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Wyrd bið ful aræd: The Morality of Fate and Predestination in Old English Poetry

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Abstract

The verse *"Wyrd bið ful arœd"* (The Wanderer, line 5b), translated by Robert E. Bjork as "fate is fully fixed", suggests the vital role of predestination within Old English poetry. The concept of fate, called "wyrd" in old English, held an important place in the Anglo-Saxon belief system. This belief included the idea of Christian predestination, as is apparent from the many literary sources referring to God's will as being set and unchangeable. Some of the most famous literary works, such as Beowulf or the Battle of Maldon, operate within this belief. The focus of this work is on the ways in which morality is built in Anglo-Saxon literature, specifically with regard to how the actions of the heroic characters are framed within the predestination ideology. Specifically, it focuses on how the concept of fate interacts with the heroic moral code of the Middle Ages, as described by O'Brien O'Keeffe. It aims to look at how the belief in fate influences the actions of the protagonists within the genre of epic poetry, and what narrative choices are made with regards to this concept. Based on this literary analysis, it further aims to explore the moral implications of those decisions, and the ways an Anglo-Saxon audience might approach heroic values within the context of predestination.

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Declaration

I declare that this thesis is an original work that I have written myself, and that all literature within this thesis has been properly cited. The work was not used to obtain another title or degree.

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1 Introduction

The Anglo-Saxon concept of *wyrd* (fate) is mentioned repeatedly throughout Anglo-Saxon literary works. While there are arguments that *wyrd* was originally a pagan concept, the idea that God is responsible for individual fates is continually referenced within the poetry of the late Anglo-Saxon period. This can be seen in instances in which the works imply that God is the one who ultimately decides the results of fights and military conflicts, such as Beowulf's fight with Grendel. It will be argued within this thesis that the concept can be understood in relation to the Christian belief in predestination, as defined by Saint Augustine. Augustine held that God had the foreknowledge of every individual's fate, and that he actively predestined some individuals for salvation (Wu 1). Augustine's writings were one of the main influences upon the Anglo-Saxon religious worldview (Jolly 71), so it is feasible that his theology had a considerable impact on the way that the Anglo-Saxons framed their understanding of *wyrd* in the post-Christianization era. It is stated in Beowulf that "What God judged right would rule what happened to every man, as it does to this day" (Heaney, lines 2858-2859); a statement that suggests that Augustine's notion of a God that actively influences the fate of every man was central to the ideological background of the poem. The connection between fate and Augustinian theology can be summarized by Weil's claim that "fate is actually God's providence realized through the unfolding of events" (103).

In addition to Augustinian theology, the moral background of the poetic writing is rooted in the heroic moral code, as defined by Katherine O'Brien O'Keeffe. The heroic moral code was a set of moral ideals that guided the actions of literary heroes of the epic poetry genre. The touchstone of heroic life was the "relationship between retainer and lord, whose binding virtue is loyalty" (O'Brien O'Keeffe 107).

The heroic moral code and the Christian theology, such as that of Augustine, were not contrary philosophies in the Anglo-Saxon worldview, as evidenced by the prevalence of the Christian warrior ideal (Jolly 29). Christian followers were often portrayed as warriors of God, and the relationship between a lord and a vassal was seen as emblematic of the relationship Christians were meant to have with God (Jolly 28).

This thesis will explore the question of how morality is established throughout the narratives of the examined poems in relation to the concept of fate, with a specific focus on the ways that the moral decisions and actions of the characters are framed in a worldview that assumes their fates are unchangeable. The poems that will be examined within this thesis are the epic poems “Beowulf” and “The Battle of Maldon”, as well as two shorter poems “The Wanderer” and “The Seafarer”. It will be argued that within this literature, both the heroic moral code and the Augustinian theology support the ideal of “embracing” one’s fate. In the heroic code, this ideal is enforced by the notion that warriors should die at the side of their lords even if escaping alive is possible, as exemplified by the retainers’ insistence to continue fighting after their lord was slain in the Battle of Maldon (lines 207-224). In the case of Augustinian theology, the ideal of embracing fate as predestined by God is supported by Augustine’s insistence that we must embrace the grace of God in order to achieve salvation, and that attempting to not follow God’s guidance would inevitably result in a life of sin (Rist 424).

2 Methodology

2.1 Methodology Introduction

This thesis will largely follow the methodology of new historicism, with a strong focus on examining the texts within the context of the Anglo-Saxon society, its culture, and beliefs. Specifically, the ethical meanings of the texts will be analyzed in connection with aspects of Christian theology that would have been relevant to the Anglo-Saxon worldview, as well as the “heroic moral code” that was popular during that time.

Firstly, the rules of the heroic moral code will be examined, focusing on the aspects that are relevant to the given heroic poetry, such as the concepts of loyalty, heroic glory, and social hierarchy. The research will then examine instances of heroic morality being relevant to each of the poems: Beowulf, the Battle of Maldon, the Wanderer, and the Seafarer. Next, the concept of predestination will be examined within the Christian context. The research will specifically examine the teaching of Saint Augustine, whose theological and philosophical writing was central to the Christian understanding of predestination. This will be followed by investigating how religion functioned within the Anglo-Saxon context, how Augustine was incorporated into the Anglo-Saxon worldview, and how the concept of fate was defined within this worldview. The role of paganism and pre-Christian aspects in the understanding of fate will also be examined. Finally, this research will outline how the heroic moral code and the Christian theology interacted within the Anglo-Saxon context and argue how aspects of all those moral influences pointed to the moral ideal of "embracing" one's fate. Lastly, the research will analyze the moral consequences of failing to embrace one's fate within the texts.

2.2 Research Aims

This study aims to examine the question of how morality was built within a literary tradition that assumed that the characters' fate was pre-determined, and how the narratives and the actions of the protagonists were influenced by this belief in fate. The research also aims to explore how cultural aspects of Anglo-Saxon society, specifically the traditional heroic moral code and the Christian belief in predestination, could have influenced the ways that fate is depicted within the literary work. This study will further attempt to analyze which responses to one's own fate are deemed as appropriate and inappropriate within the literature. Furthermore, it will examine the narrative consequences of characters attempting to embrace or escape their fate, with the focus on the moral implications those aspects convey to the audience.

2.3 Sources

In terms of source material, translated versions of the literary texts will be thematically analyzed, and additional secondary academic sources will be used to examine the discourse surrounding the interpretation, as well as provide relevant historical and sociological context to the material. Within this thesis, the translation by Seamus Heaney will be used when quoting passages from "Beowulf", the translation by Donald Scragg when referencing "The Battle of Maldon", and the translations by Elaine M. Treharne and Duncan Wu will be used for both "The Wanderer" and "the Seafarer". Through this research, this paper will attempt to shed light on some ways in which the medieval belief in a fixed fate and predestination by God interacted with the moral standards of the time.

2.4 Research Limitations

However, there are some research limitations that need be acknowledged. There is only a limited amount of surviving Anglo-Saxon poetry, so the examined works likely only represent a small sample of Anglo-Saxon written culture. Furthermore, poetry as a genre represents only one aspect of the entire body of Anglo-Saxon cultural tradition, so any conclusions drawn in this paper should be seen as an account of the literary tendencies of the time rather than a comprehensive account of the Anglo-Saxon understanding of morality.

3 The Texts

Some of the primary texts used within this work are the epic poem Beowulf, the Battle of Maldon, and shorter poems The Wanderer and The Seafarer.

3.1 Beowulf

Beowulf is perhaps the most well-known Anglo-Saxon work today, written in the form of a heroic epic that follows the deeds of the warrior-hero Beowulf. Scholarly consensus suggests the poem was written by a Christian author (Reynolds 27), although there may have been earlier versions of the narrative that were not preserved in writing.

Narratively, it follows three major episodes in the hero's life. The first is Beowulf's fight with the monstrous Grendel, who is occupying Hrothgar's halls of Heorot. Beowulf comes to Hrothgar's aid and defeats Grendel in hand-to-hand combat. However, Grendel's death leads to further conflict, and the second episode of the narrative describes the following fight with Grendel's mother. The final episode of the story describes the end of the hero's life, years after he became the King of the Geats, when he tragically dies in a fight with a dragon. The work deals with the concept of fate and predestination on multiple occasions—it discusses the fates of the monsters he fights, his own fate as a warrior, and the fate of the entire kingdom of the Geats.

Beowulf lends itself well to the exploration of the heroic code as well as to analysis through the framework of Augustinian predestination. The poem consistently reinforces heroic values, exploring Beowulf's role as a heroic warrior as well as his morality as a ruler when he becomes the king in the last episode of the narrative. In terms of Augustinian analysis, even though the characters of the poem are not Christians themselves, the narration of the poem references Christian themes repeatedly: Irving claims to have counted around 178 Christian reference in the poem ("The Nature of Christianity in 'Beowulf'" 8).

3.2 The Battle of Maldon

The Battle of Maldon is a poetic dramatization of a historical battle, which occurred between the forces of the Anglo-Saxons and the Vikings in modern-day Essex. The poem was likely composed "shortly after the battle" (Irving "The Heroic Style in 'The Battle of Maldon.'" 457) While following real historical events, the poem reads as an artistic rendition rather than a chronicle, adding dramatic depictions and moral readings of the actions of the characters. The narrative begins with the warriors, led by Byrhtnoth, releasing their horses in preparation for the Battle. The Viking attackers send a messenger asking him to pay them in gold if they want to avoid fighting, but Byrhtnoth rejects the offer and prepares for an attack. In the emotional climax of the poem, he is slain by the invaders, but the poem continues to describe his loyal warriors as they remain in the battle to avenge him. The theme of fate is relevant to their inevitable deaths on the battlefield, as well as to their moral obligations and heroics as warriors. Furthermore, the poem explores the morality and actions of a group of retainers that chose to abandon their troop by fleeing from the battlefield.

