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NAM VIRTUS PERFICITUR IN INFIRMITATE: CHRISTIAN BAPTISM OF THE HEROIC
TRADITION AND THE BATTLE OF MALDON

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ABSTRACT

This honors thesis addresses the heroic protagonists in Anglo-Saxon heroic poetry, particularly in the late fragmentary poem, *The Battle of Maldon*. The thesis seeks to defend the Anglo-Saxon heroic persona as compatible in abstract terms with Christian ethics and doctrine, although the persona originated in the pagan Germanic homelands. I have concluded that the “Germanic hero” was in large part valued, preserved, and cultivated in the Christian tradition. Early medieval Christianity had already cultivated a very similar figure in the image of Christ as a suffering servant and His saints and martyrs, who all suffered for a greater, “heroic” end. This end, Christian sanctification and perfection, grants the heroic genre a new and spiritually profound dimension that augments an older, pagan, heroic system that existed in pre-Christian Anglo-Saxon England.

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PRAEFATIO

To the experienced student of Anglo-Saxon England, literary genre can be a particularly opaque category of scholarship. Few critics assign the same genres or generic features to the same texts, while many attempts to define genres are imprecise and often lack consensus. But this is not the neophyte's perception in Anglo-Saxon studies. To him, issues of Anglo-Saxon genre are wholly unproblematic. The Anglo-Saxons composed heroic poetry – and a good deal else. In introductory handbooks the “good deal else” is usually aggregated into a few tentative compartments like “Christian elegy,” “wisdom literature,” “Christian epic,” “devotional texts,” and so forth.¹ But heroic verse is perpetually “heroic verse.”

Heroic verse has always been, and the corpus has remained, remarkably stable for many decades, masking disagreement among professional students of Anglo-Saxon genre.² This phenomenon should not, however, be surprising. Heroic poetry has always been supremely popular among scholars of Old English and other ancient Germanic languages. This popularity is not necessarily undeserved, and the artistry of *Beowulf* and *The Battle of Maldon* certainly merit the laurels bestowed on them by literary criticism. The supremacy of heroic verse has made it obstinately canonical. But the canon has not yet been coherently or fully justified. Why do *Beowulf* and *Maldon* enjoy the fame that *Genesis*, Ælfric's homilies, and even *Andreas* lack? Do they not match the former two texts in their art? Often, scholars want in them what they think

¹ See the tables of contents in Stanley B. Greenfield, *A New Critical History of Old English Literature* (New York: New York University, 1986); or R.D. Fulk and Christopher M. Cain, *A History of Old English Literature* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013).

² When it must be defined, heroic poetry in early Germanic traditions is given rather vague boundaries. See Michael Lapidge, et al., *The Wiley Blackwell Encyclopedia of Anglo-Saxon England*, 2nd ed. (Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2013), 242: “Heroic Poetry is the generic term for a tradition of narrative poetry in many ancient, medieval and modern cultures, which celebrates the mighty deeds of heroes, whose socially determined code of honour is tested in circumstances commonly involving physical risk.”

they have found in *Beowulf*. In these cases, heroic poetry is the prize of early Germanic literature because it is considered the most ‘Germanic’ of any literature in early Germanic vernaculars.

But there are difficulties to be encountered in the word “Germanic.” Its definition and semantic scope have varied in early English (let alone early Germanic) studies since their inception, and the term is often invoked with less precision than is necessary. In defining heroic literature, “Germanic” is often made equivalent to “pagan,” either implicitly or explicitly. More problematic even than this, the ambiguity of the term “heroic” has allowed it to be made synonymous with “pagan” as well. And since of late few determined attempts have been made to legitimize a coherent definition of the heroic genre, these related, yet distinct, adjectives grow increasingly muddled.

The error in this muddle is very great, though often perpetrated without full knowledge of its ramifications. Herein, I propose some sources of its inception, and suggest an alternative and more definite view of the heroic genre and what particular texts can make claim to it -- or at least the “heroic ethic,” as I shall call it. That the traditions of the heroic ethic originated (in some form) in the traditions of the pagan Germanic-speaking peoples is a well validated assumption that I mean not to deny. Nonetheless, that heroic poetry persisted in Christian England as a subversive remnant of paganism is a persistent and subtle assumption that I have no intent to corroborate. Rather, it is more apt to admit that in the heroic tradition the Christian Church and her representatives found something good and worthy of preservation. This preservation they undertook, and “baptized” it. This is a baptism, because the adoption of the heroic ethic, from a Christian perspective, can be considered essentially analogous to the baptism of the pagan Anglo-Saxons. Extant texts and historical evidence suggest that the heroic ethic was not restyled,

but rather was cultivated in a new, Christian, cultural milieu, and its characteristic features were strengthened, not diminished, by their Christian adoption.

CAPVT I

MISUNDERSTANDINGS OF “GERMANIC”

The condition of the term “Germanic” is one major hindrance to approaching a more accurate understanding of the heroic genre. The genre as it stands is an abstraction, claiming a term that modern scholarship has itself invented, which currently lacks the rigor it requires to be useful. It has borne great and often shifting semantic weight over the years, and most often an inordinate amount. It is rare for the term to be used in literary criticism for its most defensible and unequivocal intent: linguistic classification. In the early 20th century, linguistic classification was often confused with racial categorization.³ Such practice has rightly been denounced as unscientific. In more recent decades, that same tendency has at its worst confused language with culture, religion, and genre as well.

The practical explanation for our confusion of language and so much else is quite evident. Like the Proto-Germanic language, the early Germanic world is, for the most part, prehistoric. It has thus been hypothesized, homogenized (for the sake of simplicity), reconstructed, and fantasized. It is the regret of most students of the early Germanic peoples (myself included) that, unlike in southern Europe, the pagan North was all but illiterate for as long as it was pagan. Certainly, our definite knowledge of religion and oral art in pre-Christian Germanic societies is near nothing, save what is gleaned from relics and echoes.

What derives from our confusion in definitions is a fusion of the terms “Germanic” and “heroic,” and the consequent imposition of a sharp distinction between “heroic” and “Christian” genres in Anglo-Saxon poetry. Not all scholars subscribe to this distinction, but even the most

³ For the racialization of linguistic terms, see John D. Niles, *The Idea of Anglo-Saxon England 1066-1901* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2015), chapters 7-9.

hesitant of them regularly imply these conventional generic boundaries.⁴ They are not entirely misguided in doing so: the obvious difference between *Finnsburg* and *Andreas* is that one concerns itself with Heroic Age pagans, and the other with the Christian Apostles.

But from this distinction an error almost inevitably arises. It comes from the other obvious fact that both poems are written in a Germanic meter, with Germanic traditions of diction, and in a Germanic language. These are all (though only the most superficial) characteristic features assigned to heroic poetry. But the heroic genre has often been linked to Germanic paganism, not only in its language and surmised origin, but in its essential generic qualities. Presuming this link gives ground to a distinction that is rather difficult. To explain the existence of the above and other heroic features in both “Christian” and more purely “heroic” poems, a variety of tactics has been employed. One such tactic is to assume that poems like *Finnsburg* and *Andreas* are admixtures, made from scraps of discordant traditions.⁵ In his astute and well-esteemed essay, *God, Death, and Loyalty in The Battle of Maldon*, Fred Robinson takes up the position: “... the first difficulty is that *Maldon* was written out of a culture whose fundamental assumptions about God and death were incompatible with a heroic sense of life”⁶. Robinson continues with a quotation from R.W. Southern:

[T]he monastic life – or for that matter the Christian life in any form – could never be merely “heroic” in its quality. That fatal struggle of man against superior forces, that meaninglessness of fate, and the purely resigned, defensive and heroic attitude of man in

⁴ There are many scholarly texts that argue for the importance of Christian themes in heroic texts. For example, see Katherine O’Brien O’Keeffe, “Heroic Values and Christian Ethics,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Old English Literature*, eds. Malcolm Godden and Michael Lapidge (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 115-133.

