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Ensminger, Aaron

A Master's Thesis:

**1. "Making the
Christian Warrior:
Beowulf and
Christianity"...**

June 1, 1997

A Master's Thesis

Aaron Ensminger

Presented to the Graduate and Research Committee

of Lehigh University

in Candidacy for the Degree of

Master of Arts

in

English


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LEHIGH UNIVERSITY
DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH
M.A. THESIS PAPERS

<u>Topic</u>	<u>Faculty Supervisor</u>
1. <u>Christianity in <i>Beowulf</i></u>	<u>Dr. Patricia C. Ingham</u>
2. <u><i>The Man of Mode</i> and Hobbes</u>	<u>Dr. Scott P. Gordon</u>
3. <u>The Clerk/Cherl Variants in Chaucer's</u> <u><i>Physician's Tale</i></u>	<u>Dr. Peter G. Beidler</u>

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Contents

Abstracts	1
“Making the Christian Warrior: <i>Beowulf</i> and Christianity”	2
“A Love of Dissembling: Hobbes and <i>The Man of Mode</i> ”	21
“The Churlish Clerk: The Clerk/Cherl Variants of Chaucer’s <i>Physician’s Tale</i> ”	40
<i>Curriculum Vitae</i>	55

Abstracts

“Making the Christian Warrior: *Beowulf* and Christianity.” As a means of saving the Christian British culture from attacking Danes, *Beowulf* pairs Christianity and the Danish warrior code in an attempt to convert the Danish audience.

“A Love of Dissembling:” Hobbes and *The Man of Mode*.” In *The Man of Mode*, Etherege uses Dorimant, his principal Hobbesian character, to state that we should all be more Hobbesian in our day-to-day life.

“The Churlish Clerk: The Cherl/Clerk Variants in Chaucer’s *Physician’s Tale*.”
Modern editors have reread the *Physician’s Tale*. In two (and possibly four) of the instances where we today read “cherl,” we should actually read “clerk.”

Making the Christian Warrior: *Beowulf* and Christianity

Aaron Ensminger

Like many Anglo-Saxon works, *Beowulf* calls up for us images of a lost world. As we read the lines, we imagine the culture that produced them, and ask ourselves what images or ideas certain words and concepts in the poem called up for its audience. In her article on literacy, Linda Woodbridge calls this phenomenon "decontextualization," arguing that "[decontextualization] implies adding context when taking a discourse out of its original soil, where it needed no context because it came with the capacity to attract context to it"(26). In other words, modern readers tend to ascribe a context to a poem like *Beowulf* because the poem, even to us, seems to carry an unstated context within it. While we have historical records and some literature of the period, we can only imagine the feelings and ideas in the minds of the poet's listeners. Modern readers invent both an audience and its "context" for the poem, either to feel that they understand it better or simply to make it more interesting. Oral traditions, such as the one we find in epics like *Beowulf*, are particularly suited to this decontextualization. When a tale is told and retold, it must

be stripped to its barest essentials simply for the logistical purposes of storytelling. When social forces change, however, or a “discourse is taken out of its original soil,” audiences fill stories with their own contexts, either current ones or imagined “original” ones—those that the audience imagines the context to have been at the story’s inception.

Woodbridge’s idea of decontextualization is useful in thinking about religion, for it is one of the most volatile of social forces. Perhaps no other type of ideology is so influential in its own time and so unknown to later ages, for religion’s effect is most important on an emotional level, which can never be fully recorded. When a social force, such as religion that affects texts when they are written changes, this method (decontextualization) of interpreting texts becomes extremely useful. In particular, Christianity, for all of its historical evolutions, becomes one of the issues we, as readers, must decontextualize the most, for one century’s Christianity can be (and often is) vastly different from another’s. For example, in the late 20th century, we often see Christianity as a dominant cultural mode. In 10th century England, however, Christianity was not a dominant mode, but one of many competing ideologies.

To fully grasp this distinction between 10th century and 20th century Christianity, it is perhaps helpful to use the work of Peter Haidu. In “The Semiotics of Alterity,” Haidu points out that to understand texts that are often treated as “other,” readers must first exteriorize their views about issues within a work. By doing this,

readers' own ideas are placed at an equally external level with the ideas on the same issues in the text. If we exteriorize our views on Christianity, it becomes easier to see it as a competing ideology. One of the main reasons that Christianity was forced to compete with other codes in the 10th century, specifically that of the warrior-king, is that the Danes had just finished a series of raids and had subjugated much of Britain, destroying much of the church's infrastructure in the process. As these Danish tribes moved across Britain, they left pockets of their own people here and there, along with their culture, which was decidedly un-Christian. Henry Soames claims that although Christianity was clinging to a simple existence in its fading infrastructure, the clergy had little interest in converting the invaders:

It is . . . probable that the native clergy made no attempt, while their nation yet struggled for existence, to humanize its unrelenting enemies by communicating to them a knowledge of the Gospel. The Pagan warriors were besides likely to draw new prejudices against Christianity from the very success that usually waited upon their arms. Britain's trust in the Cross had not secured her fortunes . . . reliance upon Woden had been encouraged unceasingly by victory. . . . Vainly would Christianity solicit favourable notice from such minds thus prepossessed. A considerable change must be wrought . . . before [the society] could be gained over to calm reflection upon the religion of a people prostrate under its assaults.

(45)

Soames declares that the Danes were converted and Christianity saved by "Providence," and has nothing more to say on the subject. Many texts of the Anglo-Saxon period, however, such as *Beowulf*, indicate that Christianity, instead of competing with the warrior culture of the Danes, actually sought to align itself with

the Danish philosophy. It was necessary to replace the warrior culture, then, not simply because it was breaking down, but to ensure Christianity's survival in Britain. It had already been proven that Britain had no defenses against the Danes in battle, so the only way to ensure that the native culture would remain was to try desperately to convert the Danes. Indeed, this "subversive conversion" worked. John Godfrey writes that "[t]his conversion [to Christianity] was marked by the baptism of Guthrum. The conversion of the Danes steadily followed, but the means by which it was accomplished are not clear" (283). I will argue that *Beowulf*, with its Christian messages and overtones, was one of "the means by which it was accomplished." In fact, *Beowulf* has been said to have come from Mercia, which had a long tradition of scriptural poetry,¹ and though the Christian undertones of the poem have never been questioned, although the relationship of Christianity to the warrior-king has been debated.

The poem, first establishing Christian concepts as ideas on the same level as the ideology of the warrior-king, then proceeds to show its readers that the way to be a good Christian is not to be passive and wait for help to arrive, but to use God's assistance to do battle for what is right themselves. The poem, then, explicitly links Christianity with the warrior. Interestingly, it is a Danish warrior, Beowulf, who receives the heaviest Christian characterization. By establishing Christianity as an heroic (and Danish) concept, the poem accomplishes its main goal of making

¹Deanesly, 263.

Christianity a viable religion for the Danish conquerors.

The most expedient way to further the ideology of Christianity for the Danes in 10th century Britain was to link it with another more well-established one, such as the ideology of the warrior-king. After all, this warrior ideology was a successful one, for the Danes had invaded Britain while adhering to its codes. As the poem begins to merge Christianity with an already-present (and effective) ideology, however, it must also simply give the religion a place within the story. One of the easiest ways to accomplish this goal is to associate characters in the text with Christian figures.

One of the first examples of a Christian connection we see in the poem is in the description of Grendel. He is not simply a monster or even an evil man, but a direct descendant of Cain. While Cain is not exclusively a Christian figure, his story has implications for Christianity.:

...	fifelcynnes eard
wonsæli wer	weardode hwīle
sipðan him Scyppend	forscrifen hæfde
in Cāines cynne	—þone cwealm gewaræc
ēce Drihten,	þæs þe hē Ābel slog.
....	
þanon untydras	ealle onwocon,
eotenas ond ylfe	ond orcneas,
swylce gigantas	þa wið Gode wunnon
lange þrage;	he him ðæs lean forgeald.
	(102-08, 111-14)

[. . . the unblest creature occupied the dwelling-place of monsters for a while since the creator had proscribed to Cain's kin —the eternal Lord avenged the killing, because he slew Abel. From

him all evil offspring arose, giants and elves and orcs, also giants,
with whom God fought for a long time; he repaid him a reward for
that.]

