itself in much the same way.

For Woolf, the cross embodies Christ's humanity and suffering. Unfortunately, the cross displays little of either quality: while it allows its lord to be killed, it does so at its lord's command. There is no initiative here—only obedience. And there is no humanity at all. The cross both witnesses and speaks as a tree—foregrounding its origins and status as an object. After establishing its status as an object, this tree speaks bears witness to the gospels and then narrates its own vita, an occurrence seen nowhere else—no other saints' life is dictated in the first person from beyond the grave. The cross's materiality grants it a form of immortality that is uncommon. It was "killed" when it was cut down, yet retains its sentience. It is buried and resurrected, but retains its physicality. It uses these qualities to effectively "write" its own vita. But never at any time does it aspire to humanity.

The speaking cross of the Ruthwell Cross poem and *The Dream of the Rood* may owe more of its unique presentation to the actual Cult of the True Cross, rather than an ingenious attempt to navigate the Nestorian/Monophysite heresies. If this is the case, the above passage where the cross makes a pitch for its salvific efficacy is the logical extension of liturgical practice. The cross's claims of the abilities to heal and to act as intercessor are both qualities of saintly relics as a generic category. The cult of the true cross was established by the fourth century, and its influenced spread steadily westward.[58] Werner posits that the cult of the true cross was known in Kent by the sixth century and its influence was especially widespread in the British Isles throughout the

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[58] See Werner.

seventh and eighth centuries.[59] He cites a medallion featuring the Patriarchal Cross found among other coins in a cemetery in St. Martin, texts embellishing the legend of the cross—establishing a pedigree dating from the Fall and miracles performed by it—and over a thousand stone crosses still standing in the British Isles, mostly in Northumbria. Werner believes that the *Adoratio Crucis* had become a prominent part of the Good Friday liturgy by the Eighth Century, and that continental practice was influential on insular liturgy.[60] The Eastern liturgy also had two feast days dedicated to the cross, and the Anglo-Saxons had a separate ceremony of 'creeping to the cross'. Given that liturgical practice treated the cross as a saint in many ways, it is not really all that surprising to see a prosopopoeic cross claiming that mantle in its own vita.

The ability of the cross to write its own vita is the result of the intertextuality that often accompanies prosopopoeic poems. The depiction of material literature trope seems intimately connected with the mixing of genres and the combining of motifs. The Giants' Sword episode of *Beowulf* combines heroic, biblical, and folkloristic genres in order to achieve the effects of both veracity and great antiquity. The loquacious runestick of the *Husband's Message* partakes in motifs of love poetry and the riddling genre. *The Dream of the Rood,* while not strictly following the material poetry trope (though the Ruthwell Cross *is* material poetry and the *Dream of the Rood* may be written with the monument in mind) manages to combine dream vision, riddle, gospel, and vita. For some reason, when speaking of things or when things speak, Anglo-Saxon poetry is at its most inventive. Prosopopoeic poetry is poetry concerned with the *essence* of things—with the types of

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[59] Werner, esp. 190-94.
[60] Ibid. 199.

unknowable and unexpressable natures that things are deemed to possess. Quite simply, prosopopoeia is an attempt to know, to control, to possess what is essentially unknowable, uncontrollable, and unable to be possessed. Man may hold on to (or be smitten by) a sword or a stick or a cross for a while, but he may not *experience* these things. The prosopopoeic cross falls squarely into this trope, but it is also unique in that it originates in the historical narrative. This is not a generic item or one pulled from the realm of the imagination. This is the voice of a specific cross, known to have existed at a certain time, to have fulfilled a specific function, to have become a complex multivalent symbol, and to have been given a quasi-human status by the church itself. This is an item considered to have great power, and this power gives the cross a voice in Anglo-Saxon poetry. It uses its voice to claim not just its unknowable material being, but great power to intervene in human affairs—something to which no other Anglo-Saxon prosopopoeic item lays claim.

CHAPTER IV

ON ÐÆM WÆS OR WRITEN: THE SWORD AS STORYTELLER IN *BEOWULF*

I. The Episode

This chapter will examine material literature in a heroic context using the giants' sword episode from *Beowulf*. The chapter will begin by focusing on the symbolic possibilities associated with swords in Germanic heroic poetry. After establishing the range of available meanings associated with swords in Anglo-Saxon literature, the chapter will examine how those meanings coalesce in the giants' sword and how they influence the depiction of material literature in the poem. The beginning of the poem establishes the dynamic range of symbolic meanings inherent in weapons, when Scyld Scylding departs the known world along with a large hoard of weapons and other treasures.

These first descriptions of weapons in *Beowulf* are interesting in that they cut against the general trend of using weapons to link narratives. Scyld is a foundling, a caesura both past and future, but he returns to the unknown with an impressive, and useless, trove:

> Ne hyrde ic cymlicor   ceol gegywan
> hilde-wæpnum   ond heaðo wæedum,
> billum ond byrnum;   him on bearme læg
> madma mænigo,   þa him mid scoldon
> on flodes æht   feor gewitan.
> Nalæs hi hine læssan   lacum teodan,
> þeod-gestreonum,   þon þa dydon,
> þe hine æt frumScyldte   forð onsendon

ænne ofer yðe   umbor-wesende.
Þa gyt hi him asetton   segend gyldenne
heah ofer heafod,   leton holm beran,
geafon on gar-secg;   him wæs geomor sefa,
murnende mod.   Men ne cunnon
secgan to soðe,   sele-rædende,
hæleð under heofenum,   hwa þæm hlæste onfeng.[1]

(I have not heard of a ship more splendidly furnished with war-weapons and battle-dress, swords and mail-shirts. On his breast lay a great many treasures that should voyage with him far out into the sea's possession. They provided him with no lesser gifts, treasure of the people, than those had done who at his beginning sent him forth on the waves, a child alone. Then also they set a golden standard high over his head, let the water take him, gave him to the sea. Sad was their spirit, mournful their mind. Men cannot truthfully say who received that cargo, neither counselors in the hall nor warriors under the skies.)[2]

We do not know whence Scyld comes nor where he goes, giving the poem an open-endedness in the beginning that does not conform to the general trends of Anglo-Saxon heroic poetry, where there is an emphasis of the connectedness of far-flung peoples. Scyld is utterly alone and without roots, alone in his mortality—with only treasure to keep him cold company.

Scyld's role as protector of his people is symbolized by the load of weapons he bears: he brought material prosperity and glory. In the end, Scyld is linked by correspondence to his sword, helm, and byrnie: it is hard to see where the king's arm ends and the sword begins. However, the load of treasure accompanying him is the reminder of a sad truth: the body decays. The heroic world, obsessed with arms and gold, constantly grapples with the terrifying specter of mortality. The heroic impulse is to

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[1] Klaeber ll. 38-52.

[2] Donaldson 2.

aspire to immortality by surrounding oneself with items that do not decay, as futile proof

of glory. Gold endures, outlives warriors, as does steel when properly stored.

The poem ends with Beowulf's interment, where arms and treasure again play an

important role:

> Hi on beorg dydon   beg ond siglu,
> eall swylce hyrsta,   swylce on horde ær
> niðhedige men   genumen hæfdon;
> forleton eorla gestreon   eorðan healdan,
> gold on greote,   þær hit nu gen lifað
> eldum swa unnyt,   swa hi(t æro)r wæs.[3]

> (In the barrow they placed rings and jewels, all such ornaments as troubled men
> had earlier taken from the hoard. They let the earth hold the wealth of earls, gold
> in the ground, where it now still dwells, as useless to men as it was before.)

These two examples, along with the section known as the Lay of the Last Survivor,

demonstrate the internal conflict of *Beowulf*—the futile quest for immortality through the

trappings of heroic life. This material anxiety is prominently displayed at both the

beginning and end of the poem.

The center of the poem contains an example of material literature: the hilt of the

giants' sword. Beginning on line 1522, about midway through *Beowulf*, the sword

Hrunting fails the hero, refuses "to bite" Grendel's mother. Though the text speaks

admiringly at this point of acquiring glory through hand-to-hand combat, Beowulf cannot

rely on his characteristic strength to save him from his adversary. The desperate hero

reaches for a gigantic sword lying atop a pile of weapons in the lair of the Grendelkin and

uses it to both kill Grendel's mother and to decapitate Grendel's corpse. After coming

into contact with Grendel's toxic blood, the sword blade melts into *hildgeicelum* (battle-

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[3] Klaeber ll. 3163-68.

icicles), leaving Beowulf in the possession of its massive, curiously inscribed hilt—which he then presents to Hroþgar. Hroþgar examines the hilt and responds with a seemingly inappropriate speech on the dangers of pride—often referred to as "Hroþgar's Sermon". This pair of interlocked episodes forms the heart of a narrative beginning and ending with funerals, springing from the murky past of the foundling Scyld Scefing and rushing into a future darkened by the shadow of war with the Swedes: a narrative bounded by descriptions of treasure and death.

The inscribed hilt creates a text within a text. However, the epigraphic text is not the same as the text of the written poem: it contains wisdom from an amalgamation of object and text, wisdom shaped by the "thingness" of the object. As a poetic device, because the hilt is forged and has survived the ages unchanged, the authority of its inscribed message creates dissonance within the shifting oral-formulaic poem surrounding it, by introducing a certain solidity associated with alternate literate practices. Even though *Beowulf* has been altered by written practice, the material literature conceit contained within it still carries an increased sense of solemn authority within the poem—a sense of *object*-ivity that transcends time and mortality. The sword's truths, the account of ancient strife and the name etched on its hilt, are literally cut into its being—requiring an expanded set of interpretive techniques.

The giants' sword episode of *Beowulf* (and the closely connected passage often referred to as Hroþgar's Sermon) is the most complicated example of this phenomenon in Anglo-Saxon literature—containing features of folklore, oral-formulaic poetry, gnomic, biblical, and homiletic literature—in addition to differing conventions from the

epigraphic tradition. This chapter will examine how swords in the poem invite the conjoining and violation of literary conventions, culminating in a reading of the hilt of the giants' sword as an example of material literature.

II. The Critics and the Giants' Sword

The giants' sword episode in *Beowulf* has inspired the spilling of a pool of ink as dark and as opaque as Grendel's mere. Much of the recent critical attention, with some notable exceptions, has concentrated on examining small details associated with the sword and has neglected to question the implications these details have for the poem as a whole. Among the topics often debated about the episode are these: is the tale of the Flood inscribed on the hilt written or illustrated? To which giants does it refer? In what language are the *runstafas rihte gemearcod*? While these questions are interesting, they take little notice of just how central this object is to the poem.

For example, in "The Melting of the Giant-Wrought Sword in *Beowulf*," Martin Puhvel concentrates on the singularity of the melting of the blade into *hildegicelum* (battle-icicles). He then examines literary analogs of blood so hot as to melt solid objects (and solid objects melting from other causes) from Irish and Icelandic sources, as well as analogues within the poem itself.[4] The analysis does prove to be useful—none of the many ON analogues to the Two-Troll motif discussed in Stitt's *Beowulf and the Bear's Son* has a sword melting after killing its otherworldly owner, making Irish influence on

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[4] Puhvel 81-84

the episode very likely since the motif of dangerously hot blood is common in early Irish literature.[5] *Beowulf* contains the only known instance of this in Anglo-Saxon literature. The fact that the only analogs found in the critical corpus to the melting of stone or steel by blood are found in Irish examples also draws attention to both the hybrid nature and complexity of the sword: not only are its parts and functions gleaned from several literary traditions, these traditions combine into something entirely new within it.

Another short article on the giants' sword by S. Viswanathan discusses themes of divine justice and the self-destructiveness of evil. His thoughts on how the sword becomes an instrument of divine justice are interesting:

> Germanic and Old English poetic convention as well as Anglo-Saxon laws and beliefs encouraged the notion that a sword metonymically inherited and participated in the qualities, attainments, excellences as well as defects of its original owner and transmitted these almost magically to its wielder.[6]

If we accept this line of thought, the boundaries between sword and (original) owner are blurred—the character of the man seeps into the sword. And why not the inverse? If the sword can become mannish, can the man become "swordish"?

More importantly, Viswanathan also notes both the sword and the sermon's centrality to the poem—he believes that the sword and sermon demonstrate the hand of God or Fate as the primary shaper of the epic. I would push his point further: the reading of the hilt is a testament to the role of Fate in the slaying of the giants; Hroþgar's sermon is a testament to the role Fate will play in the slaying of Beowulf. Though I would argue

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[5] *Beowulf and the Bear's Son: Epic, Saga, and Fairytale in Northern Germanic Tradition* contains a large number of analogs to the Two-Troll Tradition in Northern Germanic literary works. Many of these analogs feature a sword discovered in a troll's lair that it ultimately used to kill its former owner, much like the episode in *Beowulf*.

[6] Viswananthan 360.

against the frequent interpretation *lof-geornost* (most desirous of love or praise), the elegiac final description of Beowulf's character, as being as pejorative as *ofer-hygd* or *ofer-mod*—the descriptions of the similarly doomed heroes Heremod and Byrhrtnoð—the phrase still partakes in the pervasive sense of tragic irony that also haunts their last moments. Beowulf is not overly proud, but he *is* most desirous of fame. Hroþgar foretells the tragedy of Beowulf's useless death, where man and treasure will share a similar fate—to be consumed by fire and interred in the earth. Beowulf's eagerness for fame and treasure leads him to forsake the help of his *fyrd* and to attack the dragon alone, leading to tragedy for all involved—indeed, the undoing of an entire people. Hrothgar "reads" Beowulf's future in the hilt, just as the past of the giants is read there.[7] The hero and the sword he finds are linked by parallel trajectories—both meet a fiery end while fulfilling their fates.

The nature of the language on the hilt is the focus of an article by Richard Schrader—he argues that if the giants described are antediluvian, then the writing on the hilt must be Hebrew. While inventive, this argument is built on dismissing the *run-stafas rihte gemearcod* as not referring specifically to Germanic runes.[8] This is a difficult argument to make, particularly because of the formulaic nature of the phrase *rihte gemearcod*. The correctness of the carving of runes is a common formulaic feature of

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[7] It is unclear, however, just who is reading the hilt. It is impossible to determine from the passage whether the fate of the giants is read by the narrator or by Hroþgar—either silently or aloud.

