

JOB, ECCLESIASTES, AND THE MECHANICS OF WISDOM IN OLD ENGLISH POETRY

by

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Abstract

This dissertation raises and answers, as far as possible within its scope, the following question: “What does Old English wisdom literature have to do with Biblical wisdom literature?” Critics have analyzed Old English wisdom with regard to a variety of analogous wisdom cultures; Carolyne Larrington (*A Store of Common Sense*) studies Old Norse analogues, Susan Deskis (*Beowulf and the Medieval Proverb Tradition*) situates *Beowulf*’s wisdom in relation to broader medieval proverb culture, and Charles Dunn and Morton Bloomfield (*The Role of the Poet in Early Societies*) situate Old English wisdom amidst a variety of international wisdom writings. But though Biblical wisdom was demonstrably available to Anglo-Saxon readers, and though critics generally assume certain parallels between Old English and Biblical wisdom, none has undertaken a detailed study of these parallels or their role as a precondition for the development of the Old English wisdom tradition. Limiting itself to the discussion of two Biblical wisdom texts, Job and Ecclesiastes, this dissertation undertakes the beginnings of such a study, orienting interpretation of these books via contemporaneous reception by figures such as Gregory the Great (*Moralia in Job*, Werferth’s Old English translation of the *Dialogues*), Jerome (*Commentarius in Ecclesiasten*), Ælfric (“Dominica I in Mense Septembri Quando Legitur Job”), and Alcuin (*Commentarius Super Ecclesiasten*). It then traces parallels between the Jobean and Ecclesiastean traditions and various instances of Old English wisdom. These instances include wisdom in heroic, hagiographic, and riddling poetry, including *Beowulf*, *The Battle of Maldon*, *Guthlac A & B*, the Exeter riddles, and *Solomon and Saturn I*; they also include typical exemplars of the Old English wisdom canon, including *Solomon and Saturn II*, *Maxims I & II*, *The Fortunes of Men*, *Precepts*, *Vainglory*, *The Wanderer*, and *The Seafarer*.

Preface

This dissertation is original, unpublished, independent work by the author, Karl Arthur Erik Persson.

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Dedication

In loving memory of Abigail Mary Scott, S. D. G.

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Introduction

What does Old English wisdom literature have to do with Biblical wisdom literature? This is the question that orients this dissertation, and, though it may seem simple enough, the question becomes complex once one begins to investigate it more thoroughly. What, for instance, is wisdom? How does one determine which Biblical and which Old English text should be considered wisdom literature? How does the difference between Anglo-Saxon and modern Biblical exegesis affect a comparison of these bodies of literature? And what specifically does such a comparison tell us about Anglo-Saxon literature; is the relationship one of influence, resonance, or cultural happenstance?

As subsidiaries and bypaths of the original question concerning Old English and Biblical wisdom, these questions and the research required to answer them are the primary matter of this dissertation. However, as is usual with research, my investigation into these questions has led to further related discoveries, the foremost of which was the discovery of a pattern of ascent to wisdom common throughout the commentary traditions I investigate as well as the Old English poetry that parallels it; within this latter corpus, variations on this wisdom ascent abound. Though I have been hesitant to propose any kind of strong interpretation of the historical development of these variations, I have been able to trace the different guises taken by forms of the Jobean/Ecclesiastean wisdom ascent in Old English poetry; of particular interest in my analysis is the interplay of a very public secular heroic wisdom; a baptized version of this heroic wisdom; and a more meditative and introspective kind of wisdom, more often than not featured in the mind of a single speaker rather than in a public setting. In at least one instance, I have gone so far as to suggest evidence of the direct influence of the Biblical wisdom on the Old English poetry, but, for the most part, my argument focuses on Biblical wisdom as a backdrop or

precondition for the development of Old English wisdom. I do not argue that everything found in Old English wisdom is Biblical in origin - indeed, much of it probably consists of vestigial elements of an earlier Anglo-Saxon paganism - but I argue rather that the parallels between the approach to and compilation of wisdom in both the Biblical texts and Old English texts suggest these Biblical texts as exemplars and guides that at least some Anglo-Saxon scop, writers, and compilers looked to as models for working with their own native wisdom tradition, particularly in relation to the more recently discovered wisdom of Christianity. The research in this dissertation supports the probability of this claim, and, though the difficulty of determining influence makes it impossible to extend this claim much further, this dissertation's analysis of this critically ignored yet quite probably influential precondition is, I hope, an illuminating contribution in the study of Old English wisdom.

To be clear about my methodology from the beginning, I have refrained from making any strong argument regarding the historical development of Old English poetry; this is in part because it is beyond the scope of my dissertation, which largely seeks to show the patterns rather than explain them; it is also in part because the probability of oral circulation prior to extant manuscript copies makes it difficult to tell what parts of which poems came first. My initial inclination is to suggest that what I discover, the transition from a more public to a more private and introspective wisdom mechanics, is due to the transition from an oral pagan culture to a Christian culture possessing writing technology. But a different study entirely, dealing with oral-formulaic studies and some of the Germanic roots of Old English wisdom, is required to show the degree to which such a theory is demonstrable.

Secondly, I want to clarify that this is a study of Old English poetry found in a number of different manuscripts, and this dissertation considers these poems in relation to patterns found in

other Old English wisdom poems and Biblical exegesis rather than in relation to surrounding texts in the manuscripts. While the monastic context responsible for these manuscripts is important in the Christian inflections I discover in otherwise apparently agnostic poetry, the interplay of texts and genres within single manuscripts is not the matter of this dissertation. While I have no doubt that such a study would be fruitful, particularly with regard to the Exeter book, the details involved in such a study are well beyond the scope of my project, and would in many ways constitute an entirely different study of their own.

With regard to the progression of the dissertation's argument, Chapter 1 surveys the study and definition of wisdom literature in Old English, and defines and situates the dissertation's contribution and response to prior criticism; it also justifies the scope of the dissertation, which deals with Old English wisdom literature proper, wisdom in other Old English genres, and commentary on the Biblical books of Job and Ecclesiastes. Moreover, it delineates the Platonic ascent to wisdom which, though not accessible to Anglo-Saxons directly through the works of Plato, nonetheless informs interpretations of Job and Ecclesiastes available to Anglo-Saxon readers.

Turning to historical contextualization of the Biblical wisdom, Chapter 2 outlines some major aspects of the commentary tradition on the books of Job and Ecclesiastes available to Anglo-Saxon readers. Both books feature an encounter with some form of frustration that challenges earthly wisdom and causes those encountering it to turn to a higher, heavenly wisdom. More particularly, Ecclesiastes mimes a hubbub of dialogic voices that must eventually be stilled by the voice of an authoritative speaker at the conclusion. Job differs from Ecclesiastes in its more explicit employment of martial language in the explication of wisdom.

Turning to the wisdom passages and themes in *Beowulf*, Chapter 3 shows how the text mirrors Ecclesiastes and Job in its configuration of wisdom as a warlike struggle featuring dialogue of various wisdom voices. It further shows how this poem configures heroic earthly wisdom as a limited good that guarantees survival and flourishing up to a point, but that eventually fails and leaves its audience longing for a more stable transcendent wisdom that the text implicitly approaches but never overtly states. In this, the poem mirrors the ascent to wisdom in Job and Ecclesiastes.

Chapter 4 continues discussing the continuum between heroic and transcendent wisdom discovered in the prior chapter, and argues that *The Battle of Maldon* differs from *Beowulf* insofar as it approaches the transcendent wisdom *Beowulf* only implies. Like *Beowulf*, *Maldon*, with its relative abundance of sententious passages, values heroic wisdom even as it values heroism. However, more than *Beowulf*, it focuses on the failure of heroic wisdom, and asserts more explicitly the kind of transcendent wisdom and spiritual experience that one might turn to on account of this failure. In depicting this continuum, the text reflects the Anglo-Saxon interpretation of Job and Ecclesiastes, particularly in its Jobean amalgam of wisdom and martial language.

Turning from secular to overtly religious texts, Chapter 5 investigates the way that the wisdom struggle of Ecclesiastes and Job toward higher wisdom not only helps illuminate the movement from secular to spiritual things, but also helps illuminate the ascent from lower to higher wisdom that occurs entirely within Christian spiritual experience. The texts studied in this chapter are *Guthlac A & B*. Though Guthlac's battles against the demons in *A* are spiritual, these spiritual battles are configured in heroic language. In *Guthlac B*, readers are confronted with a spiritual heroism that fails in the face of death and points toward the even higher wisdom in the

spiritual realms of heaven. Following the same sapiential pattern as *Beowulf* and *The Battle of Maldon*, *Guthlac A & B* transpose the Jobean/Ecclesiastean ascent toward wisdom into a register of faith far more overt than that of the other two poems.

Transitioning between the heroic wisdom poetry explored in the first chapters and the wisdom poetry proper explored in the latter part of this dissertation, Chapter 6 considers the Old English riddle tradition as a transitional space between these two manifestations of poetic wisdom. Turning on its head language related to both wisdom and heroic literature, riddles frustrate the riddlee and thereby demonstrate his or her own situatedness in the world and consequent need for a higher wisdom that is usually only implied. In its mimicry of worldly frustration and puzzlement, riddling language mirrors the techniques of Job and Ecclesiastes.

Chapters 7 and 8 discuss key texts in the intersection of Old English and Biblical wisdom themes, *Solomon and Saturn I & II*. Though *Solomon and Saturn I* has more to do with runic lore and magical texts than wisdom, the characters of Solomon and Saturn in this poem are rudimentary sketches of the more developed versions of these characters in *Solomon and Saturn II*. In both poems, Saturn represents a this-worldly wisdom that is overcome by the more Christian wisdom of Solomon; the difference between the poems is that, where *Solomon and Saturn I* features warrior letters and runes, these “warriors” are replaced in *Solomon and Saturn II* by bits of lore from an arcane wisdom tradition. Like that of Job and Ecclesiastes, this wisdom is dialogic, riddling, and oriented such that it transitions between the lower reaches of earthly wisdom and the higher reaches of heavenly wisdom; like Job, this poem is martial in its wisdom, which is exchanged in a game of one-upmanship, not unlike the traditional *flyting* form that it evokes.

Chapter 9 continues the prior chapter's discussion of wisdom *flyting*, and finds in *Maxims I & II* an indiscriminate play of wisdom that looks much like that embodied in the Saturn of the *Solomon and Saturn* poems; like Saturn, the *Maxims* amalgamate spiritual and earthly wisdom, and so appropriate a theological wisdom for the purposes of a this-worldly pragmatism. The *Maxims* thus read like instances of the play of voices in Ecclesiastes and Job before these voices are brought to resolution. As if in response to this atmosphere, the *Fortunes of Men* raises questions about such pragmatic wisdom developed in the public arena; the limitations of courtly wisdom are shown up by the inevitability of often brutal death, with only a hint of a higher heavenly wisdom that might answer such death and suffering. *The Fortunes of Men* marks the beginning of a turn away from the public mechanics of wisdom of *Maxims I & II* and *Solomon and Saturn II*, and opens the way for an appreciation of a more private mechanics of wisdom, carried on individually or in very small groups outside the public sphere.

Chapter 10 deals with what this dissertation describes as sapiential asceticism. This wisdom is in many ways similar to the riddling and heroic wisdom dealt with in earlier chapters, and it similarly follows an Ecclesiastean/Jobean pattern of wisdom ascent. What differentiates it from this other wisdom is its suspicion of the development of wisdom in the public and open arena; here, the *flyting* of the hall is replaced by dialogue that, though not less agonistic than *flyting*, nonetheless occurs in a private context, among a few people or even in the form of soliloquy or mental reflection. The suspicion of public, this-worldly wisdom, is particularly evident in *Vainglory* and *Precepts*, which favour a private mechanics of wisdom as an alternative to a public and this-worldly mechanics of wisdom. *The Wanderer* and *The Seafarer* further privatize this mechanics, featuring a wisdom developed within dialogic reflections in the mind or speech of (probably) a single person. Though all four of these poems follow the wisdom patterns

discovered in Job and Ecclesiastes, the latter two are particularly like Ecclesiastes with its “dialogue” of undifferentiated wisdom units compiled by a single voice and brought under the aegis of faith at the conclusion.

Throughout the dissertation, editions used are noted at the introduction of each work, and can be found under their titles in the bibliography. Where I use the translations of other scholars, I note this in a citation. Translations with no cited reference are my own, with the exception of translations of the *Moralia* in Chapter 2; since all translations here are from the nineteenth century translation in the *Library of Fathers of the Holy Catholic Church*, I specify at the beginning of the chapter that citations refer to this work.