⁵ *Finnsburg* can justly be considered a mixed text not because the content is ever explicitly Christian, but because it was recorded and likely composed in its final form in the Christian era of England. The propagation of heroic texts in Christian-era England will be discussed in greater detail below.

⁶ Fred C. Robinson, “God, Death, and Loyalty in *The Battle of Maldon*,” in *Old English Literature: Critical Essays*, ed. R. M. Liuzza (1979; Yale University Press, 2012), 425

the face of fate could not be, on a Christian view, the whole story. As Europe became Christianized the epic was bound to decline, for it left out the personal and secret tie between man and God.⁷

Ignoring the hazardous debate about the qualities of “epic,” Southern’s point is very clear and widely accepted: the “heroic” is a thing apart and ultimately has no part in the Christian world. Robinson and Southern both make abundantly clear their surmised link between their heroic ethic (as it is vaguely understood) and Germanic paganism. A genre (or a set of generic features) becomes the metonym of a religion.

But we need not make the assumption that a pagan literary genre must bear with it into Christendom all the semiotic baggage that it had in its former religious climate. There seems to be no need that the heroic genre should represent the whole of Germanic paganism, though it may represent a subset of the old cosmology and ideology. That subset is the heroic ethic, which though removed from its old pagan matrix, is not harmed, only given a new Christian vigor in its adoption. What the heroic ethic, its pagan pedigree, and reconciliation to Christendom may be, especially in *The Battle of Maldon*, will be discussed below. Now that we understand some of the critical assumptions permeating mainstream scholarship, let us address the historical evidence informing its conclusions.

⁷ Ibid., 426.

CAPVT II

MISUNDERSTANDINGS OF “HEROIC”

The rigorous historical assessments of religion in Medieval England are not often directed toward historicizing the development of the heroic genre. However, critics of literature have not refrained from their own historical analyses. Some have likewise concluded, erroneously as I see it, that history suggests what their critical method desires: that the heroic ethic is dependent on or entangled with pagan religion, and subsequently suffered in Christian England. This position has been eloquently promulgated by Craig Davis’ *Cultural Historicity and The Battle of Maldon*.⁸ Davis argues that the Germanic diction and meter, among other attributes, of *Maldon* recall (consciously or unconsciously) the pagan aspect of the ancient narrative traditions of pre-Christian England. But, “the *Maldon* poet scrupulously avoids mention of the traditional heroes.”⁹ Davis concludes that the poem “was composed after some subtle threshold in the evolution of traditional narrative culture, some fading of the force and interest such heroes had for King Alfred at the end of the ninth century.”¹⁰ He ends his article declaring “*The Battle of Maldon* demonstrates the final colonization of Germanic Tradition by Christian historicity.”¹¹ His essential claim appears twofold: that after the various early conversions of the Anglo-Saxons, there was residual sympathy with or even belief in the old paganism in England, and that England slowly had become more “Christian” in Ælfric’s day than it was in the days of Bede or Alfred. Furthermore, as this remnant of paganism died, the heroic genre died with it.

⁸ Craig R. Davis, “Cultural Historicity in *The Battle of Maldon*,” *Philological Quarterly* 78 (1999): 151-169.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 154.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 166.

I cannot find the border of his “subtle threshold” of heroic decline, if one is to be found. Davis rightly cites *Beowulf* as strong proof of early Anglo-Saxon interest in Germanic legend.¹² What I think is equally crucial about the example of *Beowulf* is that it was copied into its surviving manuscript at a late date, c. AD 1000. There is no proof that *Beowulf* was an immensely popular poem however, nor that the story of Beowulf was popular in AD 600, 700, or 800. Neither do we know this for AD 1000. But the poem and the story, and indeed much of the “heroic corpus,” evidently had enough interest to survive from the early Anglo-Saxon period, and to be recorded even in the early eleventh century.

That *The Battle of Maldon* does not mention legendary characters is very easily explained by the function of the poem. It is an occasional poem. The narrative has no need for external embellishment, and the precedent for poetry of this type had long been established in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*. The annal of Cynewulf and Cyneheard, from AD 755, is often noted in student handbooks for bearing the same heroic marks as *Maldon* and *Beowulf*.¹³ This annal was recorded in the age of King Alfred, or likely very shortly after. It also contains no reference to older heroes from legend, though the event transpired and was recorded before the approximate threshold guessed by Davis. Not every heroic poem required explicit or even implicit reference to Weland and Woden; and though Byrhtnoð’s sword was *brad and brunecg*, it is not less heroic for failing to claim heritage from the greatest smith. No matter Davis’ implications about pagan survival (which seem dubious), the heroic genre does not seem to follow a correlated pattern of decline at all.¹⁴

¹² Ibid., 153.

¹³ See, for example, Bruce Mitchell and Fred C. Robinson eds., *A Guide to Old English* (Oxford: Blackwell 2001), 208.

¹⁴ The more easily identifiable cause for the decline of the heroic genre in England is the Norman Conquest, which is unanimously acknowledged as the catalyst of many similar cultural upheavals. The decline of the genre in

It should be noted that the presence of extant heroic verse at all in many Germanic languages is good proof that it was a particular source of interest and admiration for the Christian scholars who were its primary recorders. That they even composed their own,¹⁵ and not infrequently, suggests that they enjoyed and sanctioned the art. Likewise, not all had such antiquarian interests. Nonetheless, many were evidently much more interested in proliferating heroic poetry than in crushing it. It does not seem that the tradition of heroic verse was a thing wholly evil to the Christian establishment. Had it been, I would expect the question to be asked more ubiquitously and perennially (and much less justly than by Alcuin) *quid est Hinieldus cum Christo?*¹⁶ This admonition is often cited as manifest evidence for official Christian intolerance of pre-Christian legend and heroic poetry. Such is not necessarily the case. Alcuin's just question is excellent evidence that the monks addressed were lax in their duties and preferred drinking and singing to the work of their vocation. But that Alcuin's contemporaries strove as a whole to censor heroic poetry is a supposition well invalidated by texts like *Beowulf* and Alfred's translation of *The Consolation of Philosophy*, which names Weland as a hero of old beside Brutus and Cato.¹⁷ In both cases a splendid picture is painted of the Germanic hero. In both cases, the picture is in a Christian frame, but the picture is not distorted by the frame. Nor need it be. If anything, it is magnified by the frame.

Northern Europe more broadly can be attributed to French cultural influence (note the arrival of *rímur* in Scandinavia at about the time their own heroic traditions enter decline).

¹⁵ Technically speaking, all of our extant texts (with a few small and minor exceptions) were recorded by Christians. Some texts are compilations of pagan material, like the Eddas, but some, like *Beowulf*, *Brunnanburh*, and *Maldon* were primarily Christian era inventions.

¹⁶ See Alcuin's "Epistola CXXIV," in R.D. Fulk, Robert E. Bjork, and John D. Niles, eds., *Klaeber's Beowulf* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008), 293.

¹⁷ See his *Metrum X* in Susan Irvine and Malcolm R. Godden, eds. *The Old English Boethius, With Verse Prologues and Epilogues Associated with King Alfred* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012), 114-115. It would be well to note that neither Brutus nor Cato was more Christian than Weland. In fact, Brutus is nearly as legendary and a-historical as Weland seems to be. But because Roman figures antedating Christianity were revered by Christians earlier than Germanic ones, it is often overlooked by early Germanic scholars that Brutus and Cato were written into a Christian text by Boethius just as Weland was by Alfred. They are in fact very similar in this respect.

