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'Hera and poet have an almost symbiotic relationship in the Germanic cultural tradition from which the Anglo-Saxons came'. How helpful is this claim in understanding the Old English poems you have read on this course?

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While only a small body of Anglo-Saxon written literature survives into this century, it can be reasonably assumed that Anglo-Saxon writers were aware of, and well versed in, writing the Germanic tradition. Examples of what might be called a heroic 'code' appear in texts of diverse natures among the surviving samples, so it is not stretching belief to think that the Christian monks who wrote them were familiar with the old society, Its values, structure and mannerisms. The widespread use of heroic tropes within Christian written literature however, suggests that this tradition was more than Just known, It was also Important to the Anglo-Saxons. Roberta Frank suggests that the reason for the use of Germanic legend was that the Anglo-Saxons were trying 'harder and harder with each passing century to establish a Germanic identity', but the record of the Germanic hero code appears rather to become more flexible and adaptable as each century passes. It is applied in an ever more explicitly Christian manner, and passes more judgement on the values held by the old society, that it appears rather to be more of an appreciation and conservation of a useful and relevant value system, than an attempt at cultural amelioration.

Hence, poets were not blindly adhering to tradition because they were desperately trying to create a cultural identity. They took the rich tradition of the Germanic hero and successive generations shaped him and his society to their various audiences. When poetry became written and Christian, the hero became more of a definitive poetic feature in the minds of poets and audiences, and this essay will look at the relationship between the hero, and specifically those attributes of Germanic heroism that became the criteria for him to be known as a hero, and how the poet makes use of him and his values for the poet's own purpose. To illustrate the changing nature of the poet, and how this impacts the poem, it will look at an early composition, 'Beowulf', and a much later one, 'The Battle of Malden' though both were written in the tenth century.

Firstly, poetry has cultural value as a form of performance. In an oral tradition, public performances of song or poetry were a way of transmitting and enjoying cultural knowledge. The referential and allusive nature that Anglo-Saxon poetry adopts towards its Germanic background would suggest that the poet knows his audience is aware of the ramifications of the allusions he is making, giving his stories and tales an interconnected nature, both with each other as works of literature and performance, and with the audience as sharers and transmitters of the culture. Mentions in 'Beowulf' of the heroes and events of other legends would likely have drawn nods of recognition from an audience, and an understanding of the poet's intentions in referring to them. The poet, in this way, can invite his audience to reflect on his presentation of the hero and the position as example he holds in society. The mention of Ingeld and his marriage to Hrothgar's daughter, Freawaru, as a peace-weaving arrangement will echo the position of Wealtheow for the audience, and Beowulf's warning of the fragility of peace-weaver marriages will be given added weight by the retelling of the

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tragedy of Hildeburh. The poet's position on the delicate balance of personal honour and the need for peace in politics not only gives Beowulf a balanced mind to go with his strength but give the audience a chance to think on the traditions of feuds and marriages, both as cultural institutions and narrative devices. The poet has Beowulf share his thoughts about the traditions, providing a contemplative link through the hero for the audience to their ancestors' way of life that left significant impact on the lives of the poet's contemporaries, and can act as a spur to collective memory. Thus the audience gives meaning to the poet's allusions, and his function has grown from simple entertainer to one who can, through the presentation of his hero and the episodes that accompany him, make and invite cultural comment.

This cultural reflection goes a step further when the poet sets up his hero as an example of model behaviour. It has been suggested that the intention of heroic poetry was to hold `heroes such as Beowulf up for admiration and emulation', but as has already been argued, the referential use of the Germanic tradition that builds a hero also holds him up for evaluation and scrutiny. These heroes certainly do not ask for the pity and tears of their audiences that a hero in the Hamlet school of tragedy would. They hold each other to account for their actions, and their poets feel entitled to do the same. After Beowulf has slain Grendel's mother, the troop of retainers around him praise his deeds;

13r woes Beowulfes
maned; monfg oft gecwt1
paette sub ne nord be sem tweonum
Ofer eormengrund oiler nnig

Under swegles begong selra nre
Rondhbbendra rices wyrdra.
Ne hie huru winedrihten whit ne logon
Gledne Hrodgar, ac boat was god cyning

[then were Beowulf's glorious deeds related; nowhere, they said, north or south, between the two seas or under the tall sky was there anyone better to raise a shield or to rule a kingdom. Yet there was no laying of blame on their lord, the noble Hrothgar; he was a good king].

