

Christian Heroism in *The Dream of the Rood*

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'While the poet can rely on the traditional diction to help him out of tight places in composing, he is also caught in the net of tradition, so to speak—he cannot compose in any other way.' (Diamond 5)

Just as the Franks Casket reconciles Christian and heroic themes in one aesthetic unity, *The Dream of the Rood* melds together Christian and heroic values – an appropriate counterpart to its effortless combination of Christian and heroic forms or *techne*. The Anglo-Saxon poem not only achieves harmony between such values, but sometimes unity. Nonetheless, the formulaic nature of Anglo-Saxon heroic verse still disallows a *full* reconciliation of such values, despite their apparent harmony, and so Christian and heroic values are reconciled only to an extent in *The Dream of the Rood*.

‘The Christian wine shines in the pagan bottle with a new light’,¹ writes Michael Alexander, touching upon how the Rood-poet melds Christian forms – devotional, evangelical, revelatory – with heroic forms – riddling, prosopopoetical, alliterative (Alexander 85). In *The Dream of the Rood*, Christian modes of poetic practice are conveyed through the traditional riddle form in Anglo-Saxon poetry as well as through the traditional dream-vision format. The former occurs when an inanimate object or animal is made to speak of itself and its experiences (‘Ongan þa word spreca | wudu selesta [It started speaking, most excellent wood]’). In contrast, the latter occurs when a revelatory or fantastical vision comes upon the poet as he sleeps (hence the poem commences with ‘Hwæt! Ic swefna cyst | secgan wylle, | hwæt me gemætte to midre nihte [Listen! I shall recount the best vision, which came to me in the middle of the night]’) (Kerry et al 27, 1-2). Alexander notes that the poem uses ‘the two most typical riddle-forms combined: the “I saw” type plus the “I am” type’ (Alexander 85). Such reconciliation of Christian and heroic forms displays a reconciliation of Christian and heroic aesthetic values, mirroring the reconciliation of spiritual and cultural values which constitutes the poem’s content.

As many have attested, ‘[t]he material of the sacred stories was not easily assimilable into Germanic tradition’ (84). The Rood-poet, however, manages to reconcile these two

¹ My translation. All future citations of *The Dream of the Rood* will be taken from this same source.

value-sets to the extent that Christian values and preoccupations can hang together more or less comfortably with Germanic-heroic values and preoccupations. Much of the poem is concerned with glorifying and promulgating Christian values. The poem is didactic and catechetical insofar as it is doctrinal, so doctrinal that some critics have compared its contents to the Nicene Creed (Grasso 23-38). The statement ‘þa he wolde mancyn lysan [he intended to redeem mankind]’ straightforwardly emphasises the doctrine of Jesus’ salvific sacrifice upon the Cross, redeeming Man’s sins (Kerry et al 41b). Lines 78 to 156 are perhaps the most doctrinally intense, conveying many Christian values and ideas, such as the passion of Christ (ll. 83b-84a); soteriological values and beliefs (ll. 85b-86); the veneration of Mary (ll. 92-94); evangelical values (ll. 95-99); ideas about the Last Judgement and the values it makes exigent (ll. 103-107); and finally eschatological values and ideas (ll. 131b-144b). Additionally, as Grasso states, ‘[j]ust as the pattern of the Creed proceeds from a summary of the tenets of faith to focus on the believers gathered at worship, the poem treats the salvific event and then emphasises the individual response of the rood and the onlookers to that event’ (Grasso 24). The rood claims that ‘Ne dorste ic hwæðre bugan to eorðan [I did not dare to bend down to earth]’ (Kerry et al 42b) when Christ climbs upon him, and Christ’s followers dutifully pull him from the Cross and lay him in a tomb that they have fashioned (ll. 57-67a). These ‘individual response[s]’ to Christ’s death are used to emphasise Christian values of good-works and discipleship. Furthermore, lines 13-14a (‘Syllic wæs se sigebeam, ond ic synnum fah, | forwunded mid wommum [Excellent was the tree, and I was guilty of sins, | wounded with evil]’) juxtaposes glorious heavenly life with sordid, wicked earthly life, thus conveying the conventional Christian devaluation of earthly existence in favour of the afterlife. Furthermore, the Rood-poet’s association of the Cross with both Jesus, God the Father, and the Holy Spirit (insofar as he depicts it as environed by the Holy Spirit or angels

