Semantics, Structural Linguistics, and Self-Sacrifice: Re-imagining “The Dream of the Rood”

Jeff Everhart

*Longwood University Farmville, Virginia*
Semantics, Structural Linguistics, and Self-Sacrifice: Re-imagining “The Dream of the Rood”

Keywords
Semantics, Structural Linguistics, The Dream of the Rood, Old English Poetry

This article is available in The Oswald Review: An International Journal of Undergraduate Research and Criticism in the Discipline of English: http://scholarcommons.sc.edu/tor/vol13/iss1/3
Semantics, Structural Linguistics, and Self-Sacrifice: 
Re-imagining “The Dream of the Rood”

Jeff Everhart
Longwood University
Farmville, Virginia

In Anglo-Saxon Britain, the clear boundary between Paganism and Christianity that exists today was far more obscure. The conflation of secular Anglo-Saxon beliefs and Christian ideals exemplified in the Old English poem “The Dream of the Rood” represents the growing liquidity of British cultural thought that occurred during the period of the poem’s genesis. While significant critical attention focuses on Christian ideology and its impact on Anglo-Saxon popular thought, little attention is paid to conversion tools and their function within the realms of Anglo-Saxon
secular society. In terms of Christian doctrine, the tale of Jesus’ crucifixion is characterized by selfless suffering and martyrdom. However, “The Dream of the Rood” transfigures Jesus’ execution into an act of heroism by combining aspects of Christian myth and the Anglo-Saxon warrior ethos, thus producing two distinct and contrasting results. Primarily, the goal of the Church and its logic behind ideological synthesis as exemplified in “The Dream of the Rood” was the eventual assimilation of the Anglo-Saxon pagan culture into Christianity. However, semantic and structural linguistic evidence suggests that the Anglo-Saxons similarly exploited the syncretism in “The Dream of the Rood” to further strengthen their political hold on Britain through the dramatization of the *comitatus*.

“The Dream of the Rood” achieves this tentative synthesis by portraying Jesus as a warrior with whom Anglo-Saxon culture could sympathize. In *Germania*, Tacitus describes the nature of the Germanic military ideology in terms that frame the various functions of lord and retainer in “The Dream of the Rood”:

> When the battlefield is reached it is reproach for a chief to be surpassed in prowess; a reproach for his retinue not to equal the prowess of its chief: but to have left the field and survived one’s chief, this means lifelong infamy and shame: to defend and protect him, to devote one’s own feats even to his glorification, this is the gist of their allegiance: the chief fights for victory, but the retainers for the chief. (153)
Tacitus’ statement describes the complexity of the relationships between lords and their retainers, a complexity that presents itself several times within the poem both in the paradoxical relationship between Jesus and the cross and the devoted relationship between Jesus and his followers. The strength and loyalty of the members of the *comitatus*, a Germanic military group or band of warriors led by a secular lord or chieftain, is absolute and beyond question for members of this Germanic heroic tradition. Thus, “The Dream of the Rood” frames the portrayal of Jesus Christ within this heroic tradition to make central figures of the Church more accessible to a culture based on strict military relationships. The work itself refers to Jesus as a *geong hæleð* or “young hero” (line 38), while further characterizing him as *strang ond stiðmod* or “strong and resolute” (line 39). The adjectives *strong* and *resolute* supplement Jesus’ depiction as a warrior-hero by commending his physical fortitude and his unchanging will in the face of death, both of which are cornerstones of the Anglo-Saxon warrior ethos. In *Anglo-Saxon Spirituality*, Robert Boenig notes that “Christ is no sacrificial victim in this poem; he is a hero with whom a Germanic warrior could readily identify” (42). Boenig’s commentary confirms the relative success of the Church’s goal of eventual assimilation through the representation of Jesus Christ as a figure that Anglo-Saxon culture could accept as a model of behavior while still retaining tenets of their warrior culture. However, while the reconfiguration of Jesus as a hero achieves a tentative synthesis of ideologies, the complex linguistic ambiguity of the Old English text
results in a dramatization of the *comitatus* that reflects pre-existing Anglo-Saxon political bonds.