[8] Schraeder glosses *run* as 'secret'. Erik Moltke examines the etymology of the word and concludes that 'secret', derived from Gothic sources, is a secondary meaning. He deduces from Finnish evidence that the root meaning in Old Norse was 'song' and a closer meaning for rune would be 'talking letters' (Moltke 77).

runestones.[9] Schrader stridently insists on Hroþgar's illiteracy, another untenable assumption.[10]

Johann Koberl attempts to untangle some of the loose ends of the poem using supplemental material on Heremod. While his ideas—that the name on the sword is Heremod's, who lost it fighting giants—are plausible, they are speculative and go against the grain of scholarship on the sword. However, the name on the sword *is* a direct linkage to Hroþgar's admonishments on the pitfalls of pride, the failing that destroyed Heremod: the sword is itself a prestige object. According to Hilda Ellis Davidson, swords were generally buried with high-prestige individuals—and therefore those most likely to be proud. They were not the equipage of the common foot soldier, who was more likely to be buried with a spear, if buried with any weapons at all.[11] This assertion is reinforced by examinations of Anglo-Saxon grave sites. Social status was determined to be the most likely factor for the deposition of weapons within graves—swords and byrnies being the rarest types of martial equipment found in Anglo-Saxon graves.[12] Indeed, swords were frequently used to settle ritualized single-combat between leaders of

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[9] See Seth Lerer for more on runic formulas and the Giants' Sword.

[10] For more on Anglo-Saxon literacy see Seth Lerer, *Literacy and Power in Anglo-Saxon England* and *The Uses of Literacy in Early Mediaeval Europe*, Ed. Rosamond McKitterick. It is impossible to say just how widespread literacy in runic writing was among Germanic peoples. Arguments can be made for both widespread literacy in runes and for the restriction of literacy to an educated elite. Runic inscriptions are widespread enough in the landscape and in the pan-Germanic literary corpus to give pause to the idea that runic literacy was severely limited.

[11] Ellis Davidson *The Sword in Anglo-Saxon England* 8-9.

[12] For a detailed analysis of grave finds, see Harke, "'Warrior Graves'? The Background of the Anglo-Saxon Weapon Burial Rite." *Past and Present* 126 (Feb. 1990): 22-43.

warring bands.[13] The etching of one's name upon a sword was a gesture of pride—one that outlived its owner in the case of the giants' sword—prompting a commentary by Hroþgar on the dangers of becoming overly proud.[14] Only those with high social status could aspire to this particular sin.

Seth Lerer presents a compelling case for the importance of the sword to the text. He believes that the hilt is a figure for the entire poem, capped by other episodes of wondrous artifice in the poem which:

> […] frame the presentation of the hilt and its inscription as a moment of poetic self-reflection. They invite the audience to understand the place of literature within the human community and to attempt to come to terms with the fantastic or the mythological within that literature.[15]

He sees the poem as a continual self-reflexive commentary on literacy and literature and on the act of artistic creation. I would like to take his work a step further: in a stylistic sense, the description, presentation, and explanation of this hilt are the nexus of the poem—a place where most of the various literary traditions informing *Beowulf*, from the folk motifs of the Two-Troll Tradition and the Bear's Son, to the traditional thematics and complex formulaic meters of Anglo-Saxon heroic poetry, to Christian literary traditions like the sermon and homily—overlap and conjoin. Though the alpha and omega of the poem are detailed descriptions of death and treasures lost to man, only in

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[13] Ellis Davidson *The Sword in Anglo-Saxon England* 193-96.

[14] The grammar as to whether the name on the hilt refers to its owner or maker is unclear. Precedent from epigraphic inscriptions could point in either direction, though there are slightly more extant examples of objects identifying their owners than makers. One sword discussed below is incised with its own name. The general trend of scholarship on the hilt favors its owner being the party named, and so I defer to this reading, as it fits more neatly with the sense of Hroþgar's Sermon—there is no evidence that an immoderate pride in craftsmanship was a topic at issue with the Anglo-Saxons.

[15] Lerer, 160.

the giants' sword episode does the material really speak, conveying ancient wisdom first-hand via a text-within-a-text, even if it does not do so in the first person like the swords of the Exeter Book.[16]

Joseph Harris was the first critic to compare *Beowulf* to a *summa*—an anthology containing a nearly comprehensive sampling of literary. He calls for a program of study into the literary history contained within the poem:

> *Beowulf* criticism, fixated on the unifying "idea" and determined to follow Tolkein in restoring the monsters to the center, has overlooked the poem's anthology-like characteristics and therefore its place in literary history. The *Beowulf*ian *summa* includes genealogical verse, a creation hymn, elegies, a lament, a heroic lay, a praise poem, historical poems, a flyting, boasts, gnomic verse, a sermon, and perhaps less formal oral genres. In addition, a number of other genres are alluded to, just as Chaucer alludes to drama; but without paraphrases, the generic terms—for example, *spell*—are difficult to interpret. As a whole, then, *Beowulf* presents a unique poet's unique reception of the oral genres of the Germanic early middle ages [...].[17]

I would like to answer Harris's call by analyzing the disparate literary traditions contained in the giants' sword episode; however, I disagree that the genres contained in the episode were not largely the result of an organic process.[18]

Rather than resulting from an act of consciously utilizing multiple literary genres, *Beowulf* owes the presence of so many literary traditions to a process unfolding over a vast period of time, something like the formation of a pearl. What the giants' sword episode presents is more of a recapitulation than a *summa*—a cross-section of the strata of Anglo-Saxon literary history—moving from oral folktale to Latin biblical exposition.

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[16] Riddles 18 and 69 can be solved with "sword", and use several descriptive phrases similar to those used in *Beowulf*. See Craig Williamson.

[17] Harris 17.

[18] Iibid. 16.

The interlace structure of the poem was first described in Leyerle's famous essay, but he did not dwell on the ways that overlapping poetic conventions contribute to the knotwork design of the poem. The various literary conventions act as threads winding around each other, sometimes with confusing and unpredictable results—textual knots if you will—as convention-specific rules are violated: biblical and Germanic giants clash, a sword survives the Bear's Son's mighty grip, a runic memorial text finds its way onto the blade of a sword, the appearance of runic writing in an oral poem prompts an outpouring of "literate" gnomic and homiletic sentiments.

For example, there is no one critic's theory that can fully encompass the hilt: it is a messy object, one whose influences cannot be pigeonholed and patly explained. The giants' sword resists easy classification because the different literary genres comprising it have different, and sometimes contradictory, symbologies and originate from different literary traditions. In this case, folktale and scripture figure prominently, leading to the presence of both traditional Germanic trolls and antediluvian giants from biblical tradition sharing space within the milieu of the same object—the two traditions share similarities but do not precisely overlap. The intertextual, interlaced nature of the episode leaves it with rough edges, such as the description of the flood written by the slain *after* death. The first step in untangling these symbologies and understanding the object is to examine the treatment of the sword in Anglo-Saxon literature in general.[19]

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[19] And since there are so many overlapping themes and details concerning swords between the poetry of the Anglo-Saxons and other Germanic peoples, I will also examine material from Old Norse and Old High German literature where appropriate.

III. Swords as Literature

The first question to pose to the text is why is an object generally used to transmit death being used to transmit wisdom? What is it about swords that makes them so appropriate for examining how materiality and "thingness" influence literary conventions in the context of this poem? Why is a sword used for the material literature conceit in this episode? It makes perfect sense to use the material literature conceit on a sword, because *swords traditionally both tell and anthologize stories.* First, there are many surviving examples of actual swords engraved with both Latin and runic lettering.[20] Second, swords are "signs" in this narrative in a way that no other item can approach, indexing various symbolic values within the text. Third, swords gather stories via the relationships they forge between men and via their relationships with the warriors that bear and depend on them. Named swords—those that are famous enough to be widely known—actually pull heroes into the swords' stories rather than the inverse, becoming, in effect, loose anthologies bound by the history of a particular famous blade.

Taylor Culbert notes the functions of swords in *Beowulf* in advancing the narrative of the poem, but he fails to follow the concept to its logical conclusion—the role of swords in connecting the poem to the body of Germanic literature.[21] Culbert concentrates on how use or abstention from use of a sword by Beowulf heightens the artistic effects of the poem. Unfortunately, the article is limited to the three major

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[20] For a detailed discussion of inscribed swords see H.R. Ellis Davidson's *The Sword in Anglo-Saxon England.*

[21] The Narrative Functions of Beowulf's Swords

combat episodes and to the character of Beowulf alone. This approach is interesting, but needs to be expanded: swords in the poem do not just add dramatic interest—they also aid in advancing the narrative in a more concrete fashion by linking the main narrative to some of the various episodes.

Drawing on Culbert, Gillian Overing examines the indexical system created by swords in the poem from a semeiotic perspective, in which each successive appearance of a sword in the poem references the sword appearing before and after it. In this way, the swords of the poem reference each other in order to construct an interconnected network of symbolic values.[22] Overing lists some of these as love, loyalty, shame, memory, vengeance, change, death, transience, and mortality.[23] She notes the extra-textual connections between the poem's swords and their real-world counterparts:

> The sword signs are both inter- and extra-textual, anchored within the narrative as linguistic signs, but evolving through their interrelationship and reverberating beyond the text; the interaction of linguistic signs translates our relationship to the text into a more physical, visual, material connection with it, one which possesses the immediacy of fact, feeling, or action.[24]

The link between physical and textual objects is important and needs further exploration; Overing's observation only touches on the comparisons of the semiotics of the phenomenon of the poem's swords to the steel of the *Ding-an-sich*. While swords weave a dense and varied semiotic within the text, they also—more than any other object in

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[22] See diagram III for a (limited) visual index of heirloom swords in the poem (51). A similar diagram indexing the Giants' Sword hilt does not achieve its aims of showing the sign values of the hilt as well as the preceding diagram, as it only references a single item, the hilt of the Giants' Sword, and its symbolic values as found in Hroþgar's Sermon (55).

[23] Overing 37, 56.

[24] Ibid. 37.

Germanic literature—connect stories. Their blades metaphorically pierce through the body of the text, pinning it to an associated tale.

In *Beowulf*, though largely a narrative concerned with the failure of swords, swords link to both internal and external narratives. The material presence of the sword—its pattern-welded steel—acts as a bridge over time and distance and between warriors. Therefore objects in the texts, especially swords, become *anthologizing objects*—objects that link far-flung and disparate tales. The effects of this linking are something like an anthology of stories and something like a mnemonic device: a single sword can appear in multiple stories in the possession of several heroes over vast expanses of time, or the same object can link multiple tales *within* the same organizing narrative.

IV. Swords and Exchange: Gifting

The most frequent way swords accrue stories is via their exchange between warriors. As weapons are exchanged, so are tales. The transmission of weapons in *Beowulf*—and in Germanic poetry in general—is complex, mirroring the complexity of the actual exchange of weapons in Germanic societies. The literary process of exchange is even more ritualized than material practice and occurs in a few limited types of transactions: inheritance or gift, violence, or discovery. Heinrich Harke adds another category to this list: grave-robbing.[25] These categories reflect the actual ways weapons circulated with

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[25] See Harke in *Rituals of Power*.

one major exception: the predominant method of object exchange used in modern Western culture—purchase—is almost never given as an option for the exchange of weapons in heroic literature, despite the fact that this method of exchange was probably a common method of acquiring weapons. Purchasing a weapon falls outside of the heroic ethos, stripping it of the danger, bloodshed, and heroic presence required to obtain weapons in Old English literature. None of the mentions of Weland the Smith in the Old English corpus mention a monetary transaction. It is of note that even when Weland works for others in Germanic literature, he frequently works under compulsion, such as the forced labor he provides for King Niðhad, which begins and ends in tragedy.[26]

Harke does a thorough job of analyzing categories of exchange in Anglo-Saxon society, using literary and archaeological sources, though as he mentions, it is impossible to establish the pattern of exchange using archaeological sources.[27] He does note that examples of weapons given as gifts in *Beowulf* are limited to swords, mail shirts, and helms—items that he has established are symbols of prestige, at least based on the archaeological evidence.[28] There are few instances of looting in the poem. *Beowulf* also contains no overt scenes depicting grave-robbing, a common type-scene in Old Norse literature. The only example of exchange via discovery in the poem involves the giants' sword, though this episode comes tantalizingly close to the category of recovery from

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[26] Weland's compulsory labor is referenced in the poems *Waldere* and in *Deor* with the word *seonobende*, frequently translated as "sinew-bonds" and thought to reference his hamstringing at the order of King Niðhad, detailed in the *Voluspa* and *Þidrekssaga*.

[27] 380.

[28] 380, and see this article and (other) for analysis of recovery of weapons from burials.

ritual depositions in water and graves that Harke explores via the archaeological record, since the Grendelkin's lair is both underwater and has the feel of a barrow.[29]

Gifting is a frequently occurring type of exchange in *Beowulf.* Of especial interest are the scenes where Beowulf presents Hroþgar with Grendel's arm and later the hilt of the giants' sword and Grendel's head, because these are items that fall outside of the general ritualized pattern of gifting as they are terminal, i.e. they cannot be used to do great deeds and to further augment one's status. Hroþgar presents gifts of a less arcane nature to Beowulf for his services, like swords and horses—gifts that can be used to gain increasing prestige. Later, Beowulf presents items to Hygelac, including Heoroweard's sword and a massive neck-ring which had been given to Beowulf by Wealþeow, and Hygelac in turn presents gifts of heirloom weapons and land to Beowulf. These scenes all occur at the highest social strata, where the gifts routinely used to increase social status are among the most majestic. Other examples of gifting include various gifts of arm-rings, the sword given to the coastguard who has tended Beowulf's ship, and the ill-fated and ironic gift of the cup—an object generally symbolizing peace—stolen from the dragon's hoard and given to the master of the disgraced bondsman. Unferð's loan of Hrunting to Beowulf can also be seen as a type of gifting.

There are many theories concerning the role of gifting in society, some of which have been explored in the context of the poem. Gillian Overing briefly examines gifting in the context of semiotic, in which gifts take on symbolic values:

> The poet lists and describes with care just how many treasures and of what kind
> Beowulf receives from Hrothgar as payment for his services. But the treasures

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[29] *Rituals of Power* 386-92.

form a moral, emotional currency as well: they approve Beowulf's actions and complement his courage, they express the sentiments of the giver, and transmit honor to the receiver. The drinking cup acquires meaning in its ritual passing from one warrior to another.[30]

This model is, of course, somewhat limited to the literary world and its conventions, where objects are not bound by the laws of physics and are free to conform more closely to their symbolic values, like the massive size of the giants' sword itself. Other methods of analyzing exchange in the poem also draw from the concrete, blood and sweat world of the Germanic warrior.