3.3 The Seafarer and The Wanderer

Some academics argue that it is difficult to narrow down a single, overarching theme in the Wanderer; as Fowler puts it, "It may be that there is some unifying device which establishes the mutual relevance and coherence of the separate ideas in The Wanderer; but because of the miscellaneity of its contents, and their apparent looseness of connection, a single theme, or enveloping structural device, is difficult to agree on" (Fowler 2). Nonetheless, some general themes can be identified; those include the exploration of the emotions associated with the loss of a lord, and the reflection on the immutability of fate. The narrator—who is not named within the work itself but will be referred to within this thesis as "the wanderer" based on the later title added to the poem—explains his grief over losing his lord and laments his fate. It is implied within the text that the wanderer's lord died, leaving him without kinsmen and without a leader to follow. The poem is deeply rooted in the concept of heroic morality, as it explores the expected social relations typical of heroic warriors and their lords, which Katherine O'Brien O'Keeffe describes as being at the center of the heroic moral code (107). As she states, "To lack a lord is to lack place and role, friend and kin, help in need, and vengeance after death" (107). The Wanderer also directly references the concept of fate multiple times, lamenting its inflexibility (line 5) and connecting it to the Christian faith (lines 115-116). Fowler therefore suggests two possible readings of the text: "first, as a straightforward Christian poem arguing that the world is transient and heaven is permanent… Second, as a lament on mutability as it affects the nobles and retainers of heroic society" (14).

The Seafarer narrates the experience and emotions of a sailing man far away from his society. Much like the Wanderer, the poem takes on a sorrowful tone, and its narrator reflects on the difficulties of his fate. Furthermore, it also connects fate to God (lines 43, 102-16,115-116), and compares the narrator's life to the lives of retainers (lines 15-26, 55-57). Both poems can therefore be thematically analyzed to see how the Augustinian theology and the Heroic Moral code influence the portrayal of the concept of *wyrd*.

4 What is Heroic Morality?

To understand how morality is constructed within Old English texts (especially texts within the heroic epic genre, such as Beowulf and the Battle of Maldon), we must first explore the specific rules and expectations that were associated with Anglo-Saxon warriors. Those expectations are known as the "heroic code", which would have been familiar to the contemporary literary audience.

To a great extent, the literary moral code was tied to the social hierarchy of medieval times. Two social classes were relevant for the heroic code, the lords (who had the economic and social means to lead their men in battle) and their retainers—the soldiers who would be fighting for the lords. (There would be hierarchies within the aristocracy as well, as lords would be ruled over by the king, but for the purposes of this research it is sufficient to group those titles under one social class). They would likely have similar roles in society, as according to Loyn, “lordship and kingship are the twin forces operating to bring about a more highly organized community” (199). The poetry suggests that both kings and lords would have their own retainers. The moral code was not only meant for the retainers, but for the lords as well. The social obligations of both of those classes were strictly delineated, with each group having specific roles within the “heroic lifestyle”.

The obligation of the lords within the heroic lifestyle was to provide “treasure” for their retainers—valuable gifts that would ensure the warriors’ loyalty (O’Brien O’Keeffe 107). Through the giving of such valuable gifts, the relationship gained a reciprocal nature, as the retainers would be paid for their service. However, there was an extensive symbolical meaning to the gifted treasure as well. Many times, the gifts themselves would be reminders of the warrior’s responsibilities as a retainer, with gifts like armor, weapons or horses commonly gifted (O’Brien O’Keeffe 108).

The retainers, then, would be expected to reciprocate the lord’s generosity by continued service. One of the ways that they would be expected to show this reciprocity was by defending the lord if the need arose. Even in the cases that a lord was slain, there was a strong expectation of further loyalty, as the concept of “revenge” played a great role in medieval heroic morality. Because the relationship between the lord and his retainers was so important, there were specific expectations for warriors whose lords perished in battle to avenge their deaths (O’Brien O’Keeffe 110).

However, not all forms of revenge had to end in bloodshed. O’Brien O’Keeffe notes that there were two main ways to enact vengeance: the blood feud, or, alternatively, the establishment of a *wergild*, in which compensation would be established through an agreed price (116). The works discussed, nonetheless, tend to depict revenge through battle rather than one settled in gold. It is not likely that there is a singular, defensible reason why this kind of revenge has not been reflected in literature—especially since so much of Anglo-Saxon oral and written epic work has been lost to time. Nonetheless, one possible reason could be narrative—it is easier to imagine readers being gripped by a description of battle than by a description of monetary payments. Furthermore, it could be argued that revenge in bloodshed can have greater narrative consequences and can serve as the climactic event in an epic.

Here it is crucial to point out that, while stemming from the real-life social hierarchy of Anglo-Saxon England, the heroic moral code should be seen as a literary ideal, and not a legal framework that was always followed exactly in real life. History is certainly filled with betrayals and intrigues, and while moral expectations would have been known as an ideal to strive for, it would be unreasonable to expect all historical figures to have fully adhered to them—just like how it would be unreasonable to assume that all people today are driven purely by modern ethical standards.

Nonetheless, literary heroes would still be expected to adhere to those moral standards. It is through understanding this heroic code that one gets the sense of the dramatic weight of the betrayals of Byrhtnoth's men in the Battle of Maldon and of Beowulf's warriors who abandon him at the end of the poem. Similarly, the grief of the speaker in the Wanderer is intrinsically tied to the key relationship between the lord and retainer, and the social consequences of losing this relationship. This chapter will therefore provide a brief overview of how the medieval heroic values can be used for interpreting each of those works.

4.1 Heroic Moral Code in the Battle of Maldon

Evidence of this code being relevant to literature can be found in the Battle of Maldon, in which the lord leading his men into battle perishes at the hand of the Vikings. The themes of revenge and of loyalty are hence evoked, as those would be the expectations of a literary warrior.

From the very first preserved lines of the poem, the heroic moral code is invoked almost implicitly. Byrhtnoth commands his warriors to abandon their horses, with the expectation of the brutality of the upcoming battle. From a literary sense, this is foreshadowing for the outcome of the battle—the most loyal of Byrhtnoth's men would not make it out alive, and neither would their lord. Additionally, this section also has a great significance in terms of the social context of the conflict; it immediately invokes the heroic ideal of the warriors unquestioningly following their lord into battle regardless of its possible outcome. The following couple lines further stress the loyalty of the warriors. When Offas' kinsman releases his beloved hawk before the upcoming battle, the readers get the impression that the warriors are ready to abandon everything to face whatever fate awaits them in combat. The key relationship between the lord and his retainers, as discussed above, is brought to its most grave eventuality, when both the lord and those retainers that are loyal to him are entirely ready to abandon all and face their deaths. One can make the connection with O'Brien O'Keeffe's claim about the reciprocity of the lord-and-warrior relationship being central to the heroic lifestyle here; after all, Byrhtnoth is just as ready to die by the side of his men as they are to die by his. This notion is further underscored in lines 23-24, where it is mentioned that the lord himself got off his horse and went to stand among the most loyal of his men, "where it most pleased him to be".

The diction in the poem suggests that the warriors, reciprocally, saw the earl as much more than just their leader. In line 208, Byrhtnoth is described as "their friend" rather than their lord. Furthermore, it is suggested that he is actually part of some of those men's family lineage, which makes their connection to him even greater. This view is expressed in line 224, when Ælfwine, one of the remaining warriors, states in his speech that the greatest sorrow for him following the lord's death is that "he was both [his] kinsman and [his] lord". The focus on the fact that he was physically related to Byrhtnoth is used here for dramatic effect, as the fact that some men are not only losing their leader but also a family member illustrates the depth of their relationship, and by extent, of their grief.

The practice of repaying the warriors' loyalty by the gifting of treasure is mentioned multiple times in the Battle of Maldon. When Godric flees the battle, the poem frames it as him abandoning the man that has gifted him many horses over the course of their alliance (lines 187-188). The treasure (horses, in this case) is therefore invoked as an aspect tying the retainer to his lord and is framed as one of the chief reasons why Godric is morally wrong for running from the battlefield. In this way, the modern idea of a "gift" may be at odds with the Anglo-Saxon understanding of it, if we assume a gift to be something that is given without the expectation of a repayment; nonetheless it is clear from the context of the poem that a repayment is expected and the noble thing for the warriors to do is to remain and fight to their deaths. The Anglo-Saxon perception of a "gift" can be understood through Marcel

Mauss's explanation of the concept, which Mary Douglas, in the Foreword to his book *The Gift: The Form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies,* explains as follows: "There are no free gifts; gift cycles engage persons in permanent commitments that articulate the dominant institutions" (xii).

In the Battle of Maldon, material gifts are clearly shown to be something that is only to be gifted to those who are worthy of it, such as loyal warriors. While described as generous to his retainers, Byrhtnoth is firm and outright with his refusal to pay off the Viking attackers after they give him the option. "It appears to me too shameful that you should return to your ships with our money unopposed" (lines 55-56), explains Byrhtnoth in his speech to the Viking messenger. In this case, it seems that the gifting of money, even if potentially saving the earl's lands from invasion, is seen as immoral if given to the enemies instead of your own men.

The loyalty of the warriors in the battle of Maldon is so strong that they continue to fight even after their lord's death in battle. This is a clear example of Katherine O'Brien O'Keeffe's claim that revenge was an important part of the heroic code. The poem specifically notes that those who did not betray their lord by running from the fight intended for one of two things—to avenge their lord or to die trying (line 208). The moral stance of the poem is made explicit in line 294, when it is mentioned that Offa "lay near his lord as a thegn should".

It is implied within the poem that such a death is not in vain, as it brings posthumous respect to the warrior. The theme of "glory", especially in connection with the heroic death, is strongly evoked: "Then the fight was near, glory in battle: the time had come when those fated to die must fall there…" (lines 103-105). Later, Byrhtnoth encourages his men to keep fighting even as many of them are being cut down, if they "hoped to win glory from the Danes" (line 128).

4.2 Heroic Moral Code in Beowulf

There are several aspects of the heroic moral code, as described by O'Brien O'Keeffe, which are reflected within the narrative of Beowulf. Some of the elements that are especially pertinent to the interpretation of the poem are the acts of gift-giving, the expectation of loyalty, the ideal of reciprocity between lord and retainer, the ideal of revenge and the concept of heroic glory. Those moral guidelines guide the characters' actions and influence the narrative and are often used to frame characters as either heroic or immoral. Beowulf himself is consistently depicted as following the heroic moral code, making him embody the archetype of an epic hero. Furthermore, certain customs, such as the custom of gift-giving, are used to establish the relationship between characters, such as Beowulf and Hrothgar or Beowulf and Hygelac.