Chapter 1: Old English and Biblical Wisdom: Critical and Historical Contexts

The premise of this dissertation is deceptively simple, and can be summed up in a single statement: to explore the role of select books of Biblical wisdom (Job and Ecclesiastes) as part of the cultural matrix wherein Old English wisdom developed and was written down, with Biblical wisdom contextualized historically via contemporaneous commentary on these books. I will use the remainder of this chapter to clarify each aspect of this project: what I mean by Old English wisdom, why I have chosen these particular Biblical books, and how this study will make a significant contribution to the field of Old English wisdom studies.

1.1 Biblical Wisdom

To begin with what is perhaps both the most important and the trickiest task in this dissertation, I offer below some varying definitions of wisdom drawn from the broader context of wisdom studies, followed by my own working definition for this dissertation; one of the best ways of contextualizing such definitions is through a brief survey of the critical background of Old English wisdom studies. The field of Anglo-Saxon wisdom studies exists at the intersection of a few scholarly traditions and streams of thought; some of the most prominent of these are Biblical interpretation, folkloric studies, and a focus on close reading emerging from the English discipline's grounding in New Criticism. Hence, a discussion of these trends is helpful in situating this dissertation's definition of wisdom.

In the field of Biblical studies, the modern conception of “wisdom literature” emerges from the school of Biblical form criticism, begun by Hermann Gunkel. Gunkel's interest in categorizing Biblical texts in terms of generic and other kinds of “forms” led him to posit a class

basis for a literature developed by a social strata of sages in ancient Israel.¹ Later critics furthered Gunkel's hypothesis, one of the most influential being Gerhard von Rad,² who suggested that wisdom was the working out of a philosophy of mundane things within the Yahwism of ancient Israel, a practical theology developing parallel to the more transcendently-oriented covenantal theology.³ Since von Rad, critics have taken the difference between wisdom and Yahwism in a variety of ways; this difference is highlighted by the differing emphases of James Crenshaw and Roland Murphy, both leading scholars in Biblical wisdom and authors of influential introductions to the field. For Crenshaw, there is a clash between the revelatory mode of knowledge in Yahwism and the experiential and largely anthropocentric wisdom literature.⁴ Murphy, on the other hand, sees continuity between wisdom and Yahwism, following Zimmerli's influential suggestion that the wisdom literature is a form of natural theology grounded in creation.⁵ This question, of the degree to which Yahwist or Christian revelation is compatible with experiential wisdom, is one which recurs not only in Biblical scholarship, but also in scholarly discussions that attempt to define the relation between wisdom and Christianity in Old English poetry, as this dissertation will demonstrate.

“Wisdom” in the field of Biblical studies is notoriously difficult to define, and at present the definition is grounded in what critics generally recognize as the Old Testament wisdom canon: Job, Proverbs, and Ecclesiastes in the primary canon; and, in the deuterocanon, the Wisdom of Solomon and Sirach (Ecclesiasticus). Critics also on occasion include in their

¹ R. E. Clements, *One Hundred Years of Old Testament Interpretation* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1976), 102.

² Gerhard von Rad, *Wisdom in Israel* (London: S.C.M. Press, 1972).

³ Clements, *One Hundred Years of Old Testament Interpretation*, 112–114.

⁴ See James L. Crenshaw, *Old Testament Wisdom: An Introduction* (Westminster: John Knox Press, 2010), 229–50.

⁵ See Roland E Murphy, *The Tree of Life: An Exploration of Biblical Wisdom Literature*, 1st ed, Anchor Bible Reference Library (New York: Doubleday, 1990), 111–31.

discussion of this canon some of the Psalms,⁶ and the Song of Songs on the basis of its alleged Solomonic authorship. What follows is a brief summary of some of the most basic features of wisdom, as defined in the scholarly study of Biblical wisdom.

Contemporary studies of Biblical wisdom particularly concern those Biblical activities and passages relating to the Hebrew word *hokma*, a term which can refer to areas such as politics and tradesmanship, but which refers generally in the wisdom literature to “an intellectual quality that provides the key to happiness and success, to ‘life’ in its widest sense.”⁷ Scholars have isolated a variety of different aspects of this wisdom, and by surveying this variety one can get a composite picture of what wisdom is according to Biblical studies. Though the core literary form in Biblical wisdom is the *masal*, often translated loosely as “proverb,” there are other significant forms of Biblical wisdom; most pertinent for the purposes of this dissertation are the dialogue, the didactic narrative, and the riddle.⁸ The matter of Biblical wisdom pertains for the most part to the created world and the human affairs in it;⁹ in this sense, it is this-worldly rather than focused on an afterlife, and is thus more amenable to international discourse than the more stubbornly distinct and less malleable aspects of Old Testament faith.¹⁰ God's primary role in the text is as creator and orderer of the cosmos, as implied in Walther Zimmerli's claim that “wisdom thinks resolutely within the framework of a theology of creation”;¹¹ however, God's proximity to the

⁶ See Crenshaw, *Old Testament Wisdom*, 187–95.

⁷ R. N. Whybray, qtd. in E. C. Lucas, “Wisdom Theology,” ed. Tremper Longman III and Peter Enns, *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Wisdom, Poetry, and Writings* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2008), 902.

⁸ See Crenshaw, *Old Testament Wisdom*, 31–3.

⁹ See Murphy, *The Tree of Life*, 111–132.; Crenshaw, *Old Testament Wisdom*, 207–28.

¹⁰ This international character of Biblical wisdom is noted by Crenshaw: “A single feature of the Solomonic tradition strikes readers as strange beyond measure: the comparison of Solomon's wisdom with that of non-Israelite sages. One can hardly imagine a prophetic narrative that placed a Yahwistic prophet alongside a Baalistic one, even if Yahweh's spokesmen were ranked first. This unusual feature of wisdom furnishes a clue to the international character of the sapiential tradition. We shall examine non-Israelite wisdom later on, but wish at this time to paint that phenomenon in broad strokes.” *Ibid.*, 50.

¹¹ qtd. in Lucas, “Wisdom Theology,” 903.

world should not be mistaken for a deist detachment. Fear of God is the beginning of wisdom,¹² and the personification of wisdom¹³ often found in the tradition seems prototypical of Christ's incarnation.¹⁴ Alongside issues pertaining to the order of creation, Biblical wisdom also discusses complexities that pose problems to the human understanding, such as questions related to theodicy.¹⁵ In terms of the social context it implies, it is often associated with sage "father" figures, or famous exemplars of wisdom such as King Solomon.¹⁶

The tradition behind this understanding of wisdom literature, distilled from the wisdom texts of the Bible and other Near Eastern texts relative to them, is one of the primary sources of the methodology and theorization of wisdom in the study of Old English wisdom literature, though it often goes unacknowledged. Morton Bloomfield takes his initial definition of wisdom from this field in his famous call for further study of wisdom among Anglo-Saxonists.¹⁷ He likewise in his later more internationally focused work (with Dunn) notes the importance of scholarship on Biblical wisdom as a precondition for his own study.¹⁸ Similarly, Elaine Tuttle Hansen grounds her definition of Old English wisdom in a survey of Old Testament wisdom and other related Near Eastern wisdom.¹⁹ Hence, the study of Biblical wisdom pertains to the study

¹² See Proverbs 9:10; for a scholarly elaboration of this, see Von Rad, *Wisdom in Israel*, 53–73.

¹³ See Crenshaw, *Old Testament Wisdom*, 85–88.; Murphy, *The Tree of Life*, 133–9.

¹⁴ Paul A. Olson, *The Journey to Wisdom: Self-Education in Patristic and Medieval Literature* (University of Nebraska Press, 1995), 36–7.

¹⁵ See E. W. Nicholson, "The Limits of Theodicy as a Theme of the Book of Job," in *Wisdom in Ancient Israel*, ed. John Day, Robert P. Gordon, and H. G. M. Williamson (Cambridge University Press, 1995), 71–82.

¹⁶ For further on the personae of the sages, see Murphy, *The Tree of Life*, 3–5.; Crenshaw, *Old Testament Wisdom*, 13–16.

¹⁷ Morton W. Bloomfield, "Understanding Old English Poetry," in *Essays and Explorations; Studies in Ideas, Language, and Literature* (Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press, 1970), 71–2.

¹⁸ "In the past fifteen or twenty years, for the first time we believe, the full range of the early notion of wisdom is beginning to be understood. This new understanding of the notion of wisdom is visible above all in recent Biblical scholarship." Charles W. Dunn and Morton W. Bloomfield, *The Role of the Poet in Early Societies* (D.S. Brewer, 1989), 106.

¹⁹ Elaine Tuttle Hansen, *The Solomon Complex: Reading Wisdom in Old English Poetry*, McMaster Old Eng. Studies & Texts: 5 (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1988), 12–40.

of Old English wisdom, since the former is one of the major contexts from which the latter emerged in academic discourse.

1.2 Wisdom: Paremiology, Folklore Studies, and Close Analysis

Alongside this influence from Biblical studies, another influence on Old English wisdom scholarship has been the field of paremiology, a subset of folklore studies. This too was encouraged by the directions suggested by Bloomfield; even greater than his interest in Biblical wisdom in his later work with Charles Dunn²⁰ is his interest in the workings of international wisdom, which often falls under the purview of these fields. The field of paremiology itself emerged as a serious scholarly discipline in the early twentieth century. Two important precursors to this were Richard Chenevix Trench's *On the Lessons in Proverbs*, published in 1853, and F. Edward Hulme's verbosely titled *Proverb Lore: Being a Historical Study of the Similarities, Contrasts, Topics, Meanings, and Other Facets of Proverbs, Truisms, and Pithy Sayings, as Explained by the Peoples of many Lands and Times*, published in 1902. However, it was Archer Taylor's *The Proverb*, published in 1931, that laid the serious scholarly foundations of the field, and the field continues to thrive under the aegis of a number of scholars, the foremost of whom is Wolfgang Mieder.²¹

The primary difference between the paremiological approach and Biblical wisdom studies is the narrowness of the fields' scopes. Whereas Biblical wisdom includes not only proverbs proper, but also proverb-like material and material associated with the figure of the “sage,” the field of paremiology is confined to the study of the proverb, period. The difference is highlighted

²⁰ Dunn and Bloomfield, *The Role of the Poet in Early Societies*.

²¹ For a more expansive history of the field, see Wolfgang Mieder, *Proverbs: A Handbook* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Publishing Group, 2004), xi–xvi.

in Wolfgang Mieder's response to Stephen D. Winick's attempt to expand the definition of the proverb into the more literary realms of intertextuality:

Stephen D. Winick, in an erudite essay on "Intertextuality and Innovation in a Definition of the Proverb Genre," has tried valiantly to break with the requirement of traditionality for new proverbs, arguing that a text becomes a proverb upon its creation. That would make the sentence "Where there are stars, there are scandals" a proverb! As a folklorist and paremiologist I disagree with this assessment. The fact that the sentence is "proverb-like" does not make it a folk proverb, putting in question Winick's convoluted definition:

Proverbs are brief (sentence-length) entextualized utterances which derive a sense of wisdom, wit and authority from explicit and intentional reference to a tradition of previous similar wisdom utterances. This intertextual reference may take many forms, including replication (i.e., repetition of the text from previous contexts, imitation (i.e., modeling a new utterance after a previous utterance), or use of features (rhyme, alliteration, meter, ascription to the elders, etc.) associated with previous wisdom sayings. Finally, proverbs address recurrent social situations in a strategic way. (Winick 2003: 595)

While Winick goes too far in claiming proverbiality for "proverb-like" utterances (i.e., "explicit and intentional intertextual reference to a tradition of previous similar wisdom utterances"), he includes other valid and important criteria of proverbiality that summarize the findings of important theoretical work in paremiology.²²

Winick's broad definition applies well to the Biblical wisdom and is very like what T. A. Shippey describes as "proverbiousness" in Old English and Old Norse wisdom.²³ Yet a strictly paremiological approach excludes such creative play of proverbiousness, as Mieder makes clear in his rejection of this definition.

In addition to these strands of analysis inflecting the field of Old English wisdom from quarters of paremiology and Biblical studies, it is also important to consider close analysis of primary Old English texts that have elements of wisdom in common, and this strand of scholarship is best represented in the work of T. A. Shippey. Whereas critics such as Bloomfield and Hansen draw liberally from work on wisdom in other fields, Shippey, the first to establish

²² Ibid., 5.

²³ See the discussion in the following paragraph, as well as T. A. Shippey, "The Wanderer and The Seafarer as Wisdom Poetry," in *Companion to Old English Poetry* (Amsterdam: Vrije UP, 1994), 156–7.; and T. A. Shippey, "Proverbs and Proverbiousness in Hrafnkels Saga Freysgoða," in *The Hero Recovered: Essays on Medieval Heroism in Honor of George Clark*, ed. James Weldon and Robin Waugh (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute, 2010), 127–41.

the Old English wisdom canon,²⁴ works largely by grouping common features that he observes throughout the corpus of Old English literature. Of course, though Shippey's work is based largely on his own engagement with primary texts, his approach and methodology overlap with the interests of both the paremiologically informed scholars and those more influenced by Biblical scholarship. Sententious phrases such as those of interest to paremiologists figure prominently in his work, but his interest in what he calls “proverbiousness” - the play of proverbs in literary contexts rather than formal definitions²⁵ - aligns him more closely with the broader understanding of wisdom in Biblical studies.