Just as Overing envisions gifting in Beowulf as creating symbolic meaning within the object by endowing it with symbolic values, Jos Bazelmans's study, which uses anthropological theory to analyze the exchange of weapons in *Beowulf*, sees gifting as the primary method used for constructing social identities in the poem. The two approaches complement each other, using methodology developed for both the lived and literary worlds. Bazelmans criticizes the model of *Gefolgschaft*, the established theory examining exchange in early medieval Germanic society, which views loyalty as the primary bond created by exchange.[31] He instead asserts that the individual warrior's social identity, or reputation, is constructed by the exchange of weapons in the world described in the poem and that in a society like that of the Anglo-Saxons, individuality is

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[30] Overing 43.

[31] *Rituals of Power.*

suppressed and one's social identity is instead the primary sense of self, and this self is the result of the exchange of objects.[32]

Bazelmans's is one of the few studies to use anthropological methods to examine gifting in the poem. He applies the theories of Marcel Mauss and Louis Dumont to the world of *Beowulf*, examining the commensurability of subject and object, in this case weapons. The commensurability of subject and object so central to his thesis is also confirmed by the Germanic practice of paying w*ergild*, or man-price, for the slain. Because the amount of one's wergild was strictly codified by rank in society, human life was quantifiable in Anglo-Saxon law, making man and object—in this case currency— literally interchangeable.

V. Swords and Exchange: Inheritance

In death, the Anglo-Saxon warrior was able to form new bonds by leaving precious objects to others.[33] Both wills and poetic depictions of inheritance tend to affirm Bazelmans's model of exchange as ritual, though it is difficult to accept the argument that the man bequeathing the sword was to be understood literally to become a tribal ancestor

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[32] It should be noted that there is a weakness in Bazelmans's analysis: he assumes the world of the poem is most similar to the Anglo-Saxon world, despite its Danish and Swedish origins.

[33] For a broad sampling of inheritance and swords in Germanic literature and life, see Ellis Davidson. For primary documents regarding inheritance in Anglo-Saxon England, see Dorothy Whitlock.

via this act.[34] However, within the material being of items described as a *laf* (literally 'leavings, that which is left behind'), resides the story of both the giver and the recipient. *Beowulf* has several notable examples of exchange via inheritance. In Bazelmsn's model, the object has potential to accrue the social selves from every man who has exchanged it over time, making the object eventually, in Harke's words, inalienable.[35]

The most overt example in *Beowulf* of an inherited weapon linking two narratives involves a hypothetical sword. In this episode, Beowulf casts doubt on Hroþgar's plans to marry his daughter to Ingeld as a peace-weaver. Beowulf paints a picture where a sword becomes a type of document by carrying memories that prompt an old man to begin goading a young warrior into breaking the peace:

> "Mæg þæs þonne ofþyncan   ðeodne Heaðobeardna
> ond þegna gehwam   þara leoda,
> þonne he mid fæmnan   on flett gæð
> dryht-bearn Dena,   duguða biwenede.
> On him gladiað   gomelra lafe,
> heard ond hring-mæl   Heaðabeardna gestreon,
> þenden hie ðam wæpnum   wealdan moston,
> oððæt hie forlæddan   to ðam lind-plegan
> swæse gesiðas   ond hyra sylfra feorh.
> Þonne cwið æt beore,   se þe beah gesyhð,
> eald æsc-wiga,   se ðe eall geman
> gar-cwealm gumena   --him bið grim sefa—
> onginneð geomor-mod   geongum cempan
> þurh hreðra gehygd,   higes cunnian,
> wig-bealu weccean,   ond þæt word acwyð:
> Meaht ðu, min wine,   mece gecnawan,
> þone þin fæder   to gefeohte bær
> under here-griman   hindeman siðe,
> dyre iren,   þær hyne Dene slogon,

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[34] Bazelmans views the pattern of object exchange as a process of the life cycle, following the accrual of status to the social self via the ritual of object exchange and terminating in the elevation of a warrior to the status of ancestor when precious objects are included in funerary rituals or are transmitted via inheritance.

[35] *Rituals of Power*.

weoldon wæl-stowe,   syððan Wiðergyld læg,
æfter hæleþa hryre,   hwate Scyldungas?
Nu her þara banana   byre nat-hwylces
frætwum hremig   on flet gæð,
morðres gylpeð   ond þone maðþum byreð,
þone þe ðu mid rihte   rædan sceoldest!'
Manað swa ond myndgað   mæla gehwylce
sarum wordum,   oððæt sæl cymeð,
þæt se fæmnan þegn   fore fæder dædum
æfter billes bite   blod-fag swefeð,
ealdres scyldig; (Klaeber ll. 2032-60)

      "It may displease the lord of the Heatho-Bards and each thane of that people when he goes in the hall with the woman, [that while] the noble sons of the Danes, her retainers, [are] feasted, the heirlooms of their ancestors will be shining on them—the hard and wave-adorned treasures of the Heatho-Bards, [which was theirs] so long as they might wield those weapons, until they lead to the shield-play, the destruction, their dear companions and their own lives. Then at beer, he who sees the treasure, and old ash-warrior who remembers it all, the spear-death of warriors—grim in his heart—begins, sad of mind, to tempt a young fighter in the thoughts of his spirit, to awaken war evil, and speaks this word:
      "'Can you, my friend, recognize that sword, the rare iron-blade, that your father, beloved man, bore to battle his last time in armor, where the Danes slew him, the fierce Scyldings, got possession of the battle-field, when Withergeld lay dead, after the fall of warriors? Now here some son of his murderers walks in the hall, proud of the weapon, boasts of the murder, and wears the treasure that you should rightly possess.' So he will provoke and remind at every chance with wounding words until that moment comes that the woman's thane, forfeiting life, shall lie dead, blood-smeared from the sword-bite, for his father's deeds. (trans. Donaldson 35-36)

Next to the giants' sword, this passage contains the most overt example in the

poem of a sword bearing stories. This sword plays a role in several transmissions: rather

than being left to the rightful heir, thereby augmenting his social status, it is instead

exchanged by violence and then via inheritance. However, the son of the original owner

decides to take possession of his father's *laf*, re-asserting the sword's original projected

path of exchange. This sword has become more than a sword—it is now a symbol in

which the story of its owner's death may as well be carved in runes *rihte gemearcod* to

the right reader. It does, however, require the right reader to understand the *sarum wordum* associated with the blade: rather than a general symbol of death, this sword is the symbol of a very specific death, that of its original owner, and therefore a symbol of vengeance. From this position, the sword amplifies the need for personal vengeance for one man out onto an entire people, reigniting the feud that Hroþgar attempts to heal via marriage.

A similar scenario unfolds earlier in the poem in the Finn digression, in which the sword Hunlafing is taken up by Hengest in order to avenge the killing of Hnaef:

> Þa wæs winter scacen,
> fæger foldan bearm;   fundode wrecca,
> gist of geardum;   he to gyrnwræce
> swiðor þohte   þonne to sælade,
> gif he torngemot   þurhteon mihte,
> þæt he Eotena bearn   inne gemunde.
> Swa he ne forwyrnde   worolddrædenne,
> þonne him Hunlafing   hildeleoman,
> bille selest   on bearm dyde;
> þæs wæron mid Eotenum   ecge cuðe. 1136b-45

The winter was gone, earth's lap fair, the exile was eager to go, the guest from the dwelling: [yet] more he thought of revenge for his wrongs than of the sea-journey—if he might bring about a fight where he could take account of the sons of the Jutes with his iron. So he could make no refusal of the world's custom when he placed on his lap Hunlafing, battle-bright, best of swords: its edges were known among the Jutes.[36]

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[36] Donaldson, 20. This point is hotly contested. The above translation is mainly Donaldson's, however, I have altered the translation regarding Hunlafing to reflect the actual grammar of the passage, erasing the added conjecture regarding the son of Hunlaf. Caroline Brady devotes a lengthy argument as to why she supports Kemp Malone's reading of Hunlafing as a sword's name. She mentions that it is not uncommon for pronoun subjects to be assumed if they were named in the preceding sentence, 98 n. 6. See Brady, 96-101 for more on Hunlafing as a sword's name. In addition, the suffix –ing is appended to most known examples of Anglo-Saxon named swords, including Hrunting, Nægling, and Mimming. In light of this evidence, the assumption that Hunlafing refers to a named sword is stronger than any arguments to the contrary, especially due to the parallelism that pervades the poem: Beowulf's hypothetical sword from ll. 2032-60 is used to exact vengeance in a near-identical manner, leading to the conclusion that the use of the fallen's sword to exact revenge is a type-scene that was purposefully leveraged by the poet to reflect the cyclical nature of blood-feud.

The sword Hunlafing probably belonged to Hnaef, and was therefore a fitting

instrument of vengeance. The coincidence of two swords in the poem used in a parallel

manner may indicate a variety of type-scene where an heirloom sword is used to avenge

its original owner. Either way, through inheritance these swords weave intricate histories

of their own, histories that include being the *guðwine* of many warriors, though the

original bond seems to often take precedence. Wiglaf's sword, called *Eanmund's laf*, has

also been transmitted in a manner that weaves together the histories of many men into

one sword—and judging from the previous histories of heirloom swords in the poem—

may foreshadow the Swedes' eventual war on the Geats after Beowulf's passing:

>   […] gomel swyrd geteah;
> þæt wæs mid eldum   Eanmundes laf,
> suna Ohtere(s);   þam æt sæcce wearð,
> wræcca(n) wineleasum   Weohstan bana
> meces ecgum,   ond his magum ætbær
> brunfagne helm,   hringde byrnan,
> ealdsweord etonisc;   þæt him Onela forgeaf,
> his gædelinges   guðgewædu,
> fyrdsearo fuslic,--   no ymbeða fæhðe spræc,
> þeah ðehe his broðor bearn   abredwade.
> He [ða] frætwe geheold   fela missera,
> bill ond byrnan,   oð ðæt his byre mihte
> eorlscip efnan   swa his ærfæder;
> geaf him ða mid Geatum   guðgewæda,
> æghwæs unrim,   þa he of ealdre gewat
> frod on forðweg.[37]

[…] He drew his ancient sword. Among men it was the heirloom of Eanmund,
the son of Ohthere: Weohstan had become his slayer in battle with sword's
edge—an exile without friends; and he bore off to his kin the bright-shining
helmet, the ringed mail-armor, the old sword made by giants that Onela had given
him, his kinsman's war-armor, ready battle-gear: he did not speak of the feud,
though he had killed his brother's son. He held the armor many half-years, the

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[37] Klaeber, ll. 2610b-2625a

blade and the battle-dress, until his son might do manly deeds like his old father. Then he gave him among the Geats war-armor of every kind, numberless, when, old, he went forth on the way from life.[38]

While Onela may have ignored the obligation to punish the slayer of his nephew Eanmund, his sword is a reminder that blood-feud is an ever-lurking menace. The Geats are also responsible for the death of Onela's father Ongentheow, whose weapons were looted on the battlefield and became the property of Hygelac—events grimly recounted by Wiglaf as a reminder that Beowulf's death will likely bring tragedy upon his people.

The many swords in the poem referred to as *laf*—that which remains—are swords that bear stories as a memorial to the men who owned them. Not only do these swords anthologize the stories of the men who have wielded them, they also become the impetus for action—particularly vengeance—when their original owners died by violence. In these cases, it is not just the sword that is left behind, but also a debt that the sword is needed to settle, working in partnership with its prior owner, even when he is beyond help. In these cases, it is the owner's story that is given primacy along with his name—though the object itself is also a chief player in orchestrating the action. In the case of named swords, however, an entirely different scenario unfolds.

VI. Named Swords and Personification

The named sword provides another method by which swords tell stories. However, named swords are unique in that they exist independently of the heroes who wield them.

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[38] Donaldson 46.

Jos Bazelmans discusses the connection between weapons and the world of the story, tying the construction of the social self via exchange to the semi-immortality granted by the world of story:

> As we have seen with regard to the temporality of human constituents, we can make a distinction between 'body' and 'life' on one hand and 'soul' on the other. The temporality of the first two is limited: after death the 'body' finds its last resting-place and there is an end to life. The 'soul' on the other hand is consigned until the end of time to hell fire or admitted to God's protection. 'Worth' […] takes up an *intermediate* position in the row of constituents: it will 'always' continue to exist, that is as long as there is a human community that keeps the recollection of the warrior-follower alive in stories and uses the gifts conquered or received by the warrior-follower.[39]

This model holds up as long as the sword remains nameless: the exchange is between two men alone, and while subject and object become commensurate, the *Ding-an-sich* is negated within the object to make room for a joining of the two subjects; the object disappears within the transaction, augmenting instead the fame of the men involved in the exchange.

With a named sword, however, Bazelmans's model breaks down: the subject and object are no longer commensurable. This happens because the object has become a subject all its own—the *Ding-an-sich* of the sword inverts the process by which exchange bonds men, pulling the names associated with the sword into *the sword's story*. Relationships with named swords in the poem show the deadly seriousness with which warriors depend on their swords to stay alive—the sword is a *guðwine*—a battle-friend working with, rather than for, the warrior.[40] Many examples of named swords exist in

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[39] Bazelmans 359.

[40] Klaeber l. 1810.

Germanic literature, including at least one whose name is probably etched on it in runes.[41] These names tend to reference some quality of the sword itself.[42] The named swords of *Beowulf*—Nægling, Hrunting, and Hunlafing— probably all refer to qualities of the swords themselves: Nægling probably refers to decorative nails on the hilt; Hrunting is cognate with "thrusting" or "long piece of wood", and Hunlafing could either mean "heirloom of the Huns" or some variant on the word "high".[43]

It has been observed above that swords were considered to retain some qualities of their original owners. The personification of weapons in the poem is a widespread form of metonymy, like the phallic overtones of Riddle 18. However, it is quite possible that the sword was seen not as metonymically standing in for the owner, but as possessing an independent being of its own. Indeed, this independence—the *Ding-an-sich* of the object—is the necessary quality that allows famous swords to function as repositories of tales.

