

The Dream of the Rood : a dilemma of supra-heroic dimensions

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THE DREAM OF THE ROOD:
A DILEMMA OF SUPRA-HEROIC DIMENSIONS

The heroic dilemma is variously treated in Old English literature. Its most basic expression is the situation of the warrior protagonist who for one reason or another finds himself in the position of having to choose between certain, or almost certain, death with honour, and life with shame. The latter part of *The Battle of Maldon*¹ is concerned very largely with the way in which the comitatus of Byrhtnoð faces this situation, and how, and for what reasons, individual members of the comitatus make their choice; in this poem, the exemplary character of Byrhtnoð as courageous and generous leader makes the choice of action virtually mandatory, and the treachery of Godric and his brothers particularly heinous. The same is largely true of the episode recounting Beowulf's fight with the dragon, though here the fearsome nature of the antagonist qualifies, though it does not excuse, the failure of Beowulf's followers to support their lord, and adds to the merit of Wiglaf.² In some incidents, the basic situation is modified by other factors which make the choice of action less straightforward. The Finnsburh story³ is one such instance: having made the questionable decision to accept an honourable peace with Finn after the slaying of his former lord Hnæf, Hengest is subsequently faced with an almost unresolvable clash of loyalties, and the author of *Beowulf* leaves his hearers to judge whether the choice he makes is the right one. More often, the modifying factor is the choice between lord and kinsmen (or friends). One of the best-known examples of this is the extract from the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle⁴ concerning the eighth-century king Cynewulf and the would-be usurper Cyneheard: in the course of the fighting, kinsmen are faced with the obligation to kill kinsmen in defence of, or in order to avenge, their lord, and the only survivors mentioned are, significantly, a badly-wounded British hostage of Cynewulf, and from the second fight one of Cyneheard's supporters who was also the godson of the leader of the opposing forces.⁵

It is not only in the secular literature, however, that the heroic situation is treated; and it is the purpose of this article to look in a little more detail at a subject which has received mention on several occasions in recent critical literature⁶, the heroic situation, and in particular the heroic dilemma, in *The Dream of the Rood*.⁷

It may be said at the outset that the treatment of the heroic situation in *The Dream of the Rood* differs in one major respect from that in much of the secular literature. Whereas in, for example, *The Battle of Maldon* and *Beowulf* the poet is concerned almost exclusively with the reaction to the heroic dilemma of, respectively, the English and Beowulf himself, in *The Dream of the Rood* the poet is, unusually, very much involved with both sides; and his treatment of the two protagonists differs very considerably. In one case, the heroic dilemma is essentially conventional; in the other, it is complex and unconventional in the extreme.

It is a commonplace of recent criticism on *The Dream of the Rood* that the portrayal of Christ combines his function as Saviour and as hero: he is both the Son of God redeeming mankind through the sacrifice of his life on the Cross, and the young hero, lord of his comitatus, who goes forth to do battle on their behalf against the enemy that has enthralled them.⁸ The poet emphasises that he meets his enemies, here represented by the Cross, head on:

Geseah ic þa frean mancynnes
efstan elne mycle þæt he me wolde on gestigan (33-34).

Throughout, Christ is fully in command of the situation: he strips himself for the conflict; he ascends the gallows; he grips it with his arms⁹; he sends forth his spirit; he rests after the great battle.¹⁰ The outcome of the battle is of course complex in heroic terms: Creation weeps the fall of the King, his followers prepare his tomb, chant his dirge, and leave him alone¹¹; but though his spirit leaves his body, he is not said to die, but to rest. Though the poem breaks off, it is clear that Death is swallowed up in Victory.¹² No room here for the doubts and questionings of the Garden of Gethsemane, nor the "Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani" of the Gospel records; the decision has been made long before, and the battle is fought and won.

But what of the adversary in this great conflict? Christ's choice of action is relatively straightforward, akin to those of Beowulf, Byrhtnoð and their respective followers, and the decision and subsequent actions in full accord with the highest principles of the

heroic code. By contrast, the Cross's choice of action involves factors which are all but undreamed-of in the secular code, and requires a decision which transcends it.¹³

The Cross begins its account of the Passion by recounting how it was cut down at the edge of the forest, overpowered by superior force, mutilated, and set to work for its enemies. So far, the parallel is with, say, Samson and the Philistines, and Weland and Niðhad¹⁴: as Samson and Weland undertook menial duties at the command of their captors, so the Cross is forced to act as the agent of death for those its enemies regarded as criminals.¹⁵ Here, however, the similarity ends: for while both Samson and Weland obtained the consolation of vengeance for their sufferings, those of the Cross have only just begun. It is hard to overstress the tragic horror of the situation in which the Cross finds itself when it realises that its first victim¹⁶ is to be, not the expected criminal, but the Lord of Mankind, and its own lord too¹⁷; and furthermore that the dilemma calling for immediate resolution sets all its own instinctive reactions to such a situation against the imperative call for obedience to the wills of both its new and hated masters and its beloved lord, which in this, paradoxically, are one. What lines of action are open to the Cross? To destroy all its lord's enemies, and thus fulfil the basic *comitatus* duty to defend its lord at all costs?¹⁸ No: the command of its lord, who himself had refused to call on the help of twelve legions of angels¹⁹, was opposed to such action. To engage in the single combat situation, and to yield after a brief struggle to the great strength of its lord, under whose grip it trembled as much as ever Grendel did under Beowulf's?²⁰ No: for again the command of its lord was contrary to such a solution. Like the warrior engaged in single hand-to-hand combat without weapons, and who wears down his opponent through passive resistance to his powerful embrace, until his strength ebbs, so the Cross, if it is to obey unto, not its own destruction, but that of the lord for whom it would willingly sacrifice itself, must not bow, bend or break, but stand fast until it has gained the battle it would most gladly lose. Is it possible to imagine a tragic dilemma of such dimensions in a situation of secular epic? Does not Hengest's problem pale before this? But the choice is made, and it is the right one: the Cross must sacrifice its most deeply-felt responses to the situation. The normal duty to protect its lord at all costs must give way, in obedience to its lord's own will, to the readiness not only to allow its lord to die but even to be the instrument of his death; and the Cross's reward, like that of Mary who also at the