These foundations of Old English wisdom scholarship are the groundwork for most subsequent studies. Susan Deskis's *Beowulf and the Medieval Proverb Tradition*,²⁶ for instance, follows a more formally defined paremiology, as does Paul Cavill's *Maxims in Old English Poetry*.²⁷ Hansen, as mentioned above, is indebted to the Biblical studies model, while Bloomfield and Dunn²⁸ divide their time between Biblical studies and a more folkloric approach. Carolyne Larrington follows the lead of Shippey in close analysis of parallel texts with an interest in sententiousness rather than sentences alone, but she is also indebted to Hansen and therefore implicitly indebted to the Biblical model used by Hansen.²⁹

²⁴ T. A Shippey, ed., *Poems of Wisdom and Learning in Old English* (Cambridge, Eng.: D. S. Brewer, 1976).

²⁵ On proverbiousness, see Shippey, “*The Wanderer and The Seafarer as Wisdom Poetry*,” 156–7. ; and Shippey, “*Proverbs and Proverbiousness in Hrafnkels Saga Freysgoða*.”

²⁶ Susan E. Deskis, *Beowulf and the Medieval Proverb Tradition* (Tempe, Ariz.: Medieval & Renaissance Texts & Studies, 1996).

²⁷ Paul Cavill, *Maxims in Old English Poetry* (Woodbridge, Suffolk, UK ; Rochester, NY: D.S. Brewer, 1999).

²⁸ Dunn and Bloomfield, *The Role of the Poet in Early Societies*.

²⁹ Larrington situates her work as a development and response to the work of Shippey and Hansen; Carolyne Larrington, *A Store of Common Sense*, Oxford English Monographs (Oxford University Press, 1993), 10–11.

1.3 A Working Definition of Wisdom

With regard to these intersecting fields, this dissertation is more informed by the Biblical studies approach and that of Shippey than by the study of paremiology proper. In particular, it focuses on aspects drawn from the list of Biblical wisdom features above, including wisdom's grounding in the created world and the society that is part of that world; the emphasis on earthy and more “mundane” matters rather than transcendent matters; the agonistic grappling with matters that frustrate human understanding and capacity for progress; and the relationship of wisdom and theology. As noted above, Biblical wisdom is more broadly defined than the proverbial unit of paremiology; it is thus more appropriable for a useful discussion not only of proverbs proper, but of the proverbiousness identified by Shippey and outlined above.

The most basic aspects of this Biblical definition are particularly useful for analyzing an intersection of pagan/secular and Christian traditions such as that found so often in Old English poetry, for many of the matters that fall under its purview are the common property of Christians and pagans alike; regardless of the god one serves, *forst sceal freosan*³⁰ (*Maxims I B 1*), and “the sun also rises.”³¹ However, things become more complicated as wisdom literature approaches the less earthly realm of theology. Here, the wisdom is not defined so much by its earthly and anthropocentric content as it is by its methodology which features agonistic struggle against threats in one's environment or mind - what one might usefully describe as “complexity” or “frustration.” Whereas poems of a secular or pagan bent are liable to deal with such frustration via heroic values and an emphasis on fame, the wisdom that approaches Christian theology often turns the struggle of wisdom into a mystical struggle that eventually finds its rest in God. This too is something latent in the Biblical wisdom tradition, for the fear of God is the beginning of

³⁰ “Frost must freeze”

³¹ Ecclesiastes 1:5

wisdom (Proverbs 9:10), but it raises a problem for definition, particularly when wisdom is, as Biblical scholars often insist, defined over against the revealed knowledge of theology.³² With regard to this problem, it is helpful to think of wisdom and theology as overlapping modes. In this overlap, the highest reaches of wisdom correspond to the beginnings of theology, much as the height of Greco-Roman philosophy could approximate theology in the hands of Christian interpreters in late antiquity. This overlap is the reason why the Old English wisdom is in some poems synonymous or nearly synonymous with theology.

In making this distinction between wisdom and theology I am following a long tradition of Biblical scholarship, but am parting ways with Bloomfield and Hansen. One of the common assumptions of both critics is that theology and religion itself is another kind of folk tradition that can be analyzed in the same way that one would analyze the wisdom of any group. There is thus little distinction for Bloomfield between the revealed wisdom of Christ or Torah and the more organically “natural” wisdom of the wisdom books: “Wisdom in the Bible cannot be confined to Proverbs, Job, and Ecclesiastes. It is ubiquitous. It is not accidental that both Jesus and the Father as well as the Torah itself were ultimately linked with wisdom.”³³ Ubiquitous though it may be, such an approach blurs the theological distinctiveness of Christological revelation over against some version of wisdom’s “natural theology.” More starkly in Hansen’s *Solomon Complex*, any consideration of the revealed content of the Christian wisdom is eclipsed by a focus on the form it shares with the other Old English wisdom poems; in fact, Hansen seems to consider the content a distraction from the more interesting literary technique used in these poems: “If we respond to the simultaneously subtle and conventional verbal strategies of *An Exhortation to Christian Living* or *The Menologium*...we see that each addresses more engaging issues than

³² See Crenshaw, *Old Testament Wisdom*, 207–28.

³³ Dunn and Bloomfield, *The Role of the Poet in Early Societies*, 106–107.

their apparent themes of Christian instruction might immediately suggest.”³⁴ While such studies are important, they do tend to sideline a hierarchical aspect of medieval sapiential thinking that placed God's revealed wisdom at the top and this-worldly wisdom at the bottom, with humans painfully and gradually ascending the heights of this wisdom. By drawing on scattered fragments of a general Platonic heritage, as well as their more specific incarnations in commentary on Job and Ecclesiastes, this dissertation seeks to illuminate such wisdom hierarchy and the mechanics by which humans scale it, replicated in the Biblical and Old English wisdom traditions alike.

1.4 Old English Wisdom: The Critical Background

Having offered and critically situated this dissertation's working definition of wisdom, I now turn to the the scholarly gap that it responds to, that is, the lack of an extended scholarly study of parallels between Old English wisdom and the Biblical wisdom that was arguably a significant precondition for the development of the former. The history of this scholarly gap begins with the justification of Old English wisdom to other disciplines, a defensive response evoked by a critical tendency to overlook Old English wisdom or dismiss it for its lack of artistry. For instance, the critical history of *Vainglory* is so small that it fills only four pages in Poole's annotated bibliography, and there has hardly been an explosion of *Vainglory* criticism since its publication in 1998; Poole notes that this poem is “seldom the object of praise.”³⁵ Hansen offers a helpful survey of the charges against *Precepts*: “*Precepts* has occasioned as little scholarly discussion as any poem in the Old English canon; where the work is mentioned, it is usually described as an ‘uninspired admonition’ full of ‘platitudinous advice’ and written by a poet ‘who wrote zealously but not too well.’ This ‘determinedly humdrum’ writer, we are told,

³⁴ Hansen, *The Solomon Complex*, 101.

³⁵ Russell Gilbert Poole, *Old English Wisdom Poetry, Annotated Bibliographies of Old and Middle English Literature* v. 5 (Cambridge, Eng.; Rochester, NY: D.S. Brewer, 1998), 373.

gives us ‘the raw material of poetry rather than poetry itself.’ In terms of genre, *Precepts* is most frequently included among the minor homiletic or ‘miscellaneous minor poems, and as recently as 1977, the poem was classified with ‘the debris or spoil heaps of the monastic tradition.’”³⁶ Such comments represent the critical neglect of and bias against wisdom poetry, which have haunted it throughout its critical history.

Counters to such comments can be divided into two forms; those seeking to justify Old English wisdom in terms of a New Critical/romantic understanding of the English discipline, and those seeking to justify it in a more post-structuralist milieu. Regarding the former justification, T. A. Shippey has done a heroic job of gradually expanding the literary horizons of readers more accustomed to “romantic-looking” Old English poems such as the elegies. The introduction to his survey of Old English literature makes this purpose quite clear; the first chapter is titled “An Apology for Verse,” by which he means Old English verse, and his addressees seem to be of a New Critical school for whom the highest form of literature is associated with figures such as Ezra Pound, Robert Graves, Alfred Lord Tennyson, and T. S. Eliot.³⁷ In his chapter on wisdom, Shippey begins with romantic impulses that might be familiar to his readers - a quotation from William Blake's *The Four Zoas* followed by discussion of the Old English elegies so popular in romantic milieux³⁸ - and gently moves beyond these things in the hope of expanding his readers' interest in the broader Old English wisdom tradition related to such poems. Whereas Bloomfield offered a call to arms for the defence of Old English wisdom,³⁹ Shippey took a more subversive approach.

³⁶ Hansen, *The Solomon Complex*, 40.

³⁷ For his references to these poets, see T. A. Shippey, *Old English Verse* (London: Hutchinson, 1972), 12.

³⁸ For a summary of the Romantically oriented Germano-English interest in and appropriation of the so-called Old English elegies, see Maria Jose Mora, “The Invention of the Old English Elegy,” *English Studies* 76, no. 2 (March 1995): 129–139.

³⁹ Bloomfield, “Understanding Old English Poetry.”

This approach paid off, and it was the beginning of a process that would allow Shippey to define the contours of an Old English wisdom canon,⁴⁰ and to more forcefully divorce *The Wanderer* and *The Seafarer* from the appropriation of romantic critics.⁴¹ But though Shippey is perhaps more than anyone responsible for the existence of a field of Old English wisdom studies, his means of justification had the probably unintended consequences of maintaining these studies under the shadow of romantic and New Critical norms. This is evident in one of the reasons he gives for studying the wisdom canon compiled in *Poems of Wisdom and Learning*: “There are tendrils of sense and beauty in all the didactic poems in Old English, and the tendrils are worth following both for critics and historians: they lead us to a better understanding of the nature of poetry for Anglo-Saxons, and perhaps to some awareness of their cultural preoccupations.”⁴² Though Shippey leaves here a little room for a more historicist appreciation of the alterity of Old English poetry, he appeals for justification of his work to the “tendrils of sense and beauty” romantically defined, shards of the New Critical “well wrought urn” to be discovered amidst the ruin that is Old English didacticism.

But while Shippey was justifying the wisdom poetry to a romantically inclined English discipline, the field of English underwent a sea change that prepared the way for a different kind of defence, undertaken by Hansen. This sea change was the radical critique of many of the underpinnings of the English discipline, particularly those romantic and New Critical assumptions that Shippey appealed to. In many ways, this was good news for the field of Old English wisdom. Part of the critique against the old New Critical and romantic underpinnings was that they were discriminatory toward various instances of the “other” that might threaten these underpinnings, and Old English wisdom was certainly an instance of such alterity. Hansen

⁴⁰ Shippey, *Poems of Wisdom and Learning in Old English*.

⁴¹ Shippey, “*The Wanderer* and *The Seafarer* as Wisdom Poetry.”

⁴² Shippey, *Poems of Wisdom and Learning in Old English*, 4.

was the critic who took up this line of thought, configuring Old English wisdom as a self-reflexive and prototypically “postmodern” kind of poetry:

It sounds authoritarian, but in fact takes authority as its subject and hence may reflect on and question what it seems to take for granted. It often begins with last words, and rejects the possibility of ending; it may at points look closed in form, but often in fact relies on the impossibility of closure. It invokes and explores the power of past observation, recorded in certainly formally marked utterances, to control the present, and it thereby struggles with the fact that we seem to need most desperately to fix is subject to infinite flux and endless rereading.⁴³

Here, Hansen argues for a radical indeterminacy in the Old English wisdom tradition, implicitly appealing to an academy in which Derridean ideas of deconstruction and slippage were becoming commonplace. Hansen thus stepped in to offer an apology for Old English wisdom to a postmodern readership that might consider Shippey's New Critical roots old fashioned; by doing this, she guaranteed continuing critical conversation regarding an Old English wisdom canon, however defined, and her book remains a standard text in the field.