Once an object possesses a name, it begins to possess an identity. Named swords may enhance the prestige of the warrior carrying them, but warriors pass away while their swords remain. These swords not only remain: they remain active. Nægling, the sword that fails Beowulf in his final fight against the dragon, has its own history, as does Mimming, another sword featured in an Anglo-Saxon poem.[44] Both swords figure

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[41] Ellis Davidson, 101-102.

[42] For more on sword names, see Caroline Brady, 98, and Ellis Davidson, and Klaeber's notes to his edition of *Beowulf*.

[43] For more on the roots of these names see the notes to Klaeber's edition of *Beowulf* and Brady, 98-99.

[44] For more on Mimming/Mimmung, See Waldere A & B.

prominently in *Þidrekssaga*, a Middle High German saga with Old Norse analogues. These are the tales featuring these swords that have survived. Due to the oral nature of early Germanic poetry and the passage of time, it can be assumed that the full corpus of stories linked to these two swords was more extensive. Hrunting's history, aside from its association with Unferð's family, is unknown. That does not mean, however, that it was not illustrious.

The *Ding-an-sich* comes to life in the riddles as well. Riddles 18 and 69 both feature swords as solutions. Riddle 69 is short, and the text is damaged, but it is clear that its main focus of the poem contrasts the beauty of the sword's costly fittings with the ugliness of the death it delivers in battle. Riddle 18 is the longer of the two and is prosopopoeic, depicting the sword in opposition to the wife in her role as peacemaker.[45] This opposition is seen throughout *Beowulf* where the woman (or the cup) functions as a sort of semi-object used to forge peace, though the exchange of women rarely works to suppress blood-feud. In the heroic world, the sword continually supersedes the cup:

> Ic eom wunderlicu wiht,   on gewin sceapen,
> frean minum leof,   fægre gegyrwed.
> Byrne is min bleofag;   swylce beorht seomað
> wir ymb þone wælgim   þe me waldend geaf,
> se me widgalum   wisað hwilum
> sylfum to sace.   Þonne ic sinc wege
> þurh hlutterne dæg, hondweorc smiþa,
> gold ofer geardas.   Oft ic gæstberend
> cwelle compwæpnum.   Cyning mec gyrweð
> since ond seolfre   ond mec on sele weorþað;
> ne wyrneð wordlofes,   wisan mæneð
> mine for mengo,   þær hy meodu drincað,
> healdeð mec on heaþore,   hwilum læteð eft

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[45] The numbering of the riddles used here is according to the system devised by Craig Williamson, not that of Krapp and Dobbie.

radwerigne   on gerum sceacan,
orlegfromne.   Oft ic oþrum scod
frecne æt his freonde,   Fah eom ic wide,
wæpnum awyrged.   Ic me wenan ne þearf
þæt me bearn wræce   on bonan feore,
gif me gromra hwylc   guþe genægeð;
ne weorþeð sio mægburg   gemicledu
eaforan minum   þe ic æfter woc,
nymþe ic hlafordleas   hweorfan mote
from þam healdende   þe me hringas geaf.
Me bið forð witod,   gif ic frean hyre,
guþe fremme,   swa ic gien dyde
minum þeodne on þonc,   þæt ic þolian sceal
bearngestreona.   Ic wiþ bryde ne mot
hæmed habban,   ac me þæs hyhtplegan
geno wyrneð   se mec geara on
bende legde;   forþon ic brucan sceal
on hagostealde   hæleþa gestreona.
Oft ic wirum dol   wife abelge,
wonie hyre willan;   heo me wom spreceð,
floceð hyre folmum,   firenaþ mec wordum,
ungod gæleð. Ic ne gyme þæs
compes.

I am a strange creature shaped for battle
Coated in colors, dear to my lord.
Bright thread lurks and swings in my mail,
Cradles the death-gem, gift of a lord
Who grips and guides my body forward
Through the wide rush of war. In the clear
Court of day, I bear the glint of gold,
Bright song of smiths. Often I slay
Soul-bearers with thrust and slash.
Sometimes the hall-king decks me in silver
Or garnet praise, raises my power
Where men drink mead, reigns my killing
Or cuts me loose, heart-keen, swing-tired,
Through the broad room of war. Sometimes I sing
Through the throat of a friend-the curse
Of weapons. No son will seek vengeance
On my slayer when battle-foes ring death.
My tribe will not count children of mine
Unless I lordless leave the guardian
Who gave me rings. My fate is strange:

If I follow my lord and wage war,
Sure thrust of a prince's pleasure,
Then I must stroke in brideless play
Without the hope of child-treasure.
I am bound by an ancient craft to lose
That joy—so in sheer celibacy I enjoy
The hoard of heroes. Wrapped with wire
Like a bright fool, I frustrate a woman;
Steal her joy, slake desire. She rants,
Rails, curses, claps hands, chants
Unholy incantations—bladed words
In a bloodless battle I cannot enjoy.[46]

This sword is very conscious of its social role. It is exaggeratedly male and

sexually frustrated. Its trappings match descriptions given throughout Anglo-Saxon

poetry, and it takes pride in its costly attire. The sword is also blood-thirsty. Though the

owner restrains it, he does not wield it: he unleashes it and the sword itself does the

killing. This sentiment is echoed in *Beowulf* where another sword is let or allowed to kill

and where men's role in war is drastically minimized, is shifted to that of the war-gear

itself.[47] A variant on this theme can also be seen in Old Norse literature, in which it is a

common type-scene for a sword to be fated to cause a death every time it is drawn.

Swords develop an independent identity via naming, but also grammatically as

well. Throughout *Beowulf*, on the level of language, the weapons are controlling much of

the action. Through a large portion of the poem, the hand of man is silently effaced. The

material world is personified time and time again, capturing the nominative position in

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[46] Ed. And Trans. Craig Williamson. Reprinted online at
http://www2.kenyon.edu/AngloSaxonRiddles/Riddles/Riddle18.htm.

[47] Klaeber, 2977-80, 2659-60.

the sentence. Swords sing greedy battle-hymns, they bite, they settle scores, they serve, they bring to bay, they fail.[48]

VII. The Folktale and the Giants' Sword

While the interlacing textual threads comprising *Beowulf* are to a large degree tales told and actions orchestrated by swords, the giants' sword episode uses this convention in ways unseen anywhere else in Anglo-Saxon literature. This particular sword is unique not in the *number* of stories associated with it, but in the number of literary conventions intersecting within it. The innermost layer originates in motifs derived from folktales. The sword is interesting because it demonstrates how the interaction between various folkloric motifs influences the descriptions and functions of objects in the poem. The conjoining of folk motifs helps to construct the giants' sword—the sword molds to patterns set by the conflicting needs of the motifs—leaving a massive, inscribed hilt that is unlike any other object in Anglo-Saxon literature.

The sword is a *literary object*—a chimera between substance and speech. While obvious, this distinction is very important for analyzing the sword's qualities. Literary objects tend to differ from their concrete brethren in some interesting ways: they are free to alter their forms to more thoroughly reflect their symbolic qualities. They are not fully bound to represent reality, but they are to varying degrees still beholden to materiality. Within this space, the object is shaped by the needs of the narrative rather than the

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[48] Klaeber, ll. 1106, 1521-25, 1939, 2060, 2499-500, 2508-9, 2576b-2580a, 2584b-2586a, 2680b-2682a, 2961-62. For more on personification in the poem, see Isaacs, 215-48, and Brady, 104.

bellows and hammer of the smith. The literary object is also free to display an overt interiority that the physical *Ding-an-sich* cannot display by its very nature—a convention peculiarly prevalent in Anglo-Saxon literature. The literary object must bear at least some level of resemblance to its model and follow some material practice associated with its model, but it is also free to deviate to some degree. The giants' sword displays far more deviation from material reality than any other sword in Anglo-Saxon literature, largely due to the conflicting influences of disparate literary conventions, several of which originate in folktales.

The sword itself (along with Grendel, his mother, and Beowulf's bear-like nature) mostly descends from what has been described as the Two-Troll tradition. This motif is marked by a hero who battles two or more trolls, who are related by blood, in succession—just as Beowulf first fights Grendel and then his mother. This tradition is identified as a localized Scandinavian offshoot of a tale-type classified as AT301, or The Three Stolen Princesses. Though the Märchen versions of AT301 were recorded long after *Beowulf*, certain thematic relationships are undeniable. J. Michael Stitt identifies Indo-European roots for AT301—indicating ancient origins and widespread transmission.

The examples of the Two-Troll tradition identified by Stitt are more similar to the battles fought by Beowulf against Grendel and his mother than those descending from the Märchen tradition. Analogs from the Two Troll tradition are mostly contained in the *fornaldarsögur*, Märchen-like tales recorded in Fourteenth-Century Scandinavia.[49] While the known sources for the Two-Troll tradition are Scandinavian, the language of *Beowulf*

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[49] Stitt 43.

does not suggest strong Scandinavian linguistic influence. Among the features of AT301 are two motifs that interact to physically shape the giants' sword: I. the *supernatural origin* of the hero (frequently descended from a bear on either the mother or father's side) and IV. the Proppian function of *rescue*, in which the hero of AT301 type-tales often finds a sword with which he defeats his otherworldly attackers.[50] Stitt documents around a dozen examples of swords found in the lair of a troll being used to kill their erstwhile owner.

Unlike swords found in other Germanic epics where the same named sword may bring prestige to several owners over centuries, the gants' sword is generic: it belongs to a folk tradition in which many *similar* swords have served similar functions under similar circumstances. This is important, as these swords may share overlapping traits, yet they are not the same object—there are differences as well. This is especially important to *Beowulf* because the giants' sword also differs from all of the known swords of the Two-Troll tradition in three key ways, and these differences are due to the presence of other literary traditions with conflicting symbolic systems: the sword melts, showing the influence of Irish traditions; the massive size of the sword is a direct result of the influence of the Bear's Son motif; and the sword bears two inscriptions, one of which is lengthy and references both epigraphic and biblical literature.[51] It is quite possible that the motifs of the version known to the redactor were more typical of the version

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[50] Ibid. 23-24.

[51] For a comprehensive overview of the Two-Troll tradition and its analogues, see Stitt, esp. chs. 3-5. He also gives comprehensive coverage of the Bear's Son motif (AT301) that sometimes includes a hero of ursine origin. Both Beowulf (Bee-Wolf—a kenning for bear) and of the Scandinavian hero Boðvarr Bjarki (literally Bear's Son) directly reference this motif in their names. See Klaeber xxv-xxvii for more on the etymology of the proper name Beowulf.

circulating in Anglo-Saxon England at the time the poem assumed its current form than those found in later versions. However, the absence of the unique features of the giants' sword in the swords of other versions of the Two Troll tradition should give us pause. This combination of features taken from multiple motifs suggests the form of the poem we have is the product of a long genesis with folkloric roots.

The Bear's Son motif is responsible for the tremendous size of the sword. The sword is described as being unusually large:

> Geseah ða an searwum sige eadig bil,
> ealdsweord eotenisc ecgum þytig,
> wigena weorðmynd; þæt [wæs] wæpna cyst,--
> buton hit wæs mare ðonne ænig mon oðer
> to beadulace ætberan meahte,
> god ond geatolic, giganta geweorc.[52]

> (Then he saw among the armor a victory-blessed blade, an old sword made by the giants, strong of its edges, glory of warriors: it was the best of weapons, except that it was larger than any other man might bear to war-sport, good and adorned, the work of giants).[53]

The mass of the sword helps to explain why Beowulf succeeds with this sword when all others fail him—only the giants' sword can stand up to his mighty grasp, described as containing the strength of thirty men.[54]

The success of the giants' sword in dispatching the Grendelkin runs counter to the general narrative of the poem, which repeatedly explores the *failure* of weapons to aid the hero—and by extension the failure and/or refusal of material items to fulfill the wants and needs of their owners. The first and last major conflicts of the poem are expressly

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[52] Klaeber, 1557-1562.

[53] Donaldson, 27-28.

[54] Klaeber, 379-81.

concerned with the inadequacy of weaponry in the face of overwhelming evil. Beowulf
scorns to use weapons on Grendel and ceremoniously *disarms* to fight him, much as
Christ strips before facing the ordeal of the Crucifixion in the *Dream of the Rood*.
Nægling fails against the dragon. Beowulf relies on his grasp against Dæghrefen,
crushing his enemy in his arms.[55] The fight with Grendel's nameless mother begins with
another failed weapon—Hrunting, Unferð's heirloom sword—even though the poem
quickly follows this by extolling its prowess in previous battles. This theme is intimately
linked by the collusion of the general ambivalence toward materiality evinced by the
poem with the set of folk conventions surrounding Beowulf as a "Bear's Son" type hero
who would be expected to kill his enemies with his mighty strength alone. This is the
one instance in the poem where a sword is effective in Beowulf's hands. Even the blade
of the giants' sword fails, but it does not do so until its purpose has been achieved.

VIII. The Epic and the Giants' Sword

The fallible sword has been identified as a common type-scene in Germanic literature,
independent of the supernatural origin of the hero.[56] However, in *Beowulf* the fallible
sword motif co-exists with an emphasis on the great strength of the protagonist and a
general mistrust of the weapons of war and materiality in general. Indeed, the poem uses
a gnomic statement to praise hand-to-hand combat as a preferable way to amass glory:

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[55] Klaeber ll. 2501-2508.

[56] For more on the fallible sword as a motif, see Thomas Jay Garbáty, 1962.

> wearp ða wundenmæl   wrættum gebunden
> yrre oretta,   þæt hit on eorðan læg,
> stið ond stylecg;   strenge getruwode,
> mundgripe mægenes.   Swa sceal man don,
> þonne he æt guðe   gegan þenceð
> longsumne lof;   na ymb his lif cearað.[57]

> (Then, angry warrior, he threw away the sword, wavy patterned, bound with
> ornaments, so that it lay on the ground, hard and steel-edged: he trusted in his
> strength, his mighty hand-grip. So ought a man to do when he thinks to get long-
> lasting praise in battle: he cares not for his life).[58]

Beowulf's actions here stand in contrast to the general pattern of praise for fine swords

found in medieval Germanic literature. Indeed, while his actions originate from the folk

tradition, they are cleverly harnessed to demonstrate the anxiety surrounding the material

in the poem: the sword is untrustworthy and fickle. Hroþgar and Hygelac give rich gifts,

but they, along with Scyld Scefing and Beowulf himself, find that while amassing

treasure and arms are the heroic means of amassing honor, these items are useless in the

face of mortality.