In this short passage introducing Grendel, his sinister nature is illustrated not by cannibalism or by any evil deeds, but with the word *wonsæli* (unblessed) and by his relationship to Cain. These are certainly references to the Christian Old Testament (as well as the Judaica), but the use of Cain here gives pause. Why would the poet choose to relate Grendel to Cain when here are other more vivid examples of evil in Christian lore? Surely the evil of Grendel would have made a deeper impression on the poem's audience if Grendel were an actual devil, or at least a soldier of Satan's, just as Beowulf is shown to be a warrior for God, as we will see later. What we must remember, however, is the important role kinship played in the warrior culture that received *Beowulf*. We can then see what the reference to Cain must have meant to a 10th century audience.² The first part of the manuscript, lines 1-63, are devoted to simply tracing the lofty lineage of the Danes. In fact, the first lines do not describe any triumphs of Beowulf or even Hrothgar, but of the kings of old. We hear not of how the Danes have done great things, but of how the "princes performed courageous deeds" [æþelingas ellen fremedon] in "former times" [geardagum]. The poem, then, from its beginning, links its major players directly with their lineage. The Danes (and Beowulf himself) are not brave simply because of their

²While Irving notes that many critics point out that the allusions between Grendel and Cain can become forced, the poet has made a conscious decision to link the two. Certainly there is not a one-to-one correlation, but the qualities of Cain must have a bearing on our perception of Grendel.

deeds, but because they come from brave stock. By relating Grendel to Cain, the poet portrays Grendel as not only a menace to Heorot, but as unreliable, just as Beowulf is painted as heroic through his own lineage. Just as we have a stronger picture of Beowulf's prowess in battle from his history, so we must see Grendel as an "anti-Beowulf"—he is just as determined by his kin as Beowulf is. Kinship is important not only in introducing characteristics, but in making those characteristics real to the poem's listeners, for the warrior culture to which the poem speaks holds these lineages in high regard.

We also see in these opening passages the beginnings of God not only as savior, but as warrior-king. In the description above, God is more than a benevolent spirit. Instead, he takes an active role in battles (*þa wið God wunnon*) and avenges the death of Abel. While the idea of a vengeful God is not exclusive to the Anglo-Saxon world (any image of the Old Testament's God is hardly perceived as forgiving), the idea of God taking an active role in earthly battles seems directly pointed to the warrior culture. Just as in his reference to Cain, we see the *Beowulf* poet selecting Old Testament rather than New Testament images for his audience, perhaps because the God of the Old Testament is more compatible with a warrior culture, while still providing a means of access to the Christian god. In the passage describing Grendel, God's followers do not contend with the evil spirits of the world—it is God himself who does. Much of *Beowulf* is, in fact, littered with references to God as not only a ruler, but a warrior as well. Edward R. Irving, Jr. points out that *Waldend* is used eleven times in reference to the Christian god,

Drihten is used fourteen times, and *Cyning* three times (16). These words are also used to describe Hrothgar throughout the poem, and this fact illustrates a specific link in the poem between God as not only a spiritual ruler, but as a earthly one as well, and pairs him with the traditional warrior king, which Hrothgar clearly represents. At his first introduction we are told that “*Ɔa wæs Hroðgaré / hespered gyfen*” [Then success in battle was given to Hrothgar] (64). That these words (*Waldend, Drihten, Cyning*) meaning “leader” can carry a connotation of both ruler and warrior paints a dramatic picture of the Anglo-Saxon image of God that *Beowulf* attempts to present. We are shown countless times, in fact, that the war between Beowulf and the “Grendel family” is simply another battle in God’s ongoing war with the race of giants, most notably in the description of the sword Beowulf takes from Grendel’s mother. She has in her home a sword made by the giants, and we are already told at line 113 that Grendel is descended from the race of Giants, with whom God fought.

Epithets throughout the poem reinforce the idea of God as leader in battle. In these passages, we see a God concerned with bestowing both victory and prowess in war:

...	ond sibðan witig God
on swa hwæþere hond,	halig Dryhten,
mærðo deme	swa him gemet þince. (685-87)

[and then may wise God, holy God, decree glory on whatever hand seems fitting.]

geweold wigsigor;	—ond halig God
rodera Rædend	witig Drihten,
yðelice	hit on ryht gesced
	sybðan he eft astod. (1553-56)

[... and holy God controls victory in war; wise Lord, Ruler of heaven decided it rightly when he (Beowulf) stood up again.]

...	hwæðre him God uðe,
sigora Waldend,	þæt he hyne sylfne gewræc
ana mid ecge	þa him wæs elnes þearf. (2874-76)

[... whether God granted him, ruler of victories, that he would avenge himself alone with his sword-blade when there was need for his courage.]

God may well be concerned with justice, but in these lines God also takes an active role in determining the outcome of battles. At line 3054b-3055a God is called the “true king of victories” (nefne God sylfa, / sigora Soðcýning). God decrees not only who will be victorious, but who will have glory in war, and the two are separate ideas in the poem. God bestows victory on Hrothgar, but little glory, and both glory and victory on Beowulf. This portrayal of God as an active warrior serves to integrate the Christian religion into the already existing warrior culture, to be sure. God is no longer a spirit worshiped only by conquered peoples, as the Danes would have seen the English. He is, in fact, lord not only of heaven and of Christendom, but of battles. God takes an active hand in war and is important to have in one’s corner as a strong king or warrior.

This idea of God as warrior is not without precedent in Anglo-Saxon literature. In “The Dream of the Rood,” we have a poem that is decidedly Christian, but a produced by (or directed to) a warrior culture, evidenced by the warrior-like images of Christ that we see throughout the poem:

...	gestah he on gealgan heanne,
modig on manigra gesyðe,	þa he wolde mancyn lisan.

Bifode ic þa me se beorn ymbclpte; . . .

. . .

ahof ic ricne Cyning,

Heofona Hlaford;

[. . .

He climbed on the high

gallows, courageous in the sight of many, when he would free

mankind. I trembled when the warrior embraced me. . . I raised up

the great king, lord of heaven. . .]

These lines portray not a meek martyr, but a proud warrior who stands up to endure pain and even death for a greater cause. This strength in the service of God is certainly a part of defining the “good Christian” for the Anglo-Saxons, as *Beowulf* will also show.

At the same time that *Beowulf* links the warrior culture to the ideals of Christianity and portrays God as both a leader of warriors and as a warrior himself, it also begins to demonstrate to its audience just what a good—and bad—Christian is. Hrothgar is decidedly Christian, and not shy about making that fact known. He refers to Christianity once for every eight lines he speaks,³ much more than any other character in the story, and seems sure that God has sent Beowulf to protect him:

	Hine halig God
for arstafum	us onsende,
to West-Danum,	þæs ic wen hæbbe,
wið Grendeles gyre.	

[Holy God has sent him (Beowulf) to us for grace, as I have hope,

³Irving, 9.

with Grendel's terror.]

(381-84)

This passage, it seems, refers exclusively to the Christian god, for Hrothgar does not say that Beowulf is sent for safety or for protection, but for *arstafum*—favor or grace, a Christian concept. Hrothgar thanks God not for any of his warriors, or for helping him to defeat Grendel, but for Beowulf. It is important to notice that Hrothgar praises God's actions, and not the actions of any Christian, be he Beowulf or one of his own men, in this passage. Hrothgar is either a passive Christian or has grown too old and weak to do battle himself, or simply not decisive enough in his faith to do battle. As Irving points out, he is more prone to emotion and less to action (14), which, as I will show, is antithetical to the Christian ideals the poem sets up. Even when he praises God for victory in battle, he is completely inactive in the face of God's power in sending Beowulf:

“Ðisse ansyne	Alwealdan þanc
lungre gelimpe!	Fela ic laþes gebad,
grynna æt Grendle;	a mæg God wyrcan
wunder æfter wundre,	wuldres Hyrde.

.....

þurh Drihtnes miht	Nu scealc hafað
ðe we ealle	dæd gefremede
snyttrum besyrwan.	ær ne meahton

[For this sight let thanks at once be given to the Ruler of all! I endured much from the hateful one, affliction from Grendel; always may God bring about wonder after wonder, glory's shepherd. . . . Now through the Lord's might a warrior has carried out what we all might not accomplish through our skill.]

(928-31, 939-42)

Hrothgar, while he speaks the words of piety, does not or cannot back them up with the actions of piety. All his battles have been won in the past, and the poem dwells on the fact that Beowulf must come and rescue the kingdom, for Hrothgar is unable to do so. Nowhere in the poem is this articulated more clearly than after Beowulf has defeated Grendel:

	Ðær wæs Beowulfes
mærðo mæned;	monig oft gecwæð
þætte suð ne norð	be sǣm tveonum
ofer eormengrund	oþer nænig
under swegles begong	selra nære
rondhæbbendra,	rices wyrðra
–ne hiw huru winedrihten	wiht ne logon,
gladne Hroðgar,	ac þæt wæs god cyning.