But though Hansen's success in establishing the genre for postmodern readers was great, one of the aspects her study appears to sacrifice in its postmodern approach is historical and cultural contextualization, which she too readily dismisses in her justification of this approach:

The historical approach itself is of course a recent critical perspective, as fundamentally ahistorical as any of my more blatantly twentieth-century presuppositions. As a critical method, it covers many problematic assumptions; at worst, historical criticism may rest on seriously unexamined notions about periodization and generalization, about the truth of history, the possibility and desirability of accurate reconstruction, and the status of the literary text as historical evidence. While signalling a necessary reminder the texts are situated in contexts, that writers write and readers read in specific places at specific times, the historical few bears in this reminder its own contradiction.⁴⁴

Having successfully established the canon, Hansen left the task of historically nuancing and contextualizing the genre to other scholars, a task that has occupied critics in the most recent history of the field.

⁴³ Hansen, *The Solomon Complex*, 11.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 10.

This task of contextualization was begun soon after Hansen's work by none other than the initiator of the study of Old English wisdom, Morton Bloomfield. Together with coauthor Charles Dunn, Bloomfield produced an interdisciplinary volume comparing wisdom traditions in a variety of cultural and historical contexts.⁴⁵ Including elements from Biblical studies, paremiology, and folklore studies, this work began, if very broadly and cursorily, the task of contextualizing the Old English wisdom genre.

A number of studies following this work have taken up more particular aspects of this task. Paul Cavill has investigated the formal aspects of maxims and the role they might have played in broader Anglo-Saxon culture.⁴⁶ Carolyne Larrington has looked particularly at the parallels between Old Norse and Old English wisdom.⁴⁷ A number of critics have undertaken discussion of wisdom in *Beowulf*, with the most thoroughgoing of these being Susan Deskis in her *Beowulf and the Medieval Proverb Tradition*.⁴⁸ Nicholas Howe has discussed a number of wisdom poems as forms of catalogue poetry.⁴⁹

Most recently, critics have begun once again to appreciate Old English wisdom poetry in terms of the Christian milieu that produced it, a critical decision that is long overdue. Throughout its critical history, the wisdom poetry has occupied an odd space in its relation to paganism and Christianity. Whereas a poem such as *Beowulf* has undergone critical phases with strong emphasis on secular/pagan Germanic culture and religious culture respectively, the critical history of wisdom has been more resistant to Christian interpretation. Brian O'Camb notes regarding the *Exeter Maxims* (*Maxims I*) that, when the discovery of vestigial paganism in Old

⁴⁵ Dunn and Bloomfield, *The Role of the Poet in Early Societies*.

⁴⁶ Cavill, *Maxims in Old English Poetry*.

⁴⁷ Larrington, *A Store of Common Sense*.

⁴⁸ Deskis, *Beowulf and the Medieval Proverb Tradition*. On other critics who have engaged with wisdom in *Beowulf*, see Chapter 3 of this dissertation.

⁴⁹ Nicholas Howe, *The Old English Catalogue Poems*, vol. 23. *Anglistica* (Copenhagen: Rosenkilde and Bagger, 1985).

English poetry fell out of vogue, critics did not seek to interpret the poem as Christian (as had happened with *Beowulf*), but rather as simply secular.⁵⁰ And while such impulses protected the wisdom poems in varying degrees from overdetermined allegorical interpretations such as that which Goldsmith applies to *Beowulf*,⁵¹ it also left some areas unexplored.

Recently, two critics in particular have been seeking to remedy this neglect. Michael Drout identifies a number of wisdom poems as products of the Benedictine reform that helped to spread Benedictine ideals memetically through Anglo-Saxon culture.⁵² O'Camb, building on Drout's work, likewise argues that the manuscript evidence of the Exeter book recommends an interpretation of *Maxims I* via the religious context that produced it:

Exeter maxims is a monastic book production, whatever its more distant origins may be. Recognizing the Exeter Maxims is "inscribed verse" included in a unique medieval manuscript allows us to interpret how poetry influenced those social groups that encountered, read, produced, and ultimately performed Old English gnomic poetry. Despite the understandable modern critical impulse to seek out historical documents representative of the underrepresented social attitudes of secular and lay members of Anglo-Saxon society, we must accept that most of those material documents were produced in powerful ecclesiastical institutions, and so were filtered through the particular cultural lens of monasticism. Rather than speculating about what the poem's contents may imply about its possible oral provenance, I read the poem's inscribed contents within its immediate manuscript context. By focusing on the material fabric of Exeter, Cathedral Library MS 3501, we may profitably ask why Exeter Maxims was valued enough to be included in a vernacular poetic anthology produced in a monastic scriptorium during the late tenth century. Moreover, study of the poem in its manuscript context allows us to explore how it was valued by its audience – which surely included ecclesiastical as well as secular individuals – and begin to understand its social function.⁵³

Following O'Camb, this dissertation presumes that the manuscript context of the poetry it treats implies a monastic interest in its matter; moreover, it presumes that one of the important tasks of the Old English critic involves an educated suggestion regarding some of the reasons these texts might have interested clerics. My overall response in this thesis is that one of the streams of

⁵⁰ Brian O'Camb, "Toward a Monastic Poetics: Exeter Maxims and the Exeter Book of Old English Poetry," Ph.D., University of Wisconsin-Madison, 2009, 9–11.

⁵¹ Margaret E. Goldsmith, *The Mode and Meaning of "Beowulf"* (London: Athlone Press, 1970).

⁵² Michael D. C. Drout, *How Tradition Works: a Meme-based Cultural Poetics of the Anglo-Saxon Tenth Century* (Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 2006), 219–92.

⁵³ O'Camb, "Toward a Monastic Poetics," 14–15.

influence in this monastic reception, writing, redaction etc. of the Old English wisdom was the Biblical wisdom literature, particularly Job and Ecclesiastes, as well as the exegetical traditions accrued by these books.

No one has undertaken such a study, which is curious not only because the study of wisdom in Old English was in some ways birthed from the study of wisdom in the Bible; it is also curious because the Biblical wisdom books were as readily available if not more so to the audience of these poems than some of the other analogues that have interested wisdom scholars. Scholars do not know how much access the audience of these poems had to the Norse analogues that Larrington compares them to; Larrington can only posit a hypothetical Germanic wisdom tradition out of which both Old English and Old Norse wisdom traditions emerged: “I contend that there was a body of folk-wisdom, not yet in metrical form, a body which can be sensed as a living, pulsing, gnomic background to all Germanic poetry - not just verse specifically intended as didactic. There is a gnomic ‘key’ which sounds in other genres, both in Old Norse and Old English, as this study will demonstrate.”⁵⁴ Similarly, Deskis draws in part on evidence from a period later than that of Old English poetry to establish a hypothetical proverb tradition in which to situate the Old English works.⁵⁵ In spite of their limitations, these studies do make useful contributions to the study of Old English wisdom, but if these projects are worth undertaking in

⁵⁴ Larrington, *A Store of Common Sense*, 18.

⁵⁵ Deskis, *Beowulf and the Medieval Proverb Tradition*, 8. “The reader will notice that many of the analogues adduced in the following chapters postdate *Beowulf* by a century or two. The explanation for this relative lateness is, unfortunately, historical. Proverbs circulated in medieval Europe in three ways: that is, in oral discourse, in literature, and in deliberately compiled collections. The contents of oral communication are, of course, lost to us, and literature has preserved proverbs only unsystematically and accidentally, though one may occasionally be lucky in locating multiple versions of the same sentence. Written collections of proverbs are a Latin, rather than vernacular genre which did not really blossom until the eleventh century; furthermore, their preservation and transmission were subject to the same vagaries of fate affecting all medieval texts. Thus, our knowledge of the medieval proverb tradition is less complete than is to be desired. Still the material that is available should be used to its best advantage. Although most proverbial analogues to *Beowulf*, like its legendary and narrative analogues, are later than any accepted dating for the poem, the distribution of these analogues can provide information about the earlier period. That is, the appearance of a proverb or sentence in England, France, and Germany by the twelfth century presupposes a somewhat earlier origin for that proverb. We cannot pinpoint that origin, but neither should we discount it.”

spite of their limitations, it is certainly worthwhile to investigate Old English wisdom with regard to texts that are known to have been accessible to literate Anglo-Saxons: the Biblical wisdom and the extant commentary on this wisdom.

However, in comparing Biblical and Old English wisdom, one must be careful concerning assumptions regarding what the Biblical wisdom is. In past comparisons between Old English and Biblical wisdom, scholars have not been careful to distinguish between the Biblical wisdom as read in a 21st century context and the Biblical wisdom as it would have appeared to an Anglo-Saxon readership - they speak of Biblical wisdom as though its definition is intuitive and one that has always been held.⁵⁶ My purpose in this dissertation is to find out what exactly this Biblical wisdom meant to an Anglo-Saxon readership and whether this meaning might have opened up an imaginative space for the transmission and translation of the Old English wisdom poetry.

To be clear, the purpose of this dissertation is not to track down the distant origins of material in either the Old English or exegetical bodies of literature. For the Old English wisdom, the origins of some of the wisdom no doubt lie in a distant pagan past. Similarly, in the exegetical works, the ideas are not always particular to Job and Ecclesiastes; the motif of the holy warrior, for instance, is widespread and hardly unique to Gregory's commentary on Job. This is because these works are not commentaries as one might define them from a post-Reformation and vaguely Protestant or New Critical perspective, works which begin with the hard evidence of the text and work gradually and carefully outward. Instead, they employ an associative process of interpretation that lessens the distinction between Christian tradition and

⁵⁶ See Hansen, whose approach is typical of this assumption. While it is true that some scholars have investigated Old English literature with regard to patristic interpretations of wisdom books (such as Margaret Goldsmith's interpretation of *Beowulf* via the *Moralia*), these interpretations usually aim to give a broadly allegorical or typological Christian reading of the poem - wisdom is taken as shorthand for Christianity, and the particular nuances of the wisdom genre within the broader Christian framework of belief is overlooked. Hansen, *The Solomon Complex*, 12–40 ; Goldsmith, *The Mode and Meaning of "Beowulf."*

the Biblical text; the exegetes skillfully interweave Biblical text and tradition, producing a creative synthesis rather than an interpretation confined to the narrow limits of the letter. Such an interweaving technique does not in the least threaten this dissertation's argument, for its interest is not in the originality or non-originality of these ideas. Rather, I am interested in the nexus of ideas grouped around the concepts of wisdom in the wisdom books by exegetes whose work might have been available to Anglo-Saxon audiences, authors, and scribes; I am particularly interested in the overlap between this nexus of ideas and that found in the Old English wisdom.

1.5 Scope of Dissertation

The Old English wisdom canon is not as fixed as that of other more clearly demarcated genres, so the list of poems I have chosen to discuss in this dissertation is representative rather than comprehensive; many other poems might have been included. The latter part of the dissertation covers some of the standard works in the wisdom canon, as defined by Shippey⁵⁷ and Hansen:⁵⁸ *Precepts*, *Maxims I & II*, *Vainglory*, *The Fortunes of Men*, *Solomon and Saturn I & II*, *The Seafarer*, and *The Wanderer*. The former part treats Old English poetry that is not wisdom proper, but that contains wisdom elements helpful for understanding the social and poetic context of Old English wisdom, a context that is often left underdefined in the wisdom poetry proper; these include *Beowulf*, *The Battle of Maldon*, *Guthlacs A & B*, *Solomon and Saturn I*, and the general poetic technique of the Exeter riddles.

Before proceeding, one issue that must be addressed concerning this corpus is the manuscript context, and whether the question of the overlap between Biblical/exegetical material and the wisdom literature is worth pursuing. This matter is made more complex by the

⁵⁷ Shippey, *Poems of Wisdom and Learning in Old English*.; Shippey, "The Wanderer and The Seafarer as Wisdom Poetry."

⁵⁸ Hansen, *The Solomon Complex*.

speculative nature of determining exactly what that manuscript context is. Because of the uncertainty surrounding this matter, I have made my argument such that it does not depend on a too specific manuscript context, but rather what I consider to be something of a historical puzzle: the question of why a scribal culture interested largely in exegetical and theological material might also be interested in the more literary material - and in the case of *Beowulf*, fairly secular material - that it was also involved in preserving.

This can only be a question if one grants certain premises. The first is that the poems are in fact preserved by this same ecclesial scribal culture, but I think this is plausible in the case of all of these poems and probable for most of them. Of the poems discussed, all except five (*Solomon and Saturn I & II*, *Maxims II*, *Beowulf*, and *The Battle of Maldon*) are from the Exeter book, and, as Michael Drout argues, Benedictine influence lies behind the construction of this manuscript.⁵⁹ Daniel Anlezark, the most recent editor of the *Solomon and Saturn* poems, discovers a similarly learned Christian community behind these poems.⁶⁰ That the almost secular *Maxims II* was finally written down in a Christian context is clear, not so much from its content, but from its inclusion alongside the ornately liturgical *Menologium*,⁶¹ a poem charged with ecclesial themes. The Christian backdrop against which these poems were preserved thus invites the question of how the matter of these poems is related to the traditions and beliefs that furnished this backdrop.