The tradition of gift-giving underlines the narrative of Beowulf—as O'Brien O'Keeffe points out, Hrothgar assures Beowulf that he will gain a reward before his fight with Grendel (108). One can read this gesture as an establishment of the heroic lord and retainer relationship between Beowulf and Hrothgar. In light of the rules of heroic morality, it is likely that the payment is meant to have deeper significance than just a monetary reward—to a contemporary reader, it may have signified Hrothgar's view of Beowulf as a hero of his people, and his acceptance of Beowulf (who is not technically one of his own warriors, having traveled a great distance to come defeat Grendel) as being at the same level of respect as his own retainers.

The gifts presented to Beowulf upon Grendel's defeat include a banner, a coat of mail and a helmet, horses, and a sword that is described as "both precious object and token of honour" (Heaney, line 1023). This implies that the items have a symbolic as well as material value; symbolic, because they represent the honor of Beowulf's deed, and material, because all those items would have been considerably expensive during that time. It could be argued that some of the items also have a practical purpose in terms of the heroic lifestyle, because they are items likely to be directly used for further heroic acts, such as the sword or chainmail that could be worn to further battles. The expectation for further reciprocity is established when the Danish prince urges Beowulf to use the gifts well (line 1044). This section is a good representation of the "cyclical" form of the heroic lifestyle—the deed is rewarded with material goods, which are meant to be directly channeled into strengthened loyalty, which will then be rewarded with more equipment, some of which can be used for fighting, and so on and so forth.

An aspect that somewhat breaks the established practice of lords being the ones to bestow gifts to retainers is the narrative point in which Beowulf takes the gifts he received from Hrothgar and gifts them to his own lord, King Hygelac. The treasure is hence returning from the retainer to the lord, a reverse of the traditional pattern. It needs to be noted that what makes this situation so unique is the fact that Beowulf fought not for his own lord, but for a lord that is friendly to his king. The lord-and-retainer gift giving custom is therefore complicated, as Beowulf returns home already having received treasure, and must now report to his lord. Beowulf's decision to present the gifts to his lord is framed as an attempt at re-establishing a sense of loyalty following his absence, as he hands the treasure over to the king with the statement that "It is still upon your grace that all favour depends" (Heaney, lines 2149-2150). He further emphasizes how important his lord and their relationship is to him by telling him "I have few kinsmen who are close, my king, except for your kind self" (lines 2150-2151). The purpose of this exchange, then, appears to be the same as when gifts are bestowed from the lord to his retainers—to strengthen the loyalty and mutual alliance between the warrior and his leader.

The poem emphasizes the correctness of Beowulf's decision to give his treasure to Hygelac, noting that "so ought a kinsman act, instead of plotting and planning in secret to bring people to grief" (lines 2166-2168). The giving of treasure is here associated with, above all, the social connection between kinsmen, the maintenance of social cohesion among warriors and lords, and the prevention of the kind of discord among the nobility that could lead to a decay of the Kingdom. Understanding the social intricacy of gift-giving in terms of their association to loyalty is why, upon the emotional climax of the poem, it is so striking when Wiglaf berates his kinsmen by saying that Beowulf was "throwing weapons uselessly away" in gifting them (line 2871). Beowulf's kinsmen failed to provide their loyalty when it mattered, and the fact that they received treasure but did not reciprocate correctly breaks a great taboo in the warrior lifestyle.

The fact that retainers are meant to repay the gifts of their lords through unyielding loyalty is clearly emphasized throughout the entire narrative. Most prominently, the social expectations of a warrior are neatly outlined within the text during a section in which Beowulf argues with Unferth, who is posed within the text as an archetype of an un-moral retainer. Beowulf criticizes Unferth by stating that he was never "much celebrated for swordsmanship or for facing danger on the field of battle" (Heaney, lines 585-587). He further notes that Unferth failed to enact revenge on Grendel for his attacks on his people's hall and implies that Grendel continues to murder because he knows there will be no vengeance coming from the people (lines 591-606). In those regards, Unferth failed in his role by failing to act in a way that is expected of a retainer that enjoys a lords' gifts. Even more gravely, it is noted that he "killed [his] own kith and kin" (line 588), a crime that fully embodies disloyalty. For this, Beowulf asserts that he will "suffer damnation in the depths of hell" (line 590).

Following his argument with Unferth, Beowulf goes on to give a speech before his battle with Grendel. He notes his intent to fight to the death, to "perform to the uttermost what [the] people wanted or perish in the attempt" (Heaney, lines 634-635). This boast reaffirms his willingness to adhere to heroic moral expectations, and therefore poses him as a direct foil to Unferth. Specifically, he establishes his loyalty to the lord through evoking the ideal of a retainer's honorable death. In terms of morality, Beowulf is eventually shown to be victorious over Unferth, who loses respect when he is not willing to fight Grendel's mother underwater.

The concept of heroic glory is evoked multiple times throughout the narrative. The manner of Beowulf's battle with Grendel is evocative of it. He chooses to fight Grendel in unarmed combat instead of slaying him with his sword or employing any of the warriors that came with him to fight by his side. Of course, choosing to fight alone, and with no weapons or armor, poses a great risk to Beowulf—but as he claimed in his boast, he is ready to die if that is the fate that awaits him. What reason does the poem suggest makes this kind of death more honorable than fighting alongside of his men? One reason Beowulf gives when announcing his decision is that Grendel "has no idea of the arts of war, of shield or sword-play" (Heaney, lines 681-682). The idea of hand-to-hand combat therefore appears more balanced. Beowulf notes that he and Grendel have a similar amount of strength, as he "count[s] [himself] as dangerous any day as Grendel" (Heaney, lines 677-678).

Based on this, it seems that to Beowulf, fairness in battle is more important than raising the chance of victory. In this way, he is similar to Byrhtnoth, who refuses to pay his enemies in order to avoid fighting them, even though it makes his chance at victory limited. A similar characterization of Beowulf appears later in the poem, when Beowulf is described as "formidable in battle yet behaved with honour and took no advantage; never cut down a comrade who was drunk" (Heaney, lines 2178-2180). To fight an opponent who was drunk would be similar to fighting Grendel with weapons—an unbalanced, and therefore not honorable, battle. Both Beowulf and Byrhtnoth seem to seek a celebrated battle rather than an easy one—a kind of battle that would bring them heroic glory. This ideology is expressed explicitly later in the narrative of Beowulf, when he states: "Let whoever can win glory before death. When a warrior is gone, that will be his best and only bulwark" (Heaney, lines 1387-1389).

This quote comes in the context of the death of Hrothgar's trusted councilor, Aeschere, shortly before Beowulf's fight with Grendel's mother. Beowulf attempts to comfort Hrothgar by evoking the idea of the heroic death, noting that it is Glory that is most important. In this section, modern expectations of grief may clash with the moral sensibilities of heroic life, as Beowulf tells Hrothgar there is no point in grieving. This is because of another staple of the heroic life that was discussed above—the ideal of revenge. "Wise sir, do not grieve," says Beowulf, "It is always better to avenge dear ones than to indulge in mourning" (Heaney, lines 1384-1385). He also adds a plea for Hrothgar to "Bear up and be the man I expect you to be" (lines 1395-1396). From the modern perspective, this may appear rude or insulting considering Hrothgar's loss, but it is not framed as such within the narrative. On the contrary, this form of comfort is readily accepted by Hrothgar, who thanks God for Beowulf's promise to enact revenge and readies himself for the struggle against Grendel's mother. This reaction paints Beowulf's insistence that grieving is senseless compared to the possibility of revenge as the correct response to the situation.

The motif of revenge itself occurs multiple times within the narrative—in fact, all major episodes seem to be narratively driven by it. As mentioned before, Beowulf berates Unferth for not taking revenge on Grendel for attacking Heorot hall. In this regard, the fight with Grendel is seen not as a mere task of slaying a monster, but as a moral retribution for the monster's evil deeds. The following episode is also framed in terms of revenge, as Grendel's mother seeks to avenge her son. She is described within the text as an "avenger"

(Heaney, line 1258), and she only enters Heorot after finding out that her son has been killed. It is implied that revenge is a somewhat understandable reaction from her, as when she captures and kills one of Hrothgar's men, it is described that "both parties [had] to pay with the lives of friends" (Heaney, lines 1305-1306). It is notable that Grendel's mother does not continue to regularly attack the hall as her son had been doing—instead, she retreats after killing one man, until Beowulf seeks her out and kills her. Beowulf's last opponent, the dragon, is also implied to be seeking vengeance as a response to an unjustified act, as he only attacks after a cup is stolen from the dragon's hoard, retaliating as a guardian of the treasure.

Leyerle draws a connection between the moral justifications of the antagonists and their threat to the characters, explaining that "As the motivation of the monsters becomes better justified, their force increases" (91). He notes that each monster Beowulf fights is not only connected with the theme of revenge, but that they are increasingly more justified in their actions due to the revenge. Grendel is not acting out of revenge, and therefore his actions are the least justified, but his mother is acting as a response to his death, so her actions are understandable, and finally, the dragon is bound to protect treasure which has been protected by an ancient curse, and therefore has clear reasoning for his attack when the treasure is disturbed (90-91). There are also smaller references to revenge throughout the narrative. O'Brien O'Keeffe points out some of them: "the killing of Dæghrefn (for the death of Hygelac), of Ongentheow (for the death of Hæthcyn), of Finn (for the death of Hnæf) and of Onela (for the death of Heardred)" (109).