[There was Beowulf's glory related; many often said that south nor north between the two seas over spacious ground no other under the sky's expanse was a better shield-bearer, more worthy of kingdoms—indeed they found no fault with gracious Hrothgar, friend and lord, but he was a good king.] (856-63)

In these lines, we must notice the glory in battle given to Beowulf, as well as the exhortation of his attributes as a warrior-king. He is “rices wyrðra” [worthy of a kingdom] and “rondhæbbendra” [a “better” shield-bearer]. The descriptions are placed directly next to Hrothgar's only adjectives—“friend” and “gracious.” Hrothgar is said to be a “good king,” but this statement seems to be said in haste to forestall any conclusions we would logically draw from the praise of Beowulf—almost a form of *occupatio*. The audience cannot help but see Beowulf as more worthy of fealty

than Hrothgar, no matter how much the poem makes a show of denying it.

It is in this very comparison that we see the beginnings of a new warrior-king ideology—that of the Christian warrior-king. This move that the poem makes is an interesting one. Not only does the poem extol Beowulf the Dane’s “kingly” attributes, but we see activity and vigor in battle as a good Christian virtue; God is at best indifferent to passive prayer and adulation, even in the name of Christian virtues, almost ignoring the more passive Christian king, for Hrothgar, for all his piety, is not able to send Grendel away with his prayers. In the warrior’s eyes, this contrast presumably serves Christianity in two ways: first, that God loves battle and victory, as we have already seen. Also, it is possible that God is bored with praise when it is *not* from someone who helps himself in battle. To gain God’s favor, one *must* do battle with His enemies. This must be, in the *Beowulf* poet’s eyes, the proper way to worship, for it is the active Christian, Beowulf himself, who is victorious and blessed. What is perhaps the most important part of Beowulf’s Christianity is that he is, up to the time of his death, an *actively* Christian warrior and king. He wins victories for God and then give God the credit. One example of this fact can be found at lines 1655-58:

Ic þæt unsofte	ealdre gedige
wigge under wærere,	weorc geneþde
earfoðlice;	ætrihte wæs
guð get wæfed,	nymðe mec God scylde.

[With difficulty, I survived the battle underwater with my life,
ventured upon the deed In adversity, immediately the battle would

have been ended, if God had not protected me.]

If we contrast this portrayal of the Christian warrior-king with the poem's portrayal of Hrothgar as Christian king, the direct relationship between warrior and Christian becomes even clearer. A good Christian must be a warrior. While Hrothgar gains peace at Heorot, Beowulf gains something much more important to a warrior culture—success in battle and the glory that comes with it. If we contrast these lines with Hrothgar's praise of God in lines 928-31 and 939-42, quoted above, we can see the effective difference between the Christianity of these two characters. Hrothgar thanks God for God's own actions—specifically, sending Beowulf. Here, God is the active party, not Hrothgar. Beowulf, conversely, thanks God for helping *him* in his battles—Beowulf is the active party, but has the support of God.

This poem was certainly known to part of its audience before each of its recitations by virtue of its oral history. Beowulf, then, presumably had the reputation of a hardened warrior; one that many real-life soldiers modeled themselves after. If this is the case, then the fact that God's power helps him so often would certainly serve to substantiate Christianity as a viable religion for a warrior culture:

Hæfde ða forsiðod	sunu Ecgpēowes
under gynne grund,	Gēata cempa,
[. . .]	—ond halig God
gewēold wīgsigor;	wītig Drihten,
rodera Rædend	hit on tyht gescēd
yðelice	syþðan hē eft āstōd.

[The son of Ecgthow, the Geatish warrior, would have perished under the ground [. . .]—and holy God controlled victory in war,

wise Lord, ruler of heaven, decided it rightly when he easily stood
up again.] (1550-56)

In this passage, God clearly, if he does not control the battle, certainly aids Beowulf in his victory: specifically, God “geweold” victory, or controlled it. The etymology of “geweold” is an important one, especially in this context. The word can mean to control, to be sure, but it also means “to rule” or “reign over”—the beginnings of our modern “to wield.” In fact, the *OED* gives, as one of its more common phrases using this word, “to wield a scepter.” Even the word used to describe God’s actions in this passage is used interchangeably with an earthly lord. If, as Soames writes, the Danes had an image in their minds of a weak Christian culture, this passage would at least give them pause. Here is one of the greatest warriors ever, controlling victory, and willing to sacrifice his body, nearly perishing “under the ground” in support of Christianity.⁴ If the idea that God directly controls victories does not win the Danes over, they have only to listen to Beowulf, himself a Dane, extol the virtues of his “Drihten.” When Beowulf has slain the dragon (with some help) and realizes he will die, he exhorts not one of his warriors to watch over his people, but God:

'Ic ðāra frætwa	Freān ealles ðanc,
Wuldurcyninge	wordum secge,
ēcum Dryhtne,	þe ic hēr on starie,
þæs ðe ic mōste	mīnum lēodum
ær swyltdæge	swylc gestrynan.
Nu ic on maðma hord mī[n]e bebohte	
frōde feorhlege,	fremmað gēna

⁴See Scarry for a broader account of bodily pain as substantiation of an ideal.

lēode þearfe;

ne mæg ic hēr leng
wesan.

[I thank God, Lord of all, for all these precious things, (I) say (these) words to the King of Glory, that I look on here for the fact that I have been permitted to gain for my people before my day of death. Now on this horde of treasures have I sold my old life, still attend to the needs of my people; I may not be here any longer.]
(2794-801)

This passage speaks not only to the warrior, but to the warrior-king. Again, if Beowulf can thank God for his blessings in battle and ask God to look after his people and they see this not as a sign of weakness, but of strength, perhaps Christianity can be considered not only a viable religion, but a worthy one.

We cannot simply say, however, that Christianity permeates *Beowulf* because the religion was becoming more widespread in the time of its writing. If we simply say that *Beowulf* was written by a Christian culture, we miss the real point of the poem's composition.⁵ What is necessary for a real understanding of the Christianity in the poem is to question why the poet (or scribe) felt it necessary or desirable to compose (or insert) these Christian overtones. During the 10th century, the sudden

⁵In her article "Criticism, Anti-Semitism, and the *Prioress's Tale*." Louise Fradenburg points out that many critics make the mistake of either noticing the anti-Semitism of Chaucer's tale and condemning him for it or pointing out that most of society was anti-Semitic and promptly laying the prejudices aside. "To dismiss the anti-Semitism in the tale as 'conventional,'" Fradenburg writes, "is to beg the real question why it should have become conventional, for the Jews were not always so despised in the Middle Ages" (75). In other words, the importance of the anti-Semitism of the *Prioress's Tale* lies not necessarily on the implications of the tale itself, but with what it says about the society in which it was written.

influx of the Danish pagan culture threatened the established Christian one already in place in England, both physically, with the destruction of the monasteries, and spiritually, since many of the Danes stayed in England, infusing the culture with their own pagan ideals. Since the Christian culture in Britain was in danger of being diluted, what better way to save it than to convert these heathen Danes, and what better way to convert them than with a story about a Dane who is not only heroic in the best tradition, but a Christian as well? The poem also forestalls the doubts that would be left in the Danish warrior culture, if Christianity is to be adopted. If Christianity is to replace the warrior ideals, then the warrior-king necessarily loses much of his power, for the individual warrior is no longer loyal to his lord, but to God. The poem replaces the corporeal warrior-king with an even more powerful one—the Christian god, yet links the king to God through warrior activity.

Elaine Scarry writes that "when a country has become to its population a fiction wars begin, however intensely beloved by its people that fiction is" (131). Most citizens of any country or kingdom want desperately to believe in what their home stands for—security, self-definition, or any number of ideals. When a country ceases to be what its ideals claim that it is, wars are necessarily begun to try to "get back" what has been lost. In *Beowulf*, a war begins between both Grendel and his mother and Beowulf. This war begins, it seems, in a direct response to the Christian ideals that have been lost, or defeated by a warrior culture during the wars with the Danes. The anxiety over the apparent loss of a Christian kingdom and its subsequent

replacement is echoed in the poem. It begins with Hrothgar's successes in the past ("Ʀa wæs Hroðgare / heresped gyfen"[64]) and ends with the hope that Beowulf, as a good Christian warrior, will supplant the weak one we see in Hrothgar.