However, two of the poems are more difficult to place with regard to their relationship to a Christian scribal culture: *The Battle of Maldon* and the Nowell Codex, containing *Beowulf*. The former exists only in a transcription from the original manuscript, which was burnt in the fire in

⁵⁹ Drout, *How Tradition Works*, 219–86.

⁶⁰ Daniel Anlezark, ed., *The Old English Dialogues of Solomon and Saturn*, *Anglo-Saxon Texts* 7 (Cambridge ; Rochester, NY: D.S. Brewer, 2009), 49–57.

⁶¹ See Shippey, *Poems of Wisdom and Learning in Old English*, 13.

the Cotton library,⁶² so that details of its context must be gleaned from the poem and other historical sources pertaining to the battle. However, judging from the near hagiographic construction of the poem and the detail from the *Vita Oswaldi* that monks from the abbey of Ely came to the battlefield to collect Byrhtnoth's bones,⁶³ it is not a stretch to posit some kind of ecclesial influence behind the poem. More difficult to theorize are the historical impulses behind the final transcription of *Beowulf*. Of all the poems discussed in this dissertation, this is the one most likely to raise questions about origins and the degree to which there are Christian themes in the poem. However, most scholars agree that the production in its final form was produced by clerics,⁶⁴ and it is reasonable to assume its authors/compiler would have been familiar with basic "large concepts" of Christianity. Though it is impossible to tell if the person involved in preserving/writing *Beowulf* read the *Moralia* detail by detail, it is probable that the "large concepts" from the exegesis were familiar to them, and so I have striven as far as possible to focus on these rather than more obscure passages that might be less well known - such large concepts include matters such as Ecclesiastean *vanitas*, Jobean patience, the general Godward direction of these books, and their association with wisdom.

Given the multiple wisdom books in the Bible as well as a definitional looseness that can in some cases allow for the discovery of wisdom in all Biblical texts, an assessment of Old English wisdom that covers the entirety of Biblical wisdom texts is well beyond the scope of this thesis. Rather, I have chosen to focus on the two Biblical wisdom texts that seem to reflect most closely the spirit of Old English wisdom: Job and Ecclesiastes. Though further discussion below will

⁶² D. G. Scragg, ed., *The Battle of Maldon, AD 991* (Oxford [England] ; Cambridge, Mass.: Blackwell in association with the Manchester Centre for Anglo-Saxon Studies, 1991), 15–17.

⁶³ Alan Kennedy, in *The Battle of Maldon, AD 991*, ed. D. G. Scragg (Oxford [England] ; Cambridge, Mass.: Blackwell, 1991), 65–8.

⁶⁴ Robert E. Bjork and Anita Obermeier, "Date, Provenance, Author, Audiences," in *A Beowulf Handbook*, ed. Robert E. Bjork and John D. Niles (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1997), 28–31.

illuminate further the parallelism and similarities between Old English wisdom and the medieval conception of these books, my first and most basic reason for choosing these books is their melancholy expression of faith, which is also a distinct feature of most Old English wisdom. Other Biblical wisdom presumably also shaped the milieu in which Old English wisdom was produced, but at the heart of the overlapping borders of Old English and Biblical wisdom is this melancholy, so different from the more optimistic wisdom of a book like Proverbs or the rapture of joyful wisdom in Song of Solomon - and, indeed, also different from much that passes for wisdom in modern society.

Furthermore, though deuterocanonical wisdom such as Sirach (Ecclesiasticus) and The Wisdom of Solomon also shaped the way Anglo-Saxon readers and writers understood wisdom, they are a patchwork of wisdom comprised of a combination of wisdom from the Torah, Old Testament wisdom writings, and Greek philosophy.⁶⁵ Some parts of this patchwork correspond well to the melancholy of Old English wisdom, while others do not. Because dealing with the “mixed” nature of this wisdom and its reception is a complicated matter, it is not simply a footnote that can be added to a study such as this, and must require an extensive study of its own to be dealt with thoroughly. I have therefore chosen to limit the scope of this dissertation to Job and Ecclesiastes, with the understanding that the complexities of the deuterocanonical books merit an entirely separate discussion of their own.

Though I seek to carefully historicize the texts I use so as not to assume that my own unaided interpretation of the Bible is the same as that of medieval readers, I find that every substantive and increasingly objective analysis begins in something much more subjective, an impression or idea that evokes further research, clarification, correction, and analysis. The impression pursued in this dissertation is the sense that both Old English and Biblical wisdom

⁶⁵ See Daniel J. Harrington, S. J., *Invitation to the Apocrypha*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 55-91.

gesture toward a particular stance that combines a clear-eyed and sober realism with a tenacious faith that will not let go of a God who is both a consolation and a frustration, a problem to be solved and the answer to this problem. This impression is hardly enough on its own to justify this comparison - such justification will consist in the argument built up throughout this dissertation - but it has informed my decision to limit my discussion of Biblical wisdom to Job and Ecclesiastes. One must begin somewhere, and it is this sense of a melancholy faith that has determined the “somewhere” in which to ground a study of Old English and Biblical wisdom that I anticipate will branch out to the consideration of other Biblical texts in further scholarly work.

1.6 The Platonic Ascent Toward Wisdom

As a way of preparing for the next chapter's discussion of Job and Ecclesiastes in the exegetically-informed Anglo-Saxon imagination, it is useful to establish the prehistory of the Platonic ascent to wisdom that informed the cultural and intellectual backdrop against which this imagination developed. The Anglo-Saxons presumably did not have access to many of the originators of the conception of this ascent, particularly as many of them were in the Greek rather than Western Latin tradition. Nonetheless, through channels and avenues too numerous to trace, the idea of the Platonic ascent to wisdom found its way through the Latin tradition and was one of the contexts that informed interpretation of Job and Ecclesiastes. Hence, before delving into particular interpretation of Job and Ecclesiastes, I offer a sketch of some of the primary features of this Platonic wisdom ascent as it evolved through the development of early Christian

philosophy and theology. One of the most useful outlines of this ascent and its reception is that offered by Paul Olson in *The Journey to Wisdom*, summarized below.⁶⁶

The basic concept of Plato's ascent to wisdom is famously represented in Plato's image of the cave at the beginning of Book 7 of *The Republic*. In this image, the world is a cave wherein humans are trapped, encountering only shadows of the realities that lie outside the cave. The purpose of philosophy - the love of wisdom - is to lead people outside the cave so they can encounter the real world of forms rather than the shadow world of material. This was the task of philosophy undertaken by figures such as Socrates and Plato.

In the Platonic tradition, the most straightforward way to get outside the cave was to begin by observing the order of the cosmos. Through the study of this order, one could ideally reach beyond the material world to the forms behind this order. The study of mathematics and metaphysics was therefore more important in the Platonic wisdom ascent than the honing of rhetorical skills, as these former were some of the areas of study that allowed one to burst through the observable world and get at the foundation of reality itself. By getting at this reality, one could, in turn, live in accordance with the structure of the cosmos.⁶⁷

In making this claim, Plato set himself in opposition to the school of the Sophists, whom he charged with gaining power through wisdom-technique rather than conformity to a pre-

⁶⁶ Paul A. Olson, *The Journey to Wisdom: Self-Education in Patristic and Medieval Literature* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1995). At my Defence of this dissertation, one of my examiners brought to my attention the limited scope of Olson's study as well as his imprecision in failing to make distinctions between various schools and figures, such as Neoplatonism and the Plotinian tradition; in fact, the story of the development of Platonism prior to the Middle Ages could be told in a number of ways with varying emphases on various figures. In future work with the matter of this dissertation, I intend to be more clear about such matters; however, insofar as the development outlined by Olson is indeed about Plato and the way readers after Plato developed his work, his work is not incorrect, but simply less nuanced than it could be. Given this, I have elected to continue using the term "Platonic ascent" as shorthand for the development of Platonism Olson describes. Even if it whitewashes a multitude of complexities that could be dealt with, it is nonetheless sufficient for the argument in this dissertation, which suggests this complicated cluster of Platonic and Neoplatonic ideas as a philosophical reference point for understanding later exegesis on Job and Ecclesiastes rather than as a tradition that can be tracked into the Middle Ages on a manuscript by manuscript basis.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 8-12.

existent set of forms determined by a *logos* underlying all reality.⁶⁸ Such opposition put Platonic philosophy in tension with more institutionalized forms of schooling; it is difficult to codify an education dependent on something more dynamic and fluid than technique.⁶⁹ As a result of this tension with systematized forms of learning, the wisdom promoted by Socrates and Plato often involves the ironic undercutting of “wisdoms” that pretend to be such when they in fact are not, as seen in their project of dismantling Sophistic rhetoric.⁷⁰ The exposure of Sophistic wisdom's incoherence, along with the search for cosmic order explored above, are two of the most important elements of the Platonic heritage of the Middle Ages, and they recur in various forms throughout the history of changes wrought on Platonism by thinkers after Plato.

Though this ascent appears in various forms in the pre-Christian world after Plato, the most important changes wrought on it were those that occurred when it was brought into dialogue with the particularities of Hebrew and Christian tradition. The primary tension that occurs here is the tension between the extra-material forms and the concrete, incarnate means of revelation that both Judaism and Christianity insist upon. Whereas Platonism involves escape from matter, both Judaism and Christianity insist on a good, God creation and the possibility of God's revelation through this creation: in the case of Judaism, God's historical interference and self-revelation in his rescue of Israel from Egypt; in the case of Christianity, Christ's incarnation.⁷¹

In Hebrew thought, the confluence of Platonic wisdom and Hebrew tradition had the effect of an intensified personification of Woman Wisdom, as well as an identification of wisdom with more local and earthy Near Eastern aspects of wisdom. Though a number of Biblical instances

⁶⁸ Ibid., 9.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 11.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 3–8.

⁷¹ On this “particularizing” of the Platonic ascent in Judaism and Christianity, see *ibid.*, 38–9.

might be aptly used to demonstrate this, I follow Olson in using a particularly representative passage from Sirach 24:1-9:

Wisdom speaks in her own praises,
In the midst of her people she glories in herself.
She opens her mouth in the assembly of the Most High,
She glories in herself in the presence of the Mighty One;
“I came forth from the mouth of the Most High,
And I covered the earth like mist.
I had my tent in the heights,
And my throne in a pillar of cloud.
Alone I encircled the vault of the sky,
And I walked on the bottom of the deeps.
Over the waves of the sea and over the whole earth
And over every people and nation I have held sway.
Among all these I searched for rest,
And looked to see in whose territory I might pitch camp.
Then the creator of all things instructed me,
And he who created me fixed a place for my tent.
He said, “Pitch your tent in Jacob,
Make Israel your inheritance.”
From eternity, in the beginning, he created me,
And for eternity I shall remain.⁷²

Though such a description is in part indebted to the Greek figuration of wisdom as a feminine figure, as Olson notes,⁷³ it is clear that this passage features a figure more substantially intertwined with history and the created world than Platonic wisdom. Where Plato's Socrates sees shadows, Sirach sees a world created by a wisdom that also takes part in the histories of peoples such as the descendants of Jacob.⁷⁴ The contrast, to be sure, should not be considered stark, for there is certainly overlap between this Hebrew conception of wisdom and, for instance, the figuration of wisdom/Diotima in Plato's often this-worldly *Symposium*. Generally speaking,

⁷² qtd. *ibid.*, 22–3.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 23.

⁷⁴ As Olson notes, the difference here is particularly illuminated in the difference between Platonic treatment of Homeric mythology and Jewish treatment of the story of Israel. For Israel, there is something in this very story that is God's self-revelation while, for Platonists, Homeric poetry must become a metaphor for metaphysics before the lying poets can be admitted into the republic. *Ibid.*, 39.

though, the Hebrew attachment to historical particulars and a good created order gives flesh and bones to the more ethereal Greek figuration.

This enfleshing of wisdom is further taken up by Christians in their interpretation of Christ as this wisdom figure mediating between the world and the spiritual world of forms; as Olson notes, “Early Christianity, arguing that its *Logos* announced a new Torah for which the center of history is not the history of a nation but of the Christ person, turns Israel's emphasis on history toward the history of individuals.”⁷⁵ While the Platonic tendency to recover important but hard-to-interpret stories through symbolic readings does not disappear from Christianity - there is plenty of evidence for it in allegorical interpretation of the Bible⁷⁶ - the Christian reception of the Platonic ascent continues to develop the “historical turn” started in Jewish culture. However Platonic one wanted to be as a Christian, the historical incarnation of Christ worked as a thorny counter to Platonic abstraction.

