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Early English Literature as Christian Propaganda

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Abstract

British Literature is a valid example of the way in which literature can shape the societies in which we live. This essay will examine Early British Literature as Christian propaganda. It analyzes three British works, one each from the Old English era, the medieval era, and the early modern era, and illustrates the methods in which the works reflect Christian beliefs. In addition to examining works published during a certain era, the essay also examines the environment in which the authors lived and connects it to the ideas reflected in their works. The essay ultimately reveals that Old English Literature served as propaganda that persuaded its Anglo-Saxon society to convert from paganism to Christianity and uses *The Dream of the Rood* as an example. *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* reflects the Medieval era by using Romantic conventions to create a religious story, and Christopher Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus* attempts to bring Christian morals into a society now ruled by early modern capitalism and the rise of secular philosophy and science.

Key Terms:

- Christian Propaganda • *The Dream of the Rood*
- Anglo-Saxon • *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*
- Paganism • *Dr. Faustus*

People often try to persuade others using a multitude of methods. In today's society, people use social networks, television, video, and periodicals as just a few of the ways to spread their viewpoints to others. This practice is not new. Ever since writing became universal, people have been employing the use of the written word as propaganda for their beliefs. While political propaganda is quite prominent in the present-day, religious propaganda thrived in England's early years. The Old English, Middle English, and Early Modern English periods have all produced an enormous amount of literature that serves as vessels for Christian beliefs. *The Dream of the Rood*, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, and Christopher Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus* are all valid examples of Christian propaganda.

The Dream of the Rood was first written in Old English, an indicator that it was written during the time period of the Anglo-Saxons. England was not always dominated by Christianity, and Anglo-Saxons were often devout participants in pagan practices. There is a sizable amount of evidence that indicates that *The Dream of the Rood* was written in an effort to steer Anglo-Saxon pagans towards a Christian lifestyle. The poem's author did this by associating pagan elements with Christianity in order to help Anglo-Saxons identify with it. An example of this is the fact that the story of Christ's death is told through the voice of the cross on which He died. Anglo-Saxon paganism included nature worship, particularly the worship of trees. Jesus's cross was carved from a tree. The author of *The Dream of the Rood* describes the tree in a manner that makes it seem divine:

All that beacon was covered with gold;
 gems stood fair where it met the ground,
 five were above about the crosspiece.
 Many hosts of angels gazed on it, fair in
 the form created for them. This was surely
 no felon's gallows, but holy spirits beheld

it there, men upon earth, and all this
 glorious creation. (27)

As the story continues, the tree itself goes on to proclaim a sort of divinity about itself saying, "...men far and wide upon earth honor me" (28). The fact that the author portrays the tree as something holy shows that the tree was meant to appeal to Anglo-Saxon pagans.

Though the tree speaks highly of itself, it clearly places Christ on a higher pedestal. It reveres Him, calling him "Mighty King," "Heaven's Lord," and "God of Hosts" (28). The tree also stands as a servant to the Lord by doing what the Bible says all Christians must do, spreading the message of Jesus:

Now I command you, my beloved man,
 that you tell all men of this vision...He
 tasted death there; yet the Lord arose again
 to help mankind in his great might. Then
 he climbed to the heavens. He will come
 again hither on this earth to seek mankind
 on Doomsday, the Lord himself, Almighty
 God, and his angels with him, for he will
 judge... (29)

The fact that the author uses a pagan element to spread a Christian message shows that *The Dream of the Rood* is Christian propaganda meant to convert Anglo-Saxons from paganism to Christianity.

The Dream of the Rood's portrayal of Jesus also indicates that the author wrote the piece as Christian propaganda. The New Testament describes Christianity as a peaceful religion, one that avoids conflict especially in the physical sense: "But I tell you, don't resist an evildoer. On the contrary, if anyone slaps you on your right cheek, turn the other to him also" (*Holman Christian Standard Bible*, Matt. 5:38-40). Jesus's death serves as the ultimate symbol for this peace.

The fact that he is called the “Lamb of God” shows that many see him as an innocent victim, sacrificed for mankind. His demeanor during the prayer in Gethsemane further reflects this perception: “Father if you are willing, take this cup away—nevertheless, not My will but Yours, be done.” (Luke 22:42)

The Dream of the Rood’s Jesus contradicts the common view of Jesus as a victim. The author describes Him as a “hero” and a “warrior,” and Jesus seems to be preparing for battle before His crucifixion: “Then the young Hero stripped himself—that was God Almighty—strong and stouthearted. He climbed on the high gallows, bold in the sight of many, when he would free mankind” (28). In *The Dream of the Rood*, Jesus is no longer a humble victim, but a bold soldier. The author portrays him this way because it is more in line with Anglo-Saxon culture. Anglo-Saxons valued war and found fighting to be noble. This value even carried over to the Anglo-Saxon pagan idea of the afterlife: Valhalla (“Pagan Afterlife and Salvation”). Valhalla or the “Hall of the Slain” is a mead hall where the souls of noble warriors live eternally. In Valhalla, the soldiers prepare to fight in an “apocalyptic battle” between the gods that symbolizes the end of the world (“Pagan Afterlife and Salvation”). The portrayal of Jesus as a brave warrior is another indicator of the author’s creation of Christian propaganda for the conversion of the Anglo-Saxon pagans.