If I am correct to believe that the Christian Church assimilated and augmented the Germanic hero, I would not be observing an unprecedented phenomenon. D.H. Green notes in *Language and History in the Early Germanic World* that, in its earliest years, the Christian Church assimilated many cultural traditions from its ruling *Imperium*: Rome. The episcopal structure was found fit for organizing the Catholic Church and has not since changed.¹⁸ The traditions inspired by Boethius alone are substantial evidence that Christians were interrogating and often adopting the philosophical traditions of the pre-Christian Empire.¹⁹ In traditions of art, Christian cultural baptisms abound. Many baptized traditions grew in symbolic power by virtue of their Christian adoption. To see this we might look to the precursor of the Christian halo: a symbol of political status employed in aristocratic portraiture.²⁰ Its Christianization made it an iconographic token of God's grace. Before any of these examples it should neither be forgotten that the Church came to Rome with Peter, but not under the title *Pontifex*. By AD 597 much of what had once been only Roman was indistinguishably Christian. As tokens of Christianity they came to England. There is no reason to believe that similar baptisms of older traditions were not occurring the moment St. Augustine set foot in Canterbury.²¹

¹⁸ D. H. Green, *Language and History in the Early Germanic World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 273.

¹⁹ Victor Watts, ed., *Boethius: The Consolation of Philosophy* (New York: Penguin, 1999), xi-xvii.

²⁰ Lawrence Nees, *Early Medieval Art* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 60.

²¹ The phenomenon is transparently demonstrated in material art from the early Anglo-Saxon period that is found in early churches and Christian burial sites. The Ruthwell Cross combines continental and insular styles and themes not only in visual art, but also in poetic art. It bears on it in runes an ancestral fragment of *The Dream of the Rood*, or at least a poem that inspired its composition. See Green, 6. Many early Christian literary texts also show evidence of borrowing from "Germanic" poetic conventions as well. In Bede's *Lives of the Abbots at Wearmouth and Jarrow*, the heroic chord is struck poignantly in Chapter 38, at the death of Ceolfrith. When his body is entombed in an alien land, his monastic brothers remain to guard it while others return to England to report his death. See Christopher Grocock and I. N. Wood, eds., *Abbots of Wearmouth and Jarrow* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 188-89.

CAPVT III

APPROACHING A DEFINITION

Before *Maldon* is addressed, the heroic ethic must be defined in its relevant contexts. Proposing a definition is difficult not only because scholarship has invented the term “heroic literature” itself, but also because students of the texts have built a scholarly “heroic corpus” around a phantom term. And now, despite the endemic use of the word “heroic,” it has fallen out of fashion to presume to offer a single summary of what it might actually mean, and what texts are appropriate to bear its title. Even if it is conceived only as a generic feature, rather than a genre unto itself, I am hesitant to propose a radical definition of the heroic ethic on my own. Fortunately, more apt critics have begun the task. In 1927, E.V. Gordon explained of heroic virtue in Old Icelandic:

The heroic problem of life lay primarily in the struggle for freedom of the will against the pains of the body, and the fear of death against fate itself. The hero was in truth a champion of the free will of man against fate, which has power only over material things. He knew that he could not save his body from destruction, but he could preserve an undefeated spirit, if his will were strong enough.²²

Of *Maldon*, Gordon makes a similar observation:

The Battle of Maldon does not suffer by comparison with other monuments of Germanic heroic literature, even with the noblest of the Norse sagas and Edda poems. There is none of them that shows a truer understanding of the spirit and the code that demanded resistance when all hope of success was gone and retreat would be wiser.²³

²² E.V. Gordon, *An Introduction to Old Norse* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), xxx.

²³ *Ibid*, 26.

From these assessments emerge several paradoxical realities of the heroic life. The hero, despite the “material things” controlled by fate (or *wyrd*), has a will that strives in opposition to contrary wills and the fate of the material world – that is, death. Against the first opponents he may succeed; against the latter, he necessarily fails. Because of this the hero’s body is quite expendable, subject always to a higher motive than the hope of self-preservation (the “wiser” choice). The spirit, or the will, rules over the body. As the man is crushed in resistance, his will is exalted. As his body fails, his spirit marches on. But whither does it go? The will must *will* something, as Robinson succinctly identifies: “no matter how bravely men die, they do not achieve heroic stature unless they sacrifice themselves for some purpose which readers can recognize as significant and worthy.”²⁴ This purpose is perhaps clearest in *Maldon*, though certainly prominent in every text meriting the heroic title. According to J.R.R. Tolkien, “the loyalty of the retinue is greatly enhanced. Their part was to endure and die, and not to question... in their situation heroism was superb.”²⁵

The virtue of Germanic loyalty as it is so commonly understood also appears famously in Tacitus’s *Germania*:

Cum ventum in aciem, turpe principi virtute vinci, turpe comitatus virtutem principis non adaequare. Iam vero infame in omnem vitam ac probrosum superstitem principi suo ex acie recessisse: illum defendere, tueri, sua quoque fortia facta gloriae eius adsignare praecipuum sacramentum est: principes pro victoria pugnant, comites pro principe.

(When come to war, it is a disgrace to be surpassed by the chief in strength, a shame for the strength of the *comitatus* to not equal the chief’s. Now truly it is shameful and a

²⁴ Robinson, “God, Death, and Loyalty,” 432.

²⁵ See J. R. R. Tolkien, “The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth, Beorhthelm’s Son,” in *Tree and Leaf*, ed. Christopher Tolkien (London: Harper Collins, 1988), 147.

disgrace for any living man surviving to have abandoned the chief in battle. It is the most sacred duty to defend and guard him, and to ascribe to his glory their own deeds of strength. The chiefs fight for victory: the retainers for the chief).²⁶

Of the many postulated ethics of ancient Germanic society, this spirit of loyalty and selfless servitude is best attested in extant written sources. It is well preserved in heroic poems written about Christians, but also in stories of much older provenance and broader scope: in texts as diverse as *Maldon* and *Beowulf*, as *Brunanburh* and *The Elder Edda*.²⁷

In this loyalty, either to an animate master or another “significant and worthy purpose,²⁸” the hero proves his temper. But his loyalty and will are only proved when tested, and in this test the hero demonstrates the culmination of his life of paradoxes. The hero is strong, but strongest only when he is weak. His indomitable will and spirit emerge most powerfully in evil circumstance, when fate and malice rule the day. When his body is humbled, the hero is proven by his spirit, which pays no heed to the greatest tortures. This is the Wiglaf’s virtue, who in a position of subordination and youthful weakness defied his betters and rushed to almost certain death on Beowulf’s behalf.²⁹ Wiglaf was much stronger than Beowulf’s most stalwart thanes and is supremely heroic because he shouldn’t have been. Thor’s death in the *Gylfaginning* is the very superlative of heroism not because Thor was a god, but because the god suffered and died like a man: “Þórr berr banaorð af Miðarðsormi; ok stígr þaðan braut níu fet. Þá fellr hann dauðr til jarðar fyrir eitri því er ormrinn blæss á hann” [he bears a death blow to the Midgard Serpent;

²⁶ J. G. C. Anderson, ed., *Cornelii Taciti Opera Minora* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1958), 8. Henceforward all translations, unless otherwise marked, are my own.

²⁷ This suggests the antiquity of the heroic ethic, as it is common across later Christian Germanic traditions.

²⁸ See note 26.

²⁹ Fulk, Bjork, Niles, *Klaeber’s Beowulf*, 90. Note that there is cause for controversy about Wiglaf’s motivation in his heroic endeavor: he could very well have not been acting genuinely. Whatever the scholarly conclusions of his reckless charge come to be, they do not negate the aesthetic or ritual of heroic action, which Wiglaf may or may not have used as a front for more self-serving motives.

and he staggers thence nine feet. Then he falls dead to the earth because of the poison blown at him by the Serpent].³⁰ He endured the greatest evil in the universe, whose death he achieved only because he was willing to embrace his own death. This titled him greatest among the heroes of the Æsir. The principle materializes even more vividly in *Maldon*, when Byrhtwold proclaims the best definition of the heroic temper we have, meriting Gordon's acclamations: "Hige sceal þe heardra, heorte þe cenre, mod sceal þe mare, þe ure mægen lytlað" (312-313) [The mind must be the harder, heart the keener, spirit the greater, as our strength lessens]³¹ Byrhtwold confirms beyond doubt that strong men are men who have first been made very weak.