(l. 11), just like God the Father) expresses the doctrine of the trinity, whereby all three persons of God are united in hypostatic union, which is a key Christian doctrine.²

Insofar as these Christian values hang together more or less harmoniously with heroic values, it is clear that Christian and heroic values are reconciled to some extent in *The Dream of the Rood*, often presenting a ‘compact blend of credal statements and heroic elements’ (Grasso 29). There are numerous instances of heroic values in the poem. The Rood-poet makes Jesus into a heroic sufferer like Odysseus, sustaining miseries for a higher goal, and makes the Crucifixion into a heroic conflict. As Carol Jean Wolf notes, Jesus is called a young hero (39a), a warrior (42a), a powerful king (44b), a prince (58a), and an illustrious ruler (69a) who displays resolution (40a) and boldness (41a); just as the Crucifixion is called a battle (65a) which includes foes (38a) and arrows (62b) (Wolf 203-6, 202-10). Such titles obviously reflect heroic valorisations of warriors and war-prowess, and kings and rulership. This is emphasised by the fact that, in Wolf’s words, ‘[t]he Christ of *The Dream of the Rood* is not crucified; rather, He willingly ascends the cross’, further emphasising heroic values (Ibid.).

But there are also many instances in the poem where Christian and heroic values do not merely coexist harmoniously, but actually become one, thus presenting an even more complete reconciliation of Christian and heroic values. The gems and light seen to wrap around the rood (ll. 4-9b), for instance, emphasise Jesus’ divinity, a key Christian value, yet also remind one of the ‘trophy cross’, which was a wooden cross hung with purple fabric in imitation of Roman military trophies, thus also emphasising heroic values of war, victory, and plunder (Grasso 28). The noble ‘individual response[s]’ of the rood and the disciples to Jesus’ death, as discussed above, reinforce Christian values of good-works and discipleship to the Lord. However, they also emphasise heroic values of service and allegiance to one’s lord,

² The Nicene Creed claims that Jesus is ‘of the same essence as the Father’.

values perhaps most clearly evidenced in another Old English poem, *The Battle of Maldon*, which like *The Dream of the Rood* conveys the ‘heroic ethic’ of ‘an absolute and overriding loyalty to one’s lord’ (Alexander 101). Finally, Jesus’ self-sacrifice is both portrayed as a supreme example of agapeistic (self-sacrificing, other-centred) love – a cardinal Christian value – and heroic self-sacrifice, such as in *The Battle of Maldon* when the English warriors speed recklessly into battle against a huge Viking force in order to avenge their slain lord (Kerry et al 41b).

Despite these reconciliations, I would nevertheless argue that the Rood-poet only achieves the reconciliation of Christian and heroic values to a certain extent, not fully. As Robert E. Diamond has explained:

While the poet can rely on the traditional diction to help him out of tight places in composing, he is also caught in the net of tradition, so to speak—he cannot compose in any other way. This applies not only to his actual choice of words, but to the themes and narrative techniques of his work.

(Diamond 5)

This ‘net of tradition’ forced the Rood-poet to convey Christ’s sacrifice on the Cross in terms of a heroic battle. Although he accomplishes this reasonably effectively, there is nonetheless a fundamental disjunction. Jesus’ values, and by extension Christian ones, were fundamentally pacifist and love-centred – and despite the attempts of some to construe him as a warrior-liberator who tells his disciples to sell their cloaks and buy a sword (Luke 22:36)³, this is not the orthodox interpretation of his life and values. Jesus was a figure who commanded mankind to ‘love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you’ (Matthew 5:44). In the Sermon on the Mount, he claims that ‘blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God’ (Matthew 5-7). The Rood-poet’s use of a battle metaphor to

³ See also Matthew 10:34

describe Christ's crucifixion and attempt to reconcile heroic warrior values with Christian ones, is therefore inappropriate, and means that the two value sets are not fully reconcilable.

In conclusion, *The Dream of the Rood* adeptly blends Christian and heroic values. Not only are spiritual and cultural values melded, but aesthetic ones too. Spiritual and cultural values coexist harmoniously in addition to becoming unified. However, despite this adroit reconciliation of values, it does not go all the way. Christian values of pacifistic self-sacrifice and self-abnegation nevertheless remain fundamentally irreconcilable with heroic values of war-like victory and martial self-aggrandization (the Rood brags about his exaltation [ll. 90-95]), and so the reconciliation that the Rood-poet effects is significant, but not complete.

Works Cited

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