The tradition of Christianity was threatened by the Danish warrior culture in the time *Beowulf* was written. This fact is evident simply from reading the text, for its central conflict begins with the picture of an ineffective ruler, "god cyning" or not, and ends with the death of one of the greatest warrior-kings ever portrayed in literature. Throughout the poem, however, the poet is concerned with setting Christianity up as an ideology to replace that of the warrior-king, and position the Christian god as a replacement for the warrior-king himself. We also see, through the portrayals of Hrothgar and Beowulf, exactly how Christianity fits with the existing warrior code. While Hrothgar is a Christian, Beowulf clearly gains more of God's favor by acting, by fighting Grendel and his mother as well as the dragon. Beowulf gives credit to God, but surely God loves those who help themselves, as Beowulf does. By positioning Beowulf as a strong, effective, and Christian warrior, the poet sets an example for the young warriors to come later, who, hopefully, will have adopted this British ideology, once thought to be a religion of the weak.

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A “Love of Dissembling”: Hobbes and *The Man of Mode*

Aaron Ensminger

The more prominent criticism about George Etherege’s *Man of Mode* concerns itself with morality. We see a very distinct type of morality depicted in the play, one concerned with appearances and manipulating others’ perceptions for personal gain. Dorimant and Harriet manipulate these perceptions well, while Sir Fopling takes his act to the height of buffoonery. Does the play use these characters to suggest a “way to be,” either similar or contrary to them, or simply to describe the way the world works? Should we, that is, as the play’s audience, see the social work of this play as prescriptive or descriptive? It is my contention that *Man of Mode* espouses a world view, through its principal characters, that is Hobbesian in nature, and that it, in the end, sides with Dorimant’s and Harriet’s morality in its instructions to its audience.

Before I begin any analysis, it will be helpful to define the terms my examination will use. I wish to suggest that a binary opposition of codes works within the play, systems I will call “Hobbesian” and “antiHobbesian.” In defining

these terms, I hope to identify a larger cultural debate to which *The Man of Mode* addresses itself, triggered largely by the debate surrounding Hobbes' *Leviathan*.

The Hobbesian and AntiHobbesian views

In *Leviathan*, Hobbes attempts not to prescribe the manner in which humans should behave, but simply to describe the manner in which they *do* behave. He begins his analysis by asserting that our actions can all be likened to a system, and that all of our actions, then, are as predictable as any other system (for example, the system described by the discipline of physics). In identifying the elements of his system, he is as meticulous as any scientist: First, Hobbes defines two types of motion found in men (animals): "Vital" and "Animall." The first he defines as the motions of the internal body, such as the pulse and breathing. Into the second category he places voluntary motion (118). Hobbes then points out some ways in which people exercise their "Animall" motion:

This Endeavour [animal motion], when it is toward something which causes it, is called Appetite, or Desire And when the Endeavour is fromward something, it is generally called Aversion.

That which men Desire, they are also said to Love, and to Hate those things, for which they have Aversion. (119)

In other words, people naturally move toward that which they love and away from that which they hate. Hobbes leaves no room for any other option. We are "hard wired" to have just these reactions.

Hobbes next explains that these desires always leave people in competition with one another. Nature makes men equal, says Hobbes. “[T]hough there be one man sometimes manifestly stronger in body, or of quicker mind than another; yet when all is reckoned together, the difference between man, and man, is not so considerable. . . .” (183). Since we are all relatively equal, and there is a limit on any amount of resources, a natural state of competition is brought about. Herein lies the crux of my working definition of Hobbesianism for this paper: All of us naturally compete with one another, and we will do virtually anything to win that competition. Any outward show of non-competitive behavior (generosity, sacrifice, etc.) we may seem to have or endeavor to have is simply that, merely outward. We simply attempt to put a pretty face on the ugly morals that we all, in fact, have. To achieve their goals, both Dorimant and Harriet, as we will see, are blatantly Hobbesian in their actions and values.

What, then, would an “antiHobbesian” view be? For the purposes of my analysis of *The Man of Mode*, I shall include in this category any stance on culture that maintains we should aspire to something higher than base desires, that we should attempt to do things for others at our own expense and to put any needs other than our own at the forefront of our minds. This antiHobbesian view is exemplified by *The Royal Slave*, written in 1636 by William Cartwright. The plot concerns a slave who is appointed king for a day. Throughout the play, speeches tell us that there is a certain kind of “higher” deportment, which is especially important for nobility to have..

Cratander, the title character, when he is asked who is deserving of victory in war, replies:

... him, who fights

Not out of thirst, or the unbridled lust
Of a flesh'd sword, but out of Conscience
To kill the enemy. (I. ii. 125-29)

No one who fights for Hobbesian reasons, out of lust for battle or even for basic necessities (thirst), deserves victory. Instead, those who should win act out of "Conscience" for a higher ideal. The people who deserve to win, in this antiHobbesian view, act out of "Conscience." Killing is not, presumably, something they want to do, but this value system will not allow them to do anything else—it is simply the right thing to do.

This antiHobbesian mode of thought also requires people to rise above their base instincts and do things for a higher ideal, that is, for reasons other than base desires. Upper classes, enjoying a privileged space in society, are particularly obliged to follow this prescription. Cratander relates this ideal at the beginning of the second act when he says:

.... To offend
Beyond the reach of Law without controule,
Is not the nature, but the vice of Pow'r;
And he is only great, that dares be good. (351-54)

In Hobbesian thought, the sovereign does whatever he feels is right, and in doing so, actually defines "the good." By definition, whatever the ruler wants is good for the

ruled. The ideals espoused in the above lines, however, stand in marked contrast to this idea. A ruler can only be great if he attempts to be good—presumably, to do things that he believes will benefit all without regard for his own needs.

While *The Man of Mode*, I will argue, takes a decidedly Hobbesian stance in its directions to its audience, there are overtones of an antiHobbesian leaning. These sentiments, however, are consistently undercut by both Dorimant and Harriet. In doing so, they both move closer to their respective goals and undercut the antiHobbesian side of this larger cultural debate to which the play speaks.

Hobbesian elements within *The Man of Mode*

Having established, then, the terms with which I will be working, I will now move to an analysis of the play itself. *The Man of Mode* has a number of Hobbesian elements working within it. In some ways, the genre of restoration comedy itself is synonymous with the ideals in *Leviathan*. In “Etherege and a Restoration Pattern of Wit,” D. R. M. Wilkinson identifies different ways in which Restoration comedies are defined. One such quality, dissembling, he defines as “[consisting] largely of deceiving others to one’s own advantage, protecting oneself, or evading problems—all of which again imply a state of [comic] warfare” (498). Deception, while not explicitly mentioned in *Leviathan*, is certainly a part of Hobbes’ world view. Human beings do whatever they must to compete for limited resources, and they are certainly not above using deception to get those resources. They are also not above “warfare.”

Dorimant says to Medley in the first scene of the play that “next to the coming to a good understanding with a new mistress, I love a quarrel with an old one” (I. i. 217-18). In fact, Hobbes points out that outside of an organized civil system, people revert to a war of “every man, against every man” (185). Perhaps the most notable influences of Hobbesian thought, however, occur within the characters, especially in the portrayals of Harriet and Dorimant.

Harriet, in one of her first scenes, demonstrates that she holds to a Hobbesian view of the world. In Act II, scene I, she bids her woman, Busy, to sing “some foolish song or other” (55):

When first Amintas charmed my heart,
My heedless sheep began to stray;
The wolves soon stole the greatest part,
And all will now be made a prey.
Ah, let not love your thoughts possess,
‘Tis fatal to a shepherdess;
The dang’rous passion you must shun,
Or else like me be quite undone. (58-65)

This song that Busy sings is, at its heart, a Platonic one: A good shepherdess must tend to her flock and not give herself over to love, lest she “be . . . undone.” The song upholds ideals that are, in a Hobbesian view, impossible, such as shunning passion. Passion, to a Hobbesian mind, is simply followed without thought to what is best for “the flock.” Harriet responds to this song that she “loves so well” with a Hobbesian answer. First, she calls the song Busy sings “foolish,” and then afterwards: “Shall I be paid down by a covetous parent for a purchase? I need no land. No, I’ll lay myself

all out in love. It is decreed” (66-68). The song offers a good Platonic sentiment: one must not give in to one’s base desires; if you do, you will be undone. This command, to shun our passions, is one that Hobbes would consider impossible to follow, and Harriet responds with the conviction that she will, indeed, give herself over to her instincts, and move toward that which she loves. She will give herself over to these base desires; she will give herself over to passion.