The poem's contradictory impulses toward the material are the result of clashing

conventions. *Beowulf* is unique among Anglo-Saxon poems in that its protagonist is

drawn directly from the world of the folk-tale and dropped, along with Grendel and his

mother, into the middle of a heroic epic that is largely concerned with the fates of

historical figures. In responding to theories of a historical Beowulf, Friederick Klaeber

notes that:

> [w]hat the poem tells about his person, apart from his marvelous deeds, has not
> the appearance of history or of genuine historical legend. He is out of place in the

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[57] Kleaber ll. 1531-36.

[58] Donaldson 27.

line of Geat kings, who bear names alliterating with *H*; and, still more strangely. his own *B* does not harmonize with the name of his father Ecgþeow and that of his family, the Wægmundingas. He is a solitary figure in life, and he dies without leaving any children. Neither as Hygelac's retainer nor as king of the Geats does he play any real role in the important events of the times.[59]

While Beowulf, Grendel, and the giants' sword all emerge from the folk tradition, they find themselves simultaneously disconnected from and sharing the page with the ancestral heroes of the Scandinavian peoples—heroes whose deeds were often the subject of a different poetic tradition, the heroic, that uses a different set of conventions.

Folk traditions cause the swords of heroic literature to fail in the poem and largely shape the giants' sword using the hammer and forge of conflicting conventions, but the language of the poem descends from the heroic/epic tradition. Because of this, the poem cannot help but draw heavily from the material conventions of the heroic tradition, in which swords are the objects of admiration and extensive praise—to the point where named swords are arguably characters themselves. Indeed, in her analysis of the nominal compounds describing weapons in the poem, Caroline Brady counts many alliterative compounds for weapons—many displaying an intimate knowledge of material culture—indicating a formidable formulaic arsenal capable of giving detailed descriptions of weapons under every conceivable circumstance.[60] Caught between the two sets of conventions, swords in the poem are both lavishly praised and prone to catastrophic failure. The poem integrates the conflicting impulses to praise weapons and to glorify

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[59] Klaeber xxvi-vii.

[60] Brady.

Beowulf's inhuman strength in an interesting way: it heaps far more praise on Beowulf's armor than his swords.

His armor is first described as Beowulf vows to fight Grendel. He makes an oral will disposing of his property:

> Onsend Higelace,   gif me child nime,
> beaduscruda betst,   þæt mine breost wereð,
> hrægla selest;   þæt ist Hrædlan laf,
> Welandes geweorc.[61]

(If battle takes me, send to Hygelac the best of war-clothes that protects my breast, finest of mail-shirts. It is a legacy of Hrethel, the work of Weland).[62]

Being the work of Weland the Smith is praise of the highest order throughout the pan-Germanic literary corpus. The armor is also conspicuously praised repeatedly for saving Beowulf's life during his fight with Grendel's mother:

> Him on eaxle læg
> breostnet broden;   þæt gebearh feore,
> wið ord ond wið ecg   ingang forstod.
> Hæfde ða forsiðod   sunu Ecgþeowes
> under gynne grund,   Geata cempe,
> nemne him heaðobyrne   helpe gefremede,
> herenet hearde[.][63]

(The woven breast-armor lay on his shoulder: that protected his life, withstood entry of point or of edge. Then the son of Ecgtheow would have fared amiss under the wide ground, the champion of the Geats, if the battleshirt had not brought help, the hard war-net [.][64]

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[61] Klaeber 452-55.

[62] Donaldson 9.

[63] Klaeber ll. 1547b-1553. Also cp. ll. 550-53, 1442-1454, 1502b-1505, and 1509b-1512.

[64] Donaldson 27.

The poem's focus on Beowulf's armor—as highly valued as a sword in Anglo-Saxon cemeteries—allows the poem to navigate between the conventions of the folktale and those of the heroic tradition. He accrues status via the armor while still relying on his brute strength to conquer his enemies.

The sword in heroic poetry, as George Clark notes, is a double-edged symbol.[65] It embodies within it the potential for both stability and chaos. He views the violence in the poem as coming in two distinct forms: the violence of war—endemic to society—as illustrated in the "digressions" and the animalistic violence embodied by the battles with the monsters. In his decision to eschew arms in his fight with Grendel, Clark argues:

> Beowulf's battle-plan momentarily polarizes the ambiguous coexistence of social order and social violence into the clear-cut contest of hero and monster, the vivid opposition of Heorot and the mere, the stark contrast between civilization and chaos. Up to this point the hero's weapons imply the harmonious division of society, the hierarchical principle, the continuity of tradition, and, more darkly, the ruthless and unending warfare of the heroic world. Bequeathed to Hygelac as a token of love and loyalty, two principles in order to maintain the human world, Beowulf's equipment escapes its sinister associations of violence and death. The poet contrasts Beowulf's conscious intention to oppose lawless violence by barbaric force, to plunge naked into battle against naked evil, with the pattern which the hero's disarming creates in the context of the episode.[66]

Obviously the battles with the other monsters complicate the clear lines of good vs. evil: Grendel's mother is participating in exactly the kind of blood-feud that swords generally symbolize in heroic literature; attempts to defeat her the same way that Beowulf defeated Grendel do not succeed—leading to the need to use a weapon; and the dragon is engaging in its natural function. The dispatch of the dragon also requires both a

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[65] Clark 1965.

[66] Clark 422.

massive iron shield and conventional weaponry: it cannot be wrestled with, as Beowulf

laments.[67]

However, the characters from the folk tradition *do* imply a different violence than

that of the heroic world, much as Clark suggests: the Grendelkin and the dragon are the

eternal *other*, as is Beowulf himself. They are unconnected to the fratricidal blood feuds

endemic to the Germanic world and constantly interweaving through the poem. Jim Earl

sees the violence attributed to the monsters as a need for evil in the narrative aside from

the Proppian function of villany:

> Grendel, the kinsman of Cain, is certainly and unambiguously evil; but his
> persecution of Hroþgar has served a purpose, as a needed moral corrective for the
> king. In the end, its effect has been salutary, at least in this one particular way.
> Grendel began his persecution precisely at the time when Hroþgar had become
> misled, by his own successes as a king, into believing that his power might be
> unchallengeable. The correction of this error is Grendel's one clearly expressed
> function in the poem. We might say, then, that the monsters' persecution of the
> Danes is in part a purposeful and necessary evil[.][68]

He makes this argument by examining uses of compounds using *nyd* (need) in the poem.

This brings to mind the sufferings of Job—that sometimes only through dire suffering

can God's plan be adequately comprehended. The exchange of the sword's hilt between

Beowulf and Hroþgar provides the necessary mechanism for transmitting knowledge

concerning the evils of the heroic world.

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[67] Klaeber ll. 2518-2524.

[68] Earl 87 1979.

IX. The Written Word and the Giants' Sword

The sword differs from its depiction in the folk tradition in another interesting way: its

retrieval from the battle and subsequent public display. The sword in the analogues

fulfills its Proppian function, and then the focus of the tale is placed immediately back on

the hero: the sword fades into the background. In the heroic tradition, because worth is

conveyed by arms, the sword is the subject of endless fetishizing. The giants' sword

receives far more attention than its folkloric counterparts.[69] It is also subject to ritualized

exchange, in keeping with the anthropological models discussed above:

> Þa wæs gylden hilt   gamelum rince,
> harum hildfruman   on hand gyfen,
> enta ærgeweorc;   hit on æht gehwearf
> æfter deofla hryre   Denigea frean,
> wundorsmiþa geweorc;   ond þa þæs worold ofgeaf
> gromheort guma,   Godes andsaca,
> morðres scyldig,   ond his modor eac;
> on geweald gehwearf   woroldcyninga
> ðæm selestan   be sæm tweonum
> ðara þe on Scedenigge   sceattas dælde.[70]

(Then the golden hilt was given into the hand of the old man, the hoary war-
chief—the ancient work of giants. There came into the possession of the prince
of the Danes, after the fall of devils, the work of wonder-smiths. And when the
hostile-hearted creature, God's enemy, guilty of murder, gave up this world, and
his mother too, it passed into the control of the best of worldly kings between the
seas, of those who gave treasure in the Northlands.[71]

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[69] At the outset of the exchange, the hilt is described as 'tires to tacne'—evidence of glory. Klaeber ll.
1654.

[70] Klaeber ll. 1677-1685.

[71] Donaldson 29-30.

The emphasis on control and exchange here is remarkable. The hilt is *gyfen* once and *gehwearf* twice in the space of eight lines while its makers are referred to twice and its former owners as well. What is exchanged between Beowulf and Hroþgar in the gifting of the hilt is not just prestige. It is wisdom—gnomic and homiletic wisdom inspired by the written account on the hilt, an account written by the *entas* and *wondorsmiþas* referenced above.

However, it is not entirely clear if Hroþgar actually reads the hilt, due to the fractured narrative at this point:

> Hroþgar maðelode—   hylt sceawode,
> ealde lafe,   on ðæm wæs or writen
> fyrngewinnes;   syðþan flod ofsloh,
> giften geotende   giganta cyn,
> frecne geferdon;   þæt wæs fremde þeod
> ecean Dryhtne;   him þæs endelean
> þurh wæteres wylm   Waldend sealed.
> Swa wæs on ðæm scennum   sciran goldes
> þurh runstafas   rihte gemearcod,
> geseted ond gesæd,   hwam þæt sweord geworht,
> irena cyst   ærest wære,
> wreoþenhilt ond wyrmfah.   Þa se wisa spræc
> sunu Healfdenes   —swigedon ealle—:[72]

(Hrothgar spoke—he looked on the hilt, the old heirloom, on which was written the origin of ancient strife, when the flood, rushing water, slew the race of giants—they suffered terribly: that was a people alien to the Everlasting Lord. The Ruler made them a last payment through water's welling. On the sword-guard of bright gold there was also rightly marked through rune-staves, set down and told, for whom that sword, best of irons, has first been made, its hilt twisted and ornamented with snakes. Then the wise man spoke, the son of Healfdene—all were silent[.][73]

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[72] Klaeber ll. 1687-1699.

[73] Donaldson 30.

It has been occasionally speculated that the *or fyrngewinnes* (origin of ancient strife) is recorded in the form of a graphic of some sort, but a survey of the Anglo-Saxon corpus does not disclose any instance of any form of *writan* used to indicate pictures. This is also the only appearance of the verb *writan* in the poem.[74] It is far more likely that both the account of ancient strife and the name of the sword's previous owner (or maker) are carved in runes.[75]

The runic inscription on the hilt of the giants' sword adds another layer to the material literature conceit by referencing traditional formulas carved on objects. Though it may seem like a stretch to call these uses of writing literary genres, surviving examples of runic writings are often both traditional and formulaic—wedding the form of the material on which they were carved to the uses for which the writing was intended. In addition to established literary genres, both oral and written, the hilt of the giants' sword relies on the traditional uses of inscriptions on owned objects and runic memorial stones to convey its complex message of proud possession, brutal destruction, and elegiac remembrance.

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[74] This passage may not contain the only references to writing. The word *arstafum* appears at lines 312, 381, and 456; *facenstafas* appears at 1017. Klaeber glosses these words as kindness and treachery; however, the root of *ar* could be herald or messenger or kindness here, as the word only appears in the dative plural, and the presence of *stafas* could very well indicate runic writing—perhaps meaning something like blessed or helpful letters. The use of runic objects as talismans is widely documented, and may have been absorbed into the language as curse or blessing, with or without the actual presence of runes. The other appearance of *stafas* appears with the opposite meaning: *facenstafas*—a type of curse. Negative constructions using the word *staf* are common, and often appear explicitly in the context of harmful runes. It may be that there is much more of a residue of Germanic literacy in the Anglo-Saxon corpus than has been previously supposed. A tantalizing example of this can be found the poem Solomon and Saturn I, where an enemy has inscribed a curse on his sword with *wællnota* (slaughter letters) and *bealwe bocstafas* (baleful book-letters) (ll. 161-63) that can be neutralized by saying the *Pater noster*. See ___ 89 and notes on 117.

[75] See Lerer 167 for further discussion of runic formulas and the Giants' Sword.

There is a large extant body of runic inscriptions, though mainly found in Scandinavia. There is still a considerable body of inscribed objects from the British Isles; some of the inscriptions are either in Latin or use the Latin alphabet. A large portion of them, whether runic or Latinate, reference the person who owned, made, or commissioned the object. These inscriptions are almost always prosopopoeic, using the imagined voice of the object as a witness to its own possession or creation. The use of prosopopoeia here may be a way of showing the object's consent to its manufacture or bondage. Hilda Ellis Davidson surveys known examples of inscribed hilts in particular. She finds examples of inscribed hilts referencing a person who named a sword and its name may have been carved on the reverse. She also locates inscribed hilts referencing both owners and makers.[76] The material practice of inscribing hilts appears to use literary conventions mirroring those of the poem.

The name on the hilt is not explicitly stated, but the formula used to describe it— *þurh runstafas   rihte gemearcod,/geseted ond gesæd*—mirrors formulas found on another type of runic object, the runestone.[77] It should be recalled that at this point the hilt's massive size is not emphasized by the narrative. The hilt described in the Grendelkin's lair would have been very large—perhaps larger than Beowulf could have actually placed into Hroþgar's hands. Unfortunately, the text is not specific as to its size—this is left to the reader's imagination—but it must be large enough to contain a (possible lengthy) runic account of the origin of ancient strife. The large size of the hilt is

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[76] For more on inscribed Hilts, see Ellis Davidson 77-82.

[77] Lerer's arguments for evaluating the hilt using conventions taken from runestones are nicely summarized on pages 167-71.

a result of the conflicting literary conventions outlined above. These conventions combine in such a way as to make the hilt capable of participating in additional systems of literary conventions that a regular sword could not encompass. These conventions include those associated with the runestone, massive stone monuments which, though rare in the British Isles, are fairly common in Scandinavia.

