

The Battle of Maldon, The Passion of St. Edmund and Guthlac are examples of Christian Anglo-Saxon narratives which demonstrate the transformation of historical events and identifiable past figures through literary craft and social forces into legendary tales. They all share the motifs of warfare and Maldon and Edmund use similar historical events. By being at different stages of the journey from history to legend they illuminate somewhat the mechanism involved in the transformation. In this process there is a controlling mythic ethos of geography, nation and God which belonged to the Anglo-Saxons. It was a particular amalgam of a fatalistic Germanic heroic virtue best expressed in physical warfare and a Christian martyrology with an emphasis on spiritual battle, which informed the dramatic depiction of the Angles versus the Danes and the saints against the demons. This alloy is revealed in the narrative structure of the stories, the particular situation the Anglo-Saxon's faced at the time of writing and the way they sought meaning in the repeated waves of destruction and plunder.

Narrative structure seems rather an odd thing to look for in Guthlac A as even for a saint's tale there is a paucity of action in the usual sense of the word. The "action" occurs in the realm of ghostly business and seeks to glorify the solitary life of the saint. The poem is framed by generalisations about saints and the action contained within has none of the terrors of torture and martyrdom often found in such tales but depends on episodes of struggle between Guthlac and the angels and the horde of demons. These unworldly events are however described in terms of the sequence of combat and its topography.

Although the work is about a Christian saint who is concerned with things of the spirit, it is expressed in terms of battle in keeping with the heroic ethos of the Anglo-Saxon people to whom he is an example. His progress is couched in the commonplaces of battle: the description of the terrain, the preparations for bloodshed, parley with the enemy and combat proper.

The site of his hermitage, and consequently of the abbey of Crowland (Attwater 169), has become hallowed ground, a landscape where miracles happen:

He started inhabiting, alone, a hilly dwelling place...

This rural locality had been hidden from people until the ordaining Lord revealed the hill within a wood... (Bradley 252, 253)

But this very hill becomes described as a fortification which is defended by Guthlac. There is a definite geography not only identifying the spot with the abbey of Guthlac's cheerleaders, but with

a land claimed for God from the devils. He talks of being among a “wide...wilderness and the multitude of fugitive settlements and the secret dwellings of wretched spirits.” (Bradley 257) But he has claimed this as his Father’s territory and will defend it against the assaults of the demon hordes.

Guthlac prepares for battle as a religious warrior:

There he came to be an example to many in Britain when he climbed the hill, a blessed warrior, tough in resistance. Zealously he equipped himself with spiritual weapons and vestments; he sanctified the place and as his rallying-point he first raised up the Cross of Christ. (Bradley 254)

The Cross raised in battle alludes to Constantine’s legendary success using the Cross as a banner. The spiritual weapons recall Paul’s encouragement of the Ephesians:

So stand your ground, with truth buckled round your waist and integrity for a breastplate, wearing for shoes on your feet the eagerness to spread the gospel of peace and always carrying the shield of faith so that you can use it to put out the burning arrows of the evil one. (Eph. 6.14-7)

Guthlac’s preparation for battle is to live in service of God. He grows strong in the arts of the warfare that he needs. No parallel to boasting in the mead hall is available to God’s warriors other than purchasing “heavenly glory” (Bradley 252) by their good works.

They give alms; they comfort the poor; they are generous of heart with their lawful possessions; with gifts they show love towards those who own less; daily they serve the Lord and he observes their deeds. (Bradley 252)

Guthlac is taunted by the devil’s spokesman who offers friendship in exchange for abandoning the stronghold and threatens annihilation if he defies the horde in appropriately bloody words:

We shall seek you out...with a bigger force, in such a way that it will not be necessary to lay hands upon you for your corpse to fall from the wounds of weapons...Then they will knock you down and tread on you and harass you and wreak their anger upon you and scatter the bloody remnants. (Bradley 256-7)

This parley with the enemy offers terms which are rejected by the hero in long winded speeches which devolve to dependence on God's will: "My hope is with God; I care nothing at all for earthly well being." (Bradley 257) The battles proper are rather unfair on the demons who have to contend with Guthlac's dullness as well as angels who protect him.