This portrait of the hero has been securely ascribed to the "Germanic" province of Anglo-Saxon poetry. But the doctrine above (to apply a slight misnomer) is not uniquely the province of Germanic, nor pagan, culture. For as evident as this doctrine was in the Germanic world of Tacitus, it is even more evident, more fundamental, in the fabric of the Christian faith. The greatest example of the doctrine is, of course, Christ.

Cum in forma Dei esse/ non rapinam arbitratus est esse se aequalem Deo/ sed semet ipsum exinanivit formam servi accipiens in similitudinem hominum factus et habitu inventus ut homo/ humiliavit semet ipsum factus oboediens usque ad mortem mortem autem crucis [Though he was in the form of God, he did not judge equality with God something to be seized. Rather, he emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, coming in

³⁰ Anthony Faulkes, ed., *Snorri Sturluson: Edda, Prologue and Gylfaginning* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 1982), 50.

³¹ D.G. Scragg, ed., *The Battle of Maldon* (Manchester: Manchester University Press 1981), 67.

human likeness; and found human in appearance, he humbled himself, becoming obedient unto death, even death on a cross].³²

Only God was strong enough to choose and endure the death of humanity, even of the weakest of humanity, for the sake of all men:

...an ignoratis quia quicumque baptizati sumus in Christo Iesu in morte ipsius baptizati sumus/ consepulti enim sumus cum illo per baptismum in mortem ut quomodo surrexit Christus a mortuis per gloriam Patris ita et nos in novitate vitae ambulemus [are you not aware that just as we are baptized in Christ Jesus we are baptized into his death as well? Indeed we are buried with him through baptism into death that, as Christ rose from the dead by the glory of the Father, thus we might come into new life].³³

I can find no more satisfactory response to Southern's plea for a "personal and secret tie between man and God"³⁴ than Christ's sacrifice in perfect obedience to the Father, and perfect service to humanity. Not even Thor could condescend to do this. What more could the heroic poet desire when Christ came to England? For He came not to destroy the heroic ethic, but to fulfill it.³⁵

With this objection aside, it may be wondered whether formulations like the above heroic doctrine exist in the early Christian tradition. As evident as they are in the example of Christ, they are made even more explicit in Saint Paul. If the Germanic doctrine of strength in weakness was not called so in the pagan North, it was when Christian missions came bearing good news: "dixit mihi sufficit tibi gratia mea nam virtus in infirmitate perficitur libenter igitur gloriabor in infirmitatibus meis ut inhabitet in me virtus Christi" [he said to me "my grace is enough for you,

³² Philippians 2:6-8. Also, the unwillingness of Christ to ascribe his own glory to Himself, but rather to the Father, even when Christ and the Father are One, and are equal in power. Compare this to the example in Tacitus, whose *comites* must match the glory of their chief, even while commending to him all their glory.

³³ Romans 6: 3-4.

³⁴ See note 7.

³⁵ Recalling Mt 5:17-18.

for strength is perfected in weakness.” Gladly then I will glory in my weaknesses, that the strength of Christ may dwell in me].³⁶ The Christian monks, clerics, and educated men and women in Anglo-Saxon England who heard the tales of ancient heroes would have heard St. Paul’s theme like a brazen blast. For his words are made in the same temper as the Germanic hero. Wiglaf’s saving power is absolutely heroic, and absolutely Christian. Byrhtwold’s exhortation demands what would have been called pagan fury, were it not now Christian wrath.

But even before *Maldon*, we see this principle manifested in early Anglo-Saxon Christian historical traditions. Bede himself paraphrases St. Paul in *The Abbots of Wearmouth and Jarrow*, citing the suffering of the abbots Benedict and Sicgfrith as an occasion to prove their fortitude. They had suffered various illnesses of the body for some time before their deaths, yet continued their (now even more) devout lives of prayer even in their communal suffering: “tanta namque eos affecit inirmitas carnis, ut perficeretur in eis virtus Christi” [for thus such weakness of the flesh afflicted them, that the strength of Christ be perfected in them].³⁷ The abbots remained loyal to Christ in their suffering, and likewise their monks to them. In the monastic tradition, the heroic ethic takes the form familiar to Southern,³⁸ in which the men suffering are not warriors in the flesh, but spiritual warriors.³⁹ This metaphor of spiritual warfare begs for a marriage with the martial, communal suffering of the *comitatus* with the chief in *Germania*. The products of this marriage are texts like *Maldon*.

³⁶ Corinthians II 12: 9.

³⁷ Grocock and Wood, *Abbots*, 50.

³⁸ See note 3 above.

³⁹ See St. Paul’s Letter to the Ephesians, 6:10-17 for a very physical rendition of spiritual warfare, leaving a wealth of visual metaphors akin to the heroic tradition for the use of Anglo-Saxon commentators. Likewise, see Grocock, Wood, *Abbots*, 40, wherein this metaphor is reiterated in the story of Ceolfriht, who “relictis semel negotiis saecularibus, depositis armis, assumpta militia spirituali, tantum mansit humilis” (with business of the world left behind, arms abandoned, and having taken up spiritual service, remained quite humble).

In this marriage, however, I fear that some still see destruction. For Christ is a champion of not only faith in virtue and self-sacrificing love, but also of hope. Hope is generally dismissed as contrary to the hopelessness of the Ragnarok or *Maldon*, contrary to fate and *wyrd*. The hope of Christ indeed is nearly contrary to the death of Christ. But neither is the case. The hope of Christ is certainly not the hope for blissful life in the world – He and the early martyrs are proof enough of that. The hope of Christ is neither for inevitable salvation. No orthodox Christian could presume on his salvation, least of all at the moment of his death.⁴⁰ The hope of Christ is rather hope in an intelligible good, the intrinsic worth of virtue: “omne datum optimum et omne donum perfectum desursum est descendens a Patre luminum apud quem non est transmutatio nec vicissitudinis obumbratio” [every ideal thing given and every perfect gift comes down from the Father of Lights, with whom there is no transmutation, nor overshadowing of change.]⁴¹ His hope is the very possibility that any man can freely choose to cleave to the gifts of God. This hope is a perfect and imperishable hope, because a Christian can remain loyal to the virtues of Christ forever.

The heroic principle, as already stated, celebrates loyalty. Loyalty is of course very necessary in the Christian tradition, and superb loyalty demands in turn superb humility. The “slaves of righteousness” must be willing to be called so.⁴² In the heroic tradition, the most treasured thanes are the most loyal and the most humble. Even in their strength, they fight not for

⁴⁰ See Henry Betenson and G. R. Evans, eds., *St. Augustine: Concerning the City of God Against the Pagans*, Penguin, 2003), chapters 21-26.

⁴¹ James 1: 17.

⁴² Romans 6: 16, 20-22: “Nescitis quoniam cui exhibetis vos servos ad obediendum servi estis eius cui oboeditis sive peccati sive oboeditionis ad iustitiam...Cum enim servi essetis peccati liberi fuistis iustitiae/ quem ergo fructum habuistis tunc in quibus nunc erubescitis nam finis illorum mors est/ nunc vero liberati a peccato servi autem facti Deo habetis fructum vestrum in sanctificationem finem vero vitam aeternam” [Do you not know that when you exhibit yourselves to one for obedience, you become his slaves to whom you are obedient, either sin, or obedience to righteousness?...When therefore you were slaves of sin you were free from righteousness: what then was the benefit that you had of these things at which you now blush? For the end of these things is death. Now truly you are free from sin and have been made slaves of God: you have your fruit in the last sanctification, which truly is eternal life.]

themselves, but for the greatest glory of their lord. (“principes pro victoria pugnant, comites pro principe”). It is not by crude accident that *Genesis A* names the *Almihtig Drihten a þeoden* and His angels *þeodas*.⁴³ Obedience to Christ and God the Father is the first and only means by which a man can partake in enduring virtue. Thus he is saved and, paradoxically, becomes exalted as a hero in the superlative degree.