Runestones' primary purpose is to memorialize the dead. The giants' sword both references its owner and memorializes the giants who made it. The sword is repeatedly referred to with variants on the formula *enta geweorc*—the work of giants. This description is common in Anglo-Saxon literature and used for a variety of wondrous objects. The giants referenced as the sword's makers are probably those of Germanic origin. The inscription itself is ambiguous—merely the origin of ancient strife. The nature of the strife is not explicitly stated. The next half-line interpolates an account of the biblical flood which killed the offspring of men and angels. It is left to the reader to infer the connection, but the connection does seem to be an account of the death of a group of biblical giants. Seth Lerer posits that the connection between the giants extolled as the sword's crafters and the biblical giants memorialized in the passage lies in the conventions of the Scandinavian runestone. He explores the formulae used by the stones, finding that the formula from the poem has close parallels from the epigraphic tradition.

It cannot, however, be determined here if Hroþgar is capable of reading the runes on the hilt, but his literacy should not be ruled out. The sheer volume and extremely informal nature of many of the surviving runic objects from the Germanic world are

concrete proof that some portion of the population was literate.[78] The massive

Scandinavian runestones were public displays and therefore were obviously meant to

have *some* sort of an audience. Characters from the sagas also occasionally both read and

write runes without being referred to as 'runemasters'.

Seth Lerer assumes Hroþgar's literacy when he posits that the fracture in the

narrative at this point is meant to depict the act of private reading:

> Within the drama of the presentation, Hrothgar's apprehension of the writing
> stops his speech even before it starts. It is as if the king, about to speak, suddenly
> sees the inscription, and pausing in silence, delays his response until the text is
> grasped. Then, having absorbed its meaning, Hrothgar can resume his initial
> response and begin to speak. The poet's narrative technique is thus mimetic of
> his character's actions, as he suspends time to enable the audience and the king to
> meditate together on the subject of its meanings.[79]

While stopping short of a presentation of interiority, this point in the poem exposes a

fracture in which the oral-formulaic nature of Anglo-Saxon verse is forced to deal

explicitly with written practice. Though the material literature conceit here expressly

depicts runic literate practice, Latinate literacy and gnomic literature are also pulled into

the hilt's milieu with the description of the biblical destruction of giants. The

introduction of runic writing and biblical subject matter prompts the text to respond with

a homily on the dangers of avarice and pride; the introduction of the act of reading

prompts the text to respond with traditional gnomic wisdom instructing a young man on

how to lead.

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[78] See Moltke for a comprehensive catalog of Scandinavian runic items.

[79] Lerer 166.

Hrothgar's sermon can seem out of place and counterintuitive to modern readers; it seems less than grateful for the old king to respond to a great deed with a speech on the dangers of pride and warnings about Beowulf's impending death. The speech contains elements of gnomic literature, biblical exposition, and homily. Elaine Tuttle Hansen argues that the gnomic elements of Hroþgar's speech may originate from a type-scene in which a wise old man passes on his wisdom to a young man, much like the premise of the didactic poem *Precepts*:

> Hrothgar's longest speech is [...] primarily intended to be read as a parental instruction or wise father's advice poem. The 'sermon' is anything but interpolation; Hrothgar is specifically characterized as the wise father of Beowulf, his speech is carefully structured on themes and techniques commonly used by wise speakers in Old English poems and what he says plays an intergral part in the dramatic structure of *Beowulf*.[80]

As noted earlier, when the men exchange the hilt they exchange both glory and wisdom. Glory is the main preoccupation of the heroic life and heroic poetry, as would be expected by the exchange of a trophy recovered in the commission of great deeds. However, this particular trophy is also a text, creating an opening in the poem for wisdom, both traditional and homiletic. This scene of the exchange of the hilt is a masterful balance—the gift Hroþgar gives to Beowulf is not just the expected recognition of his great deeds but also the much more valuable gift of his accrued experience. Beowulf is at this point a warrior, not a leader. Hroþgar makes it clear by bestowing his

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[80] Hansen 54-55.

wisdom accrued while ruling the Danes that Beowulf is no mere warrior—he is a future king.[81]

Hrothgar's 'sermon' is, like a homily (a sermon based on biblical exposition), inspired by text—the runic text of the sword. It could also be seen as marginalia glossing the sword because of the habit of Christian literacy to examine a bit of writing and then expound on it with a sermon; hence the thick layers of marginalia surrounding most medieval scripture. In this sense, there are overlaps between the material literature conceit and ecclesiastical literary practice, as the introduction of writing on an object in Anglo-Saxon alliterative poetry also tends to lead to the inclusion of conventions from other literary genres. The sermon addresses two main sins, pride and avarice. Avarice is the sin most hateful to the heroic ethos, as avarice in a king leads to a lack of honor accrued by unrewarded warriors.

Hroþgar references avarice twice in his speech: when he gives the example of the anti-social and blood-thirsty Heremod as a model of leadership to be avoided and tells Beowulf, "Þu þe lær be þon,/gumcyste ongit! (Teach yourself by him, be mindful of munificence).[82] Hroþgar expounds on Heremod's example:

Þinceð him to lytel,   þæt he lange heold,
gytsað gromhydig,   nallas on gylp seleð
fætte beagas,   ond he þa forðge Scyldt
forgyteð ond forgymeð,   þæs þe him ær God sealed,
wuldres Waldend,   weorðmynde dæl.
Hit on endestæf   eft gelimpeð,
þæt se lichoma   læne gedreoseð,
fæge gefealleð;   fehð oþer to,

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[81] As he makes clear in ll. 1845-53.

[82] Klaeber ll. 1722b-23a; Donaldson 30.

se þe unmurnlice   madmas dæleþ,
eorles ærgestreon,   egesan ne gymeð.[83]

(What he has long held seems to him too little, angry-hearted he covets, no plated rings does he give in men's honor, and then he forgets and regards not his destiny because of what God, Wielder of Heaven, has given him before, his portion of glories. In the end it happens in turn that the loaned body weakens, falls doomed; another takes the earl's ancient treasure, one who recklessly gives precious gifts, does not fearfully guard them.)[84]

Avarice seems to be the main focus of the sermon, as avarice is antithetical to heroism. To be a good king, one must distribute glory and honor among one's followers in the form of treasure and weapons.

However, pride is often seen as the focus of the speech. Pride is a perennial topic in Anglo-Saxon homilies. At face value, Hrothgar's 'sermon' seems to fit the definition of a sermon more than a homily—it is pedantic but not rooted in the interpretation of scripture as a homily would be. However, if one considers the tale of the flood the scripture chosen for exposition, the speech begins to resemble a homily—only lacking a concrete linkage between the inscriptions and pride. Either the name incised on the hilt or the account of ancient strife could be the text inspiring the homiletic urge in the passage, but it is not clear that either provide the exemplum.

However, the Anglo-Saxon word for pride, *oferhygd*, is fairly common— appearing almost exclusively in expressly Christian texts.[85] Its appearance in *Beowulf* is

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[83] Klaeber ll. 1748-57.

[84] Donaldson 31.

[85] The number of examples is increased when the word *oferhygd* is included, a misspelling occurring in glosses on patristic works and possibly the repeated error of the same dyslexic monk.

the one occurrence in a heroic context, but its meaning is clearly pejorative and

reinforced by repetition:

> Bebeorh þe ðone beaolonið, Beowulf leofa,
> secg[a] betsta, ond þe þæt selre geceos,
> ece rædas; oferhyda ne gym,
> mære cempa! Nu is þines mægnes blæd
> ane hwile; eft sona bið,
> þæt þec adl oððe ecg eafoþes getwæfeð,
> oððe fyres feng, oððe flodes wylm,
> oððe gripe meces, oððe gares fliht,
> oððe atol yldo, oððe eagena beahrtm
> forsiteð ond forsworceð; semninga bið,
> þæt ðec, dryhtguma, deað oferswyðeð.[86]

> (Keep yourself against that wickedness, beloved Beowulf, best of men, and
> choose better—eternal gains. Have no care for pride, great warrior. Now for a
> time there is glory in your might: yet soon it shall be that sickness or sword will
> diminish your strength, or fire's fangs, or flood's surge, or sword's swing, or
> spear's flight, or appalling age; brightness of eyes will fail and grow dark; then it
> shall be that death will over come you, warrior.)[87]

However, its root, *hige* (or *hyge*) has a meaning closer to courage and is found frequently

and in a great variety of texts. This is a case where the language lacks a word for a

Christian concept, borrowing from heroic language and modifying a word to

approximate—though the meaning would still be infused with positive tones of

courageousness. It is hard to see 'overly courageous' in the same sinful sense that it

acquires in the speech.

It is here that the material poetry conceit reaches its apex of meaning: it

introduces the habits of written practice, but not just that of runic practice. Instead the

introduction of a text also introduces the associations of the entire range of Anglo-Saxon

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[86] Klaeber ll. 1758-68. Also note that *oferhygd* appears near the beginning of this section of the speech,
framing it within the context of sinful pride.

[87] Donaldson 31.

written practice, from the runic memorial to marginal glosses on the sinfulness of pride. The giants' sword is shaped by changing literary conventions as the story is carried over time, culture, and geography. As the sword is enlarged and inscribed by contact with alien literary traditions, it continues to acquire new features and associations—ending in Hroþgar's famous speech which reaches past the dynamic of materialty and mortality and towards Christian salvation.

The giants' sword is the lynchpin of the poem—the material literature conceit that reveals the dynamic possibilities of the poem. Swords in Germanic literature often bear tales via exchange or prosopopoeia, as do the other swords in the poem, but this is the lone example of a sword anywhere in the Germanic literary corpus bearing a tale in writing. Because of the unique demands placed upon this object as it is exposed to genre-specific conventions, the literary history of the poem itself can be seen as it moves from folktale to oral-formulaic poem, absorbing the epigraphic traditions of swords and runestones, as well as Christian written traditions. In a poem both enamored with and skeptical of materiality, the material becomes a figure for the poem itself—and this points the way past the limitations of the heroic ethos.

CHAPTER V

CONTROLLING THE UNTAMED OBJECT: *WELANDES GEWEORC* IN ANGLO-

SAXON ENGLAND

"Velent is so famous in the northern half of the world that there is no higher praise of workmanship than to say that it was Velent's skill that made it. ...He enjoyed great honor and was of all men the most skillful and widely renowned." Ðidrek's Saga, Book 69

I. Weland the Smith in Anglo-Saxon Literature

In conclusion, I would like to examine the connections between the character of Weland

the Smith and material literature in Anglo-Saxon literature. The preceding chapters have

focused on the symbology of material literature in an Anglo-Saxon love poem, a

Christian devotional poem, and in a heroic epic. Across these diverse genres, material

literature reveals aspects of Anglo-Saxon attitudes about materiality itself. Writing on an

object is a way of imagining the *Ding-an-sich* of the material object—similar to the

commonly used device of prosopopoeia. However, when writing is introduced on an

object in Anglo-Saxon literature, there is an element of intense solemnity introduced

along with it—a solemnity not found in simple prosopopoeic riddles. The object is

portrayed as a dispassionate, intensely reliable witness.

In the three instances where this device occurs, a multitude of literary genres and

conventions are combined in new and novel ways. The text appears to be uncertain how

to integrate an object with writing on it, leading to a scriptural account being given by a

tree, a marriage contract negotiated by a stick, and another scriptural account told by the hilt of a sword—all objects that pull freely across the spectrum of Anglo-Saxon literary conventions in order to deliver their messages. However, the presence of material literature also creates a situation where the poem contains intertextual literary conventions, inviting still more of these conventions into the text.

The textual instability created by the material literature conceit mirrors Anglo-Saxon society's pervasive mistrust of materiality itself: material anxiety is a common theme in Old English literature—from the pedantic tone of many of the short poems to the inventive use of prosopopoeia—the material object is shown to be something both feared and desired. The fear and desire for the object leads to, depending on the genre of the poem, attempts to either reject or control it.

The object's literary presence becomes a polyvalent symbolic space for numerous competing cultural values, such as heroism or holiness. This space contains the ambivalence displayed in Anglo-Saxon literature toward material culture—particularly richly made items and weaponry. This ambivalence is not limited to heroic literature, but can be found in nearly every Anglo-Saxon poem. Judging from the level of material anxiety displayed in Anglo-Saxon writings, their world appears to have been a little more *alive* than ours. The *Ding-an-sich* of the object was something to be feared: it tarnished the soul by provoking greed and avarice; it failed when a warrior was in need; it conveyed an external sense of worth; it knew secrets. The Anglo-Saxon psyche was vulnerable to the object, and as a result the body of Anglo-Saxon literature is rife with

conventions designed to control and to tame the object. It is against this background that I now turn to the character of Weland the Smith, the master-smith of the Germanic world.

References to Weland do have a symbolic import beyond the narratives associated with the character, often functioning as a metaphor for material culture itself. If any generalization about Weland's meaning for the Anglo-Saxons can be made, it is that he has a symbolic relationship to tangible objects that is shown both by carvings *on* material objects to highlight the degree of craftsmanship involved in their construction, and by poetic references *to* material objects of skilled craftsmanship as *Welandes geweorc*. Poetic references to Weland act as mediators between the tangible and the intangible. They are *a priori* polyvalent in that they represent craftsmanship and also materialism, as well as extended suffering, horrifying revenge, the power of kinship, and a link to the pre-Christian past. Weland's metaphoric significance is as complex as his character: he is supernatural but not a god, and he is a character from the heroic past but not a hero. He is capable of horrifying and very unheroic acts of violence against women and children. In addition, he is intrinsically linked to the products of his labor, *Welandes geweorc*. Within this framework, Weland primarily acts as a poetic symbol for the traditional Anglo-Saxon relationship with material culture, a tradition called into question by Christian cultural ideals of non-violence, obedience, and poverty. In addition, he encompasses characteristics contested even within the Christian tradition, like vengeance and kinship. Weland's symbolic complexity and the variety of possible metaphors he can express can be seen as representing a larger thematic literature of the material in Anglo-Saxon England.

References to Weland can be found in *Beowulf, Waldere A, B, Deor*, Alfred's translation of *De Consolatione Philosophia*, two charters (Birch Numbers 603 and 908) dating from the tenth century, the Franks Casket, and possibly on two cross-shafts at Leeds. These textual appearances are not of homogenous genre: they cross several textualities—the written literate, the oral literate, and the popular folklore embedded in the English landscape and displayed in legal documents that inflicted the violences of ownership and boundaries on that landscape.