Apart from the obvious local propaganda values within this tract, the idea that God claims a spiritual wilderness has resonance with the Christianisation of England. Further, the need to defend this tenancy suggests the battle with recrudescing paganism. Ironically, this would indicate the use of Germanic heroic thought against essentially Germanic paganism. Such defense of England as Christian would also be integral to the response of the Angles to Viking raids.

The narrative structure of Edmund reveals that the heroic Anglo-Saxon warrior had been truly intoxicated by the Christian air he had to breathe. The framework is again provided by battle, even though Edmund remains passive and Christlike. There is nothing to suggest that King Edmund actually fought the Danes in anything other than the usual manner with swords and spears (Attwater 111). As his developing sainthood made the story of his conventional battle and defeat by the Danes untellable, the fight goes on as heroic spiritual warfare. As with Guthlac A this indicates that even as Christianity distances its saints from actual violence there remains an absolute necessity to respect the heroic outlook in Anglo-Saxon thought. If two figures portrayed as unwarlike as Edmund and Guthlac need to be seen as warriors then it may well have been literally unthinkable to the Anglo-Saxon mind for this not to occur.

Edmund's holy fight requires preparation akin to that of Guthlac's. Guthlac prepares to fight demons just as Edmund gets ready to face the forces of the Vikings who are explicitly linked with the devil (Crossley-Holland 228). The imitation of Christ is the way for a holy warrior to ready himself and Edmund is portrayed as a King who was in essence Christ-like. Just as Guthlac's virtues are praised, Edmund's deeds are his credentials for combat in the realm of the spiritual.

To the poor and to widows he was charitable like a father, and with benevolence always guided his people to righteousness, and restrained the fierce, and lived blessedly in the true faith. (Crossley-Holland 228)

The conflict opens with a message from the Vikings to submit and pay them off. This is not unlike the terms offered to Guthlac and again, although Guthlac and Edmund are not physically violent, like any proud heroic warrior they reject the easy way out in the face of superior opposition. Compromise is rejected and the fight commences, not as the physical warfare that undoubtedly took place, but as Christian surety versus futile paganism. Death is portrayed as a blessing for King Edmund.

In spite of a framework based on the pagan field of battle in Edmund, the major decision upon which the action rests is Christian, that is the decision by King Edmund to let God decide the issue. Saint Edmund's tale turns on this decision to allow God to decide his fate. The problem then become how to see God's plan in the defeat consequent on this decision. Divorced from any actual battle, his decision not to submit is just one of the countless inventive ways saints seek their martyrdom.

Truly, you were now worthy of death, but I do not wish to defile my clean hands in your impure blood, because I follow Christ who so gave us example; and I will happily be slain by you if God so decrees it. (Crossley-Holland 229)

Having heroically dispensed with Edmund's head the tale dribbles into a collection of vignettes involving the saint's corpse with overt propaganda intent. The wolf protecting the head is interesting as in the aftermath of battle the wolves would have joined the other feeders on carrion as partakers in the field of battle. The wolf's fear of

tasting the fallen warrior interferes with the dynamics of warfare as much as Edmund's decision to sacrifice himself without a fight.

The task of finding an explanation for God's tendency to allow the Angles to be slaughtered by the Danes falls to the glorification of the actions of the soon to be fallen hero. In Edmund there is the loyalty of a King dying for his people which is analogous to Christ's sacrificial death. It is somewhat the converse of the tradition Germanic code of loyalty to the leader of the tribe. The loyalty of Edmund to his people is repaid by their veneration as they recover the head and tend the saint's remains. His spiritual victory makes the actual defeat meaningless. The meaning of sacrifice of life in Christian thought can be one of redemption of God's people, here identified as the Angles.