We know too little about Germanic paganism to understand what the ancient *Germani*, and later the Anglo-Saxons, believed about life after death. We do know very clearly that they believed in the virtue of loyalty to master and the will. And if that was the only cosmologically significant virtue, it was all the more like loyalty to God, the only Source and Redeemer of all virtue. For the Germanic hero, living on earth was a hopeless affair.⁴⁴ That fate and the afterlife were hopeless and “meaningless”⁴⁵ to the pagan *Germani* is quite plausible. But to insist that the heroic model of life was meaningless would be simply ridiculous. It was maybe the only thing for which there was hope in the days before Christ, who elevated it even unto the heights of eternal reward.

In the aftermath of these conclusions, it is apt to return to a term that arose at the beginning of this document: *baptism*. A baptism is not simply an assimilation. A pagan is not baptized by syncretizing his cosmology with the Christian religion.⁴⁶ He is rather purified from all the sins of his old religion, the stain of his original sin is lost, and he is given the chance of

⁴³ George Philip Krapp, ed., *The Junius Manuscript*, The Anglo-Saxon Poetic Records (New York: Columbia University Press, 1931), 3.

⁴⁴ This is not all too unlike to the doctrine of the Fall before Christ’s redemptive act.

⁴⁵ See note 7.

⁴⁶ See Leo Sherley-Price, R. E. Latham, and D. H. Farmer., trans., eds., *Bede: The Ecclesiastical History of the English People, with Bede’s Letter to Egbert and Cuthbert’s Letter on the Death of Bede* (Penguin 1990): 92. Though Pope Gregory, in his letters to St. Augustine of Canterbury, argues that pagan temples may be reconsecrated as Christian churches, he only allows this inasmuch that the temple-buildings are not themselves evil, though nonetheless a part of early English paganism. What are truly evil, like the demons of the English pagans, their statues, and their festivals, are to be eradicated, as in the letter on pg. 94.

salvation.⁴⁷ We see an analogically similar phenomenon in the preservation of the heroic tradition in Anglo-Saxon England. There is no need to speculate what exactly the heroic tradition lost when it became Christian – though we could start with some traditional heroes like Weland and Woden (contrary to the Norse Christian tradition). What the tradition did not lose is what, as far as our pre- and post-Christian evidence suggests, is central to it. The heroic ethic and its doctrines of strength in weakness, hope in despair of life, loyalty, and the reverence paid to these virtues are as much in Tacitus as in *Maldon*. What reconstructed evidence we have from the pagan Germanic world suggests the centrality of the heroic ethic. Thus it is not a product of the Christian tradition, though it was taken into the Christian tradition. Not because the Christian tradition lacked a similar model, but exactly because the Christian tradition already had it. Only, in the Christian tradition, these strengths became associated with not only human heroes but an all-powerful Godhead, to whom men could be fully united in weakness.

⁴⁷ As in Sherley-Price, Latham, and Farmer, *Bede*, 80, which details the remission of both pagan subscription to incestuous practice and the sin associated with it.

CAPVT IV

BYRHTNOÐ'S BLUNDER

The historical Battle of Maldon was fought in AD 991 by an English defensive force mustered in Essex and led by Byrhtnoð, son of Byrthelm, *ealdorman* of King Æthelred. The only extant literary depiction of the battle, so called *The Battle of Maldon*, directs the attention of the narrative to Byrhtnoð and to his *ofermod*, or his excessive pride. In the body of criticism surrounding *The Battle of Maldon*, the object of most scholarly attention is the term *ofermod*, which has been amply discussed. Second in proportion to studies of Byrhtnoð and his *ofermod* are analyses of the heroic tradition and its mature recognition in *The Battle of Maldon*. These analyses also either begin or end with a discussion of Byrhtnoð. The history of interest in the heroic features of this poem is as old as the poem itself (and indeed as old as heroic verse in the Germanic North). The impetus for the much more modern, 20th century interest in Byrhtnoð originated in the scholarship of J.R.R. Tolkien.⁴⁸ Shortly after Tolkien's efforts to redirect the attention of *Maldon* criticism, Byrhtnoð began to draw the eyes of most critics. Two interpretations of Byrhtnoð's character, particularly *ofermod*, quickly established and opposed themselves to the other. One began with Tolkien and insisted that Byrhtnoð is and should be condemned by the *Maldon* poet for his *ofermod*. The other interpretation was most strongly expressed fifteen years later by George Clark, whose primary thesis denied the fault that Tolkien

⁴⁸ Published in 1953 with two short essays, "Byrhtnoð's Death" and "Ofermod," *The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth, Beorhthelm's Son* (see note 25) examined lines 89-90 of *The Battle of Maldon* with heavy scrutiny. Like "Beowulf: The Monsters and The Critics" (though to a lesser extent), this drama and its attending essays incited a revolution in Anglo-Saxon criticism. Before Tolkien's publication, *The Battle of Maldon* was studied, like so many other Anglo-Saxon poems, only to extract a few distorted clues of what pagan England may have been. Tolkien's analysis of Byrhtnoð was a necessary rebuke to this attitude of antiquarians, but perhaps drew too much attention to Byrhtnoð, depriving the rest of the poem fragment of scholarly interest.

assigned to Byrhtnoð and cited from the testimony of the poet.⁴⁹ These synopses are, of course, generalized, and these critics do not disagree on all points. They both name Byrhtnoð as the hero of this poem. Neither doubts that he is “heroic,” though each ascribes a different valence to the word and implies much different critiques of Byrhtnoð through use of the word.

The work of Tolkien and Clark and their contemporaries began a new tradition of *Maldon* criticism that dealt primarily with the aforementioned topics. The two factions of criticism that initiated this movement have never been reconciled: modern critics continue to affiliate themselves explicitly or implicitly with one party or another.⁵⁰ This division is unnecessary and reinforces a major critical error in the analysis of *The Battle of Maldon*. Both modes of thought make an implicit assumption that our evaluation of Byrhtnoð and all his deeds must remain the same from the beginning of the poem to its end. This is not a valid assumption. Byrhtnoð’s *ofermod* can be as fallacious as his final prayer on the field of battle is righteous. Nor must the motive of Byrhtnoð’s decisions at the start of the battle be in accord with his final exhortations before his death. According to the narrative and linguistic evidence, it seems clear that Byrhtnoð made a tactical error at Maldon, which is condemned, regardless of his other virtues and faults.

The Battle of Maldon has been acclaimed for its realism.⁵¹ It cannot be more true to life to believe that, in the shifting tide of a battle turned to storm, an old earl might repent an error

⁴⁹ After Tolkien, Clark is likely the most cited in *Maldon* criticism, certainly in criticism discussing Byrhtnoð. He begins a 1968 article with his challenge to Tolkien: “*Maldon* criticism is not entirely monolithic - revisionists are stirring - but one may still speak of a ‘received interpretation’ whose general outlines are chiefly traceable to E.D. Laborde and J.R.R. Tolkien. Although this “received interpretation” harmonizes reasonably well internally, numbers of readers feel a disturbing tension between the scholastic analyses of the poem’s meaning and their intuitive response to the poem itself.” George Clark, “The Battle of Maldon: A Heroic Poem.” *Speculum* 43 (1968): 52. The validity of this “intuitive response” is debatable, but has nonetheless informed many opponents of Tolkien’s *Maldon* criticism.

⁵⁰ One of the most explicit in recent decades can be found in I.J. Kirby, “In Defense of Byrhtnoth” *Florilegium* 11 (1992): 53-60, which was written to commemorate the millennial anniversary of the battle at Maldon. In it, he states his affiliation with Clark and denounces the analysis of Tolkien.

⁵¹ Gordon, *Maldon*, 27, “...every detail is true and real...The poet’s art in presenting [the speeches in the poem] is admirable: they are varied and individual, but they recur always to the same theme.” This realism separates this

before he is capsized. Byrhtnoð does blunder at Maldon. And his fault is recognized. But he if he is condemned for his *ofermod*, then he is just as much praised by the *Maldon* poet for his otherwise beloved personality: his generosity, his loyalty, his comradery, and, finally, even his desperate attempt to free himself and his soldiers from the evil result of *ofermod*.