Later in the same scene, she demonstrates this same Hobbesian stance in a different manner, when conspiring with Young Belair:

Young Belair: If we give over the game, we are undone. What think you of playing it on booty?

Harriet: What do you mean?

Young Belair: Pretend to be in love with one another. ‘Twill make some dilatory excuses we may feign pass the better.

Harriet: Let us do’t, if it be for the dear pleasure of dissembling.

(106-11)

Harriet’s Hobbesian mode licences her to do whatever she needs do in order to move towards that which she desires (loves), even if it means that she will be lying to those around her. In fact, she agrees to do it even for the simple “pleasure of dissembling.”

At the end of the play, when Dorimant has confessed his love to Harriet and is attempting to tell her that he will give up his womanizing ways, Harriet responds with another Hobbesian sentiment:

Dorimant: I will renounce all the joys I have in friendship and in wine, sacrifice all the interest I have in other women—

Harriet: Hold! Though I wish you devout, I would not have you turn fanatic. Could you neglect these a while and make a journey into the country?

Dorimant: To be with you, I could live there and never send one thought to London.

Harriet: Whate'er you say, I know all beyond High Park's a desert to you, and that no gallantry can draw you further.

.....

Dorimant: Is this all? Will you not promise me—

Harriet: I hate to promise. What we do then is expected from us and wants much of the welcome it finds when it surprises.

(IV. ii. 135-43, 149-51)

While Dorimant is (seemingly) renouncing all the Hobbesian pleasures of life and proclaiming his willingness to leave London and return to the (pastoral) country with Harriet, she debunks Dorimant's platonic sentiments in these lines. While Dorimant speaks of renouncing, sacrificing, and promising, using words like "never" and "all," Harriet responds with ridicule and temperance. She accuses Dorimant of turning "fanatic" and points out that she could never believe a promise from Dorimant that caused him to go against his base desires—namely, his joys "in friendship and in wine." She seems willing to credit only Hobbesian motivations; any others she disbelieves.

Harriet, then, shows us her Hobbesian leanings by explicitly stating her intentions in her response to Busy's song as well as by debunking the Hobbesian statements Dorimant makes in his attempt to win her over. Despite his "heartfelt" confession, however, Dorimant, too, has displayed his own Hobbesian nature throughout the play. One of the first examples of this occurs at Lady Townley's, when Dorimant admires Belinda, and Mrs. Loveit takes offense:

Dorimant: Good, there's one made jealous already.

Mrs. Loveit: Is this the constancy you vowed?

Dorimant: Constancy at my years? 'Tis not a virtue in season; you might as well expect the fruit the autumn ripens i' the spring. (II. ii. 177-81)

This sentiment of Dorimant's uses a logic similar to Hobbes', for similar ends:

[I]f a man should talk to me of a *round Quadrangle*; or *accidents of Bread in Cheese*; or *Immaterial Substances*; or of *A Free Subject*; *A Free-will*; or any *Free*, but free from being hindered by opposition, I should not say he were in an Error; but that his words were without meaning; that is to say, Absurd.

(112)

Hobbes sneers that anyone who claims to have free will is not incorrect, but simply absurd or illogical. Dorimant carries this logic a step further by claiming that to expect him to be true would be as absurd as expecting a tree that bears fruit in the fall to suddenly bear fruit in the spring. Just as the tree in the orchard has no free will or choice over when it will be harvested, Dorimant has no free will in his constancy.

Dorimant realizes, however, that such open self-interestedness is not always the way to get what he wants. Sometimes it is necessary for him to seem to fall on the other side of this debate between Hobbesian and antiHobbesian sentiment. His true goal, however, becomes clear to the audience. In fact, Dorimant uses antiHobbesian ideals in a decidedly Hobbesian way—to further his own ends. Later in the play Dorimant seems to lament his society's loss of these antiHobbesian ideals:

Dorimant: Forms and ceremonies, the only things that uphold quality and greatness, are now shamefully laid aside and neglected.

Lady Woodvill: Well, this is not the womens' age, let 'em think what they will. Lewedness is the business now; love was the bus'ness in my time. (IV. I. 11-15)

This exchange is particularly interesting for two reasons: First, Dorimant seems, oddly, to become the mouthpiece of antiHobbesian thought by lamenting the lapse of the “forms and ceremonies” that were important in an earlier age. The reader must remember, however, that Dorimant is actually in disguise here, and he is simply appropriating these notions for his own Hobbesian ends—desire for a woman. This is perhaps one of the few moments at which Etherege openly places these two ideologies opposite each other. We, as the play’s audience, cannot help but see the irony of Dorimant, perhaps the play’s most Hobbesian character, mouthing this decidedly antiHobbesian sentiment. When Dorimant explicitly states Platonic ideals, he simply appropriates them for a use. Dorimant clearly believes the old adage, “all’s fair in love and war.” We know that Dorimant certainly does not believe a word of what he says in this passage—“forms and ceremonies” have not left the world. Indeed, Dorimant stages his own “ceremony” in this interchange by allowing Lady Woodvill to believe that he agrees with her on the state of society. He is simply showing us, indirectly, the tools that they are and always have been. Instead of “upholding quality and greatness,” they allow Dorimant to satisfy his base desires. It is also interesting to note that while Lady Woodvill is lamenting the Hobbesian air that seems to surround her, there was actually a time, in her view, when there was something more. While Dorimant calls this simply “forms and ceremonies,” Lady Woodvill says that “love was the bus’ness” in her time. Dorimant clearly believes that these pretty faces

merely masked the Hobbesian ideals to which he subscribes. Lady Woodvill sees them as something that had been substantial and real.

Dorimant gives his audience a more explicit example of his recognition of behavior as simply masks in Act V, scene I:

Now for a touch of Sir Fopling to begin with. –Hey Page! Give positive order that none of my people stir. Let the *canaille* wait, as they should do. – Since noise and nonsense have such pow’rful charms.

“I, that I may successful prove,
Transform myself to what you love.”

(84-89)

In this passage we see that Dorimant explicitly rejects the idea of forms as indicative of something real. When he calls to his page, he realizes that he is putting on another face—Fopling’s—and then proceeds to call what he does “noise and nonsense.” This act is, for him, simply another means to an end—a way to be “successful” in the “competition for limited resources,” specifically, Harriet.

What About Love?

The end of the play definitely seems to take a stance in the debate between the Hobbesian world views that it has placed in competition with antiHobbesian views, such as the ones exemplified in *The Royal Slave*. The question is, what stand does the play take? Dorimant at one instant renounces his libertine status and claims to want nothing more than to be true to Harriet for the rest of his days and also, at the same moment, tells Bellinda, to whom he has also promised his love, “Th’extravagant

words they speak in love. 'Tis as unreasonable to expect we should perform all we promise then, as do we threaten when we are angry" (V. ii. 272-75), reaffirming his Hobbesian leanings. Many critics, such as Norman Holland in *The First Modern Comedies*, believe that the value the play sets forward is "to express the private self in a social form which is decorous, natural, and even redeeming. . . ." (95)—a Platonic sentiment, to be sure. To truly discern the stand the play takes, however, we must decide whether Dorimant and Harriet achieve their goals at the end of the play. Do Dorimant and Harriet, the principal Hobbesian characters, win out at the end of the play? Harriet, at least, seems to be "successful" in achieving her goals. She seeks nothing more than to free herself from a forced marriage, which she does, and to take Dorimant to the country with her, presumably to test his devotion, to see whether he can truly be happy without the constant excitement his intrigue has brought him.

The only question, for the reader, lies with Dorimant. Dorimant seems to have "won" Harriet, but this question is complicated by the role that "love" plays in Dorimant's "conversion." Warren Cherniak, in the introduction to *Sexual Freedom in Restoration Literature*, writes that

Dorimant's first reaction to the first stirrings of real love in *The Man of Mode* is to fear being disarmed or unmanned, like the hero of Rochester's 'The Imperfect Enjoyment'; it is as though he has no vocabulary to express sexual feeling other than the language of domination.

(13)

Cherniak, then, believes that Dorimant does actually find "real love" in the play.

Brian Corman, too, in his "Interpreting and Misinterpreting *The Man of Mode*," writes

that “*The Man of Mode* is a comedy without a hero, a comedy which must be seen as satiric, that is, a comedy through which lessons are taught by negative example” (37). He continues on to posit the idea that Harriet and Dorimant actually show their feelings in the asides that occur throughout the play, and that those true feelings are love: “It is difficult not to take the relationship. . . . as a serious one that is propelled toward marriage at the end of the play. Dorimant and Harriet express their genuine feelings in a series of asides throughout the play” (49). He then provides us with a series of asides that prove his point:

Dorimant: A thousand smiles were shining in that face but now; I never saw so quick a change of weather.