Another aspect of the heroic morality that can be seen in the poem is Beowulf's insistence to adhere to the social structure between lords and retainers. The social hierarchy that is so deeply intertwined with the heroic lifestyle is reinforced with Beowulf's refusal to take a position over a lord. While Beowulf becomes the King in the last episode of the poem, he does not attempt to rise to the position until there are no more heirs of his old king that could have a claim to the throne. In fact, he refuses to take the throne even after the queen offers it to him following king Hygelac's death, as Hygelac had a son who is an eligible heir. Even though the queen has little hope for her son becoming a capable leader, it is stated that "there was no way the weakened nation could get Beowulf to give in and agree to be elevated over Heardred as his lord" (Heaney, lines 2372-2374). This decision is not framed as practical—after all, Beowulf has proven his worth as a warrior and his leadership would likely benefit the Geats greatly. If that is the case, then the reasons for his decision to refuse to take a position that would deny the prince his inherited title are likely ideological. He instead chooses to advise Heardred, and "honoured and minded him until he matured as the ruler of Geatland" (lines 2377-78). It is not until the prince is slain by Onela, a betrayer, that Beowulf agrees to become the king, as there is no longer any other rightful heir to the throne.

Even so, having noted all the aspects of the heroic ideal that Beowulf embodies, it would be amiss not to recognize that the poem is—at least to some extent—aware of the limitations of the heroic life, especially in connection to Beowulf's role as the king. John Leyerle posits the contradiction between the qualities needed for a king and the ideal heroic warrior a central theme of the poem, posing what he calls "a fatal contradiction at the core of heroic society" (89). He explains it thus: "The hero follows a code that exalts indomitable will and valour in the individual, but society requires a king who acts for the common good, not for his own glory" (89).

A question arises of whether Beowulf's failure to survive his encounter with the dragon stems from his inability to separate the role of the King from the expectations of the retainer. Leyerle claims that "Beowulf does not emulate the long-enduring restraint of [Hrothgar]" (95), as he goes on and attacks the Dragon. This suggests that Beowulf's insistence on taking the role of a self-sacrificing retainer may not be the correct action for the king, given that his death has long-lasting consequences for the nation. If this reading of the poem is correct, it may serve as both a criticism and a reinforcement of the social aspects of heroic morality. A criticism, as Beowulf's bravery eventually leads to his death, but a reinforcement, as it was his inability to correctly assume the expected position in the retainer-and-lord relationship—if Beowulf acted more as a King and less as a retainer, exhibiting Hrothgar's restraint, his fate may not have been as bleak. That being said, it was not uncommon for literary lords to give their lives up along with their retainers (as was discussed in the Battle of Maldon), so the argument of Beowulf being an unsuccessful king is limited in terms of heroic morality. On one level, the text does note that Beowulf was indeed a good king, (line 2390) and while his death brings on the end of prosperity for the Geats, he is still described as a great hero and praised for his deeds throughout the narrative. Nonetheless, on another level, it is still arguable that the poem is aware of the disadvantages and tragic consequences of the heroic lifestyle, and it also serves as a criticism of it. The issues with the lack of boundaries between the role of the hero and the king are summed up as such;" Heroic society inevitably encouraged a king to act the part of a hero, yet the heroic king, however glorious, was apt to be a mortal threat to his nation" (Leyerle 97). In this regard, the poem does not simply replicate the heroic morality of the times (although its characters reflect those values and the narrative is moved by the concerns of heroic morality) but critically engages with them, and with their effect on the society at large.

4.3 Heroic Moral Code in the Wanderer and the Seafarer

The Wanderer and the Seafarer are two poems that deal with the lord-and-retainer relationship not in the context of battle but in the context of examining a man's life without the influence of a lord. Unlike the Battle of Maldon and Beowulf, they do not follow the narrative of an epic poem but take on a rather reflective approach. The theme of revenge is not explored in either poem, as it is implied that revenge is either not possible or not applicable to the situations of the narrators. Instead, the poems explore the social and emotional dimensions of heroic life.

As noted above, the Wanderer is a poem deeply rooted in the concerns of the heroic lifestyle. As the narrator ponders his life without a lord, the poem explores the social and emotional aspects of the heroic life, and the implications tied to the event of a retainer losing his position in society. When the narrator asks "Where has the horse gone? Where has the man gone? Where have the treasure-givers gone?" (Wu and Treharne, lines 92-93) he certainly has the social connotations of those aspects in mind. As discussed above, treasure was a symbol of the lord's reciprocal relationship to the retainer, a status symbol of a warrior's place in society. The Wanderer associates a sense of strong grief with the loss of those aspects—grief that seems to go beyond the struggle with the loss of materiel comforts or societal privileges. Instead, the Wanderer's position is framed as a deeply emotional loss of purpose. When the narrator of the poem describes his search for a lord, he notes that he was seeking a man "who might show [him] affection in the meadhall, or would comfort

[him], friendless, entertain [him] with joys" (Wu and Treharne, lines 27-29). This clearly frames the lord as a figure that is meant to offer social and emotional support, contrasting the Wanderer's sense of "friendlessness" with the possibility of a joyful life. It is further noted that in his dreams, "it seems to him in his mind that he embraces and kisses his lord" (lines 41-42). This, along with the idea of the lord providing comfort and joys, creates an image of the lord and retainer having a strongly familiar relationship. In this sense, the economic importance of the lord as a provider of gold seems to be secondary to the sentimental value that he held to the Wanderer.

Similarly, the narrator of the Seafarer also ponders on the difficulties of life without a lord and kinsmen surrounding him. While the circumstances of the two poems' narrators are likely different—the wanderer is implied to have lost his lord, while the seafarer is separated from his kinsmen due to his voyage on the sea—the thematic concerns they express in regard to living without the social support of the lord-and-retainer relationships are somewhat similar.

The seafarer expresses the notion that the life of a retainer is preferable to the life of a sailor. In fact, it is implied that he believes that a man living the heroic life cannot fully understand his situation, as he notes that "This the warrior does not know, the man blessed with luxury, what some endure, those who travel furthest on the paths of exile" (Wu and Treharne, lines 55-57). The "luxuries" are noted here, however, much like the wanderer, the seafarer's conception of the advantages of heroic life is not limited to the material conditions. He notes that, in his position, "No protective kinsman might comfort the desolate spirit" (lines 25-26). It therefore appears that much like the Wanderer, he yearns for the emotional comfort associated with the heroic lifestyle.

4.4 Heroic Morality in Theological Context

Thus far, the focus has been on the heroic moral code and its social aspects: the relationships of lords and retainers and the roles that were expected of them. However, the heroic ideology was just one facet of the overall Anglo-Saxon worldview and would not have been the only influence on the way morality was established within the examined literature.

It would be reductive to focus on the social and ideological aspects of the warrior lifestyle, as encapsulated in the heroic moral code, without examining them in the wider ideological and theological context in which they operated. The Heroic Moral Code was not opposed to Christian morality; on the contrary, the two ideologies were intertwined together. As explained by Jolly, “The Christian warrior ideal is evident throughout Anglo-Saxon art and literature in the merger or overlap of Germanic heroic and Christian images” (29).

A Christian theological understanding is particularly important when discussing heroic morality specifically in relation to fate, as the concept of fate within the examined poetry can often be understood in terms of the Christian concept of predestination. Therefore, before delving further into the ways that the issue of fate is dealt with in the literary works, it is important to outline the main theological explanations of predestination and of God’s role in human fates.

5 Predestination in the Christian Context

As the Anglo-Saxon society would have already been converted by the time the poetry discussed here was written down, it is sensible to assume that Christian beliefs would have had an influence on the popular culture and writing of the time. With relevance to the discussed topics of fate and morality, the most relevant Christian concept to this work is the notion of Predestination. This chapter will outline the theology of Augustine of Hippo, who was one of the most influential theologians in terms of the Christian understanding of predestination, as well as one of the philosophers that directly influenced the Anglo-Saxon religious worldview.

5.1 Augustine of Hippo

Augustine of Hippo, also known as Saint Augustine, is one of the early Christian theologians most associated with the concept of predestination. He was born in 354 AD, became a priest in 391 AD, and soon rose up to the position of the bishop of Hippo Regius, located in modern day Algeria, where he remained until his death in 430 (Stump and Kretzmann 1). As a bishop, he dedicated his life to the studies of philosophy and theology and wrote extensively within those fields. There is no doubt that his work had a considerable impact on the later medieval Christian thought. Stump and Kretzmann claim that "Patristic philosophy and theology, and every area of philosophy and theology in the later medieval period, manifest the mark of his thought." (2). This sub-chapter will outline Augustine's thoughts on predestination, the human role in our own fates, and his conception of free will.

In order to grasp Augustine's philosophical point of view, it is necessary to examine it in the context of his beliefs, that is, in the context of Christian Theology. Philosophy and theology were subjects that John Rist argues were inseparable from each other during his time (420), so it is crucial not to enforce distinctions between his understanding of fate and free will and his religious conviction. In fact, as will be examined below, his philosophical doctrines on the topics are so deeply rooted in the concept of God's omnipotence that it would be impossible to explain his arguments in a secular manner. This is not surprising given his position as a Bishop; considering the importance of the Bible in the Christian philosophical sphere, it is understandable that philosophical beliefs associated with Christian scholars must be examined through a theological lens. Augustine certainly centered his inquiry into predestination around the concept of God's foreknowledge and grace, and continually stressed his authority. Stump and Kretzmann go as far as to claim that "Augustine himself would certainly have put first, in importance to himself and to a philosophical comprehension of the world, an understanding of the nature of God and God's relations to the world." (2). However, the nature of the extent to which he believes God's influence has an impact on the human will is still discussed among academics. Specifically, there is still a considerate discourse about whether he holds a "full-blown Calvinist position" or whether he allows for some sense of free human will (Rist 420).

To understand Augustine's position on predestination, it is also useful to outline the historical context in which he developed his treatises. According to Shuai Sun, the most common understanding of fate when Augustine began writing his theology was "astrological fatalism", a term that refers to the belief that an individual's fate is tied to the astrological location of the stars at the time of their birth (35). Augustine rejected this view, framing fate as connected only to God. Still, there was another set of beliefs to which Augustine took opposition, dedicating a large portion of his writing to denying its claims: the Pelagian heresy. In fact, it seems that Augustine's beliefs were in part developed due to the influence of what he viewed as their incorrect conclusions; according to Wetzel, “much of his theology of grace was articulated in response to someone else’s – usually a Pelagian or a Pelagian sympathizer’s – supposed mistake” (49).