CAPVT V

OFERMOD

Still in the early years of this century, *ofermod* continues to dichotomize *Maldon* criticism. This has become so typical that some critics have accused the *Maldon* poet of intentional ambiguity:

...the word's ambiguity is no accident or aesthetic failure on the part of the poet; rather, like the poem as a whole, the word pushes the reader in contradictory directions, both toward heroic elegy and toward Christian admonishment. It is a sign of both praise and blame.⁵²

Though the poem itself may contain both praise and blame, the praise is not to be found in the word *ofermod*. The definition of *ofermod* is a matter of contention among philologists, but most agree that it can be approximated by “pride” or “overconfidence.”⁵³ In its only other uses in Anglo-Saxon poetry, it is associated with the pride of Satan.⁵⁴ This, of course, suggests that *ofermod* is no virtue. Clark himself has argued aptly that like Modern English “pride,” *ofermod* could easily have two valences: one that he calls “pride of the Yankees,” and the other that we would identify as *superbia* in Satan.⁵⁵ However, there is no evidence for the former sense in Anglo-Saxon verse. And in *The Battle of Maldon*, the immediate context of *ofermod* savors more of censorship than the praise of a patriot. The image of Byrhtnoð denying the viking messenger is clearly in the traditional heroic mode by critical standards: “Byrhtnoð maþelode, bord hafenode,/wand wacne æsc, wordum mælde,/yrre and anræd, ageaf him andsware” (42-44)

⁵² John Halbrooks, “Byrhtnoth’s Great-Hearted Mirth, or Praise and Blame in *The Battle of Maldon*” *Philological Quarterly* 83 (2003): 235.

⁵³ See Helmut Gneuss, “The Battle of Maldon 89: Byrhtnoð’s *Ofermod* Once Again” *Studies in Philology* 73 (1976): 130-31

⁵⁴ Clark, “Maldon,” 69.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

[Byrhtnoð spoke, board he shook,/waved his slender spear, words he said,/irous and one-minded, gave him answer].⁵⁶ Unlike this, we do not at all see Byrhtnoð intimately when he leaves land to the enemy host: “Ða se eorl ongan for his ofermode/alyfan landes to fela laþere ðeode” (89-90) [Then the earl began for over-big pride/to leave too much land to loathful folk].⁵⁷ Where now is the proud earl in his glory? If Byrhtnoð’s *ofermod* had been more commendable, the poet would have visually amplified it. Byrhtnoð is instead obscured by the poet, in the very moment that he allows *landes to fela*.

When the action returns to the Viking host and English *werod*, the battlefield becomes once again intimately visible. The next time we see Byrhtnoð in detail, he has just struck and slain a viking *ceorl*. His *ofermod* rises once again: “Se eorl waes þe bliþra,/hloh þa, modi man, sæde Metode þanc/ðæs dægweorces þe him Drihten forgeaf” (146b-148) [The earl was the gladder,/laughed then, lusty man, and said God thanks/for the load of the day the Lord had lightened].⁵⁸ This is certainly an exultant scene, but one that reveals Byrhtnoð’s fault not by words, as in lines 89-90, but with images. Immediately after the proud earl laughs, “forlet þa drenga sum daroð of handa,/fleogan of folman, þæt se to forð gewat/þurh þone æþelan Æþelredes þegen” (149-151) [heaved then a man of the host a spear from hand,/it flew from him so that it passed too far/through the noble thane of Æþelred].⁵⁹ Byrhtnoð’s *ofermod*, melodramatic celebration, cost him his life in single combat. Why does the *daroð* strike Byrhtnoð in this moment of great personal triumph? Whether it is a result of his error, divine justice, or poetic justice is unclear. But the juxtaposition of Byrhtnoð’s final proud exclamation and the flight of the spear cannot be accidental. What result, then, should we expect his *werod* to

⁵⁶ Scragg, *The Battle of Maldon*, 58.

⁵⁷ *Ibid*, 60.

⁵⁸ *Ibid*, 61.

⁵⁹ *Ibid*, 61-62.

endure for his *ofermod*? The *daroð* that will eventually deprive Byrhtnoð of his life deprives the English of their chance of victory when the earl falls. As it is presented by the poet, *ofermod* cannot be ignored as a source of folly in Byrhtnoð and a cause, if not *the* cause, of the English defeat on the Essex coast.

CAPVT VI

FAULT AND HEROIC REDEMPTION

The danger of *ofermod* is manifestly clear in *Maldon*. Tolkien so concludes, though much more concisely than I have above: “Beorhtnoth was wrong, and he died for his folly.”⁶⁰ The succeeding statement is more qualified: “But it was a noble error, or the error of a noble.”⁶¹ This latter use of the word “error” is more true to the poem. The quality of *ofermod*, like *übermut* in the High German traditions,⁶² does appear in texts esteemed “heroic,” though explicitly only seldom. But *ofermod* does not at all appear “heroic” in the eyes of this poem, nor even tragically heroic, though Byrhtnoð may have thought he was heroic in lines 89-90. What then is the phenomenon we are witnessing? Tolkien’s own analysis in *Ofermod* begins to direct us to our answer: Byrhtnoð was “moulded also by ‘aristocratic tradition,’ enshrined in tales and verse of poets, now lost save for echoes.”⁶³ Its distribution makes clear that “overbearing pride”⁶⁴ must be a reflex of some heroic ritual⁶⁵ coupled with the heroic ethic. But the poet’s condemnation of Byrhtnoð signals that *ofermod*, if it was ever proper for a hero, is no longer. Nor should it be. Pride is no less a sin against the heroic ethic than it is a sin in the sight of God. No man who over-estimates his strength can be perfected in weakness. Neither can Byrhtnoð, in his recklessness, keep good on his vow of loyalty to the king, Æthelred, his elder.⁶⁶ By forsaking his Christian baptism in pride, Byrhtnoð forsakes also the baptism of the heroic ethic.

Nonetheless, that Byrhtnoð is also praiseworthy seems undeniable. This is not a result of *ofermod* leading “the reader in contradictory directions.” Rather, we have proof that some prior

⁶⁰ Tolkien, “The Homecoming,” 25.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Clark, “Maldon,” 69.

⁶³ Tolkien, “The Homecoming,” 24.

⁶⁴ Gneuss, “Maldon,” 130.

⁶⁵ This ritual would of course be *flyting*.

⁶⁶ To whom he refers as *ealdor min*. Scragg, *Maldon*, 58

or future act or acts of his have at least made his error more easily forgiven, if not redeemable.

Byrhtnoð is not a worker of evil by habit and he endears himself to the poet's audience long before the Vikings make their appearance in the poem fragment. His sharp chastisement of the last noblemen to leave their hawks and horses leaves no doubt of Byrhtnoð's stern determination: "þa þæt Offan mæg ærest onfunde/þæt se eorl nolde yrhðo gepolian,/he let him þa of handan leofne fleogan" (5-7) [When the kin of Offa first found/that the earl would not suffer slackness,/he let his favored hawk flee].⁶⁷ He commands respect from the young thanes and commands ours as well. His love for his men is as strong as his will, and he "trims" his *werod* with affection, and even pity:

Da þær Byrhtnoð ongan beornas trymian
 rad and rædde, rincum tæhte
 hu hi sceoldon standan and þone stede healdan,
 and bæd þæt hyra randas rihte heoldon
 faeste mid folman, and ne forhtedon na. (17-21)

[Then there Byrhtnoth began to brace the men,/ rode and counseled, called to the men/
 how they should stand and hold the stead,/ and bade that they hold their boards aright/
 fast in their hands, and fear never.]⁶⁸

In body and mind, he prepares these men for a battle they may not survive. That we know its tragic ending only inspires our love for Byrhtnoð more.

