

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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***The Dream of the Rood* 700-775 (conjectural)**

Dating and authorship

Dating difficulties surround most of the major works of Mediaeval literature. Records were often lost, damaged, or misinterpreted, and above that there was the difficulty of determining where and by whom major writings were created. In the present instance, there are only limited landmarks to guide us to the authorship or date of the poem called *The Dream of the Rood*. We know that the text is preserved in the Vercelli Book, a 10th century archival compilation, existing in Italy, and from other evidence we surmise that the text may date from the eighth century. An instance may indicate how fortuitous is the 'other evidence' concerning the possible eighth century dating of the poem. The Ruthwell Cross, an eighteen foot tall obelisk-cross, decorated with foliage and runes, tells a collage of stories from the Bible, and preserves parts of *The Dream of the Rood*.

The poem

The *Dream of the Rood* (pole; cross) is a dense religious poem, 156 lines of alliterative verse, in which the narrator recounts a dream that came to him in the middle of the night:

*Listen! I will speak of the sweetest dream,
What came to me in the middle of the niught,
When speech-hearers slept in their rest.
It seemed to me that I saw a most wondrous tree,
Raised on high, round wound with light,
The brightest of beams.*

Translation throughout by Roy Liuzza)

From this point on we are in the hands of a hyper sensitive observer, who at once observes the tree glistening with jewels, as brilliant to behold as the creation itself, and sees that this gallows is for no felon, but is circled round with the blessings of the holy angels. From the outset of this dream, we are fixated on a wooden cross of great splendor and meaning, and though the drift of the language is fully Christian, the implications of the articulate and glistening tree are as pagan-archaic as a maypole.

From this initial vision point the narrator reflects on his own sinfulness, and the contrast it makes with the brilliance of the tree. It is at this point that the complexity of the poem kicks in:

Beneath that gold I began to see an ancient wretched struggle, when it first began to bleed on the right side.

Is the wood itself the creator?

I saw that eager beacon change garments and colors,

Risks the poet, ascribing to the tree two traits, soaked with blood and 'bedeckt with treasure.'

The introductory feast of attention is complete. We would have no trouble thinking of the poem ahead of us as pagan and Christian interwoven. To a degree this conclusion would fit the read of *Beowulf*, in himself a king of secular salvations, a slayer of evil forces, and a sacrificial victim, while at the same time a bare knuckled warrior from Geatland.

At this point the wood of the tree begins to speak, transformed now into a historicizing tree reflecting on its original felling, at the forest's edge, and recognizing again God's plan to make it, me the tree, the carrier of the exhausted bleeding body who mounted me. I dared not, the tree continues, dare to bend down or slacken my straightness; I knew what I was responsible for carrying. One with the man he is carrying, and bloody with the blood of that man, he endured, mocked, with his bloody burden. He continues to address us, ruminating on the events of the tomb, and eventually the adulation of the tree, himself, For all his scars and blood, the tree, partly the man who died there, part beneficence itself, sees itself as a salvation conferring force. Surrounded by the Savior and the tree he died upon, mankind has nothing more to fear. The narrator exits triumphantly from his adventure into salvation by way of the material wood, which first entered into conversation with the daring mortal.

The pagan- Christian imagination

We have briefly pinpointed four individual authors from the early Middle Ages.

Boethius and Cassiodorus carried with them classical learning, the experience of a Christian culture, a Roman Imperial perspective—in what concerned the split between Romanitas and the new world which did not yet know how to name itself.

The figure of Philosophia, in *The Consolation of Philosophy*, is a prototypical mercy figure, skirting the emotional richness of what, in the Mother of Christ, become a defining figure for the growing emotional richness of early Christianity. while Cassiodorus immersed himself, for one thing, in the liturgical music destined to play so large a role in the early development of Church music.

The authors of *Beowulf* and *The Dream of the Rood* arguably created a couple of centuries after the two Ostrogothic diplomats and scholars. In both of these workers in the imagination, Christian themes were sharply developed. (The emergence of those themes was evident, here and there, throughout ancient classical culture—in the spiritual loyalty of Antigone, in the instinctive understanding between Orestes and Iphigeneia, even in the wounded love of Dido for Aeneas, and in the complex-compassionate world-view of the Emperor Marcus Aurelius. By and large, though, the Greco Roman world outlook was short on compassion, if long on human understanding.)

When we come to *Beowulf* and the poem of the *Dream of the Rood*, we immediately intuit an altered climate. There are, in *Beowulf*, many references to Biblical material—for example the flood, and Cain—to whom Grendel is plausibly likened—and there is the image of Beowulf himself, as a noble, perhaps salvific figure, keen to clean out vicious figures like Grendel, his mother, and the dragon. There is no motivation for Beowulf's action, outside the pure desire to clear away evil. *The Dream of the Rood* carries this theme of pure ego lessness to the doorstep of Christianity—in fact to the limits of any highly organized religious insight, into the articulate of the spiritual speaking through nature into the human orbit.

Study guides

Does the present poem surprise you by its 'modernity?' That is, does the imaginative work that moves the poem into a speaking tree, and from there into the tree's burden and joys seem to you bold beyond expectations, stylistically and sensually? Does 'modern poetry' not thrive on the same kind of daring we see in this poem, where the dislocated subject moves penetratingly over a fretful and ambiguity rich field of meaning?

Is the Rood itself a part of nature or an other ego to the speaker of the poem? Does the speaker of the poem become the Rood? In other words, who is the subject and who the object of this poem? Does the fact that the poem is a 'dream' authorize a kaleidoscopic landscape, in which all the participants are articulate, and even the narrator is part of what he narrates?

This poem is 'Christian' in the way it involves the religion's savior, his sufferings, and the meaning of his suffering? Is it also a hymn to nature, and to the power of nature to express the deepest human experiences? Is the narrator a 'pantheist' as well as a monotheistic believer?