These References challenge the received history of Anglo-Saxon processes of cultural and religious syncretism, and when closely examined, add unexpected variance and depth to Anglo-Saxon conceptions of holiness, power, and pride in craftsmanship as inscribed on objects. And they are particularly crucial for the study of the poetics of Anglo-Saxon material culture as it evolved over the Anglo-Saxon period. This poetics of the material is displayed across literacies: as often present on stone carvings, unspoken in the beauty of brooches and book-covers, and defended in poems. The Anglo-Saxons' preoccupation with objects bordered on obsession, but the desire for the material was tempered with a terror—not just of the material, but of mortality. The Anglo-Saxon hero sought immortality via fame and gold, gold that never tarnishes or fades—a quality the human body cannot possess. The materiality of the human body was the ultimate horror—a vision of the dust. This fear resulted in a need to control: by directing the voice of prosopopoeic objects and anchoring them in their subservience, by physically carving their servile status upon them, by condemning them. Weland controls objects

like no other character in the pan-Germanic corpus: he takes raw material, learns its secrets, and forces it into the forms and functions desired by men.

To highlight the polyvalent symbolic qualities contained in references to Weland, the examples of his presence in Anglo-Saxon thought can be most fruitfully examined by use—poetry to be read or recited, charters to divide the landscape and contain the folk beliefs within it, and objects meant to conceal (the Franks Casket) or display (the Leeds crosses). The current study will be limited to those mentions that occur in poetry and the Franks Casket. It is clear from the variety of references to Weland that they did many types of cultural work. The following examples show the cultural work of even brief mentions of Weland is quite substantial when placed into context.

II. Beowulf

The mention of Weland in *Beowulf* is perhaps the least complicated, but still demonstrates the variety of work a reference to Weland does in a text:

> Onsend Higelace,   gif mec hild nime,
> beadu-scruda betst,   þæt mine breost wereð,
> hrægla selest; þæt is   Hrædlan laf,
> Welandes geweorc.   Gæð a wyrd swa hio scel! (ll. 452-455)
>
> (Send to Higelac,   if battle may take me,
> the best of battle-coats,   that protects my breast,
> the best of corselets,   that is the legacy of Hreðel,
> the work of Weland.   Wyrd goes eternally as she must!)[1]

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[1] All translations in this section my own, except where noted.

This is the briefest mention of Weland in the corpus. What is emphasized here is the absolute superiority of Beowulf's mail-shirt. It is twice described as "the best" before being described as Weland's work. It is also an heirloom, the bequeathal of Beowulf's maternal grandfather, Hrethel. The symbolic emphases in this passage are placed on quality and kinship by emphasizing the family history and the superhuman workmanship of Beowulf's byrnie. Mentioning Weland also links *Beowulf* to the mythic history of the Germanic peoples: to possess a work of Weland is to be worthy of mythic representation, and by proxy, literary presence. Literary presence, among Germanic peoples, often meant representation of a figure or of a deceased personage in stone carvings. Literary presence was often a material presence. By virtue of association, the possesser of Weland's work takes a place among the heroes of the mythic past who also possess battle gear made by Weland, Regin, Mimir, or simply by giants. Weapons and armor made by these supernatural beings offered super-human levels of protection, allowing the hero who possessed them to remain safe from the threat of human warriors and to mount a successful challenge against the powerful inhuman forces that inhabit the landscape of the ancient Germanic imagination.

The reference deepens in complexity when placed into the context of the surrounding narrative. Beowulf's speech is the boast of a young man about to try himself against the monstrous supernatural presence of Grendel. It is placed in apposition to Beowulf's decision to fight Grendel unarmed, with both passages meditating on the possibility of death in battle:

> Hæbbe ic eac geahsod, þæt se æglæca
> for his won-hydum wæpna ne recceð.

Ic þæt þonne forhicge,   swa me Higelac sie,
min mon-drihten,   modes bliðe,
þæt ic sweord bere   oþðe sidne scyld,
geolo-rand to guþe;   ac ic mid grape sceal
fon wið feonde   ond ymb feorh sacan,
lað wið laþum;   ðær gelyfan sceal
Dryhtnes dome   se þe hine deað nimeð.   (ll. 432-441)

(Further have I heard that the dread foe
in his wild rage scorns using weapons;
therefore, that my liege-lord Hyglac may
rejoice in his heart, I too abjure
the use of the sword or yellow broad shield
in battle, but with bare-handed grip
shall I sieze the fiend and fight for life,
foe against foe; he whom death takes off
must there give himself to God's judgment.[2]

Hie þæt ne wiston,   þa hie gewin drugon,
heard-hicgende   hilde-mecgas,
ond on healfa gehwone   heawan þohton,
sawle secgan: þone syn-scaðan
ænig ofer eorþan   irenna cyst,
guð-billa nan   gretan nolde,
ac he sige-wæpnum   forsworen hæfde,
ecga gehwylcre.[3]

(Those brave, noble warriors did not know,
entering the fight with best intentions
to hew and thrust here and there and thus
seek Grendel's soul, that no sword on earth,
even the best of iron war-blades,
could make a dent on that miscreant;
for he had worked a spell on weapons
to blunt their edge.)[4]

Beowulf's choice turns out to be prophetic; as we see time and again in the poem, man-

made weapons are powerless against the inhuman. Hrunting (ll. 1522-28) and Nægling

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[2] Greenfield.

[3] Klaeber ll. 798-805.

[4] Greenfield.

(ll. 2677-87) will both fail him in his time of need. What would be the point of possessing a sword made by Weland if the narrative demands that swords are useless to you in battle? Weland's work is generally thought of as a superior sword, usually the sword Mimming/Mimmung, not defensive gear like shields and byrnies. However, this is not the only mail-shirt attributed to Weland. Walter's mail shirt in the *Waltharius* is Weland's work (l. 965), and in *Ðitrek's Saga* Witege, Weland's son, is outfitted in full battle gear by his father, not just given custody of Mimming.

III. *Waldere A*

Waldere A also mentions Weland in connection with his handiwork. Waldere, however, only faces human opponents, and he has possession of Mimming, Weland's most famous work, with which to achieve victory, as Hildeguð reminds him:

> Huru Welandes worc ne geswiceð
> monna ænigum ðara ðe Mimming can
> hearde gehealdan. Oft æt hilde gedreas
> swatfag ond sweordwund secg æfter oðrum. (ll. 2-5).

> (Surely Weland's work does not weaken
> for any of men who are able to hold
> hard Mimming. Often in battle, dropped
> blood-stained and sword-wounded, one man after another.)

Mimming is as famous as the warrior who wields it. The possession of Mimming is not an uncomplicated reference; it links the events of *Waldere* to the remainder of the Scandinavian and Old and Middle High German saga cycles narrated in such poems as the *Hildebrandslied*, the *Rabenslacht*, the *Niebelungen Leid*, the *Kudrun*, the *Elder Edda*,

and *Ðidrek's Saga of Bern*, et cetera. And of course, the poem is also directly linked to the Latin *Waltharius* with which it shares much—including references to the work of Weland. The above speech is generally accepted as spoken by Hildeguð, and does not appear in other versions of the story. It adds interest as one of the few female voices in Anglo-Saxon poetry, in which the praise of Weland's work, and through it the material, is foregrounded. The use of references to Weland to situate the poem in the general, and highly allusive, tradition of Germanic saga literature is continued in the second fragment of the poem, *Waldere B*.

IV. *Waldere B*

Waldere B, a second leaf from the fragmentary manuscript of what was probably once a lengthy poem, also makes reference to Weland through another of his symbolic qualities: his engendering of the famous hero Widia[5].

> [............]   ce bæteran
> buton ðam anum,   ðe ic eac hafa
> on stanfate   stille gehided.
> Ic wat þæt [h]i[t] ðohte   Ðeodric Widian
> selfu*m* onsendon,   *ond* eac sinc micel
> maðma mid ði mece,   monig oðres mid him
> golde gegirwan;   iulean genam,
> þæs ðe hine of nearwum   Niðhades mæg,
> Welandes bearn,   Widia ut forlet;
> ðurh fifela ge[wea]ld forð onette. (ll. 1-10)
>
> (? better,

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[5] Or Witege, Wudga, Vidge, Vidigoia, etc. Like Theoderic and Eormanric, Widia is a composite character who gravitated into the larger heroic cycle from historical origins. He appears to have been derived from elements of the Visigothic hero Vidigaja and the Gothic king Wittege (Gunmere 169).

except for this one,   which I have, too,
in [its] sheath,   still hidden.
I know that Theoderic   thought to send
it to Widia himself,   and also a great treasure
of treasures with the sword,   many others with him
to adorn with gold;   he received a reward for a past deed,
since Widia, Niðhad's kin,   Weland's son,
released him from captivities,
hastened [him] away through the power [realm] of the giants.)

There is no parallel to this passage in the Latin Waltharius. Weland's work here

refers to the hero he fashioned through his revenge on Niðhad: Widia. Weland's son here

defeats giants, giants who are members of his own kin group in *Ðidrek's Saga*. Widia is

also mentioned in *Widsið*, though his family connections are not, and he is the reason

Beaduhild *eacen wæs* in *Deor*, giving Widia something of a literary pedigree in Anglo-

Saxon poetry. Like the earlier reference to the sword Mimming, the description of Widia

as *Welandes bearn* links the poem more tightly to the various strands of heroic poetry

compiled eventually in the encyclopedic *Ðidrek's Saga*. It does this by tying Widia more

firmly both to the tale of Weland's revenge on Niðhad and to the *fyrd* of Ðidrek, and in

so doing, also associates Walter and Hagen with these stories, fusing them into the

interlaced meta-narrative of Germanic heroic poetry.

The casual allusion to the tale of Weland's captivity and revenge turns out to be

loaded with the kinds of associations that form the notable interlace structure of heroic

poetry, especially as a symbolic valance for kinship in heroic poetry, because Widia is the

last in a long line of supernatural personages featured in Germanic literature. His family

tree boasts his great grandmother, the gigantic sea-being Wachilt, her son by King

Vilkinus: the giant Wade, and Wade's son Weland, also known as the King of the Elves

in the Norse *Lay of Volund* and who remained strong enough in the English folk tradition to hurl a stone over a mile at his apprentice, thereby imprinting "Sniveling Corner" on a landscape covered with the work of giants.[6]

Weland's symbolic import is often tied up with revenge because his revenge on King Niðhad was one of the cruelest tales of vengeance in a literature filled with nightmarish tales. Sifka's revenge on Ermanrik, narrated in *Didrek's Saga*, echoes outward into kin-slayings and child-killings, pits Vidga against his former liege, Ðidrek, and finally ends with Ermanrik's live disemboweling in the guise of a medicinal cure. Both Brynhild and Kriemhild exact similarly horrific vengeances over Sigurd. Revenge itself in Germanic literature seems to not be the territory of warriors. Rather, while warriors do carry out feuds, the most horrifying vengeances are plotted and carried out by women. Even Sifka is responding to his wife's rape by Ermanrik. Nothing short of apocalyptic nihilism comes from a woman's revenge in Germanic literature.

One difference between their respective revenges and the tale of Weland told in *Didrek's Saga,* the *Lay of Volund*, and the top panel of the *Franks Casket*, is that something good does finally come out of Weland's revenge on King Niðhad, the birth of a famous hero. As H.R. Ellis Davidson notes, this is a close parallel to one of Odin's adventures narrated by Saxo in the *Gesta Danorum*.[7] Also, the extent of the violence of Weland's revenge depends on the version of the Weland tale. In *Didrek's Saga,* Weland was legitimately betrothed to Beaduhild before he is maimed, and they are eventually

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[6] Ellis Davidson, Weland the Smith 148.

[7] 57, vol. II, n. 45.

happily reconciled. In the *Lay of Volund,* conversely, he violates Beaduhild and flees back to Hervor, his swan-maiden wife, abandoning Beaduhild to her shame. We cannot be sure how many variants of the tale were known to the Anglo-Saxons, nor which of them is meant to be represented in the poem *Deor*.

V. *Deor*

The reference to Weland in *Deor* is unlike any other in Anglo-Saxon Poetry in a number of ways. It is one of two instances where Weland is used in conjunction with overtly Christian imagery. It is not oblique: a portion of the tale of Weland is narrated in its own right, not as a set of descriptive associations aggrandizing another hero or emphasizing his weapons or armament. Rather, Weland's symbolic associations with kinship and suffering in the Christian ethos are fore-grounded and subordinated to a general theme via the refrain, and his traditional association with vengeance is downplayed and left unspoken. The poet holds to his theme of suffering overcome by focusing on Beaduhild's pregnancy and her brothers' deaths and avoiding implicating the cause of those miseries, Weland, who here is used to embody an overtly Christian cultural ideal of ascetic suffering instead of premeditated and bloody vengeance.

> Welund him be wurman wræces cunnade,
> anhydgig eorl, earfoþa dreag;
> hæfde him to gesiþþe sorge ond longaþ
> wintercealde wræce, wean oft onfond,
> siþþan hine Niðhad on nede legde,
> swoncre seonobende on syllan man.
> Þæs ofereode; þisses swa mæg!

Beadohilde ne wæs   hyre broþra deaþ
on sefan swa sar   swa hyre selfre þing,
þæt heo gearolice   ongieten hæfde
þæt heo eacen wæs;   æfre ne meahte
þriste geþencan   hu ymb þæt sceolde.
Þæs ofereode;   þisses swa mæg! (ll. 1-13)

(Weland himself knew exile   among serpents,
single-minded lord   endured troubles.
He had for himself   sorrow and longing for companions,
winter-chilled exile.   He often experienced woe
since Niðhad   laid him in fetters,
supple sinew-bonds   on the better man.
That passed over,   so may this.

Beadohild was not   as sore at heart
for her brothers' deaths   as for her own affair,
when she clearly   had to see
that she was increasing;   she might not ever
think fearlessly   about how that must be.
That passed over,   so may this.)