Byrhtnoð's anxiety for the safety and honor of his soldiers emerges again when he is weakest, only seconds before his death:

...þa gyt þæt word gecwæð

⁶⁷ Ibid, 56.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

har hilderinc, hyssas bylde,

bæd gangan forð gode geferan;

ne mihte þa on fotum leng fæste gestandan. (168b-171)

[then that word he spoke/ hoar warrior, emboldened the men,/ bade them go forth, and goodly fare;/ he could no more stand fast upon his feet.]⁶⁹

Among his very final thoughts are the emboldening words that he cries out to the advancing Englishmen as his strength to stand fails. This generosity of spirit seems consonant with his liberality as a citizen. The testimony of the *Liber Eliensis* suggests that he was a major patron at Ely and was so remarkable that his fame extended past the Norman Conquest, when the *Liber* was written. According to E.V. Gordon, “few of the heroes of times older than the eleventh century were remembered in England after the conquest, as far as extant literature gives us evidence.”⁷⁰ Almost all the historical documentation of Byrhtnoð contributes to his praiseworthy fame, not infamy - *ofermod* seems to be the very notable exception. But we should not think that Byrhtnoð failed to eventually recognize his error very consciously, with sorrow and regret.

Byrhtnoð’s final words in his prayer on the beach-head of Maldon express this regret. His first address to the *milde Metod* is a prayer of thanksgiving, but from it a deep fear emerges. He beseeches for passage into Heaven and concludes: “ic eom frymði to þe/ þæt hi helsceaðan hynan [mine sawla] ne moton” (179b-180) [I have need of thee/ that the fiends of Hell may not harm [my soul].⁷¹ The vagueness of this great need has incurred some scholarly interest. According to Robinson, this is a remnant of pagan Germanic superstitions of Valkyries, who

⁶⁹ Ibid, 62.

⁷⁰ Gordon, *Maldon*, 27.

⁷¹ Scragg, *Maldon*, 62.

could steal the souls of men.⁷² Perhaps the *helsceaðan*, the fiends of Hell, are demons much nearer to Byrhtnoð than the long extinct shades of pagan England. Any Christian man who has transgressed and recognizes his transgression has a good reason to fear the fiends of Hell. This urgent plea for salvation, almost overwhelming fear of spiritual death, and care-filled exhortations to his failing army all indicate that Byrhtnoð knows and repents his mistake. This final prayer is not as simple as a plea for satisfaction of some blind salvific desire, but a complex moment of introspection; Byrhtnoð has concluded, like Tolkien, that allowing *landes to fela* was “too foolish to be heroic.”⁷³ Too foolish to be deemed righteous, either for the recording poet, or in the eyes of God Himself. Damnation and eternal punishment loom. Byrhtnoð recognizes this weakness at the moment his body itself is strained to its greatest limit. He is most heroic here because he is strong enough to proclaim his weakness to God and to all in hearing, ignoring death all around him. Byrhtnoð exchanges the folly of *ofermod* for a more perfect heroism, which redeems his strong deeds and now shameless death.

Byrhtnoð’s *ofermod* is clearly a failure of character in *The Battle of Maldon*. But it is not irreconcilable - and reconcile it Byrhtnoð does in his plea for forgiveness. I have read *Maldon* in this way because it allows for two critical opinions to converge, as easily as virtuous men can transgress and repent. The beauty of *Maldon* is in its faithful presentation of a supremely difficult

⁷² Robinson, “God, Death, and Loyalty” 82-83. Robinson argues that pagan stories of Valkyries choosing the souls of warriors manifested themselves in the stories of Christian souls struggling with demons: “Jacob Grimm cites numerous occurrences of the motif in later vernacular literature and suggests parallels between the Christian version of the death-struggle and pagan Germanic visions of the Valkyries descending to catch up the souls of the slain.” Such depictions in literature are unsurprising, but Robinson identifies the root of these depictions very deep in the culture of Christian England: “What is most striking about these various accounts of devils and angels struggling over the souls of the dying is the stark terror which they bring to the experience of death and their apparent negation of the usual Christian consolations for death.” While such superstitions could easily have existed, there is almost no cause to believe that this is the source of Byrhtnoð’s fear. Much more likely, especially for a pious and educated man who frequented and donated to a great English monastery, is simply the fear for a soul doomed to Hell by sin, where it would certainly be found by *helsceaðan*.

⁷³ Tolkien, “Homecoming,” 24.

human endeavor - contrition and a cry for absolution in the hope of forgiveness. That Byrhtnoð was capable of this proves his worth and heroism and merits his army's love for him, with all his faults, at the Battle of Maldon.

CAPVT VII

PERFECTED HEROES

If Byrhtnoð is the most prominent character of *The Battle of Maldon*, he is not necessarily the most worthy of emulation, despite his eventual redemption. For this honor we must look to his less dignified retinue. It is from among the lowest ranks of his doomed militia that weak men are perfected in battle, and become the heroes at Maldon.

It is the peculiar nature of the heroic ethic that great heroes need not be great noblemen, nor socially dignified whatsoever. Whether this was true in *Germania* is debatable. At any rate, the oft-cited quotation from Tacitus does not exclude the most socially inferior from this ethic. The significance of his martial image is not the noble rank of the retainers or the chief but their noble deeds (*fortia facta*). Perhaps there were no retainers of low social standing in pagan Germanic heroic traditions. Nonetheless, there is no reason to believe that the heroic ethic would have been inappropriate in lower social orders, had those orders opportunity to participate in similar martial settings.

But when a leader is honorable and strong, he does not need the humility of his retinue to find his glory. Christ is no stronger because of His martyrs, though His glory in the human realm may be magnified. The same is true of the virtuous chieftain in Tacitus's *Germania*, as the image of the Germanic chieftain may be magnified by the *comitatus*. Byrhtnoð is not of such an unassailable character, however, and despite the reparations for his misdeeds made at the moment of his death, the effect of his blunder cannot be annulled. When a strong prince falls in his pride, we must look to the least likely men of all for great heroes. Such men are provided to us by name in *Maldon*, and the exhortations of Leofsunu and Dunnere rise from obscurity to become the most heroic voices of resistance in the failing defense at Maldon.

In the catalogue of soldier's speeches and descriptions of their final deeds in battle, men are exhibited from a diverse group of social orders. The titles of the soldiers mentioned by name range from *geneat* to *ceorl*.⁷⁴ Their dialogue addresses their grave need for enduring loyalty and humble service to Byrhtnoð, even after his death. They all, with the exception of the sons of Odda, fulfill these demands. But the significance of each soldier's deeds at Maldon is not unaffected by his social class. Dunnere and his cry of encouragement carry more weight than the words of noblemen like Byrhtwold, exactly because Dunnere is a *ceorl*. He, unlike the *geneatas* and *þegnas*, holds little allegiance to Byrhtnoð because he was a *fyrð* man called in to fight from the country.⁷⁵ Men like Byrhtwold were from the *heorðwerod* and were army regulars, so to speak. They had lived and fought beside one another before and, at least as far as tradition suggests, cultivated friendships that would have been impossible between the high command and men from the *fyrð*. Men like Dunnere were summoned only in times of crisis and had likely never seen battle before Maldon.⁷⁶ Their lack of any true affiliation to Byrhtnoð demands a loyalty that is more impersonal, more seated in permanent virtue, than fraternal love. Their loyalty had to be above all a celebration of loyalty for its own good sake, not because strong kinship or personal love for Byrhtnoð. Michael Knightly remarks the cultural significance of this discrepancy in his recent paper:

This emphasis on [Dunnere's] class (and therefore the expectation of his marginalization), when combined with his apparently ready influence upon the noble

⁷⁴ For a description of these ranks, see Dorothy Whitelock, *The Beginnings of English Society* (New York: Penguin, 1954), chapter 5.

⁷⁵ Scragg, *Maldon*, 22.