Given the importance of this Christian redaction of wisdom for the exegetes available to Anglo-Saxon readers, the details of this Christian ascent to wisdom/Christ are worth exploring in depth. For Olson, there are three figures in particular who represent the development of the Christianized Platonic ascent: Origen, Gregory Thaumaturgos, and Augustine. The pertinent work concerning the former two figures is *Oratio Panegyrica in Origenem*, in which Gregory chronicles his own ascent to wisdom under the tutelage of Origen. St. Augustine in his *Confessions* further develops this Christian understanding of the wisdom ascent. These works, according to Olson, participate in a process of articulating and reshaping the Platonic ascent for Christian purposes.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Olson notes that early Christians believed in “a Bible that is to be read as history but also as a Platonic philosophical fable.” Ibid.

1.6.1 "Baptizing" Plato with Origen, Gregory

Thaumaturgos, and Augustine

According to Olson, the understanding of pain in the Origenian ascent is one of the marked changes that Origen makes to Plato's original conception; contrasting Gregory's Origenian wisdom ascent with the lives of the "Olympian Plato and Socrates,"⁷⁷ Olson traces the way that the experience of pain takes a more prominent position in Gregory's account of his ascent, including "the pain of the 'death' of the father, the pain of Origen's pummeling dialectic, and the pain of departure from Origen."⁷⁸ Olson's earlier citation of Gregory Thaumaturgos helps to illuminate the nature of this pain:

At times [he] attacked us in the manner typically used by Socrates and tripped us up with his arguments when he saw us becoming restless with him, like unbroken horses that ran away from the road and galloped crazily about randomly until with a bridle he persuaded us. And this process was at first unpleasant and painful to us, when he drove and cleansed us with his own learned discourse, we who were certainly inexperienced and unprepared for reason.⁷⁹

According to Olson, a pedagogic interpretation of pain such as this passage represents is the result of a Pauline emendation of Plato wherein Origen and Gregory take seriously Paul's development of a cruciform Christian wisdom, particularly as it is outlined in 1 Corinthians 1-4.⁸⁰

This pain "leads the student away from the rhetorical, legal studies and mechanical pedagogy to a struggle with real life problems" wherein "the interpretation of these problems comes from the inner Logos and from a providentially provided teacher,"⁸¹ in this particular case, Origen. The self-emptying that occurs through the experience and interpretation of pain prepares one for the study and appreciation of the overarching *Logos* of the cosmos, largely

⁷⁷ Ibid., 32.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ qtd. *ibid.*, 29–30.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 32-3.

⁸¹ Ibid., 33.

through scientific disciplines. This study, beginning with earthly things, ascends through traditional “lower” and “higher” subjects in Greek philosophy. It is facilitated by a collaborative process between the student, teacher, the student's internal impression of the *Logos*, and an external personified *Logos* that also intervenes. Perhaps most importantly with regard to the Christianization of Platonism, Origen equates Christ, the wisdom of God, with the external *Logos*.⁸²

Though Origen and Gregory were some of the first Christians to work out this Platonist-Christian synthesis, St. Augustine's development of the subject was perhaps the most influential throughout the Middle Ages, whether directly or through intermediate works; hence, an understanding of the particular shape of this Augustinian version of the Platonic ascent is necessary for further discussion of its permutations throughout the medieval period. This Augustinian journey outlined in *The Confessions* consists in the self-emptying enacted through pain/discovery of vanity; a turn outward from the emptied self toward the stuff of creation; an identification of the God seen in creation with the one found in the Bible; and a final mystical union with this God.

The first stage that Augustine goes through is one that Olson refers to as self-emptying, and it corresponds to the painful self-growth seen in Origen's programme, as discussed above. The pain through which Augustine experiences this self-emptying is of varying sorts, and could also be labelled “frustration” or “vanity,” to use the Ecclesiastean term, for it frustrates him and teaches him to see the limitations of his own self and society. It includes undeserved punishment in school and grief that turns to prayer upon the death of a friend. However, it is not “large” griefs such as these but rather the comparatively banal experience of a toothache that eventually drives home for him the message of suffering, that he suffers from Original Sin and is in need of

⁸² Ibid., 26–40.

salvation external to himself.⁸³ Precisely what he begins to learn through this process is well articulated by Olson, who describes the way pain supplements and delimits his Neoplatonism:

Unfortunately, the Neoplatonist power and Wisdom of God has not known pain, has not emptied Himself. The Neoplatonists could not teach Augustine the meaning of pain or the message of Antony's life, the meaning of 1 Corinthians 1.24. They could not communicate what Augustine learns in the "Tolle, lege" garden...But after pain has opened Augustine to the world beyond myth and outside himself, he is ready to seek a more objective knowledge.⁸⁴

This "more objective knowledge" takes the form of two distinct but overlapping categories: scientific knowledge and the more local but nonetheless empirical knowledge arising from personal experience. Alongside this opening to creation, Augustine similarly opens himself to the divine revelation that allows him to name and identify the *Logos* he encounters in the world as the very same God revealed in Christ and sustaining the universe. This opening to divinity culminates in the experience of mystical contemplation given to Augustine in Ostia.⁸⁵

Thus, the Augustinian version of the Platonic ascent to wisdom can be summarized as follows. The person, puffed up with rhetoric and sophistry, experiences pain and frustration and a perception of the vanity of the world. This opens him or her to the twin realities of creation and the Christ-shaped *Logos* lying behind it. As the contemplative works his/her way through experience of the created order, he/she eventually reaches the experience of mystical contemplation of God.

1.6.2 The Augustinian Inward and Upward Turn

As a way of further clarifying this ascent, it is useful to consider particularly the function of an inward and upward turn in Augustine's ascent to wisdom. With regard to the inward turn,

⁸³ This summary is informed by that of Olson, *ibid.*, 54–5.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 55.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 55–67.

Mary Wallis notes its invention by Augustine and further deployment by Alfred in the Anglo-Saxon *Consolation*, where *Mod* replaces the speaking “I”:

Augustine claims in the *Soliloquia* to have ‘invented a genre whose achievement was to internalize the process of dialogue by writing fictions of the mind in conversation with itself’....Augustine's use of the dialogue in this way finds an analogue in Boethius' *Consolatio*, which shows the sound mind of the wise man taking shape through a self-reflexive and progressively internalized debate. In Alfred's Anglo-Saxon version of the *Consolatio*, where, significantly, the OE mind word *Mod* is used to replace the “I” of the original, wisdom is seen to lie in the divinely enlightened mind instructing itself. Here, the dialogue is an induction into inner wisdom; error and mental distraction are replaced by knowledge and centredness.⁸⁶

Simply put, this inward turn is the replacement of external interlocutors with a variety of personae speaking in a single mind. This turn from the more public social debate to a more internal and private debate is one which this dissertation will encounter frequently in the Biblical commentaries with their focus on the ascent from external to contemplative spirituality; it is also evident in certain of the Old English poems that transmute the Old English *flyting* debate along similar lines, as Wallis herself very briefly notes of *The Wanderer* and *The Seafarer*.⁸⁷

It is important, though, to bear in mind that this inward focus should not be seen as a narcissistic shutting out of external things but rather as a withdrawing from external things so as to get at the higher things to which they allude. There is a movement from outward things to inward things, and then the gaze of the soul is moved upward from within toward spiritual things. Phillip Cary has explained this well in his summary of *Confessions* 7. Cary finds that the Platonist (likely Plotinian) book that led Augustine toward Christianity would in fact have contained an idea contrary to Christian doctrine, that the soul itself is divine. According to Cary, Augustine silently passes over this doctrinal error by adding a feature to Plotinian inwardness, an upward turn that follows the inward turn. As Cary puts it, Augustine is “simply trying to state what he thinks is the truth: that the soul can turn inward to find God, as Plotinus says, but that it

⁸⁶ Mary V. Wallis, “Patterns of Wisdom in the Old English *Solomon and Saturn II*” (Ph.D., University of Ottawa, 1991), 100–101.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 101.

is more complicated than Plotinus makes it out to be, and therefore we need to correct his description using the older Platonist language of height and ascent.”⁸⁸ This movement inward and upward is taken up in medieval interpretations of Job and Ecclesiastes, as will be shown in the following chapters; it is also evident in the Old English wisdom tradition's turn from a public mechanics of wisdom toward a mechanics more private and withdrawn from the dialogic debate of the public sphere.

1.6.3 Wisdom and Warfare

Although this Augustinian outline encapsulates for the most part the synthesis of the Platonic ascent inherited by medieval thinkers, there is one further development of its reception that is useful to keep in mind throughout the rest of this study; this development is the representation of this ascent in terms of epic poetry, particularly the martial imagery associated with epics as well as other epic motifs related to struggle. According to Olson, this process has its roots in a desire to defend the Greek Homeric tradition against its dismissal in the Platonic tradition. In the original Plato, the philosopher charges poets with telling lies, and makes no room for them in his Republic. However, later Platonists did not take such a hard line on poetry, and sought to rescue the Homeric tradition from Plato's dismissal. This they accomplished by reading the epics not in the strictly literal terms that had induced Plato to think of poets as liars, but rather through an allegorical method that interpreted the martial themes of the poems as types of the educational struggle as conceived of in the Platonic ascent. Later interpreters used the same process to interpret Vergil, and the technique became particularly popular among a Christian readership that could not wholly affirm the pre-Christian values of these classical

⁸⁸ Phillip Cary, *Augustine's Invention of the Inner Self: The Legacy of a Christian Platonist* (Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 40.

works of literature.⁸⁹ As heirs of the Latin Christian tradition, Anglo-Saxons were thus also heirs of this tradition accustomed to configuring martial imagery as an alternate way of talking about the Platonic ascent to wisdom. The probable influence of this way of thinking is evident in the intersection of martial and sapiential discourse so common in the poetic, Biblical, and commentary texts that are the matter of this dissertation.

1.6.4 Conclusion

Though Olson devotes an entire book to analysis of this wisdom ascent, the above summary provides sufficient context for understanding the next chapter's discussion of the way that medieval commentators approached Job and Ecclesiastes. To be clear, I am not claiming that exegetes used this Platonic ascent as a rigid programme in their works; neither am I even claiming that all the aspects of this ascent were known to every single exegete. What I am suggesting is that this Platonic ascent, such a significant part of the background in which Jobean and Ecclesiastean exegesis was shaped, affords a useful grammar for discussing this exegesis. What is important for this dissertation's argument is not the degree to which there is a "through line" from the Platonic ascent to the Old English wisdom traditions; rather, what an understanding of this ascent offers is a terminology and context for understanding the exegesis on Job and Ecclesiastes available to Anglo-Saxon readers, which exegesis this dissertation suggests as a significant context for the development of Old English wisdom.

⁸⁹ Olson, *The Journey to Wisdom*, 85–116.

Chapter 2: Job, Ecclesiastes, and the Commentary Tradition in Anglo-Saxon England

2.1 Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is not to provide a comprehensive reception history of Job and Ecclesiastes. Rather, it is to outline a rhetorical form common to both books (as interpreted in commentary available to Anglo-Saxon readers) and also to the Old English wisdom explored in later chapters. Roughly, this form involves the navigation of a world of difficulty and frustration, sometimes with a particular focus on this frustration as experienced in the realms of human cognition and agency (Ecclesiastes), and sometimes with a broader focus on suffering and pain in general (Job). The form of this navigation is dialogic, with a variety of voices or personae representing a variety of opinions often in conflict; the dialogue form leads these more earthly perspectives toward a higher, heavenly perspective. Where Ecclesiastes and Job differ in their conceptions of this ascent is in the degree to which it is associated with public and visceral drama and struggle; the nature of the Ecclesiastean dialogue is elusive at the best of times, often resisting clear explanation, while the book of Job with its already dramatic context lends itself to the more straightforward association of its dialogue with external and public milieux. Reinforcing this association with external and public milieux is the martial language that medieval readers perceived in Job; this martial language sets it apart from the more ethereal language used to describe the struggles in Ecclesiastes. These differences will become important for later distinctions between kinds of wisdom in Old English poetry.

The sources used to demonstrate these interpretations of Job and Ecclesiastes are not comprehensive, nor are they meant to be; outlining the nuances and details of every minor

similarity and difference amidst all texts accessible to the Anglo-Saxons would be a dissertation-length project in itself. Rather, I have chosen certain of the texts and themes because they were (arguably) the most influential treatments of these books available to Anglo-Saxons - alternatives certainly exist, but the works covered here are sufficient to speak for traditions of Jobean and Ecclesiastean interpretation in the main.