While the plot structure of the dream vision attempts to preserve the Christian archetype, the “Rood” poet offers a recount of the crucifixion that characterizes Jesus’ motivations in a manner that contradicts Christian ideology. In effect, Jesus’ portrayal in “The Dream of the Rood” operates as a means of strengthening the bond between lord and retainer through the characterization of Jesus’ death. Self-sacrifice and martyrdom, traditional terms used to describe Jesus’ execution, are not terms applicable to Jesus’ death as portrayed in the “Rood.” The crucifixion within the dream vision is more aptly characterized as something required of Jesus by Anglo-Saxon culture and desired by Jesus himself so that he can fulfill certain Anglo-Saxon cultural dictums regarding bravery in battle. Barbara Yorke writes that the “Anglo-Saxons came to use the […] practices of the British church as an instrument for extending their political domination over British provinces” (136). The poem transfigures Jesus’ death and resurrection into a portrait avowing Anglo-Saxon *comitatus* relationships, therefore further solidifying the Anglo-Saxon political system through the exultation of death in combat. Specifically, the poem portrays the crucifixion as a *mician gewinne* or “mighty battle” (line 64) and the speaker notes that Jesus “hasten[ed] eagerly when he wanted to ascend onto the [cross]” (line 33). Jesus’ willingness to hasten to battle echoes the ideals of Anglo-Saxon warrior culture, yet the same eagerness contradicts many Christian ideals by promoting violent
and bloody conflict, effectively propelling the values of the Anglo-Saxon political system to a state of higher importance. The use of *eagerly* and *wanted* in line thirty-three implies that Jesus is pleased with and desires his own execution, which suggests that his motivations are selfish and therefore unaligned with traditional Christian doctrine.

The entirety of faith and Christian piety rests solely on the idea of willing sacrifice to absolve mankind of its sins. However, Jesus’ selfish motivations in “The Dream of the Rood” represent the willingness of man to sacrifice his life for veneration and honor from his culture. Adelheid L.J. Thieme notes that “the `Rood’ poet […] refers to moral principles prevalent in Anglo-Saxon culture” (109) to highlight the distinctions between the belief systems of pre-Christian societies. The characterization of Jesus’ motivation as self-serving contradicts Christian doctrine, ignoring the ideals of sacrifice and piety that Christianity is founded on, choosing instead a restructured archetype modeled after Anglo-Saxon warrior ideology. Effectively, “The Dream of the Rood” combines Christian tradition with Anglo-Saxon ideology to produce a depiction of Jesus Christ that conforms to a warrior ethos, thus strengthening Anglo-Saxon *comitatus* bonds while simultaneously making aspects of Christianity more appealing to members of this heroic tradition.

The Old English poetic language of “The Dream of the Rood” creates points of ambiguity in translation that often obscure a secular reading of the text. Upon the second coming of Jesus, the text states that “[Jesus] will ask before the multitudes where the man/ might be/ who for the lord’s
name would taste/ bitter death” (lines 111-114). Arguably, this statement represents Jesus’ judgment of the faithful, absolving those who value and practice the same piety and sacrifice as he did in life. Anthony R. Grasso concurs with this interpretation and claims that “[j]udgment will be made solely on the basis of the individual’s willingness to follow the Lord and to be an active witness to faith” (32). While this interpretation is valid, it focuses entirely on the text in a religious context, ignoring the complex social and political implications of the lines as well as the complex ambiguities and structural properties of the Old English language.

The term lord in Grasso’s interpretation is taken to signify Jesus as Christian archetype; however, the possibility exists that the term implied something different and far less Christian. Regarding the same passage, Robert Boenig states that “[Jesus] is also a ‘powerful king’ and ‘lord’ (= dryhten in Old English, originally the designation of a warlord in charge of a band of warriors)” (42). The portrayal of Jesus as ‘lord’ in a comitatus sense is far more in keeping with his portrayal as a warrior throughout the poem, as well as the characterization of his followers as hilderincas or “warriors” who rush “to build a tomb for him” (line 66). Yet, many scholars disagree with Boenig’s interpretation of the lexical item dryhten. For example, Andrew Galloway states that dryhten “appears over fifteen thousand times in extant Old English writings and refers only twenty-eight times to secular lords; fifteen of these rare occurrences—over half—are in Beowulf” (202-3). Initially, it appears that the sheer repetition of the lexeme dryhten in religious contexts would
render the interpretation of Boenig implausible. However, Galloway does not fully apply the semantic and lexical properties of Old English to their full and logical conclusions and furthermore ignores the various contexts in which the written usages of *dryhten* are recorded.