The Pelagians were a Christian religious group that was considered heretical for their claims and was condemned in Rome. They were founded by Pelagius, who found his following through urging the citizens of Rome to hold themselves to a higher moral standard (Wetzel 51). However, the manner in which Pelagians proposed that this higher moral standard could be achieved soon became controversial. Caelestius, his disciple, seemingly questioned the theology of original sin, which the north African Christian leaders considered to be essential to their beliefs (Wetzel 52). The Pelagians also held that some of the Biblical figures from the Old Testament had lived lives free of sin (Rist 426). This was, clearly, an extension of their argument against the doctrine of the original sin, as no individual could live a completely sinless life if he or she has inherited the sin of Adam. While this ideal of leading an existence free of sin may have had a great appeal to Pelagian followers, it created deep controversy among the wider Christian community and prompted the ire of the clergy, including Augustine. As will be discussed later, Augustine was a firm believer in the Original Sin, and incorporated it into his theory of predestination.

The reason that the Pelagian controversy is brought up here is that the theological discourse of his time was highly influential to his writings, as many of his texts were written as responses to the specific religious movements of his time. Stump and Kretzmann note that Pelagianism, along with two other influences (Manichaeism and the heresy of Donatism) were so fiercely combatted by Augustine that they effectively shaped his philosophical views on free will (2). The theological differences between Augustine and his opponents, such as the belief in original sin, are therefore contextually important to understanding his writing. Augustine’s beliefs will therefore be discussed here in reference to the heresies he is trying to deny.

There are two terms that need to be understood in order to examine Augustine’s views of fate: “foreknowledge” and “predestination.” In Augustine’s writing, foreknowledge implies God’s fixed knowledge of human wills (Wetzel 50), as he holds that God knows of all human fates. However, he is not a mere passive observer of our lives. In fact, he directly influences the fate of humans based on his foreknowledge, as he "for those who are predestined to be saved He actually prepares the will to believe" (Wu 1). Ultimately, Augustine believed not only that God has the foreknowledge of human fate, but also that he takes direct action in it and prepares some souls for salvation. This preparation of the soul is known as "predestination".

The difference between foreknowledge and predestination is explained by Wetzel. He notes that the abstract distinction between the two is that "what is predestined is foreknown, but not all that is foreknown is predestined" (50). By this, he means that God knows about the fate of all people but does not prepare redemption for all of them. What happens to those that are not predestined to reach heaven? It is generally agreed that those whose wills God foreknows but does not predestine are fated to never reach salvation. Consequently, "if you are not one of the saints – one of those looked after by God – you are most certainly lost; your lot in life is to remain part of a ruined race, squandered in sin." (49).

This has important implications for the role of human agency regarding their fate—the key to achieving salvation in Augustine's theology is not human actions, but the grace of God. No matter the actions a person undertakes throughout their life, it is still ultimately God's choice weather the individual is going to be offered forgiveness or not. The idea of needing forgiveness even if one did everything to act morally may seem unreasonable to modern readers. It is a common belief in modern Christianity that salvation is connected to individual deeds—one who does good deeds will be rewarded by reaching heaven, and one who partakes in evil will be punished in hell. However, Augustine's insistence that deeds aren't the determining factor for salvation may be explained by the fact that a fundamental belief that shapes Augustine's understanding for the role of God's Grace in salvation is the aforementioned doctrine of original sin, which assumes Adam's sin is passed on to humans at birth. Augustine holds that all humans were born with sin, and that it is this sin that makes it so that our own actions are not enough to ensure our salvation. He takes this position when arguing against Pelagianism; according to Wetzel, there were three major philosophical mistakes he brought up against the Pelagians, being "to think that God redeems according to some scale of human merit; to imagine that some human beings are actually capable of a sinless life; to suppose that the descendants of the first human beings to sin are themselves born innocent" (52). The latter two mistakes are easily explained through the doctrine of original sin—because humans inherited sin from Adam, they cannot be born innocent (as they carry the sin with them) and they therefore cannot live a sinless life. The first mistake, that humans are redeemed on a scale of merit, may need further explanation.

In explaining his conception of the role of original sin in human fate, it makes sense to begin with Augustine's understanding of Adam. According to Rist's reading of Augustine, both Adam and later humans were in some ways free, but they are not free in an equal manner (423). This is further explained by Wu, who notes that Adam, before sinning, had the ability to "live a righteous life whenever he willed to", but we do not have this possibility, as we are bound by the sin inherited from him; we are no longer able to "Will the good in this life" (31). What this means is that following Adam's expulsion from the Garden of Eden, humanity lost the ability to willfully perform good deeds, as we are so predisposed to the sin we carry within us. This view is supported by Wetzel, who claims that "the most important difference between Adam and the rest of us is that we no longer have – if we ever did – his original choice" (55). It follows, then, that we cannot be judged by God based on merit—if we no longer have the ability to will good outcomes, we cannot be judged on the goodness of our actions. Nonetheless, Wetzel appears to imply we can still be judged by God as sinners because we carry sin within us. He explains that "To be born human is to be born judged. Those predestined to be spared are shown unaccountable mercy" (54). Here seems to lay the solution to the question of why even those who wish to do good may not be granted salvation—because salvation is not a reward at all, but rather, a mercy that God chooses to give to some, but none are entitled to.

This leads to Augustine taking a philosophical position that emphasizes what Wu calls "the absolute authority of Grace" (6). Grace, in this context, refers to God's forgiveness of a man's sin and his help in making the man morally "good". Because a man cannot choose good freely, and he therefore cannot be judged based on merit, God needs to give him his grace in order for him to do good deeds. Augustine therefore comes to what Wetzel describes as "a relentlessly God-driven account of human redemption" (49). This means that the only way that anyone can achieve salvation is if God decides to give them his grace—

humans do not actually have the ability to change their fate without God. Rist agrees with this position, stating that "God's assistance is required if fallen man is ever even to want to reform his life" (425). In fact, it is argued that even faith is a sort of gift from God, who changes the human will to be good (Wu 7).

So, what is the human role in one's own fate? According to Wetzel, it seems that little of the redemption process is left to humans in Augustinian theology, as "he seems to have all but obliterated the human part" (49). In some regards, human intentions appear to be guided by weather they are predestined for good or not; "A man wills what is good, says Augustine, because he is good; he wills what is bad because he is bad" (Rist 422). However, if we presuppose that humans are only good if God gives them his grace, then it seems that it is almost impossible for us to influence what we will achieve without God's intervention. Nonetheless, Rist holds that there is an academic consensus that Augustine still believed that there is responsibility in every man (420).

How is this possible, given the limitations we have discussed so far? What the theology seems to suggest is that despite needing God's grace for redemption, some things are left to human decisions. Specifically, it is the ultimate decision to heed God's call, or to "adhere to the *uocatio*" that humans are free to undertake (Wu 9). This implies that we are free to reject the possibility of redemption by God by our own decision. Thus, we are essentially choosing between being able to do good deeds (if we accept God's Grace) or being only able to only do evil. In this way, free will still exists, even if it is not "enough" for salvation by itself—quite on the contrary, choosing to rely solely on our own will without god's interference seems to be a possibility leading a human to do evil. Human agency is therefore framed as being a limited decision of whether to accept God, or the decision to reject him.

Still, the possibility of choosing to accept or reject God appears to be proof for the argument there is free will in Augustinian theology, as we are ultimately able to accept or reject our own salvation through God. However, the issue is complicated by the nature of God's Grace being offered only to some people. Stump assumes that if humans were able to freely reject the Grace of God without God's influence on the decision, then the problem of free will would be solved (139). Humans could choose between evil and good based on whether they would accept the Grace or not and would therefore be ultimately responsible for their own fate. Still, she limits this claim to the scenario in which "God offers to every person the grace that produces the will of faith" (139). However, this view is not the academic consensus; in many readings of Augustine, God only offers his grace to specific people. The freedom of choice, then, seems not to be granted to those who are never offered God's grace at all. Rist, for example, explains that there are two ways in which a man can fail to reach salvation: "He can reject the saving grace which is offered to him, or he may not be offered saving grace at all" (429). As discussed above, those would be the men whose will is foreknown, but not pre-destined. People that are not predestined, consequently, have very limited moral freedoms, as their choices will lead to "inevitable evil" (429). This lack of freedoms is explained by the human inability to perform good deeds without God's help; "Unless he is helped by God's grace, fallen man's freedom of choice is only the freedom to sin" (424). This means that we cannot do good freely, as we need God's grace in order to do that. However, we are free to do evil.

The dichotomy between choosing to act freely in evil or submitting to God and being able to perform good deeds creates what Rist calls the Augustinian paradox. While the sinner has the ability to choose evil freely, he is not truly free, as he is bound by sin. A man that is obedient to God, paradoxically, enjoys freedom from sin, but does not enjoy freedoms in choice, as he follows God's guidance (424). Nonetheless, Rist makes it clear that by outlining this concept of will, Augustine does not doubt a person's mental abilities of choice—the word which would be used for the concept of will in his writings, *voluntas,* "does not denote for Augustine a part of the human psyche; rather it is the human psyche in its role as a moral agent" and could be translated as "moral self" or "moral personality" (421). This implies that while we are unable to choose correct moral actions without God's guidance, humans are not mere "puppets" in Augustinian theology but are given some form of autonomy over their actions.

6 Defining Fate in the Anglo-Saxon Context

While Augustine's influences would have had a considerable impact on medieval religious scholasticism, it must be taken into account that the Anglo-Saxons would have had their own cultural explanations, understandings and practices of the Christian faith and the concept of fate itself. Considering the great cultural diversity of medieval Europe, it would be unreasonable to look at the established Christian doctrine without examining how it was translated into the local practices of the studied group of people. This chapter will therefore give an overview of the beliefs and customs specific to the Anglo-Saxon people of the medieval era, and how they impacted the understanding of fate.