climactic moment of her life chose obedience to the will of God at the risk of shame and dishonour before men, is to be honoured above its kind.²¹ For the paradox of the Cross's experience is that it is at once fighting for and against its lord; it is the measure of its sufferings that like its lord it is pierced and reviled, it is buried as he was, and in due time raised as he was.²² And it is the measure of the greatness of the nameless poet of *The Dream of the Rood* that he perceived the profound possibilities of this more than heroic dilemma as one of the manifold aspects of his treatment of the Passion theme.

I. J. KIRBY.

NOTES

¹ *Anglo-Saxon Poetic Records* (hereinafter ASPR), 6 vols, eds. Krapp and Dobbie, 1931-42: vol. 6, 7-16.

² See *Beowulf* (ASPR. 4.3-98: also editions by e.g. Klaeber and Wrenn), especially lines 2596-2668 and 2845-2891.

³ See *Beowulf* (editions cited) 1066-1159, and *The Battle of Finnsburh* (ASPR.6.3-4).

⁴ See e.g. *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, translated by G. N. Garmonsway, 1953-, 46-49; the original text is edited e.g. as extract 1 in Sweet's *Anglo-Saxon Reader* (revised Whitelock, 1967).

⁵ Both of these had fought hard and long, and had been severely wounded, in defending their lord or in order to avenge him, despite the other factors involved in this choice of action.

⁶ See e.g. M. Swanton, *The Dream of the Rood* (1970), page 70, and A. A. Lee, "Toward a critique of *The Dream of the Rood*", in *Anglo-Saxon Poetry: Essays in Appreciation*, Nicholson and Frese (1975), 163-191.

⁷ See ASPR.2.61-65. The poem is also edited by Dickins and Ross (1934-) and Swanton (1970).

⁸ See in particular lines 39-41:

Ongyrede hine þa geong hæleð, (þæt wæs god ælmihtig),
strang ond stiðmod. Gestah he on gealgan heanne,
modig on manigra gesyhðe, þa he wolde mancyn lysan.

For a more detailed treatment of this point, see C. J. Wolf, "Christ as hero in *The Dream of the Rood*", *Neuphilologische Mitteilungen* 71 (1970), 202-210.

⁹ See line 42. In view of Patten's unfortunate attempt to adduce sexual imagery in this episode (see her article "Structure and Meaning in *The Dream of the Rood*", *English Studies* 49 (1968), at page 396), it is perhaps necessary to emphasise that the secular imagery here is that of unarmed single combat. Christ, like the young Beowulf, relies on the strength of his grip, not on war-gear of any kind.

¹⁰ See lines 49, 64f.

¹¹ See lines 55f, 65-69.

¹² In view of the apparent contradictions running through lines 63 to 69, it seems reasonable to posit that in line 65 *gewinne* may imply "victory" as well as "battle".

¹³ In this respect one may perhaps suggest a comparison with *The Wanderer* and *The Seafarer*, in which, it has been argued, the Christian response to life and its problems is shown to transcend the secular one.

¹⁴ See Judges 16.21 and e.g. *Deor* 1-7 (ASPR.3.178: for the full story, see the Old Norse *Völundarkviða*, edited by Jón Helgason in *Tvær Kviður Fornar*, Reykjavík 1962). These parallels are of course not in the poem.

¹⁵ *The Dream of the Rood*, line 31.

¹⁶ In Christian tradition, the Cross is regarded as virgin, and the general approach of the poet is certainly that Christ is its first victim. In my view any interpretation of the difficult line 19a which indicates otherwise is highly questionable; *earmra* should not be taken to refer to earlier sufferers on Christ's Cross, particularly as the rest of the sentence clearly refers to the piercing by the spear. Swanton's alternative suggestion (see "Ambiguity and Anticipation in 'The Dream of the Rood'", *Neophilologische Mitteilungen* 70 (1969), page 412), that *earmra* indicates Christ's enemies, and *ærgewin* their hostility to him (better perhaps, their attack on him), seems to be the best solution to the crux so far proposed.

¹⁷ The Cross, as part of the Creation, owes the comitatus duty to its Creator and Lord.

¹⁸ See lines 37f, 47.

¹⁹ See Matthew 26.53.

²⁰ This is the more difficult temptation to resist: hence, certainly, the threefold repetition at lines 35-38, 42f and 45.

²¹ See lines 80-94.

²² See lines 46, 48a, and 75-78, and note in particular the three-fold stress of 48a.