For Ecclesiastes, this chapter mainly relies on two texts: Gregory's interpretation of Ecclesiastes in his *Dialogues*, and Jerome's commentary on Ecclesiastes. The former is important because, rather than remaining tangled in the obscurities of the *Dialogues*, it became a popular gloss included in commentaries on Ecclesiastes,⁹⁰ and it was translated into Old English with the rest of Gregory's *Dialogues* by Werferth.⁹¹ Jerome's commentary is important as the source Anglo-Saxon readers might have turned to in order to clarify things about Ecclesiastes; not only did Anglo-Saxon readers have access to it, but it even seems to have been available to those one might not expect to possess manuscripts, such as women; according to the *ex libris* inscription on an Italian manuscript (Würzburg, Universitätsbibliothek, M. p. th. q. 2, Lapidge, page 163, #78), this copy belonged to an Abbess named Cuthswith in England around 700 A. D.⁹² Parts of

⁹⁰ Eric Jon Eliason, "*Vanitas Vanitatum: Piers Plowman, Ecclesiastes, and Contempt of the World*" (Ph.D., University of Virginia, 1989), 87–8.

⁹¹ Citations of the *Dialogues* throughout this chapter are from Gregorius Magnus, *Bischofs Waerferths von Worcester Übersetzung der Dialoge Gregors des Grossen über das Leben und die Wunderthaten italienischer Väter und über die Unsterblichkeit der Seelen*, ed. Hans Hecht, trans. Werferth, *Bibliothek Der Angelsächsischen Prosa*, Begründet Von C. W. M. Grein...5. Bd (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1965). Translations are my own.

⁹² Michael Lapidge, *The Anglo-Saxon Library* (Oxford [England] ; New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 56n21. See also Michelle P. Brown, "Female Book-Ownership and Production in Anglo-Saxon England: The Evidence of the Ninth Century Prayer Books," in *Lexis and Texts in Early English: Studies Presented to Jane Roberts*, ed. Christian Kay and Louise Sylvester, Costerus new ser. 133 (Amsterdam ; Atlanta, GA: Rodopi, 2001), 47–8. Other evidence of knowledge of Jerome's commentary in Anglo-Saxon England includes two manuscripts and some citations by Bede. One of these (Kassel, Gesamthochschulbibliothek, Fol. theol. 21) is of Northumbrian provenance, and was brought to Fulda in the seventh century (Lapidge, page 159, #38); the other (Würzburg, Universitätsbibliothek, M. p. th. q. 28a) seems to have been produced by Anglo-Saxon scribes on the Continent in the Fulda-Würzburg region circa 800 A. D., and only contains excerpts of the Ecclesiastes commentary (Lapidge, page 163, #83). Bede also clearly had access to the text, as he cites them in his Commentaries on Luke, James, Proverbs, and the Song of Solomon. Lapidge, *The Anglo-Saxon Library*, 215.

Alcuin's commentary on Ecclesiastes also supplement this chapter's argument, since Alcuin's exegesis offers a case study of an Anglo-Saxon engaging with Ecclesiastes,⁹³ even if there is little evidence of extensive English engagement with this text.⁹⁴ With regard to Job, Gregory the Great's *Moralia* was certainly the most influential and accessible text in Anglo-Saxon England; there is enough manuscript evidence that Lapidge can list it as one of the staples of a typical Anglo-Saxon library.⁹⁵ This evidence, considered alongside Gregory's popularity as the patron of England's salvation,⁹⁶ suggests that the *Moralia* were probably not only considered an aid to reading Job, but also more generally a key text on scripture and spirituality for Anglo-Saxon readers. Though I supplement the *Moralia* with Ælfric's sermon on Job ("Dominica I In Mense Septembri Quando Legitur Iob"), the *Moralia* on their own are more than sufficient in establishing probable major trends in Anglo-Saxon interpretation of Job.

2.2 Ecclesiastes

2.2.1 Solomon and the Platonic Ascent

One of the best means of understanding the ascent toward wisdom discovered in Ecclesiastes is its place in a tripartite reading of the Solomonic books roughly corresponding to

⁹³ Though Alcuin's move from England to France make him a less than typical example of an Anglo-Saxon scholar, his continued communication with others from his homeland in England demonstrates Alcuin's sustained interest in and therefore influence by and on Anglo-Saxon culture. Cultural context is not only determined by the physical geography in which one lives, but also by those traditions one engages with, and Alcuin's engagement is sufficient to speak of him as an Anglo-Saxon author. On Alcuin's ongoing interaction with the English while he was in France, see Chapter 3: Between Two Courts in Donald A. Bullough, *Alcuin: Achievement and Reputation*, (Leiden: Brill, 2004), 331-431.

⁹⁴ Lapidge lists three manuscripts produced on the continent and (allegedly) in England before the Norman invasion. However, for two of these (London, British Library, Harley 213; and Salisbury, Cathedral Library 133), the English provenance is unknown (see Lapidge, page 170, #37; and page 173 #74). The English provenance for the third manuscript (Rouen, Bibliothèque municipale, 26) is in the eleventh century (Lapidge, page 172, #71), so that its arrival before the Conquest could be a debatable point. Lapidge, *The Anglo-Saxon Library*.

⁹⁵ Ibid., 127.

⁹⁶ On Gregory's popularity in Anglo-Saxon England, see Patrizia Lendinara, "Gregory and Damasus: Two Popes and Anglo-Saxon England," in *Rome and the North: The Early Reception of Gregory the Great in Germanic Europe*, ed. Rolf H. Bremmer, Cornelis Dekker, and David F. Johnson, Mediaevalia Groningana New ser., v. 4 (Paris ; Sterling, VA: Peeters, 2001), 137-56.

stages in the educational ascent toward wisdom in Platonic tradition. Eric Eliason, whose study is still one of if not the most thorough analysis of this correspondence, nicely summarizes this influential Origenian approach to the Solomonic books:

In Origen's view of the process of education, Ecclesiastes holds a mediating position between the most basic religious instruction—good conduct—and the most sublime religious achievements—the mystical contemplation of divine things. Or, in other words, Ecclesiastes pertains to those whose religious instruction is already significantly under way, but who have yet to attain the highest goals of that instruction. It is the next to last stop in the project of learning to love. Jerome, faithful to Origen, expands these ideas in his commentary (250-1) and from this source they pass into the works of Alcuin (668-9), *glossa ordinaria* (Eccl. 1.1), Hugh of St. Victor (116), and Honorius of Autun(92).⁹⁷

As Olson notes,⁹⁸ this Origenian programme amalgamates the Solomonic books with the Platonic ascent to wisdom outlined in the prior chapter, and the position of Ecclesiastes in this tripartite ascent to wisdom is significant in understanding the book's function in an imagination shaped by this Origenian reading - in this case, the Anglo-Saxon interpretation of Ecclesiastes, shaped by Jerome's interpretation of the book and represented in Alcuin's commentary. In this tripartite reading, Ecclesiastes emerges as a middle space between simplicity and perfection, a training ground where one might prepare oneself for the final perfection of contemplation. Given this interpretation, it is hardly surprising that the book came to be associated with asceticism, as seen in the commentaries of Jerome and Alcuin, discussed below.⁹⁹

⁹⁷ Eliason, "*Vanitas Vanitatum*," 54-5.

⁹⁸ "He [Origen] says that the Greeks speak of three disciplines aside from the verbal discipline of logic: ethics, physics, and contemplation (i.e., metaphysics or theology). Of these disciplines, physics corresponds to what Gregory calls natural philosophy, and the mathematical subjects and contemplation correspond to the theology that ascends above the creation to the Logos. Origen locates these "philosophic" disciplines in the Solomonic books as well as in Greek works. He asserts that ethics is found in Proverbs; physics in Ecclesiastes (which teaches of the cycles, vanities, and uses of natural things); and "contemplation" in the Canticle of Canticles. The allegorical progress which Origen finds in the three Solomonic books is analogous to that which he says are also to be found in the "works of the Greeks" (i.e., Plato) by certain Platonists." Olson, *The Journey to Wisdom*, 34.

⁹⁹ See section 2.2.3 below.

2.2.2 Gregorian "Voice Theory" and Ecclesiastes

While Origen's interpretation establishes the place of Ecclesiastes in the broader rhetorical schema of the Solomonic books, Gregory the Great's *Dialogues* are responsible for an interpretation of the book more relevant to its particulars. This interpretation develops after Peter the Deacon asks Gregory about Ecclesiastes 3:18-20, which verses seem to contradict the doctrine of the resurrection. Gregory replies that, in the book, Solomon, the author, takes on a variety of personae. The perspectives of these personae are stand-ins for real beliefs that people might hold, but they vary in degree of truthfulness. Solomon's purpose in the book, then, is to imitate the kinds of arguments and assertions that the sinners and unlearned might make in order to lead them to the final truth at the end of the book.¹⁰⁰ Though only a small portion of the *Dialogues*, the interpretation in this Gregorian passage was popular throughout the Middle Ages.

As Eliason notes:

Gregory treats only a minuscule portion of the text of Ecclesiastes, but because he chooses a few of the most provocative cruces in the book and offers a powerful and attractive method for interpreting them, the influence of his work is out of proportion to its brevity. Alcuin (670-1), the *glossa ordinaria* (Eccl. 1.1), and

¹⁰⁰ Soðlice þeos boc is haten rihtraciend, ac Salomon, þa þa he spræc be þysum wisum in þære bec, he onfeng þæs hlydendan folces 7gyte 7 wæs mid þy abyrgod, þæt þa (113a) wisan, þe he þær spræc þurh his race 7 socne, wen is, þæt þa ongyte þus þæt ungelærede mod 7 þæt gedræfde, 7 hit wære þy swa ungewiss for costnunge 7 gehlyde þæs folces. Hit is gelic þon swylce he onfengce swa manige hadas to him mislicra manna to gerihtanne, swa manige swa he cwydas onstyrede þurh his socne. Ac þæt byð se soðsagola raciend 7 dema, se þe mid his aþenedre handa gestilleþ þa geruxl 7 þæt gehlyd eallra manna 7 hi þonne gespaneð 7 gelapað to anum dome. Eac in þære ylcan bec Salomones is gecweden: "gehyre we ealle samod þone ænde þissere spræce." 7 eac hit is gecweden: "ondræd þe God 7 heald his bebodu; þæt byþ soðlice ælc man, se þus deð" (4.4.5-17). Gregorius Magnus, *Bischofs Waerferths von Worcester Übersetzung der Dialoge Gregors des Grossen über das Leben und die Wunderthaten italienischer Väter und über die Unsterblichkeit der Seelen*, 265.

"This book is rightly called the orderer, for Solomon, when he spoke concerning these things in that book, took up the understanding of these clamoring folk, and was with that busied, so that these mindsets, which he articulates there through his rule and questioning, perhaps these he might test - the mind unlearned and disturbed and, as it were, by that so uncertain on account of temptation and the loudness of the folk. It is therefore like such that he took upon himself so many personae of various men to correct, as many as the speeches he stirred up through his questions. But that is the truthful ruler and judge, who with his extended hand stills the tumult and that clamor of all men and entices and invites them to a single judgement. Also in that same book is the saying of Solomon: "Let us all together hear the end of this speech." And also it is said: "Fear you God and hold his commandment: that is truly each man, who thus does."

Hugh of St. Cher (f.70v) incorporate this section of Gregory's work into their commentaries in something close to its entirety.¹⁰¹

Following this observation, Eliason goes on to demonstrate its influence on the commentaries of Pseudo-Rupert of Deutz, Nicholas of Lyra, and most significantly, Bonaventure. Though all of these except Alcuin post-date the Anglo-Saxon period, the passage's popularity suggests a prior history wherein the quote did not simply remain accessible only to those who stumbled onto it in the *Dialogues*, but was circulated among commentators on Ecclesiastes at least as far back as the time of Alcuin.

2.2.3 Frustration and Vanity in Ecclesiastes

While Gregory's interpretation frames the book, it does little to connect the individual pieces, so that though one knows the book to be a conversation of multiple personae, one is nonetheless left with the feeling that the matters of the book are disparate and barely connected. Jerome's commentary,¹⁰² another resource the Anglo-Saxons had access to, might have confirmed this - often his remarks seem occasional, reflecting piecemeal on the individual verses rather than binding the book together into an overarching theme.¹⁰³ The phrase Gregory uses to

¹⁰¹ Eliason, "*Vanitas Vanitatum*," 87–8.

¹⁰² Citations for Jerome refer to Hieronymus Stridonensis. *Commentarius in Ecclesiasten*, in *S. Hieronymi Presbyteri Opera, Pars I*, ed Marc Adriaen, Vol. 72, 246–361, *Corpus Christianorum Series Latina*. (Turnhout: Brepols, 1959). Translations are my own.

¹⁰³ Hard evidence of this text as a restless text chaotically pushing against any fixed sense of cohesion is difficult to pin down; it is an impression one gets when one reads the commentary and tries to summarize what one read; there are instances that gesture toward the broader organization, but they are often bogged down in paraphrases and elaborations, such as the following commentary on 4:4:

Et uidi ego universum laborem et simul omnem virtutem operis; quia aemulatio uiri a sodali eius; et quidem hoc uanitas et praesumptio spiritus. Conuersti me rursus ad alia, et uidi omnem fortitudinem et gloriam laborantium, et deprehendi bonum alterius esse, alterius malum, dum inuidus aliena felicitate torquetur et patet insidiis gloriosus. Quid enim uanius, quid instar spiritus sic nihili, quam homines non suas flere miserias, uel propria lugere peccata, sed melioribus inuidere? (IV.47–55) Ibid., 284–5.