Harriet: I feel as great a change within, but he shall never know it.
(III. iii. 58-61)

Dorimant: This fool’s coming has spoil’d all; she’s gone, but she has left a pleasing Image of her self behind that wanders in my Soul—it must not settle there.

(III. iii. 121-23)

Dorimant (aside): I love her, and dare not let her know it, I fear sh’as an ascendant o’re me and may revenge the wrongs I have done her sex.

(IV. i. 139-41)

Harriet (aside, turning from Dorimant): My love springs from my blood into my face. I dare not look upon him yet.

(V. ii. 92-93)

I believe we also have another possible example of Dorimant’s consistent belief in love, and this appears in Act V, scene I, when Mrs. Loveit is chastising Dorimant:

Mrs. Loveit: Public satisfaction for the wrong I have done you? This is some new device to make me more ridiculous.

Dorimant: Hear me.

Mrs. Loveit: I will not.
Dorimant: You will be persuaded.
Mrs. Loveit: Never!
Dorimant: Are you so obstinate?
Mrs. Loveit: Are you so base?
Dorimant: You will not satisfy my love?

(230-38)

This effect of this passage seems to me to be dependent on staging and delivery. Should these lines be read one directly after another, with no pauses between them, the effect would be one of a mildly venomous banter. If they were to be read, however, with one judiciously placed pause, directly before Dorimant's last quoted line, "You will not satisfy my love?" we then see not a Dorimant who, as he says at the beginning of the play, "I love a quarrel with an old [mistress]" (190), but a Dorimant who does indeed believe in the existence of "real love," and cannot believe that love would be denied. The lines themselves, in fact, seem to justify this reading simply because of their language. The banter up to Dorimant's last (quoted) line concerns itself with convincing and image, with its references to "public satisfaction" and persuasion. Dorimant's line "You will not satisfy my love?" stands in marked contrast to these lines with its explicit reference to love.

Through the reasoning of Holland, Cherniak and Corman as well as my own play with staging, it seems that Dorimant may indeed, at some level, come to experience "love," of a sort. All these Platonic readings, while they recognize the Hobbesian element in the play (and usually find it distasteful), assert that the play, in the end, uses these motivations ironically to denigrate the mode in which Dorimant

and Harriet operate throughout the play. If Dorimant leaves his Hobbesian shell behind to experience “real love,” how can we define him as a Hobbesian character? We have to determine what Dorimant’s goals in the play are. If we are to say that Dorimant wins if he has Harriet’s affections, then he does win. If he is simply thrilled with the chase itself, then the play is testament that idea. But what if Dorimant actually seeks love in the play? The idea of love would seem to be inconsistent with his Hobbesian nature. What most of us call love, however, can have a place in a Hobbesian system and so, in Dorimant’s. If we are all in competition for limited resources, then “love” is simply a means to the end of living well. It’s an alliance for possessions, sex, or anything else, and we simply call the alliance love. Love, then, in a Hobbesian system, is not a *goal*, but a *means*. In fact, we see this fact demonstrated by Dorimant when he says to Bellinda (after he has professed his love for Harriet):

“Th’extravagant words they speak in love. ‘Tis as unreasonable to expect we should perform all we promise then, as do all we threaten when we are angry” (V. ii. 272-74). While Dorimant recognizes that love exists, he realizes, true to his Hobbesian mold, that it is an excuse, a vehicle to carry and substantiate promises. While Dorimant may feel “stirrings” of real love, as Cherniak claims, it is clear from his exchange with Bellinda that he has not become a Platonic character. Love, for Dorimant, is an excuse for unkept promises and for his machinations in his relations with women. Never do we see Dorimant sacrifice for love, or anyone he is ostensibly

in love with. Love is simply a tool for him to use—another weapon in his game of dissembling.

Most critics, then, to support their Platonic readings, see the ending as a movement to cast the rest of the play in an ironic light, because Dorimant “succeeds” when he agrees to give up his libertine life for Harriet. This conclusion seems to be taken from a turn in the play that may or may not be all it appears. Dorimant may profess his love for Harriet, but the play suggests that this “love” that Dorimant feels may not be a selfless one, but another Hobbesian element. The conclusion most critics draw is that since Dorimant falls in love, a Platonic sentiment, the play must be renouncing the Hobbesian ideals it has exemplified. If love can be a tool in a Hobbesian system, then we have no way of knowing just how Dorimant feels, and must judge his nature by examining the rest of the play. Even if we do, as readers, see a marriage in Dorimant’s and Harriet’s future we need not see marriage in a Platonic light. Brian Corman notes (in a paraphrase from David Veith) that it was, in fact, common for Restoration men to take mistresses or concubines, and that they “should perhaps be regarded as polygamy . . . rather than adultery” (53). Corman cites Harriet’s Hobbesian response to Dorimant’s gushing at the end of the play as evidence for this assertion. Even if we take the play to have a neat ending, in which Dorimant and Harriet marry at some point after the production, Dorimant may still be

the libertine he is when the curtain opens, for his society provides an outlet for his Hobbesian leanings.

Etherege in a Hobbesian World

There was a debate in British culture at the time the play was written over Hobbes' landmark work, *Leviathan*, and this play definitely, whether it sees the view espoused in Hobbes' work as good, sees Hobbes' ideas as true. This is, indeed, the way to succeed in the world, and both Dorimant's and Harriet's success is evidence of this idea. The fact that both Harriet and Dorimant put a Platonic face on their Hobbesian world view, however, cannot be ignored. Perhaps, as Harriet says, "Beauty runs as great a risk exposed at court as wit does on the stage, where the ugly and the foolish are all free to censure" (IV. i. 137-38). While both these characters put a witty and beautiful face on their self-servedness, and they are both exposed for the Hobbesian creatures they are, neither is censured. Both Dorimant and Harriet find their goals and each other by the end of the play. Neither of these characters has a Platonic or idealistic view of the world like the ones espoused in *The Royal Slave* and other works of the time. These characters, instead, have a Hobbesian view of the world and a blatantly Hobbesian mode of existing in it. The fact that both of these characters attain their goals indicates that Etherege wishes his audience to see that the way to succeed in the world is to realize that we operate in this mode, and not to pretend to

ourselves that we do otherwise. No one in *The Man of Mode* is any worse off for Harriet's and Dorimant's Hobbesian tendencies, just as the subjects in Hobbes are no worse off when the ruler works for his own goals. To succeed and define "the good," Etherege seems to say, we must simply do what is good for each of us individually—the larger good will come of it.

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The Churlish Clerk: The Cherl/Clerk Variants in Chaucer's *Physician's Tale*

Aaron Ensminger

In the *Physician's Tale*, a false judge, Apius, becomes entranced by Virginia, the lovely and pure daughter of Virginius, a noble knight. Apius enlists Claudius to form a scheme to win Virginia. Claudius will claim that Virginius has stolen his servant, and Apius will find in Claudius's favor, then taking Virginia for himself. The story is a straightforward one, except for the actual identity of Claudius himself. Much debate has risen about the degree of Chaucer's revision of the tale. In eight lines of the *Physician's Tale*, Chaucer refers to Apius's co-conspirator as "cherl"—if we read the *Riverside Chaucer* or any of the other widely used modern editions.⁶ In fact, however, the manuscripts are divided as to what word we should read in each occurrence. While some read "cherl," others read "clerk." Still others read "clerk" in

⁶Such as Baugh, Albert C., *Chaucer's Major Poetry* (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1963); Fisher, John H., *The Complete Poetry and Prose of Geoffrey Chaucer* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1989); Donaldson, E. T., *Chaucer's Poetry: An Anthology for the Modern Reader* (New York: Ronald Press, 1975), and Pratt, Robert A., *The Tales of Canterbury* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1974).

some instances, then “cherl” in others. Some manuscripts read “clerk” and have then been “corrected” to read “cherl.” The question of how to read these lines is obviously not a new one. It was a problem for scribes who copied even the earliest manuscripts. We will never discover what Chaucer actually wrote when he first created the tale or what he revised it to, if he did revise it. All we can do is attempt to discover the reading that follows the tale itself, to see what reading best fits the context of the story and decide whether it also fits the manuscript evidence..