This episode shows the retainers that have heard of Beowulf's successes praising him, but the poet makes it clear that they are not doing it to the detriment of their own king. This suggests that these people were clear about what in a man made a good hero, and a good king, and while lauding one were aware of the effects such a comparison could have on the presentation of their own lord. The care with which the poet makes this clear would point to the expectation his audience would have about the poet using his characters to set an example of behaviour, and using this example to measure the conduct of others.

This same kind of care in presenting hero as example is taken in The Battle of Malden', but to a different end purpose. The poet has an agenda that he wishes to prove in writing the poem in the style of the heroic, that of the difference between simple soldier, and deserving hero. He sets up Byrthnoth, a noble in charge of the English army during a skirmish with some Vikings, as one in the battle-hardy mould, for the purpose of providing an exemplary model of behaviour. He cannot claim, as the 'Beowulf' poet can, near superhuman strength for his hero, nor can he pit his hero against inhuman foes, but nevertheless, Byrthnoth is given other heroic attributes. He 'ongan beornas trymian' ('began to arrange his warriors'), he has a loyal 'heard werod' ('hearth-troop'), and he is 'nn red'

('single-minded' or 'focused'). However, the poet adapts the Germanic hero as a centre of strength and a good example to all warriors, and gives Byrthnoth the added distinction of exemplary Christian. A generous benefactor to the religious centre of Ely, the poem commemorates Byrthnoth not Just as a great soldier and loyal servant of the king, but also as a model for reconciling the necessary brutality of the Germanic warrior lifestyle and the Christian religion. It brings the scale of the epic down to the known and the particular, a familiar noble and an old enemy, yet the poet manages to have his hero transcend this known sphere and treats battle — once the only test of a heroic contender —as a mere prelude to the Christian heaven. The poet cannot make his hero a victor, but in the context of a Viking raid he can give Byrthnoth the moral victory over those whose souls are damned to hell. Paul Siarmach suggests that the moralistic victory is central to the poem, but his analysis centres on the word 'oferniode' meaning 'over-proud`, suggesting that It is the Christian sin of pride that led to their downfall. However, in the context of 'ofermOcle' being translated to mean 'over-confident' or 'over-exuberant', Szarrnach's analysis of this as simple Christian moralising is questionable. The very values that make Byrthnoth a hero in the style of the poem chosen are the ones that let him down; a contortion of the Germanic ideal about what makes a hero a hero, and at once It becomes both simpler and more complex than a deserving defeat. In the pragmatic, unflinching attitude of the pagan warrior, defeat sometimes happens, and in the context of a Christian background, battle is a chance to prove his suitability to heaven and not a disastrous loss. The prayer he says, commending his soul to the protection of angels further Illustrates the liberty with which the poet has adapted Germanic heroes to the shaping of a Christian hero, in that the pagan warriors went into battle with nothing but their strength and wits to rely upon, and as such, had to value those things above hope for help from a divine source. The Maldon poet has taken the literal defeat of a heroic warrior, and turned it, using those same values of strength and fearlessness, into a Christian commendation of character.

However, the nature of the hero-poet relationship is not a simple one-sided affair. While the poet needs a hereto entertain and challenge his audience, the hero also needs a poet to present him. It is, ultimately, the poet who has control of the characters he presents and the response to them he hopes to elicit from his audience, yet there will always be different interpretations of the poet's words and intentions, as shown above with the contention over the meaning of ofermade. In this sense, the poet loses a little of the control he has over his hero, and the hero, while dependent upon his record, can take on a little poetic space of his own.

The poet has control over what he writes and how he writes it, so the intention in using certain heroic tropes passed through the oral tradition would be to create new material in a familiar context and framework that the audience can interact with. J. R. R. Tolkien, in his revolutionary essay 'Beowulf and the Critics', tells us that, Just because the name of an Anglo-Saxon poet does not survive, does not mean we can assume that his authorship was not important to him, or that we can forget the personal factor involved In writing poetry. The 'Beowulf' poet has chosen carefully the episodes within It that are related by other poets, and by Beowulf himself, so as to make the maximum Impaction the unity of the themes of hardship, heroics and feuding. Likewise, the 'Battle of Maldon' poet has carefully manipulated the stock epithets of a heroic poem to create a poem in which the referential frames are very much those of Germanic heroism but the hero is Christian. Even more subtly, the Maldon poet has chosen his religious sentiment within the Christian tradition to avoid the imagistic nature of The Battle of Brunanburh' to make a Christian hero, rather than a Christian poem.