Edmund's defeat was in the first wave of Viking terror but is written during the second wave in which the shame of giving up danegeld to the invaders is once again topical. There is an urgency about the claim of sovereignty in Edmund. King Edmund wishes his people could enjoy "their native land" (229) and "would rather die...for my own land," (229) than flee. That it is shameful to cede sovereignty, tribute and land to the invader suggests an alternative defensive position of great power. The land is eternally and unchangeably the property of the Angles by God's wish and so death for God is intertwined with death for country. Such death is but an early taste of God's bliss and there is confidence that God will frustrate

the pagans in the end. This powerful apocalyptic response to oppression did not fit the unfolding history but easily influences the less utilitarian world of legend. The compromise known to have been the usual response to the Danish threat is anti-heroic, quite pragmatic and most certainly not the stuff of legend.

In Maldon there is structure based on combat because there really is a battle to describe this time. There is no doubt a battle occurred of some sort at Maldon in 991 and the concrete details of the combatants have been seen as suggesting an early date of composition of the poem (Locherbie-Cameron 165).

In Maldon the preparation phase is not leading a holy life, but practical considerations like Offa's son sending his falcon to safety and the warriors driving off their horses. Byrhtnoth has organised battle with no allowance for the possibility of retreat. Again there is parley with the pagan enemy who offers comfort for compromise. The battle and speeches which follow are clearly within the province of heroic literature and yet even in Maldon in which we have an account of actual fighting even Beowulf would have been proud of, the axle upon which the action turns is Byrhtnoth's decision to let God decide the issue.

While not as inherently suicidal as Edmund's behaviour the imprudent decision of Byrhtnoth to let the Danes across the causeway annoys every amateur strategist who reads the poem. Even the poet calls it "foolhardy" (Crossley-Holland 13). The decision responsible for all the deaths is given a clear Christian context.

'Now the way is clear for you. Come over to us quickly,
warriors to the slaughter. God alone can say
who will control the field of battle.' (Crossley-Holland 13)

As much as blame is placed upon those who ran away, the good Christian Earl has placed his faith in a God who for now seems

to prefer the pagans in trial by ordeal played out as battle. The followers of Byrhtnoth submit to this expression of the will of God, by attempting to follow his soul's journey to meet God, in other words like good Christian martyrs. The call to a Germanic heroic ethic of fealty to one's lord is redeemed from its fatalistic origins by Christian notions of sacrifice.

In Maldon the fall of Byrhtnoth is followed by a speech by one of his thanes which explains their motivation. Aelfwine invokes the mead hall, his ancestry and his fear of shame if he deserts his fallen lord:

‘Think of the times we boasted
at the mead-bench, heroes in the hall
predicting our own bravery in battle.
Now we shall see who meant what he said.
I will make known my ancestry to one and all:
I come from a mighty family of Mercian stock...

No thanes shall ever reproach me amongst the people
with any desire to desert this troop
and hurry home, now that my prince has been hewn down
in battle. (Crossley-Holland 16-7)

This evokes the kin and comitatus loyalties noted in Germanic tribes by Tacitus and still of influence in Anglo-Saxon thought (Ford 102). The impulse has been Christianised to the extent that the men “prayed to God that they should be allowed to avenge their lord by killing all his enemies.” (Crossley-Holland 18) Further the thought of fleeing would have been a denial of their faith. The certainty that Byrhtnoth has that his soul will dodge the devils and reach peace, and the suggestion that his thanes' deaths will likewise lead to heavenly

reward leave the same uncomfortable feeling as remission of sins for crusading and suicide bombing in later eras. The usefulness to the king of such thought is evident when the policy reverts from appeasement to massacre as in 1002 when Ethelred orders the death of all Danes in England (Keynes 93).

Byrhtnoth's only immediate reward is the loyalty of his fellow warriors who die with him. As with the death of King Edmund there is nothing pragmatic about such behaviour. It is "never sensible, worldly, or rational" (Frank "The Ideal of Men Dying with Their Lord" 105), but heroic enough to satisfy Germanic thought and sacrificial enough for Christian tastes. It becomes the stuff of legend acceptable to both of those influences in English thought. The heroes die gloriously not just for their lord but for Christian England. The declaration by Byrhtnoth that he is defending the home of his people and King Ethelred (Crossley-Hall 12) involves his loyalty to his King and nation.

The geography of the battle may indicate a complex analogy to the country's predicament with the Vikings. Byrhtnoth is worthy of praise as an Earl who tries to fight them on the beaches before they can ransack the country. At another level his decision to allow the Danes to cross the causeway of representative a more general laxity which allowed the Vikings to land, live and claim parts of England.