Sir Gawain and the Green Knight is not obvious Christian propaganda, but upon further study, it becomes apparent that it is an allegory promoting Christianity. On the surface, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* seems to be solely a piece of romance literature, a type of literature that came to prominence during the Middle Ages. However, certain elements of the story symbolize other things, producing a Christian message. Gawain, the story’s protagonist, serves as a representative of the ideal Christian. The author often characterizes Gawain as blameless, often

calling him “good” (558). An indicator of this is the items that he carries with him into battle. Around his neck and on his shield, he bears a five-pointed star, a “pentangle.”

And why the pentangle is proper to that peerless prince I intend now to tell, though detain me it must. It is a sign by Solomon sagely devised. To be a token of truth by its title of old... (623-26)

Through the pentangle, Gawain represents Christianity because it is the sign of Solomon, a king that held great favor in the eyes of God in the Old Testament. The pentangle also represents “the five wounds/That Christ got on the cross” (642-43). The author uses the material that the pentangle is shaped from to represent Gawain’s goodness saying, “Was Gawain in good works, as gold unalloyed,/Devoid of all villainy, with virtues adored in sight” (633-34). This blameless nature that Gawain possesses mirrors the goodness that Christians must embody. Gawain also carries the image of “the high Queen of heaven” (the Virgin Mary) on his shield (647). The fact that he carries these symbols of Christianity with him shows that he values it. Since he is a knight, a respected individual in medieval society, his Christian representation sends the message that Christians are to be admired and emulated.

The story details the journey in which Gawain travels to receive retaliation at the hands of the Green Knight. Gawain’s journey symbolizes the Christian journey to salvation, while the Green Knight symbolizes God. On the journey, Gawain encounters obstacles that are said to befall many Christians. One of these obstacles is fear and uncertainty. As he ventures from Arthur and Guenevere’s kingdom for the first time as a knight, he must encounter the elements of a harsh winter with no shelter. In his time of need, he prays, crying “On Christ in his great need” (762). God gives his response when Gawain reaches a place to stay right after he prays. Gawain

handles this obstacle just the way that an ideal Christian should. He later encounters another obstacle: temptation, in the form of his host's wife. As a knight, he is supposed to avoid any intimate contact with a woman, but spends days with the host's wife and "talked of this and that until 'twas nigh noon" (1280).

When Gawain meets the Green Knight at the end of his journey, he reveals that he's been watching him the entire time: "...I know well the tale,/And the count of your kisses and your conduct too,/And the wooing of my wife—it was all my scheme!/She made trial of a man most faultless by far" (2359-62). The omnipresent nature of the Green Knight represents God, and the way in which he willfully tests Gawain resembles the way in which God allows Satan to tempt Job, also a blameless Christian (*Holman Christian Standard Bible*, Job 1:8). The Green Knight also has a forgiving nature towards Gawain, another characteristic of God: "Such harm as I have had, I hold it quite healed...I hold you polished as a pearl, as pure and as bright" (2390, 2393). The author of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* illuminates Christianity and promotes the idea all Christians are able to receive forgiveness.

Christopher Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus* is a piece that differs from those of the early and late Middle Ages. It was published during England's early modern Period, a time that signaled the rise of capitalism as well as philosophical and scientific ideas that often deviated from the Church. Through *Doctor Faustus*, Marlowe creates Christian propaganda that addresses the people living in this sort of society. He begins by condemning the insatiable thirst for knowledge that seemed to give rise to many early modern scientists and philosophers. Doctor Faustus tosses aside his books of law, medicine, philosophy, and theology because he claims that he's studied them all and wants more knowledge (Marlowe 1-2). He resorts to "necromantic books" or black magic,

claiming that their "lines, circles, schemes, letters, and characters" are "heavenly" (50-51). Through this detail, it is obvious that Marlowe is condemning the way in which many early modern thinkers spread ideas that contradicted those of the church. He urges the English to return to Christian ideas because any intellectual desire outside of those ideas is a breeding ground for Satan.

Marlowe also attacks ideas brought about by capitalism and the way in which they deviate from Christianity. Lines 52-54 detail Faustus's motivations for studying necromancy:

Ay, these are those that Faustus most desires
O what a world of profit and delight,
Of power, of honor, of omnipotence
Is promised to the studious artisan!

The reasons for Faustus's studying are greed and pride, values deemed sinful within Christianity. Marlowe illustrates just how sinful greed is when Mephistophilis tells Faustus that God damned Lucifer to hell for "aspiring to pride and insolence" (67). It becomes Faustus's downfall as well when God damns him to hell (110-114). Capitalism made it so that anyone could attain wealth and status by providing goods and services. Marlowe condemns this practice by illuminating the greed that can result from it. The fact that God punishes Faustus for that greed shows that his character serves as a warning about what can happen when one disregards a Christian life.

The Dream of the Rood, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, and *Doctor Faustus* are all valid examples of Christian propaganda. The author of *The Dream of the Rood* wrote to spread Christianity in an Anglo-Saxon pagan society, while the author of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* did the same in a medieval society so taken with romance and knighthood. Christopher Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus* reminded an early modern society of Christian values forgotten in the

wave of an intellectual and economic renaissance. All three authors used literature as a method of spreading their ideas, but they did not do so through non-fiction analyses. They spread their ideas through story-telling and using elements that related to their society, allowing them to both inform and entertain their readers. This fulfills the true purpose of literature.

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