6.1 Popular vs. Formal Religion

One theory that illuminates how religion functioned within the Anglo-Saxon society is the interaction between popular and formal religion, as discussed by Karen Lousie Jolly. She defines popular religion as "practical expression" of a religion through ritual and common practice (22). Formal religion, she explains, "Sought to insure consistency in Christian doctrine and practice" (22). In general, she notes that formal religion was mainly textual, while popular religion tended to be oral (22). In an example, a doctrinal text describing the deeds and life of a saint might be considered as formal religion, while oral legends of the saint's life or folk celebrations associated with them may be considered popular religion.

Nonetheless, it is important not to see those two forms of religious expression as directly opposed. Jolly focuses on interactions between the two forms of religion rather than on any possible tensions between them; in fact, she claims that the established view that supposes that there was a strong distinction between the two forms of religion because of class differences between the learned men that would engage with formal religion and the lay people that would mostly participate in popular religion can be somewhat reductive, as it omits to engage with "the shared culture of both groups" (21). Instead, Jolly depicts the two forms of religion as connected aspects that interact and respond to each other, with priests often attempting to translate aspects of formal religion into forms that the laity would understand and engage with.

The issue with examining the impact of religious thought on literary expression is that a lot of surviving evidence of religious culture comes from formal religion, as it was more likely to be written down. Some aspects of the religious life of Anglo-Saxon society that may have influenced the poetry of the time could therefore be lost to time. Still, because of the interactions between formal and popular religion, we can assume that formal religion would have impacted the popular literary works, such as Beowulf and the Battle of Maldon. For example, Whallon notes that Beowulf was probably influenced by the "religious currents created by Aldhelm", a religious figure of seventh century Wessex whom he credits with combining the Celtic and Roman Saints (81).

Still, the literary reformers that Jolly claims had the largest impact on the Anglo-Saxon religious sphere were Ælfric and Wulfstan, who wrote doctrinal texts with the intention of correcting the religious ambiguity of popular sermons (74). Nonetheless, the purpose of those texts was not fully formal; the reformers aimed to appeal to the laity as well as the educated nobility, thereby popularizing aspects of formal religion (76). Jolly also notes that, conversely, Germanic beliefs were accommodated more often in the reformers' writings than in other popular sermons, as they attempted to explain them in Christian terms to create a more coherent belief system (74).

An example of an aspect that was incorporated into the Christian lifestyle were medical "charms", which would not imply magic to the Anglo-Saxon people but rather God's healing (89). According to Burridge, there has historically been an incorrect assumption in which "medicine was seen to be detrimentally affected by Christian and pagan influences alike" (46). In reality, it is more likely that elements from the pre-Christian era of medicine would have been reframed to be in line with the Christian beliefs of the early Middle Ages. Burridge suggests that in early medieval Europe, pre-Christian traditions could be incorporated into medical practice without deviating from the Christian worldview: "Christian features could be added to a prescription, expanding it rather than eliminating its non-Christian content" (63). In this way, the medical practices were one of the aspects that were shaped by the Christian viewpoint. As suggested by Jolly, Ælfric and Wulfstan seemed to advocate for similar incorporation of popular religious elements into a unified system of beliefs through their literary reform (74).

6.2 The Augustinian Worldview

Eventually, the literary reform that attempted to unite the various aspects of religion led to the creation of a more coherent worldview. Augustine specifically became important to this popularization of formal religion, as his writings became the basis for this worldview, which Jolly calls the Augustinian worldview. Here, it is possible to examine how Augustine's writings, discussed in the previous chapter, were contextualized in Anglo-Saxon society. The Augustinian worldview was an example of the formal religion being adapted with the intention of being understandable to lay people (72).

6.3 The Anglo-Saxon View of God

Similarly to Augustine's view of God, God in the examined Anglo-Saxon poetry is described as an all-powerful figure that has control over fate. In Beowulf, it is noted that "He who wields power over time and tide: he is the true Lord" (Heaney, lines 1610-1611). This quote implies that God exercises direct influence over earthly matters, as opposed to being merely an observer of human lives. This reflects Augustine's view that God directly influences individual lives and is directly responsible for their predestination, or lack thereof. However, while the primary focus of a lot of Augustine's writing on predestination seems to be the fate of humans in the afterlife—that is, whether, and how, God predestines them for heaven—the Anglo-Saxon poetry seems to not have a strong tendency to philosophically examine the afterlife of its characters and instead seems to examine God's influence over the characters' lives on earth. Within the examined texts, God is depicted as being responsible both for positive events (such as Beowulf's victories), but also for misfortune. It is described in the Seafarer that men are anxious "about what the Lord will bring [them]" (Wu and Treharne, line 43). Within the context of the Seafarer, this line connects the narrator's grief and hardship to a fate that God has direct influence over.

It was discussed in the previous chapters that Augustine was not entirely clear about why some people receive the grace of God while others may never be called by him. Within Augustine's theology, the free will of accepting or rejecting God's grace only applies to those who were offered grace in the first place, but humans do not receive the understanding of why God chooses to predestine some people and not others. A similar sense of a lack of understanding of God’s plans, and the anxiety associated with it, translates into the uncertainty depicted in Anglo-Saxon poetry. In the Seafarer, it is stressed that “fate is greater, the Lord more mighty than any man’s conception” (Wu and Treharne, lines 115-116). The Wanderer and Beowulf provide similar accounts of an all-powerful god that controls the fate of humans.

6.4 The Wanderer’s Explanation of Fate

Having established the background of the Anglo-Saxon religious and cultural understandings that could have been influential on the depiction of fate within poetry, we can examine the way that fate is defined within the text itself. Out of all the examined poetry, the Wanderer is perhaps the most direct in its allusions to fate. It is stated towards the beginning of the poem that *“Wyrd bið ful aræd”* (“fate is very inflexible”) (Wu and Treharne, line 5). It is thus established early within the poem that its narrator likely has little hope of changing his fate himself. This fixed nature of fate is presented as a source of difficulty for men, as it is expressed that “Nor can the weary mind withstand fate, nor the turbulent mind find help” (lines 15-16). Still, it is made clear throughout the poem that God has full control over fate. When the narrator laments the decline of the heroic lifestyle within the poem, he notes that “The Creator of men thus laid waste this earth” (line 85). Much like the view of God in Augustinian theology, the depiction of God in the Wanderer suggests that he is actively predetermining the fates of humans on Earth.

6.5 Fate in Beowulf

Much like in the Wanderer, fate in Beowulf is described as inflexible. Even the battles are described as being subject to fate, with God’s influence determining the outcome and the victor. Even with Beowulf’s great strength, it is ultimately God that permits his victories. For instance, in his battle with the dragon, it is explained that “God who ordains who wins or loses allowed him to strike with his own blade” (Heaney, lines 2874-2876). Fate, in this sense, not only determines who dies and when, but also many other aspects such as how the battle unfolds.

In terms of the interpretation of fate, much discussion surrounds specifically the third episode of the poem, with regards to the cursed dragon-hoard and Beowulf’s subsequent fight with the dragon. While Beowulf's earthly fate is certain within the poem—he dies in combat against the dragon—there is still academic discourse surrounding his fate in terms of the afterlife. William Cooke notes that one of the most common views is that of Eric Stanley, who holds that Beowulf was damned as a result of the curse placed on the dragon's hoard (207). However, John Tanke argues that Beowulf was cursed to the fate of death, but not to damnation (358). What we know from the text is that "The high-born chiefs who had buried the treasure declared it until doomsday so accursed that those who robbed it would be guilty of wrong and grimly punished for their transgression, hasped in hell-bonds in heathen shrines" (Heaney, lines 3069-3073). Strikingly, the text does not comment on Beowulf's actual fate—only on the declaration of the chiefs that cursed the treasure. Tanke supports his claim that Beowulf may not have actually been damned with the claim that "God is the ultimate owner of the treasure, and he controls the fate of all who would make it their own" (364). This claim is in line with the Augustinian understanding of predestination, which stresses the fact that only God is responsible for determining who is destined for hell and who shall reach salvation. To assume that the chiefs had the power to set a curse that would truly damn someone would be to assume they had foreknowledge equal to that of God and that they could act on it in a way that would dictate someone's fate after their death. This assumption contradicts everything we have discussed about fate and God's ultimate power so far, as it would place humans into a position of controlling predestination. In the context of the Augustinian worldview, then, it is more reasonable to state that the curse brought about his death, but that God still had the ultimate power over his salvation.

7 Fate and Paganism

There is a considerable amount of discourse among Anglo-Saxon literature scholars on the role of pre-Christian religious views within the medieval understanding of fate. While some argue that *wyrd* is essentially a pagan concept, other scholars see it as being so incorporated into the Christian philosophy that it no longer has any Pagan characteristics.

Mary C. Wilson Tietjen, for example, falls under the category of scholars that see Wyrd as a purely pagan phenomenon. She draws a sharp distinction between Christianity and fate, stating that "…men are subject both to the Christian God and to the pagan power of

Wyrd" (161). Her argument is by no means suggesting that those aspects are in theological opposition—in fact, she continues by stating that "The ideals, divine and human, of paganism and Christianity exist side by side in Beowulf" (161). Nonetheless, presenting Wyrd as a pagan concept that is separate from the power of the Christian God raises some questions on how this concept is integrated into the Christian theme, especially when interacting with the idea of an all-powerful God. Ultimately, Tietjen is doubtful of Wyrd having a Christian explanation, stating that "The idea that fate in Beowulf is sometimes controlled by God is subject to qualifications" (163). This argument does not hold up when considering the Christian view of God as the creator—how can the control of an omnipotent God be subjected to qualifications?