As with Edmund the socio-historical context of Maldon is the requirement of the English people to pay huge taxes to the Danes to

avoid destruction. The policy of appeasement caused hardship to all walks of life (Ford 118) and in the long run did not prevent the Danes taking control of the country. It is the warriors who will be the agents of God and England against the heathen hordes, oddly contrasted with the clerics who seem bent on compromise.

A.D. 714. This year died Guthlac the holy, and King Pepin.

A.D. 870. This year the army rode over Mercia into East-Anglia, and there fixed their winter-quarters at Thetford. And in the winter King Edmund fought with them; but the Danes gained the victory, and slew the king; whereupon they overran all that land, and destroyed all the monasteries to which they came. The names of the leaders who slew the king were Hingwar and Hubba.

A.D. 991. This year was Ipswich plundered; and very soon afterwards was Alderman Britnoth slain at Maldon. In this same year it was resolved that tribute should be given, for the first time, to the Danes, for the great terror they occasioned by the sea-coast. That was first 10,000 pounds. The first who advised this measure was Archbishop Siric. (The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, Berkeley Digital Sunsite)

The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle gives the bare bones of what happened in these incidents over two hundred years. Truly from such events legends grow in the retelling. Guthlac requires the greatest work because a warrior legend has to be drawn from the meager pickings of a hermit's life. The actual battles memorialised in Maldon and Edmund give an factual starting point to observe the growth of the legends.

Since the actual writing of Edmund and Maldon is likely to have been early eleventh century the extra hundred years of tradition have allowed the meaning of Edmund's death to be fully incorporated into an appropriately saintly paradigm. The events of the battle at Maldon had less time to be transformed before coalescing in the text of Maldon, but other sources show the same process in which Edmund goes from defeated King to glorious martyr also occurring to Byrhtnoth. Had the success against the Angles of Canute and William been delayed a century, Byrhtnoth may possibly have made saint

judging by the legendary material which appears in later writings on his life and the battle at Maldon. In the Life of St. Oswald there are details added which increase the spiritual side of his endeavours. Here Byrhtnoth's feats are miraculous because he is old and weak and only God sustains him through the battle as far as he gets because of his worthiness, almsgiving and masses. The defeat is made into an implausible victory as the Danes' losses are depicted as so severe that they were rendered ineffective as a fighting force (Lapidge 54-5). The problem of Viking incursions is given meaning as a judgment upon the Anglo-Saxons, after the manner of the Jews being conquered, a thought which presupposes a status as God's elect. The account from the monastery at Ely adds further material which links Byrhtnoth to their establishment to the detriment of their competitors. (Kennedy 67) He is made a protector of the monasteries and his inheritance is reported as going to the Church. He loses his head in the battle in a report perhaps influenced by Edmund. (Blake 343) Just as the veneration of Saint Edmund and Guthlac would have been of local importance, Byrhtnoth gets his reputation polished by those who benefit from his legacy.

Edmund made that next big step from hero to national saint. It is important to the writer of Edmund that Dunstan lets a foreigner know that English saints are up there with the best in the world (Crossley-Holland 233). The account we have in Edmund of the sacrificial Christ-like King is a perfectly good national saint because he

does not fight in the physical world. Guthlac is even further removed from real battle but he provides local competition for foreign hermits with their saint's legends.

All these tales are Christian legends which rely on heroic battle motifs for their substance. The legends work within these heroic myth of the Anglo-Saxons more or less swamped by the Christian myth. Maldon is the closest to the event and least tainted by saintly gloss but the trend in its later parallel texts suggests the physical prowess of Byrhtnoth is already sliding into spiritual virtue. In Edmund a putative heroic Anglo-Saxon poem about King Edmund's bravery in defeat by the Vikings is completely lost in the passive portrayal of the saint's tale. Guthlac A offers no battle at all yet happily steals the garb of the warrior to cover its threadbare tale. It is as if by some law of entropy all these heroic stories tend to that lowest form of literature, the saint's tale.

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