This ability that the poet has, to create an enduring legacy to a man or concept is a critical feature of poetical self-awareness. These poets know the power of words themselves,

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and as such, know that they are fulfilling a socially important function in recording famous events or popular stories. This is shown In 'The Battle of Maldon' where Byrthnoth's last act is not simply death, but death accompanied by a prayer. He commends his soul to heaven and the protection of the angels on Its Journey there, and in doing so, imbibes his words with the power of God to fulfil that request. Without the words he has spoken, he is just another dead warrior but with them, he is a Christian hero. The idea that words can change the course one's soul is to take after this life is a very powerful one, particularly in a genre that deals with words as an earthly legacy. It is telling that the last word in the lengthy epic 'Beowulf' is 'Iofgeornost' , meaning 'the most eager for praise/ glory'. The Beowulf poet has left his readers with the implication of his own work; that Beowulf's name and deeds shall last beyond his body. This is different In nature to Byrthnoth's hopes of living beyond his body, and yet both rely upon the power of words to achieve something more lasting than transient life on Earth.

The poet knows that he, as the wielder of words, has the power to ensure that Beowulf's desire for renown is met, and that Byrthnoth's example does not become lost to the din of the battlefield. The use of poetry within a poem draws attention to the craft of the poet In the purpose of making a hero a hero to remember. After the battle with Crendel's mother, Beowulf is treated to the tale of Sigemund the dragon-slayer, where the singer parallels Beowulf's deeds to those of a legendary hero from the past. Here, the poet is showing how, through poetry itself, a hero is made. Heroes have their deeds remembered and sung about, and as Beowulf has been treated to a poem dedicated to his successes, It has signified he is now on the same plane of legend as Sigemund, as has become, for both Beowulf's retainers and the poet's listeners or readers, Beowulf as history will remember him. The battle at Maldon and the death of Byrthnoth fs recorded in the factual account 'The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle', but the fact that poet took this knowledge and set It to a background of heroic style and Christian example, means that he was deliberately creating a hero out of someone already known in order to commemorate Byrthnoth and ensure that the can get his message across; that physical defeat is not the end of a hero, for his example and name lives on in words.

This double-nature of poetry as a means of making and preserving a hero is presented to us only in its written form, but the oral tradition from which It came will have shaped and influenced it, and hence will have influenced the nature of the hero as he is presented by the poet. When an oral performance, a singular event, becomes a written one, it takes on a life apart from that of the poet performer. It separates the poet from his artefact, and in doing so removes the hero from the sale domain of the poet himself. The hero becomes as much a separate entity as the poem does, being as they are no longer tied to a specific performance at a specific moment in time. As shown, the surviving written examples of Anglo-Saxon poetry still retain a heavy Germanic influence in their presentation, whether It be on an entire society, such as that in 'Beowulf', or selective attributes of the traditional hero given to a character, such as in `The Battle of Maldon'. As poetry moved from oral to written, and from Pagan to Christian, the role of the poet in society and his relationship to his audience would have also changed. He can shape his material a little more definitely, take a little more time over the composition of it and preserve it as It is for future generations, but the poet also loses a little of his connection with It as he writes it down and separates himself from it in the minds of his audience, because they no longer see him in the telling of the hero's story. As writing becomes professionalised, so may the standard expected of court and hall poets rise, and these cumulative changes alter the hero's place in society as much as they do the poet's. He is no longer needed as simply a battle-hardened warrior; as people grew more literate, as the

political system stabilised into a unified kingdom and saw multiple threats from invading outsiders that one man alone could not assuage, the hero lost his place as a real need for people, and became Instead a shining example of past strength and glory.

Ultimately , each poem from the Anglo-Saxon era that comes down to scholars today has something unknowable about it, whether It be the poet's name, part of the text that is missing or the context of the references made within It. Yet they endure, self-conscious legacies of great and educated men, preserving the names and the deeds of heroes spanning Europe and centuries. It seems that in the act of writing, the poet has fulfilled the great Germanic hero's last wish and ensured he is remembered, while the hero has ensured the poet has a place as a chronicler and entertainer within his people. The hero and the poet cannot be easily parted in the Anglo-Saxon tradition; each has so much at stake as the other's success.

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