Evidence from the text itself seems to point to the idea of God having at least some control over the events of the narrative and the individual characters' fate. This is seen most plainly when Beowulf, readying himself for the battle with Grendel, decides to drop his weapons and fight in hand-to hand combat, stating that whoever wins is rightfully meant to do so through God's will. It is highly suggested that Beowulf is, besides his own strength, also relying on God's favor in this instance; specifically, the text stresses that "he relied for help on the Lord of All, for His care and favour" (Heaney, lines 1273-1274). This implies that God not only had the ability to pre-determine fate, but also actively influences the outcome of events. This view is supported by Bloomfield, who notes that in this section of Beowulf the "power of God is continually stressed" (564). Furthermore, at the end of this narrative event, the text itself seems to once again stress God's involvement in the matter, as it states that "[Grendel] would have killed more, had not mindful God and one man's daring prevented that doom" (Heaney, lines 1055-1056). While Beowulf's bravery is highlighted in this section, it is the "mindful God" who is mentioned first as being responsible for the death of Grendel and the lives that were saved through it. Significantly, it is Beowulf's daring, not his strength or fighting prowess that is mentioned here. This could be read as a reflection of the idea that while Beowulf possessed great strength and ability, he would not be able to defeat Grendel with strength alone—he needed God's help to achieve his victory. What was admirable about the character, therefore, was not connected to his physical ability, but rather to his brave willingness to put his life at risk under the judgment of the Lord.

This type of narrative element, in which a character asks for the judgment of God through the means of a physical fight, would not be foreign to the Anglo-Saxons. Bloomfield explains the Beowulf episode as an example of *judicium Dei*, explaining it thus: “This term is used by those who participated in or discussed trial by combat to refer to an organized attempt to call upon God to decide the justice of a claim or an action, and very often in the early Middle Ages to decide the truth of an accusation of treason” (564). Some forms of a trial by combat were actually historically preformed, even though not common for the Anglo-Saxon people but for other Germanic people (549). There is an argument to be had about whether trial by combat could have also been historically implemented in England before the Norman Invasion—and whether the allusion to it in Beowulf could be used as an argument that it was (556)—but it is not important for the purposes of this analysis, as the historical authenticity (or lack thereof) of this type of battle does not necessarily impact its literary function within Beowulf. In terms of literary analysis, Bloomfield does lean toward a Christian reading, suggesting that the author intended “to stress Beowulf's great piety and faith” (557).

Tietjen also attempts to establish oppositions between the morality of Beowulf and Christian morality, stating that “Although the Christian view that God affords grace and guidance to the efforts of the worthy is evident throughout Beowulf, the kind of "worth" that merits God's favour is by no means Christian. Beowulf most certainly exemplifies the Christian virtues of mildness and humility, but he is worthy of God's favor because of his great strength and courage” (168). It seems that Tietjen implies that strength and courage are, at their core, not necessarily Christian values. This view is predicated on the idea that heroic morality is in essence an un-Christian morality. However, this view may be influenced by modern understanding of Christian doctrine and would likely not be held by Christians of the Anglo-Saxon era. As discussed in the “heroic morality” section, the idea of a warrior dying for their lord was seen as a moral achievement under the heroic code of the time. This ideal was by no means in conflict with Christianity; in reality, the relationship between the lord and the retainer was seen as a reflection of the relationship between God and the Christian people, who were themselves depicted as God’s warriors in the Anglo-Saxon times (Jolly 28).

Not all academics agree with Tietjen's reading. The more likely explanation is that fate within Anglo-Saxon literature, while possibly having pre-Christian origins as a concept, is synthesized with Christianity in a way in which it is framed as being subject to God's will.

Of course, this discussion hinges on the argument that the text itself is Christian in nature. If Beowulf was not a Christian text, but instead a pagan text with some Christian elements superimposed over it, the argument that God is not all-powerful within the narrative would certainly not be as preposterous. It is therefore beneficial for the purpose of this paper to examine the extent of the supposed paganism within Beowulf.

7.1 Is Beowulf Pagan?

The discussions on the extent of the role of paganism within the concept of fate are especially concentrated around Beowulf, as the work specifically references a pre-Christian past. There is no doubt that Beowulf contains references to both pagan tradition and Christian elements. This complicates the paganism-versus-Christianity argument among academics, as it cannot be solved by purely finding evidence of one or the other within the text. Rather, it appears that the argument centers around the contentions about whether Beowulf itself is pagan in narrative with a Christian explanation essentially written "over" it, or if it is fully Christian with the pagan elements only being a reference to a long-gone past. We can survey some evidence of why it seems that the most likely explanation is that Beowulf is indeed Christian, with the pagan elements being incorporated into the work through a Christian theological lens.

When examining the faith expressed by the characters of Beowulf, it is striking that they seem to be monotheistic, despite the story being set in a pre-Christian past. Marie Padgett Hamilton frames this choice as a solution to the dilemma of characters worshipping pagan Gods such as Woden being too inappropriate for the Christian society, but the fully Christian characters being unreasonable for the historical setting of the narrative; hence, "the Beowulf-poet may be resolving the dilemma when he avoids reference to Christian worship or the saints and merely represents his nobler agents as intelligent monotheists" (310). In this manner, the characters remain Pagan—they do not worship Jesus Christ—but the paganism is framed in a way in which it is easily understood by Christian readers, as it makes continuous references to an all-powerful God.

The Christian view is supported by William Reynolds' article "Heroism in 'Beowulf': a Christian Perspective". He admits that, from a historical standpoint, it is impossible to definitively prove if the author was truly Christian (28); indeed, we do not have records of the author's identity, so discourse about their personal beliefs is largely futile. Any conclusions about the religious meaning of Beowulf must therefore be made from textual evidence—Reynolds notes that there are notable inferences to be made from the poem, which constitutes "a coherent work of art whose meaning is accessible to any reader in so far as he is able to understand and respond to these techniques" (43). It is through this textual analysis that Reynolds comes to the conclusion that the text seems to be aware of the limitations of the pagan worldview of its Characters.

Specifically, he points to a section of the poem after Beowulf's defeat of Grendel's mother, which shows the "limitations of Beowulf's view of evil" (29). In this section, Hrothgar discusses the dangers of living for material gains rather than for spiritual fulfillment. In the Heaney translation, he advises Beowulf with the words "beware of that trap. Choose, dear Beowulf, the better part, eternal rewards" (lines 1758-1760). This most likely alludes to Christian values, which are connected to rewards in the afterlife.

Another one of the Christian elements noted by Reynolds is the connection between the Christian concept of sin and the antagonistic character of Grendel, whom he describes as the personification of sin (31). This theme is further explored by Malmberg, who compares the Old-English phrases used to describe the devil and demons to those used to describe the monstrous Grendel. In his article, *Grendel and the Devil*, he cross-references certain phrases used in relation to Grendel with their uses in other works that were written in or translated into Old English. His goal is to examine the nuanced connotations of specific Old English vocabulary—specifically in relation to Satan or the devils—to determine if the descriptions contained in Beowulf would be likely to elicit similar associations in a contemporary audience.

Significantly, Malmberg's analysis suggests that some of the vocabulary used in relation to Grendel does indeed have a strong connotation with the Christian concept of the devil. He explains that the phrase *Godes andsaca*,(renouncer of God) used to describe the antagonist, occurs in Old English poetry ten times: out of those ten, six reference Lucifer and his devils, one is the description of the Pharaoh in *Exodus* (who Malmberg claims is an allegorical representation of the devil as well), as is one in *Azarias,* one is a description of "the damned" in *Christ*, and the last one is used in reference to the damned in *Christ and Satan* (242). Over half of the uses are therefore directly connected to the devil himself, and all ten of them are connected to some Christian sinners. This usage suggests that the appearance of the phrase in Beowulf may have also elicited a similar religious connotation to a contemporary audience.

Reynolds and Malmberg's analyses of Grendel as a personification of Christian sin suggests that the Christian elements of the poem are not just asides added onto a pagan epic but are indeed symbolically interwoven into the religious meaning of the narrative.

Reynolds also argues that a Christian reading is appropriate for the significance of Beowulf's death and the subsequent tragic fate that befalls the Geats. While Beowulf succeeds in defeating the physical threats to his people, he cannot assure a happy future for his kingdom. Reynolds argues that it is human evil that brings on the unfortune that follows Beowulf's death, as it is the "Swedish threat" from "foreign princes" (39) that becomes the major tragedy at the end of the narrative. The implied solution to such a threat—that lies not in monstrous enemies but in human discord—is for people to "free themselves of sin" (39). If we adopt this reading of the narrative, the moral of Beowulf seems to be that while secular heroics acts are noble, Christian morality is needed to sustain a society without it falling into turmoil.

It can be admitted that this discourse is not pertinent to Beowulf's full history. It is entirely possible that an older version of the poem, pagan in nature, existed long before the written version we have today. The multiple references to the seemingly pagan beliefs of some of the characters suggest that the writer of Beowulf could have built upon a pagan legend; after all, it is the narrator himself that makes up the largest number of Christian references—almost 61.7 percent of the total amount, according to Irving ("The Nature of

Christianity in ‘Beowulf’” 9). Nonetheless, it is incorrect to assume that the writer simply added Christian elements to a previous legend. As discussed above, God is incorporated into the narrative itself, seemingly influencing the results of Beowulf’s battles. Furthermore, the antagonist of Grendel is rooted in strong Christian imagery, depicting him as a devil-like creature and a descendent of Cain. The conclusion of the work also seems to have a Christian moral, characterizing the pagan characters as fundamentally tragic. Christianity thus has a role within the epic that goes way beyond the surface level. Ultimately, we cannot determine how many similarities the version of Beowulf that we are familiar with today had with any pre-Christian versions. After all, the only version of the text that can be academically analyzed is the one that was preserved in writing—and that version seems indeed to be Christian.

8 Embracing Fate

The matter in which Christian philosophy on predestination seems to converge with the heroic morality is the matter of embracing one’s fate and one’s death. We have previously discussed Augustine’s claim that the freedom to act without God’s influence and grace is a freedom to sin and to lead oneself away from the path of salvation. Similarly, it was noted that acting against the desires of one’s lord was one of the greatest taboos for a retainer within the heroic moral code, even if following one’s lord meant following him to death. Both of those philosophies seem to suggest the moral action is to follow the fate prescribed to you.

In some regards, it is hard to imagine how following the prescribed course of your life could be considered a moral action, especially if we imagine that we do not have the option not to do so. However, the texts appear to suggest that even if we do not have power over our ultimate fate, we do have the decision on whether we receive it with acceptance or not. When Beowulf is dying after his fight with the dragon, it is implied that it is difficult for him to embrace his death, even if it is the end that God has foreseen for the warrior. As the poem states, “For the son of Ecgtheow [Beowulf], it was no easy thing to have to give ground like that and go unwillingly to inhabit another home in a place beyond; so every man must yield the leasehold of his days” (Heaney, lines 2587-2591).