⁷⁶ Scragg, *Maldon*, 20-21.

retainers, suggests that [their] web of interdependency extends well past Byrhtnoð's comitatus into the common *fyrð*.⁷⁷

The loyalty of the *fyrð* men suggests a more transcendent moral value among the soldiers than close fraternity or social duty. Robinson extends a similar observation about Leofsunu further: "Leofsunu is a less distinguished retainer, and ... [h]e shares neither kinship nor close friendship with Byrhtnoð."⁷⁸ The very least is expected of these common men. Though they are not socially separate from the fighting force at Maldon, there is no expectation of them to demonstrate martial skill or fraternal loyalty. This is evidenced enough through the laws of King Æthelred.⁷⁹ Among other things, these laws demand that *fyrð* must not desert, at least while their leadership is able to enforce order.

Nevertheless, Byrhtnoð's tactical blunder and death returns freedom to the *fyrð*. They could have fled had they so chosen. And if they wanted to live, they would not have fought: the battle could not be won. Leofsunu and Dunnere were the least responsible for the mistakes made in their high command but in their choice they reap the same reward for *ofermod* that Byrhtnoð does. Instead of saving their lives they elect for a more "significant and worthy" purpose: loyalty to Byrhtnoð and to their nation.⁸⁰ Accordingly, they perish. To re-iterate Tolkien: "By [the poet's criticism of *ofermod* in lines 89-90] the loyalty of the retinue is greatly enhanced. Their part was to endure and die, and not to question, though a recording poet may fairly comment that

⁷⁷ Michael R. Knightley, "Communal Interdependence in The Battle of Maldon," *Studia Neophilologica* 82 (2010): 63.

⁷⁸ Robinson, "God, Death, and Loyalty," 434.

⁷⁹ See A. J. Robertson, ed. and trans., *The Laws of the Kings of England from Edmund to Henry I* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1925), 86: "And gif hwa buton leafe of firde gewæande þe se cynincg silf on sy, plihte him silfum oððe wergilde... 7 se þe elles ham of fyrde gewende, beo se CXX scill' scyldig" (and if anyone without leave should flee the *fyrð* wherein the king is present, he risks his own life or wergild...and he who flees home from another *fyrð*, he shall owe 120 shillings).

⁸⁰ Robinson succinctly identifies that the valor of suffering servants must not be vainglory: "no matter how bravely men die, they do not achieve heroic stature unless they sacrifice themselves for some purpose which readers can recognize as significant and worthy" ("God Death and Loyalty," 432).

someone had blundered. In their situation heroism was superb.”⁸¹ The men of all ranks at Maldon (with the exception of Odda’s sons) did *not* question, though it was well within their ability and right to challenge their sense of duty to. What instead emerges is a radically strong choice: to respond to a duty, to which they are bound only by impersonal love, for which they must forfeit their lives.

The further the social rank descends from Byrhtnoð, the more purely does the loyalty of his soldiers derive from this impersonally grounded love, rather than social convention or hope for reward. Men like Leofsunu and Dunnere become the most praiseworthy – because they had no need to be. The superior heroism of these two in particular is suggested by the poet’s placement of their speeches in the poem and the change in the narrative that follows. The sequence of catalogued speeches drastically changes after the two juxtaposed declarations of Leofsunu and Dunnere. Before them, Ælfwine claims “*hearma maest*” (223),⁸² for he was a kinsman of Byrhtnoð. Afterward the poem recounts his attack and defeat of an advancing Dane. Offa reflects on Ælfwine’s dialogue immediately afterward in the sequence and proceeds to condemn Godric for fleeing the battle. Comparatively, Leofsunu and Dunnere deliver many fewer words, but their influence is much more potent. Their two short appearances importantly precede a long series of skirmishes on the battlefield, all won by Englishmen (260-308).⁸³ None of the men named speak again, until the end of the series when Byrhtwold delivers his famous lines.

⁸¹ See note 25.

⁸² Scragg, *Maldon*, 64.

⁸³ Scragg, *Maldon*, 65-67.

This drastic shift in narrative focus, from the provocative portrayals and quotations of Leofsunu and Dunnere to the commotion of the fight, suggests that they were the impetus of the Essex army's resurgence. The battle following Dunnere's speech proceeds accordingly:

þa hi forð eodon, feores hi ne rohton
 ongunnan þa hiredmenn heardlice feohtan
 grame garberend, and God bædon
 þæt hi moston gewrecan hyra winedrihten. (260-264)

(Then they went forward, not fearing for their lives; the retainers set about fighting fiercely, the grim spear-bearers, and asked God that they might avenge their dear lord).⁸⁴

Dunnere's choice comes to represent the choice of the whole. His heroic virtue is strong enough that, after he has vowed his own loyalty to Byrhtnoð, none acts to the contrary.

Nowhere, however, does the poem suggest that Leofsunu and Dunnere took on the role of in their social hierarchy. Byrhtnoð remains their lord and they his servants, though they are now leaders in the immediate battle. They succeed as such by inspiring the proud defenders of Maldon with their two brief speeches. Leofsunu leads his comrades by action, declaring: "Ic þæt gehate, þæt ic heonon nelle / fleon fotes trym, ac wille furðor gan / wrecan on gewinne minne winedrihten" (246-248) [I promise this: that from hence I will not flee the space of a single foot, but will go further, and avenge in the battle my beloved lord].⁸⁵ He has no authority of rank that Ælfwine and Offa have and can only lead by his own example. Thus he must, because of his lack of authority and the perfection it simulates, be perfected himself, before he can lead the rest. He humbly assures all who can hear:

Ne þurfon me embe Sturmere stedefæste hæleð

⁸⁴ Scragg, *Maldon*, 65.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

wordum ætwitan, nu min wine gecranc

þæt ic hlafordleas ham siðie...

...ac me sceal wæpen niman

ord and iren. (249-253)

(The steadfast men of Sturmer need not sting me with insults, now that my lord has fallen, saying that I would go home without my lord ... instead weapons shall take me, point and iron).⁸⁶

Even in this boast, Leofsunu proclaims a weakness of sorts: that he has kin to return to, and their judgements will weigh on him heavily upon his return. His promise not to take a single step backward sets a noble tone, but his fear of returning to Sturmer is just as important. He reminds the men around him that they would face the same shame that he would, and that Godric has faced, should anyone flee the battle. If the virtue of the heroic ethic was not enough to keep men in the fight, the fear of shame in its violation would be, most of all when others remained to fight.

Dunnere comparatively leads the soldiers by encouragement. He begins to articulate the heroic ethic, though much more clumsily than Byrhtwold: “Ne mæg na wandian se þe wrecaþ þenceð / frean on folce, ne for feore murnan” (258-259) [He must never slacken, who hopes to revenge his lord on this people, nor care for his life].⁸⁷ He ignores his safety, and opts for loyalty to Byrhtnoð. Byrhtwold expounds the heroic ethic flawlessly, but it is most perfectly exemplified only in Leofsunu and Dunnere. This is because they are the least likely men of all, who by all rights should have been the weakest defenders at Maldon. In not forsaking the heroic virtue that

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

should have incensed the hearts of the aristocratic sons of Odda, Leofsunu and Dunnere immediately grow stronger than they.

The Battle of Maldon is among the most potent instances of Anglo-Saxon literary heroism, and even then in a Christian context. Not because the cause of the heroes in the *fyrð* has any overt religious value, but rather because it is founded on the heroic ethic: strength in weakness. The ethic, of prehistoric extraction, became doctrine with St. Paul, was cherished by Bede and his monastic predecessors, and remained, as it ever was, in the martial setting – and in *Maldon* with Christian soldiers. The Christian men of the *fyrð*, Leofsunu and Dunnere especially, bring the heroic ethic to a perfection that is left only potential in Tacitus. They are weak because they are outnumbered; they are weak because their fight could not be won; but they are also weak because they are men of no pedigree. Leofsunu and Dunnere had no more duty to Byrhtnoð than to fight and to leave once he died and his army dissolved. But they fought instead like men of the *comitatus*, and humbled themselves even further for no other purpose but loyalty: deprived of social necessity and even fraternal love. It is for their radical perfection in radical weakness that the humblest men in *The Battle of Maldon* merit the poem its great heroic stature, by which much heroic poetry may be measured.

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