Old English nouns are not dissociative lexemes as they appear in Modern English. Rather, they are lexical items with deeply rooted structural relationships to other nouns within the same word families. Dieter Kastovsky notes in “Semantics and Vocabulary,” a section of *The Cambridge History of the English Language: Vol. I*, that “the vocabulary of a language is as much a reflection of deep-seated cultural, intellectual and emotional interests […] as [are] the texts that have been produced by its members” (291). Thus, it is imperative to consider the structural relationship of *dryhten* as it relates to other nouns in its word family before dismissing the possibility that the lexical item may have had other, more culturally relevant semantic properties to the Anglo-Saxon speech communities that used this term regularly. When the Old English lexicon is examined, it becomes immediately clear that the structural relationships between *dryhten* and related nouns primarily exemplify relations of military or political importance. Based on the root lexeme *dryht*, meaning “multitude, army, company, body of retainers, nation, people” (Hall 89), *dryhten* and the large majority of other related nouns follow the general pattern of signifying relationships of special importance to the *comitatus* ideology that dominated Anglo-Saxon society before conversion. When examined synchronically, it is
easy to dismiss the term *lord* as an approximation of Jesus’ title, given the relative Judeo-Christian hegemony that exists in Western culture at present. However, when the work is examined diachronically, these structural ambiguities and blatant ideological contradictions become apparent. In many ways, as the “Rood” poet re-imagines the mode of Jesus’ sacrifice, the literal language of Old English betrays the military and political functions of Jesus in the poem and thus a probable interpretation of an audience of Anglo-Saxon laypersons.

It is improbable to suggest that the semantic shift of the term *dryhten* from a military, secular meaning to a religious meaning happened immediately or even completely. Kastovkesy admits the tenuous reception of *dryhten* in Old English linguistic research. The lexeme is neither an “analogical semantic borrowing” nor a “substitutive semantic borrowing” completely; instead, the lexeme resembles more closely a mixture of the two, a phenomenon that lends to its ambiguity (310). However, the dating of the “Rood” text itself in the Vercelli Manuscript (ca.1000 A.D.) and the fragments of the poem discovered on the Ruthwell Cross, which date to roughly the late seventh or early eighth century, provide at least some basis to substantiate a claim that the lexeme *dryhten* would have retained its native *comitatus* functions despite the growing conversion of the British isles. The interpretation of Jesus as secular chieftain has several distinct implications. Primarily, Jesus’ judgment and veneration of those willing to die becomes a measure of a man’s fortitude in battle and the
willingness to die for a military leader, thus producing honor for the deceased and the culture through death. However, the distinct Anglo-Saxon cultural dictum of sacrifice in battle effectively disavows the Christian tenets of piety and devotion by venerating those willing to die gloriously in battle in the name of a chieftain and not those who suffer and repent for their sins and the sins of others. Importantly, the rhetorical implications of Jesus’ characterization as warrior instead of martyr result in a degradation of the Christian archetype, while the synthesis of cultural ideologies and myth produces a depiction that further codifies the Anglo-Saxon political system through the dramatization of the *comitatus*.

The focus of “The Dream of the Rood” ignores the aspect of Christ’s suffering for and as man, instead focusing on Jesus as a god who is able to cheat death through his valor in battle. Robert B. Burlin notes that “nothing was more glorious to emergent Christianity than the union of man and God” (40). This “union,” however, is not a symbolic reunion in heaven in “The Dream of the Rood” but the promotion of a man to god-like status through consistent veneration for sacrifice in battle. Mitchell and Robinson suggest that this type of immortality is inherently tied into the *comitatus* ideology outlined by Tacitus in *Germania* and exemplified by Jesus’ heroic portrayal in “The Dream of the Rood”: “a different kind of immortality […] is stressed in [Anglo-Saxon] literature. This was *lof*, which was won by bravery in battle and consisted of glory among men, the praise of those still living” (135). This *lof*, this idea of earthly immortality,
stands in stark contrast to the Christian notions of an ethereal afterlife. Valiant death becomes the point of transformation in which Christ is able to gain honor and god-like status just as other sections of the poem suggest that man is able to gain this status through valiant service and death in the name of his lord:

Lo, the King of glory, guardian of heaven’s kingdom
honored me over all the trees of the forest,
just as he has also, almighty God,
honored his mother, Mary herself. (lines 89-92)

However, this path to eternal life contradicts typical Christian doctrine by suggesting that through veneration one may achieve a god-like status and live forever in the esteem of those still living, instead of focusing on the tribulations that Christ experienced suffering for and at the hands of man. Indeed, the poem’s ignorance of Christ as man implies also an ignorance of his teachings and actions while alive, especially the ideological tenets resulting from the narrative of his suffering and crucifixion. Therefore, the characterization of Christ as exultant warrior in “The Dream of the Rood” usurps his position as the Christian model for behavior. In *The Web of Words*, Bernard F. Huppe notes that the poem’s emphasis “is entirely on Christ as God triumphant, not on Christ as suffering man” (75). Importantly, the speaker of the poem discusses being transported to the afterlife and feeling “joy in heaven” where he can “dwell in glory” (lines 139, 142). The idea of a pleasing afterlife is similar in both cultures; however, the
continual Anglo-Saxon stress on veneration becomes present in the phrase “dwell in glory,” which again suggests the idea of *lof* and its connections to *comitatus* bonds. Christ’s portrayal as celebrated warrior effectively disavows the validity of the Christian archetype while simultaneously promoting and strengthening the bonds of the lord-retainer relationship through the suggestion of venerated immortality as a result of sacrifice in battle. However, despite the deep structural connection between Jesus’ function in the “Rood” and the military ideology of the Anglo-Saxons, the Church was not unaware of the ideological drawbacks with these types of conversion tools. Rather, this type of ideological syncretism, despite the often conflicting messages, became an accepted tool of religious officials actively engaged in the practices of conversion.

Conversion of the Anglo-Saxon people remained the primary goal of the Church in medieval England for much of the period leading up to the poem’s appearance in the Vercelli MS. In an excerpt from Bede’s *History of the English Church and People*, Pope Gregory’s statement to Saint Augustine communicates the degree to which religious officials were aware of the need for tools that combined these two competing ideologies: “[S]elect from each of the churches whatever things are devout, religious, and right; and when you have bound them […] let the minds of the English grow accustomed to them” (73). The content of Pope Gregory’s correspondence with Augustine highlights the Church’s official policy of syncretism in Britain, stating that ideological amalgamation, time, and exposure are
the means through which conversion will be successfully accomplished. Effectively, “The Dream of the Rood” is the product of the papacy’s decree. The poem binds together threads from Anglo-Saxon warrior culture with those of Christian doctrine to produce what is effectively a fabric of Church rhetoric, meant to create a cultural environment in which, over time, Anglo-Saxons could readily accept and participate in traditional Christian behavior.

Effectively, “The Dream of the Rood” represents a synthesis of Christian mythology and the virtues of Anglo-Saxon warrior culture. While much care is taken in the combination of Christian and Anglo-Saxon mythological elements, the characterization of Jesus Christ ignores ideals central to Christian belief and replaces them with virtues of Anglo-Saxon culture in an attempt to further solidify cornerstones of the Anglo-Saxon political system. Similarly, linguistic evidence contained in the poem suggests the existence of two competing interpretations that hinge on the semantic properties of the lexeme dryhten. Given the ambiguous and convoluted nature of the linguistic evidence in the poem, it is difficult to disregard either interpretation entirely. However, it is necessary to admit that the religious climate of England during the period in which this poem appeared on the Ruthwell Cross and in the Vercelli MS. was nowhere near as clearly demarcated as the religious climate at present. Therefore, it is necessary to separate with some degree of discretion the interaction between competing ideologies in “The Dream of the Rood” and the beliefs and religious structures of a Judeo-Christian hegemony.
Works Cited

Bede. *A History of the English Church and People.*