To unpack this, one must ask what it was that passed away. The general reading is that the pains of the subject of each stanza passed away, and so can those of the narrator. *Ofereode* is an interesting verb, sometimes meaning to pass over, to pass beyond, to pass across, or to traverse.[8] The general sense is to cross a barrier or to transgress, or to fade away, to end: to complete a liminal journey in the most literal sense. *Ofereode* is also used to describe the passing over of the Flood, Moses' great famine; *yfel* passes over. Olaf, the scourge of Norway, *ofereode* the various shires of England. The sense is highly poetic, which fits with the most common use of the word, *slæp ofereode*, to awaken from sleep. Of the thirty-one occurrences of the word in the Old English Corpus, eight specifically refer to awakening from sleep, six belong to the refrain of

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[8] Clark Hall 256.

Deor, and at least four refer to the passing over of a supernatural calamity or evil. At this point, just what *ofereode* means to Weland and Beaduhild must be examined.

There is general agreement that *Deor* casts its narratives taken from the heroic past in light of their suffering, which then passes over in the manner of Boethian consolation. But the question is raised, does the suffering of these exempla actually fade? That depends on which of the possible versions of the vast story cycles are being alluded to in such a compressed form. For instance, in at least one version of the Gauti and Magnild ballad, Magnild is killed and her sufferings pass over into death. Also with the Weland story, the version closer to *Ðidrek's Saga* would produce less suffering for Weland and Beadohild than the version of the story narrated in the *Voluspa*. The stanzas are all linked together by either tragedy or a possible end to pain, and we cannot tell if their sufferings have passed over or if they themselves are just dead and gone. Though the gnomic passage clearly harnesses the suffering of pre-Christian Germanic characters for Christian ends, the sense of *Deor* is mournful—these lovers and kinsmen both suffer and fade into post-Christian oblivion.

The choice of opening *Deor* with two scenes from the story of Weland brings the reader into a conflicted set of relational narratives and allusions. The split between the first two stanzas show two victims of *wræc,* but one is the victim of the other. Weland and Beaduhild are presented as a pair of lovers in some the *Ðidrek's Saga* version of the story, but Weland's attachment to his wife Hervor is stressed in the *Volundrkvitha.* Deor opens with a set of lovers separated, or else sets in motion a chain of victims and victimizers who are either kin or lovers. Weland, with his metaphoric embodiment of

kinship, is the appropriate figure to open a poem examining the pain inherent in the breaking of kinship and love bonds, and the suggestion of the *Dryhten* as a compensation for temporal separation. This usage is in keeping with other elegiac poems like the *Wanderer* or the *Seafarer*, but unlike those poems, here we only have a brief description of the lord/thegn relationship which is usually used to represent a relationship with the Christian god.

Indeed, the poem could best be viewed through the lens of love and kin relationships that are twisted and sundered, not the lord and thegn relationship that links Hagen to the poet Deor. When the stanza arrangement is set aside, we are left with kinship bonds for Beadohild to her brothers and her father, Niðhad; Theoderic is often presented as Eormanric's nephew. Weland and Beaduhild (depending on the version of the story) and Geat and Maðhild are involved in love relationships.[9] The reference to Heorrenda, or Horant, also neatly finishes as an allusion to a great love story between Heren and Hild, the strife between Hagen and Heren, and the role of Weland's father Wade, in initiating the strife between husband and father. This set of relationships allows a new, potentially revolutionary metaphor for a relationship to the Christian god by extending the appropriate metaphor from that of the war band—lord to thegn—to love and kinship relationships. As we have seen from the references in *Waldere B* and *Ðidrek's Saga*, there is a standing pattern of Weland's being representative of intergenerational kin ties in Germanic literature, and that tradition may be the primary

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[9] Kemp Malone gives two versions of the Gauti and Magnild story based on modern ballads. Like the extant versions of the Weland and Beaduhild story, one ends with a tragic separation and one ends happily. There is no way of knowing which version is being referred to in this poem.

symbolic import of Deor, highlighting the kin ties of the characters of Germanic literature as they fade like the dreams of sleep passing away, and co-opting them in order to deepen the available metaphoric expressions of relationship with the Christian god.

The focus of *Deor* is, therefore, shifted from the battle-glory of heroic poetry, and domesticated by focusing on suffering, love, and, kinship. Kinship and love amplify the magnitude of the suffering of *Deor*'s sufferers. Beaduhild mourns for the death of her kin at the hands of her lover, a classic Germanic dilemma exemplified also by Brynhild. The valor of Theoderic is passed over in favor of emphasizing his persecution. Because Theoderic is usually depicted as the nephew of Eormanric, his persecution seems much more heinous. Thus the suffering of *Deor* poses a brutal question: if the sufferers of this poem suffer at the hands of their dearest, as Deor does, where can one turn for love? Of course the answer is the *Dryhten*, but the poet gets there by stripping away the revenge of Weland against King Nithad in the first stanza and depersonalizing it, making another example of suffering leading the reader toward the gnomic passage of the poem.

However, unlike *Thidrek's Saga of Bern*, *Deor* is concerned solely with meditating on suffering. Within a seven-line stanza, six variant words for suffering are used to describe Weland's mindset. Nothing is mentioned on how he endured his suffering by plotting a gruesome revenge against the children of the man who caused his suffering. This focus on suffering indicates that the author here does not consider the poem heroic, but sees an affinity within it to Christian symbolism, particularly to Christ the suffering smith, whose suffering was a favorite meditational theme to Christians throughout their history.

The next paragraph could be construed as providing the revenge focus so often seen in the Scandinavian and German tellings of this legend, but Beauduhild's stanza does not read as directly related to the stanza above it. Instead, it is cut adrift from the narrative and aligned to the other narratives by its theme, patient suffering without the joy to be expected from becoming the mother of a famous Germanic hero. Thidrek's joys are also ignored for a focus on the more obscure suffering he faced by becoming a supposedly friendless exile. The heroic themes here are refined and stripped of their heroism so that they become meditational as well. This is not the effect presented by the Frank's Casket, another Anglo-Saxon work that could well have been produced by a contemporary of the *Deor* poet.

V. Alfred's *De Consolatione Philosophia*

Weland is the only Germanic character in Alfred's entire translation of Boethius, appearing as an aside inspired by a translation musing on the death of Fabricius. The name Fabricius sparked a chain of associations from Faber, and eventually resulted in a gnomic passage that resisted Boethius's text.

> Death lumps together lowly and high-born as one;
> She ranks the highest with the base.
> Where are the bones of trusty Fabricius now gone?
> Brutus, stern Cato have no place.[10]

This text was translated into an alliterative poem:

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[10] ll. 13-16, p. 36.

> Deað ne scrifeð
> þonne him rum forlæt   rodora Waldend
> ac he þonne welegan   Wædlum gelice
> efnmærne gedeð   ælces þinges:
> Hwær sint nu þæs wisan   Welandes ban,
> þæs goldsmiðes   þe wæs geo mærost?
> (Forðy ic æwæð þæs wisan   Welandes ban
> forðy ænegum ne mæg   eorþbuendra
> se cræft him losian   þe him Crist onlænþ,
> ne mæg mon æfre þy ðe   ænne wræccan
> his cræftes beniman   ðe mon oncerran mæg
> sunnan onswifan   7 ðisne swifran rodor
> of his rihtryne   rinca ænig--).[11]

> Death heedeth these not
> When heaven's Governor   giveth him leave.
> But the wealthy man,   and the wanting in goods,
> Death maketh equal,   in all things alike.
> Where now are the wise one's,   Weland's bones,
> The worker in gold,   once greatest in glory?
> I ask where the bones   of Weland are buried
> For never any   that on earth liveth
> May lose any virtue   lent him by Christ;
> Nor may one poor wretch   be robbed with more ease
> Of his soul's virtue,   than may the sun
> Be swung from his path,   or the swift heavens
> Moved from their courses   by the might of a man.
> Who now is aware   of wise Weland's bones,
> In what barrow lying   they litter the ground?[12]

The main sense of Boethius' passage, the uselessness of fame and martial reputation,

clashes with the deep-seated Anglo-Saxon cultural value placed on lasting glory from

battle. The cultural work accomplished by Alfred's use of Weland in his translation of

De Consolatione Philosophia is as fascinating as the process of refashioning heroic

legend to serve the purposes of Christian elegy. Alfred's defense of the eternal nature of

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[11] ll. 29-41.

[12] Sedgefield trans.

the gifts of the Lord to artisans stands out, both in defiance of the sense of the passage he is translating and its status of being Alfred's sole use of a Germanic name in the translation. When combined with the similar and disproportionately lengthy defenses of smithcraft in *The Fates of Men* and *The Gifts of Men*, the reader is left with the realization that smithcraft is vigorously upheld and defended in these poems, even while they lament temporal existence as loaned and transitory.[13]

VI. The Franks Casket

The sheer variety of contexts in which Weland is mentioned in even one nation's literature can give an intriguing glimpse into the cultural work accomplished by the legend, particularly how it is related to, or interlaced into, a structure comprised of unrelated tales so that a coherent narrative emerges. This is the mechanism followed by the *Poetic Edda*, *Thidrek's Saga of Bern*, the poem *Deor*, and the narratives carved onto the early eight-century whalebone box known as the *Franks Casket*. However, the overall effects accomplished by interweaving the Weland story into all of these master-narratives are not at all similar. Especially dissimilar are the intended themes

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[13] *The Gifts of Men:* "One is subtly skilled in gold and gems when a lord over people commands him embellish jewels to be objects of renown for him. One, an ingenious smith, can make many weapons for use in war when he forges helmet or hip-sword for human combat, or battle-corselet, shining blade or shield's disc, and can weld them firm against the spear's flight." Trans. Bradley 327.
The Fortunes of Men: "To one amazing talents are furnished as a craftsman in gold; he will be regularly tempering and finely ornamenting the mail-coat of a mighty king and he will bestow broad lands upon him in reward, which he will willingly accept." Trans. Bradley 343.

demonstrated by the Weland passages in *Deor* and the top left panel of the *Franks Casket*. *Deor* is a sanitized version of the legend, wholly concerned with suffering and using the revenge motif only to meditate on the nature of suffering throughout heroic literature. The panel narrative is a sadistic depiction of revenge stripped of its precipitating cause. Before I compare these narratives in detail, however, let us examine the complex nature of Weland as a character and symbolic contradictions he brings to any literary reference.

It is impractical to spend too much time relating the Anglo-Saxon manifestations of the legend to the wider medieval world, but it is also wise to examine the thematic differences in the Anglo-Saxon treatment as opposed to the *Lay of Volund* or *Thidrek's Saga of Bern*. In *Deor*, it is Weland's suffering that is given more treatment than his revenge, the major theme in the Nordic materials and the Franks Casket. This is significant because it may represent a subtle softening of the symbolic qualities of the legend as a Christian ethic emphasized his suffering rather than his dramatic revenge. It is possible that this shift in emphasis from Weland as a maker of swords, perhaps imbued with the power and malevolence of their creator, becomes Weland the suffering blacksmith whose revenge, while mentioned, is de-emphasized in the longest poetic reference to his legend in Anglo-Saxon England. This minimizing of Weland's more violent qualities could be the precise type of co-opting that allowed a symbolic language representative of fine things to continue to exist in Anglo-Saxon poetry while the references were bled of their original violence and supernatural associations.

The Franks Casket, however, does not echo either the theme of suffering useful for Christian meditation found in *Deor*. Neither does it showcase the fabulous creations of Weland, such as swords or byrnies. It does not contain any folktale material native to Anglo-Saxon topography, or show the strange elvish smiths of the charms. The Frank's Casket only portrays bloody and cruel revenge, but it does this as part of an interlace structure that unites myths of culture heroes from around the known world, and it links them with a runic riddle about a whale.

The casket contains scenes of the sack of Jerusalem, the suckling of Romulus and Remus by their adopted wolf-mother, and two panels whose narratives are difficult to ascertain, although the word 'dom' (judgment) in inscribed on one panel. The top is formed from two panels—one of the nativity, marked with 'magi' in Latin with runic letters, and the scene of Weland's revenge. Both panels hail the birth of great heroes, Christ and Widia, but by very different means. Scholars have seen the panels placed in opposition to one another as different ends of a moral compass, but this view does not take into consideration the purpose of the rest of the panels. It is not that Weland is meant to be perceived as evil and Christ as good. Instead, these myths taken together form a narrative closer in intent to that provided by most heroic poetry—an interlaced heroic narrative in which the individual narratives are combined into a thematic whole. Three of the narratives given provide us with culture myths surrounding the birth of heroic figures, including Christ. Romulus, Remus, Christ, and Widia are upheld here in an item the purpose of which is unknown. It could, in fact, have been a child's toy inscribed with stories and a riddle, for all anyone truly knows, especially considering that

its themes involve several famous children. Thematically, these are stories of magic and action, not the patient suffering demonstrated by the editing of the *Deor* narratives.

VII. Conclusions

The study of Weland in Anglo-Saxon literature is an entryway into a larger poetics of material culture in Anglo-Saxon England. It is evident in a rich collection of alliterative phrases describing swords and the smiths who made them, or giants and the work of giants. It can be found in manuscripts, carved on stones, and written into the landscape via charters. It displays considerable anxiety about the place of material life in a culture deeply concerned with spiritual life. Critics usually assign the alliterative phrases describing swords to heroic literature and leave them there, but those alliterative phrases have parallels. The debate over the place of Anglo-Saxon material life is evident in elegiac poetry, in gnomic poetry, in charms, and in homilies. It is particularly pronounced when describing smiths, especially supernatural smiths, but it is present in many facets of Anglo-Saxon literature.

Weland embodies a more complex set of metaphors than those involving material culture alone. The pride in craftsmanship visible in Alfred's *De Consolatione* and in the gnomic poetry, as well as on the Franks Casket, melded into complex descriptions of weaponry in heroic poems, but Weland's associations with vengeance are decidedly un-Christian, despite *Old Testament* exempla. His associations with kin-groups, the base units of early Anglo-Saxon society, are also conflicted, as those relationships often

erupted into bloody feuds in traditional literature. The emphasis placed on suffering, however, worked alongside Christian cultural ideals and their concomitant idealization of asceticism and purification. A reference to Weland in Anglo-Saxon England is a complicated metaphor raising a host of conflicting cultural phenomena that continually recombine depending on context. These conflicting phenomena are visible throughout Anglo-Saxon cultural evidence, but only combine in Weland, whose ability to create and therefore control the material object leads to his constant presence in Anglo-Saxon literature: the smith and the object are metaphorically linked.

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