Manly and Rickert, after listing the number of times “clerk” and “cherl” are used in the eight lines, summarize their conclusions: “It is possible that the variant ‘clerk’ originated as a scribal error by the ancestor of the large group [that is, those manuscripts not of independent descent] but it also seems more likely that Chaucer originally wrote clerk.”⁷ I intend in this study to give reasons both textual and contextual for Manly and Rickert’s conclusion and to rethink the use of “cherl” for every occurrence of the variant, as it appears in most modern printed editions.

Most of the manuscripts we have, then, read “clerk” for the two first occurrences and “cherl” thereafter. Almost all the other manuscripts read “clerk” at some point. There are, however, some manuscripts we consider more authoritative, usually because of their age or because they are considered to be at the top of a

⁷Manly and Rickert, *The Text of the Canterbury Tales, Volume II* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1940), 324.

family. Additional 10340 (Ad⁴), Harley 7334 (Ha⁴), Hengwrt (Hg) and Ellesmere (El) are considered to be the oldest of the manuscripts, all dated before 1410. Corpus Christi 198 (Cp), Cambridge Dd.4.24 (Dd), and Lansdowne 851 (La) are all earlier than 1420, and Longleat 29 (La), and Petworth (Pw) both were produced before 1430. If we use these ten manuscripts as the basis for our examination, we find that all but Hengwrt and Ellesmere do indeed fall into Manly and Rickert's "large group" of manuscripts. That is, all of the most authoritative manuscripts listed above, except Hengwrt and Ellesmere, read "clerk" instead of "cherl" at lines 140 and 142. Hengwrt and Ellesmere are the only two manuscripts we have that read "cherl" at every occurrence:

	140	142	153	164	191	199	202	264
Ad ⁴	Clerk	Clerk	Cherl	Cherl	Cherl	Cherl	Cherl	Cherl
Ha ⁴	Clerk	Clerk	Cherl	Cherl	Cherl	Cherl	Cherl	Cherl
Hg	Cherl	Cherl	Cherl	Cherl	Cherl	Cherl	Cherl	Cherl
El	Cherl	Cherl	Cherl	Cherl	Cherl	Cherl	Cherl	Cherl
Cp	Clerk	Clerk	Cherl	Cherl	Cherl	Cherl	Cherl	Cherl
Dd	Clerk	Clerk	Cherl	Cherl	Cherl	Cherl	Cherl	Cherl
La	Clerk	Clerk	Cherl	Cherl	Cherl	Cherl	Cherl	Cherl
Ll ²	Clerk	Clerk	Cherl	Cherl	Cherl	Cherl	Cherl	Cherl
Pw	Clerk	Clerk	Cherl	Cherl	Cherl	Cherl	Cherl	Cherl

The above chart provides a dramatic representation of just how uncommon the "cherl" reading is in the first two lines of the poem.

Before I begin to discuss the usages of each word, however, it is important to define both “clerk” and “cherl” as Chaucer would have used them in his tale. Any usage of the word before 1561, the *OED* writes, can have one of three meanings: “a man ordained to the ministry or service of the Christian church,” “a man (or woman) of book learning . . . a scholar,” or “the offices of writer, scribe, secretary, keeper of accounts, and the transaction of all business involving writing.” I would argue that what we have in Claudius is not a religious clerk or a simple learned man, but a clerk of the last sort, for there is no other mention of religion in the tale. Also, Apius, as we will see below, does not write his judgments himself, but simply decrees them, and so, would have need of a clerk to keep records.⁸ The exact meaning of “cherl,” on the other hand, is a more difficult one to pin down. The *OED* has various meanings, from simply “man (In Middle English mixed with other senses)” to “peasant, not of noble birth” to “a base fellow, villain.” What most of the definitions have in common, however, is a reference to a non-noble or even low stature, and it is indeed in this sense that I believe Chaucer uses the word. The two words, then, certainly have different meanings within the story. If Claudius is simply a “cherl,” he is a man of

⁸J. Burke Severs details each of Chaucer’s clerks in his essay in *Chaucer and Middle English Studies in Honor of Rossell Hope Robbins*, ed. Beryl Rowland (London: Allen & Unwin, 1974), but omits Claudius because of precisely the misreading I am discussing.

low stature. If he is a “clerk” as well as a “cherl,” however, Claudius is an intelligent man with a villainous nature.

That we should be reading “clerk” instead of “cherl” for even one of the occurrences is possible and even probable, then, based solely on the manuscript evidence, as Manly and Rickert point out, arguing that it is more likely that Chaucer wrote “clerk.” Even with the discrepancies between manuscripts, however, modern editors still follow Hengwrt and Ellesmere by reading “cherl” at every instance.

Larry D. Benson, in the *Riverside Chaucer*, has but a sole note on this issue that reads only: “The [manuscripts] are divided between **cherl** and *clerk*, the former being perhaps a translation of the [French] *ribauz*.”⁹ He gives no explanation of why the decision to read “cherl” was made, except to point out that *ribauz* is a French equivalent to “cherl.” The tale is borrowed from the *Roman de la Rose*, which does use *ribauz*, but this argument is a weak explanation of what may, in fact, be a misreading in our modern editions.

The simple fact that the manuscripts are divided (and that the majority of them read, at some lines, “clerk” instead of “cherl”) is enough to justify a modern rethinking of Chaucer’s usage of the words. The context of each line can give us

⁹*The Riverside Chaucer, Third Edition*, ed. Larry D. Benson (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987), 903. All quotations are from Fragment VI and all italics are added.

important clues to the readings of each instance, perhaps more important clues than the manuscripts themselves.

The first contested line occurs at 140. The Physician introduces Claudius and shows us just how he fits into Apius's scheme. Here is the line in context:

That wel he wiste he myghte hire nevere wynne
As for to make hire with hir body synne.
For which, by greet deliberacioun,
He sente after a *cherl*, was in the toun,
Which that he knew for subtil and for boold. (137-41)

This occurrence, along with the next, is probably the most contested instance of the word, and for good reason. The Physician is, in these lines, simply introducing Claudius. While "cherl" gives us insight into his moral nature, we have at this point in the story no information about the role he fills in society as we do with the other characters of the story, and this information is much more important to the Physician than moral qualities are in introducing his characters. When he introduces Virginius, we do not have a line that describes how good-hearted or chivalrous he is, but "A knight that called was Virginius" (2). When Apius is introduced, we are told not of his lechery, but that "Now was ther thanne a justice in that toun" (121). Even when we meet Virginia, for all her nobility and virtue, the Physician tells us that "This knyght a doghter hadde by his wyf" (5). The Physician, in introducing each of his characters, is careful to give us a measure of his or her social role. While Virginius is

a good and noble man, he is first a knight. While Virginia is pure and virtuous, she is most importantly Virginius' daughter. Apius is certainly a dishonest lecher, but we are first told that he is a justice. It seems to make more sense, given the Physician's concern with social standing, evidenced by his introduction of other characters, that he would tell us at his first introduction of the man's societal role, and the only possible reading that fills this gap is "clerk." In short, we have the possible reading of "clerk" from virtually all the manuscripts, and the contextual evidence supports it.

At line 142, we have another use of the word in question, as part of the same introduction scene:

This juge unto this *cherl* his tale hath toold
In secree wise, and made hym to ensure
He sholde telle it to no creature,
And if he dide, he sholde lese his heed. (142-45)

These lines are still a part of the Physician's introduction of Claudius. We should keep in mind, when reading these lines, the Physician's concern with social presence. In line 142, we have a pairing of "juge" and "cherl." Why would Chaucer pair two words in this line with opposite descriptive functions? If we are to read "cherl" here, Chaucer could have illustrated the scene better by describing Apius's character as well. Instead, it makes more sense that the Physician would pair two words describing occupation, like "juge" and "clerk." In fact, this pairing makes more sense

because the two occupations would have much more opportunity for interaction than a judge and a cherl.

The last three lines of the above quotation, describing Apius's threat to Claudius, make more sense if we read "cherl" as "clerk" as well. Apius would presumably have more licence to threaten a clerk, since a clerk would be in a position subservient to him. When we see the threat, we have to ask, "Why could Apius not have simply threatened to kill Virginius if he refused to hand over his daughter?" The answer is simple—Apius, as a judge, has no direct power over people unless they have committed a crime or they work directly under him. Since Virginius has committed no crime, and Apius has no direct authority over him, he must find someone else to help with his scheme. While Claudius is surely a cherl in the story, there is no evidence that he has committed any crime, and the only power Apius would have over him is if he were in a position dominant over Claudius—if he were a clerk. Line 142, then, has even more evidence for the "clerk" reading than the first occurrence in 140. To pair "juge" and "clerk" makes more sense for both the meaning and its effect in the story. If we read "clerk," it also gives us more information with which to interpret the lines directly following. Specifically, it allows us to understand why Apius has such power over Claudius. These two lines (140 and 142) are also the only ones for which we have such overwhelming evidence for the "clerk" reading. Of the

ten oldest manuscripts, only two (Hengwrt and Ellesmere) read “cherl” in these two lines. While most texts are taken from one of these two manuscripts, the evidence, both textual and contextual, clearly indicates that we should read “clerk.”