And yet, Beowulf's death is described as heroic, and he appears to eventually face his fate with dignity. Mortally wounded, he attempts to brace himself for his death by asking to see the dragon's treasure, stating that "my going will be easier for having seen the treasure, a less troubled letting-go of the life and lordship I have long maintained" (Heaney, lines 2749-2751). In this manner, even though the readers have been told that it is not easy for Beowulf to accept his death, they are shown that he takes direct actions to embrace it, using the dragons hoard as a tool to help him let go of his attachments and to prepare for his fate. In the end, it seems that Beowulf accepts not only his own fate, but the fate of his kinsmen as well. As his last words, he proclaims that "Fate swept us away, sent my whole brave high-born clan to their final doom. Now I must follow them" (lines 2814-2816).

Ultimately, it seems that the issue of establishing a moral life when the course of one's fate is already pre-destined is eased by the fact that the belief in predestination itself is an integral part of the Anglo-Saxon moral expectations. The heroes of Anglo-Saxon poetry do not struggle to achieve morality despite their fate being inevitable; instead, they build their sense of morality through their inevitable fate. It is the actions one takes in response to fate that are decisive. This notion is possibly best explained through the following quote by Weil: "Call it God's providence or the mysterious, ubiquitous *wyrd*: an arrow by any other name would kill you. Your choice, then, was whether you took that arrow in the back or head-on, and how you chose determined whether you would be sung as a hero, a villain--or not at all" (96).

9 (Moral) Consequences of Trying to "Defy" Fate

This chapter will explore the ways in which the texts frame the cases in which characters attempt to change or escape their fate. In the epic poetry, it is arguable that the cases of retainers abandoning their lords in battle can be read as not only an offense against the heroic moral code but also an attempt to "defy" fate itself, given that they are trying to avoid their deaths. However, it should be noted here that defying fate is, by definition, impossible within the Anglo-Saxon worldview. We can therefore frame the avoidance of death in battle not as a full defiance of fate itself, but instead as the failure to put oneself in a position in which they would willingly ask God to decide their fate, like Beowulf does when he asks the Lord to determine the victor in his battle with Grendel. Furthermore, in many cases the attempts to delay fate by fleeing battle prove to be just trading one misfortune for another, specifically avoiding death at the cost of losing heroic glory and the social advantages that come with the heroic lifestyle.

We have previously discussed the character of Unferth in the context of his failures to embody heroic values. Nonetheless, despite his previous moral failures, it seems to be his inability to face his fate and risk the probability of death at the hands of Grendel's mother that finally ruins his reputation. The poem does not leave the moral judgment of his actions as implicit: it is noted outright that "He was not man enough to face the turmoil of a fight under water and the risk to his life" (lines 1468-1470). In this, he is once again posed as a foil to Beowulf, who is always ready to put his life in the hands of God and let fate decide the victor of the battle. While Unferth escapes the probable death, he cannot escape the punishment that follows, as he loses his respect and fame.

In this way, many of the characters that attempt to escape their fate on the battlefield are still doomed to lose the lives they enjoyed as honorable retainers, being instead limited to lives of shame. In this sense, the heroic moral code and its social repercussions function as sort of agent of fate, bringing repercussions to those that were believed to have attempted to escape God's plan. In this way, when God decided one's life as a hero was to end, it would inevitably happen, either through a heroic death or through the loss of heroic status. This is more implicit in The Battle of Maldon, which does not comment on the fates of those that abandoned their lord and escape the battle (or, if it did, the section was not part of the fragment that survived until present day), but it does name the deserters and describes them as immoral. If the characters described within the poem were truly alive to survive in the real-life battle of Maldon, then their depiction within the poem could be a negative influence on their reputation. However, as we cannot know the influence of poetry on real-life historical figures, it is enough here to point out that it is implied within the text that the men who refused to put their fate to the test in battle and accept the possibility of death should be denied the heroic glory that the other warriors are granted.

It could be argued that some forms of defying God's will are depicted as more damaging than others. The action that seems to be described as most evil within the poetry—

namely Beowulf—is to turn on one's kin. We have examined this briefly in the context of heroic morality and the taboo of disloyalty, but the idea of betrayal goes beyond the lord-and-retainer relationship, and it can be argued that it has additional moral dimensions in the context of fate. Especially with cases of betrayal against one's family, it could be argued that the act in itself can have connotations of defying fate, particularly if we associate being born into a specific family as being "fated" to be with your relatives and to assume their position in society. It has been discussed in previous chapters that social order played a large role in the medieval moral codes, so at least to some extent, individuals were expected to remain in the societal position determined by their birth. Beowulf, for example, refuses to be crowned as the next king while the previous king's sons are still alive, despite the fact that the royal family gives him permission to take the position. In this manner, Beowulf is respecting God's will, as he believes that the man that was destined by birth to be the king is a better choice for a ruler than himself, despite the others' doubts about the prince's ability to lead the Geats. There is no doubt that one's birth would have been seen as being determined by God's will, according to Leyerle "Kin-right, the right received from the gods, devolved on any member of the royal family and there was no clear notion of primogeniture" (99) in Germanic societies. This means that it was assumed that members of the royal family were divinely fated to be the rightful rulers, although Kingship would not be reserved for the oldest son but would instead be elected among the eligible heirs. If one's family lineage is considered such an important factor for one's fate in life, it is understandable that the betrayal of one's family would be considered one of the greatest sins a man can commit within the Anglo-Saxon worldview; it is not only an act against the moral expectation of loyalty, but also an act in which one defies the social order that God fated them to be born into.

In Beowulf, the fate of those who choose to betray their families is grim. Leyerle argues that family conflict is at the root of the misfortune that befalls the characters of the epic; claiming that "The Danish royal family was decimated by internal factions, not by Grendel" (92). Here he is likely referring to the internal struggles that occur long after Beowulf's fight with Grendel, but are foreshadowed at the beginning of the poem when it is noted that "the killer instinct unleashed among in-laws, the blood-lust rampant" (Heaney, lines 84-85). This conflict, it is implied, would eventually lead to the burning of Heorot. The consequences for the betrayals within the family are grave—they lead not only to the suffering of the betrayers, but to the doom of the entire clan.

It has been noted that Unferth's punishment for his inability to risk his life in battle and leave his survival up to fate is the loss of his heroic reputation. However, the punishment for the harm he caused to his family is implied to be much more severe, as "Beowulf…reproaches Unferth with fratricide and predicts that he will go to hell" (Leyerle 91). This illustrates how transgressive the act is within the Anglo-Saxon society—betrayal of a lord is enough to ruin someone; however, violence against one's family (especially one's parents) is seen as a cardinal sin for which even God is likely to damn someone.

10 Conclusion

The examination of the selected Anglo-Saxon poetry suggests that both the heroic code and Augustinian theology of predestination can be used for the interpretation of the Anglo-Saxon portrayal of fate. This thesis aimed to explore which moral responses to one's fate were deemed as appropriate within the explored literature. In terms of the question of how the morality of literary characters is established in relation to their fate, the research shows that the examined poetry tends to highlight the ideal of embracing one's fate, and to describe the consequences of attempting to defy one's fate as negative.

Both the Augustinian theology and the heroic moral code support this ideal. Augustine believed that men are responsible for their moral behavior (Rist 420), even if God has already foreseen their fate. This creates what Rist calls "the Augustinian Paradox", in which a "fallen man has free choices, always of evil, but does not enjoy freedom" (424)". Augustine thought that human freedom, outside of the influence of God's Grace, would essentially lead to inevitable sin (Rist 424). The role of human responsibility in Augustinian philosophy could therefore be described as somewhat passive: one can choose to follow God's guidance and give up parts of their freedoms of choice, or they could choose freely outside of God's influence, but this would only lead to sin. However, this does not mean that there was no freedom of choice altogether, since the choice to follow God's guidance, however passively, was still a choice; as Weil notes, the Anglo-Saxons “bore responsibility for their own actions, whether foreknown by God or forecast by fate” (103).

This belief provides some key parallels to the relationship between warriors and their lord, as described by the heroic moral code. The warriors are expected to follow their lords into battle in the heroic moral code, their loyalty to their lord being seen as a key aspect (O’Brien O’Keeffe 107). In a sense, their freedom of choice could also be described as passive—they must follow their lord, even to their death, and any decision to do otherwise is seen as morally disreputable (a fact that is apparent form Beowulf’s treatment of characters like Unferth or the Battle of Maldon’s description of those who flee the battle). In both cases, men are urged to follow the guidance of those above them, whether it be God or a lord, and their morality is determined by their ability to accept the position prescribed to them. In this sense, the connection between God and a warrior lord is supported by the fact that Jesus was often portrayed in terms of a “lord” and his disciples in terms of “thegns” (Jolly 29).

What implications do those philosophical traditions have on the ways that the poetic characters are meant to morally grapple with their fates? This essay has argued that fate, being determined by God, is meant to be accepted much like God’s influence in Augustinian theology. This idea of accepting fate, even in the sense of accepting one’s death, is reinforced in the heroic code, which mentions that “Lasting glory is won only under conditions where one’s life is in doubt” (O’Brien O’Keeffe 109).

The idea of a fixed, inescapable fate is therefore not an obstacle to Anglo-Saxon heroes leading moral lives; in fact, it is the aspect through which they establish their morality. Beowulf’s insistence on letting God decide the outcome of his battle with Grendel (lines 685-687), as well as the willingness of the warriors at the battle of Maldon to continue fighting despite losing the battle, are instances in which characters gain glory specifically for deciding to accept their fate in combat. While fate may be predetermined, a Hero’s reaction to it was not: as Weil explains “Bravery in extremity, grace under pressure: these are choices, and these a man could shape” (96). It is hence not an Anglo-Saxon hero’s death that determined if they were deserving of glory, but their ability to embrace the possibility of death that did.

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