At line 153, we come to what seems to be the first instance at which we could read “cherl” for the contested word. In this passage, we find Apius and Claudius going their separate ways after the plan (still unknown to us) has been agreed upon: “Hoom gooth the *cherl*, that highte Claudius. / This false juge, that highte Apius” (153-54). In these lines we have the first occurrence of the names of each of the story’s villains in a parallel construction. We also have the first descriptions of each character’s morality, and for this reason we can accurately read “cherl” in line 153. As the Physician tells us Apius’s name, he makes a point to give us a description of his character—a “*false juge*.”

If the Physician is concerned with parallels, as he has been before, in describing each character’s social standing first, it is reasonable that he also gives us an assessment of Claudius’s character by calling Claudius a “cherl.” While both Claudius’s and Apius’s first introductions give us information about their social standing, these new occurrences give us information about this moral character. This parallel construction—first social place, then character assessment—occurs in the introduction of every character. For Virginius, we learn first that he is a knight, and

then that he is “Fulfilde of honour and of worthynesse, / And strong of freendes, and of great richesse” (3-4). When we are first introduced to Virginia, we learn that she is first a daughter, and then that “Fair was this mayde in excellent beautee / Aboven every wight that man may see” (7-8). In the same manner, we first learn that Apius is a judge, and then that he is “false,” and we learn that Claudius is a “clerk,” and then a “cherl.” In this occurrence, then, our overwhelming evidence is contextual. The physician seems to give his audience parallels on which to construct their assessment of characters. First we see position, then morality. It is logical, then, that we should read “cherl” at line 164. As in lines 140 and 142, we also have solid manuscript evidence for the “cherl” reading. Only Harley 7335, Trinity Cambridge R.3.3, and Sloane 1686 differ and read “clerk,” and Cambridge Ii is divided; it actually reads “clerk/cherl.”

At line 164, we have perhaps the most clear-cut reading thus far. Claudius is making the show of presenting his case to Apius::

This false *cherl* came forth a ful greet pas,
And seyde, “Lord, if that it be youre wille,
As dooth me right upon this pitious bille,
In which I pleyne upon Virginius.” (164-67)

The reading must be “cherl.” No manuscript differs from the “cherl” reading, either in Manly and Rickert’s “large group” or the group of the ten oldest manuscripts, and the context supports it. This scene is one of the most repugnant of the tale. Claudius

is lying in a court of law, and Apius is not only aware of it, but encourages Claudius's ludicrous assertion that Virginia is his slave.

At line 191, after Claudius has given the court his account of Virginius's supposed theft, we have another instance at which it seems logical to read "cherl:"

Virginius gan upon the *cherl* biholde,
But hastily, er he his tale tolde,
And wolde have preeved it as sholde a knyght,
And eek by witnessyng of many a wight,
That al was fals that seyde his adversarie. (191-95)

These lines are from Virginius's point of view, and it does indeed seem more logical that Virginius would see Claudius as not a "clerk," but as a "cherl." In addition, the Physician is emphasizing just how unfair the entire scheme is to Virginius in these lines, for he is being denied a chance to speak on his own behalf. While Virginius "wolde have preeved it as sholde a knyght," his adversary, Claudius, is "fals." The Physician works to portray Virginius as a proper knight, and reading "cherl" in these lines paints a contrast between these two characters. The Physician seems to want us to see this contrast, for he calls Claudius Virginius's "adversary." If we are to see a contrast between the two characters, then, "cherl" makes more sense here than "clerk." In fact, the manuscripts support this reading, for only one manuscript (Harley 7333) differs from the "cherl" reading to write "clerk."

In the next lines, Apius's judgment, we have what is perhaps the most convincing contextual arguments for reading "clerk" in any of the instances in the tale, at least contextually. Apius says to Virginius:

"I deeme anon this *cherl* his servant have;
Thou shalt no lenger in thyn hous hir save.
Go bryng hire forth, and put hire in oure warde.
The *cherl* shal have his thral, this I awarde." (199-202)

This is, quite obviously, a legal pronouncement, meant to be binding and recorded.

Why, in a formal decree, would Apius use "cherl" to describe Claudius? While Claudius may very well be a cherl, a legal pronouncement is no place for a negative qualitative label. These lines make much more sense if we read "clerk" at both places. If we read these lines with "clerk," we no longer have a judge who insults his own conspirator, but one who uses the most precise language possible in a legal document. While the overwhelming evidence, contextually, is for a reading of "clerk," the manuscript evidence is just as overwhelming, even unanimous, in favor of reading "cherl." There is not a single manuscript that writes "clerk" at 199 and only one that does at line so 202. It seems that in this passage, we have what amounts to a stalemate. While the context forces us to read "clerk," the manuscripts themselves show us that we have to read "cherl."

The last occurrence of the contested word is at line 264, in the denouement of the story, when the Physician relates the story of what the townspeople did in retaliation for the false judgment:

The peple anon had suspect in this thyng.
By manere of the *cherles* chalangyng,
That it was by the assent of Apius;
They wisten wel that he was lecherus. (263-66)

If the instances of the words earlier, in Apius's judgment, had the most confused readings, this use must surely be the clearest. In these lines the Physician is giving a clear judgment of Apius ("lecherus"), and we can clearly see that the Physician wishes his audience to see these villains for exactly what they are—"cherls" and "lecherous." The manuscripts are just as clear as the context, in this case. Only two manuscripts (Harley 7333 and Helmingham) write "clerk." It seems that, at this point of the story, the jig is up. We all know that Claudius is a cherl, and the Physician leaves no doubt in our minds, going so far as even to omit Claudius's name.

"Clerk" and "cherl" are easily confused for each other in manuscripts, for they look similar in most hands. Three of the five letters are the same, and the two that are different both have ascenders. With the wide discrepancy between manuscripts of the *Canterbury Tales*, we must assume that either Chaucer revised his story or that scribes misread or changed the text. There was obviously great confusion over these lines, for one manuscript (Cambridge Ii) actually writes "clerk/cherl" at one instance

instead of either word. It would be simple, certainly, for a scribe to misread and think he was correcting other scribes who came before, believing he was restoring the original Chaucerian consistency. It becomes our task as scholars to decide whether Chaucer actually meant “cherl” or “clerk,” or, as I contend, some mixture of the two. Some occurrences of the word simply cannot mean “cherl,” some make little sense as “clerk,” and at least one is completely befuddling, with a context pointing us toward “clerk” and manuscript evidence that forces us to read “cherl.”

Any edition of Chaucer requires decisions about contested passages. I contend that at lines 140 and 142 of the *Physician's Tale*, editors have made an incorrect choice. Both the context and manuscript evidence of this “clerk/cherl” variant point to the fact that we should read not “cherl,” but “clerk” at each line. The manuscript evidence for lines 199 and 202, similarly, deserve at least a note in current editions of the *Canterbury Tales*, for the context strongly suggests that we should read “clerk,” while the manuscript evidence points to “cherl.” It is possible that a scribe or Chaucer himself nodded at these two later lines, but it seems more likely that we have a case of overzealous scribal revision. A scribe copying this story would read “clerk” twice, then “cherl” twice. When he came to lines 199 and 202, it is not difficult to imagine that he would have changed the reading of “clerk” to “cherl” to make the story appear more consistent. It is possible that we also have an overzealous

scribe responsible for the two variants in lines 140 and 141 as well. Hengwrt and Ellesmere are generally believed to have been written by the same scribe, and a careful scribe at that—these two manuscripts are regarded as the most authoritative ones we have. Perhaps this scribe actually read the story he was copying before he started, and believing he was correcting an earlier scribe's mistake, made the text consistent at all points. In any event, the logical inconsistency of lines 199 and 202 should be pointed out in editions of Chaucer's works.

Whether or not we believe that the readings of some of these contested passages should be changed, I hope that this discussion can be reopened, for scholars deserve more information on this issue than the meager note in the *Riverside Chaucer*. There is indeed a question of how we are to read these lines, and if even one occurrence makes more sense if it is read as "clerk," we should take this fact into account in all of our readings.

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