“And I saw all labor, and all the virtue of work together – from rivalry of man against his fellow – and this indeed was vanity and presumption of spirit. I turned myself again to other things, and I saw all the strength and renown of laborers, and I discovered the good of one to be the evil of another, while the envious one is tormented by the

describe the Ecclesiastean dialogue in the Old English in fact confirms such an interpretation - he describes the voices in the book as *þæt ungerydelice 7 þæt hlude geflit þæs folces*,¹⁰⁴ a description that brings to mind the circuitous and often more associative than logical *flyting* methods embodied in Old English poetry such as *Solomon and Saturn II* and the *flyting* match between Beowulf and Unferth.

But unruly though it is, if one were to hypothesize a theme of the book for Anglo-Saxon readers, it would be vanity, or frustration. The concept of vanity at this stage in the interpretation history is not as codified as it becomes in later scholastic reception, but it is clear from Jerome that it permeates the world - both Christian and secular/pagan. Jerome offers in various places a number of particular instances of frustration, and though he does not explicitly say that each and every of these is a direct definition of the word “vanity,” it is implied that the frustration represented offers snapshots of the world of vanity that is the theme of the book. In one instance, vanity thwarts the gaining and maintenance of material possessions.¹⁰⁵ In another, it is seen frustrating cognitive understanding of the world.¹⁰⁶ Moreover, this vanity is not simply confined

happiness of others, and the vainglorious one exposed to traps. For what is more vain, what image of the spirit more worthless, than men not lamenting miseries, or mourning their own sins, but envying betters?”

While this is an apt reflection, it does not give a sense of the verse's place in the overall thematic and rhetorical structures of the book, though in doing this it is only reflecting the restlessness of the primary text itself.

¹⁰⁴ 4.4.2 Gregorius Magnus, *Bischofs Waerferths von Worcester Übersetzung der Dialoge Gregors des Grossen über das Leben und die Wunderthaten italienischer Väter und über die Unsterblichkeit der Seelen*, 265. “that unruly and loud *flyting* of the people.”

¹⁰⁵ *Quid superest homini in omni labore suo, quo laborat sub sole? Post generalem sententiam, quod uana sint omnia, ab hominibus incipit: quod frustra in mundi istius labore desudent, congregantes diuitias, erudientes liberos, ambientes ad honorem, aedificia construentes, et in medio opere subita morte subtracti audiant: Insipiens, hac nocte auferetur anima tua a te: quae autem parasti, cuius erunt? maxime cum ex omni labore nihil secum ferant, sed nudi in terram redeant, unde sumpti sunt.* (I.107-15) Ibid., 253.

What profit is there for man in all his labor, in which he labors under the sun? After the general saying, that all is vain, he expounds from human nature: that in vain they toil in the work of this world, gathering riches, teaching children, going after honor, constructing buildings – and in mid-work, suddenly taken by death, they hear: Fool, this night your soul will be taken from you; whose then will be your contrivances? Just so they bear nothing with them from all their labor, but return naked to the ground, whence they were taken.

¹⁰⁶ *Omnes sermones graues non poterit uir loqui. Non satiabitur oculus uidendo, et non implebitur auris auditu. Non solum de physicis, sed et de ethicis quoque scire difficile est. Nec sermo ualet explicare causas*

to the secular sphere; in one instance, Jerome, after extensively describing the toil and weariness that humans endure, goes on to describe its effects on holy persons in the church.¹⁰⁷ In yet another instance, the toil of vanity comes to be associated with those who are (according to Jerome) erroneous in their intellect - such as philosophers and heretics.¹⁰⁸ The very particular

naturasque rerum, nec oculus, ut rei poscit dignitas, intueri, nec auris, instituyente doctore, ad summam scientiam peruenire. Si enim nunc per speculum uidemus in aenigmate, et ex parte cognoscimus et ex parte prophetamus, consequenter nec sermo potest explicare quod nescit; nec oculus, in quo caecutit, aspicere; nec auris, de quo dubitat, impleri. Simul et hoc notandum, quod omnia uerba sint graua et magno labore discantur, contra eos, qui putant otiosis sibi, et uota facientibus uenire notitiam scripturarum. (I.206-18) Ibid., 256.

Man cannot articulate all burdensome speeches. The eye will not be satisfied seeing, nor will the ear be fulfilled by what is heard. To know is difficult, not only concerning physics, but also concerning ethics. Discourse cannot explicate the natural causes of things, nor can the eye contemplate as the worth of the thing demands, nor can the ear, by an instructing teacher, arrive at the sum of knowledge. For if now through a glass we see in riddles, and we know in part and prophesy in part, discourse consequently is not able to explain what it knows not; nor can the eye, in things to which it is blind, perceive; nor can the ear, in things which it doubts, be fulfilled. At the same time this too is to be noted, that all words are burdensome, and learned with great labor, contra those who believe a knowledge of Scripture to come for their idle selves by making prayers.

¹⁰⁷ *Omnis labor hominis in ore eius et quidem anima non implebitur. Quid enim est amplius sapienti a stulto, quid pauperi, nisi scire, ut uadat contra uitam? Omne quod laborant homines in hoc mundo, ore consumitur et attritum dentibus ventri traditur digerendum. Cumque paululum gulam delectauerit, tamdiu uidetur tribuere uoluptatem, quamdiu gutture continetur. Cum uero in aluum transierit, desinit inter cibos esse distantia. Et post haec omnia, non repletur anima comedentis: siue quod rursum desideret, quod comedit, et tam sapiens quam stultus absque cibo nequeat uiuere, et pauper nihil aliud quaerat, nisi quomodo possit organum sui corpusculi sustentare, nec interire inedia. Suue quod nullam utilitatem anima ex refectione corpusculi capiat et cibus tam sapienti quam stulto communis sit, et illuc uadat pauper, ubi opes esse perspexerit. Melius est autem hoc intelligi de ecclesiastico uiro, qui in scripturis caelestibus eruditus, omnem laborem suum habet in ore suo et anima ejus non impletur, dum semper cupit discere. Et in eo plus habet sapiens, quam insipiens, quia cum pauperem esse se sentiat, pauperem autem illum, qui in euangelio beatus dicitur, properat ad ea comprehendenda, quae uitae sunt, et ambulat arctam et angustam uiam, quae ducit ad uitam, et pauper est a malis operibus et scit ubi Christus qui uita est, commoretur. (VI.45-68) Ibid., 298-9.*

All man's labor is for his mouth, and indeed his soul is not filled. For what more is for the wise one than the fool, what more the poor one, unless to know how he may go toward life? All that men labor at in this world is consumed by the mouth, ground by teeth, and given to be digested in the belly. And when a morsel delights the palate, it seems to give pleasure so long as it is kept in the throat. Indeed, when it has passed through the stomach, the difference between foods ceases to be. And after all this the soul is not replenished by eating. Or if he might again long for what he has eaten, then even so the wise one as much as the fool cannot live without food, and the pauper seeks nothing else except in what way he can sustain the organ of his puny body, how not to die by starvation. Or if what the soul takes from the refreshment of the body is of no use, and food for the wise as much as the fool is common, and the pauper goes there, where he has seen riches to be. Better is this understood concerning an Ecclesiastical man, who, erudite in the heavenly scriptures, has all his labor in his mouth, and his soul is not filled, while always he desires to know. And in this he has more wisdom than folly: because with the pauper he knows himself to be poor, that poor one moreover who in the gospel is called blessed, and hastens toward those things to be comprehended which are of life, and walks the straight and narrow way, which leads to life, and the pauper is kept from the works of evil, and knows where Christ is, who is life.

¹⁰⁸ *Labor stultorum affliget eos, qui nesciunt ire in ciuitatem. Cum superioribus etiam hos iunge uersiculos: aut generaliter de omnibus stultis, qui ignorent Deum, aut specialiter de haereticis disputat. Lege Platonem; Aristotelis euolue uersutias, Zenonem et Carneadem diligentius intueri et probabis uerum esse quod dicitur: Labor*

details of these instances are not, for the purpose of this dissertation, as important as the ubiquity of vanity they convey; around every corner - even if they are Christian corners - one encounters it and deals with it in the best way one can.

All these elements together - the book's apparent disorganization, its inclusion of both falsehood and truthfulness via "voices," and its exploration of vanity - make for a particularly harrowing reading experience for those seeking to understand the book. The difficulty of facing the issues explored in Ecclesiastes is implicit in Jerome's prefatory note, which presents it as a study in asceticism,¹⁰⁹ presumably following Origen's interpretation of the book as the purifying

stultorum affliget eos. Veritatem illi quidem omni studio quaesierunt; sed quia non habuerunt ducem, et praeuium itineris, et humanis sensibus rati sunt se comprehendere posse sapientiam, ad ciuitatem minime peruenerunt, de qua in psalmo dicitur: Domine, in ciuitate tua imaginem eorum dissipabis. Omnes enim umbras et diuersas imagines atque personas, quas sibi in uariis dogmatibus induerunt, in urbe sua Dominus dissipabit. De qua et alibi scribitur: Fluminis impetus laetificat ciuitatem Dei. Et in euangelio: Non potest abscondi ciuitas super montem posita. Et in Isaia: Ego ciuitas firma, ciuitas quae oppugnatur. Siquidem hanc ueritatis et sapientiae ciuitatem, cum firma sit et robusta, omnes et sapientes saeculi et haeretici impugnare conantur. Et quod de philosophis diximus, hoc idem etiam de haereticis sentiendum, quod frustra laborent et affligantur in studio Scripturarum, cum ambulent in deserto, et ciuitatem inuenire non ualeant. De quorum errore et psalmista commemorat, dicens: Errauerunt in deserto et in iniquo, uiam ciuitatis et habitationis ejus non inuenerunt. (X.227-251) Ibid., 339-40.

The labor of fools beats them down, who know not how to go to the city. With the above join even these verses: he speaks either generally concerning all fools, who ignore God, or particularly concerning heretics. Read Plato; unravel the cunning of Aristotle, look diligently upon Zeno and Carneades, and you will prove true what is said: The labor of fools beats them down. Indeed with all eagerness they seek truth; but because they have no leader, or prior direction, and they imagine by human sense that they are able to comprehend all wisdom, they arrive not at all at the city, concerning which it is said in a psalm: Lord, in your city you will disperse their image. For all shades and diverse images and persons, who cloak themselves in various philosophies, God will dissipate in His city.

Concerning which it is written elsewhere: "The Strength of a river brings the city of God joy. And in the gospel: A city built on a mountain cannot be hidden. And in Isaiah: "I am a strong city, a city which is attacked." Since indeed, when it is firm and robust, all the worldly wise and the heretics undertake to attack this city of truth and wisdom; even what we have said concerning philosophers, this same is to be understood concerning heretics, who labor in vain and are beaten down in the study of Scripture, when they walk in the desert, and are not able to find the city. Concerning which error the Psalmist recalls, saying, "They have wandered in the desert and in dry places, they have not found the way to their city or habitation.

¹⁰⁹ *Memini me ante hoc ferme quinquennium, cum adhuc Romae essem et Ecclesiasten sanctae Blesillae legerem, ut eam ad contemptum istius saeculi prouocarem, et omne quod in mundo cerneret, putaret esse pro nihilo, rogatum ab ea, ut in morem commentarioli obscura quaeque dissererem, ut absque me posset intelligere, quae legebat. ("Praefatio" 1-6) Ibid., 249.*

I remember how, nearly five years before this - when I was then at Rome, and interpreted Ecclesiastes for holy Blessila, so that I might provoke her to contempt of this age, and that she might reckon all she surveyed in this world to be for nothing - I was asked by her to examine all obscurities by way of a small commentary, so that she might be able to understand what she was reading in my absence.

asceticism that prepares one for the mystical experience of the song of Solomon.¹¹⁰ Alcuin¹¹¹ also suggests in a prefatory poem to his commentary that reading the book unaided is a little like going to sea in stormy weather;¹¹² and while he promises that his aid in navigating the book will produce placid waters in flowering meadows, the actuality of this interpretation is not in fact much less ascetically oriented than Jerome's, as he notes elsewhere in the commentary:

*In quem librum, ex sanctorum opusculis Patrum, ac maxime de beati Hieronymi commentario, parvum composui Breviarium, vestri causa, filii charissimi, quatenus paterna sollicitudine admonerem vestrum nobile ingenium, ne nimio amore studeatis caducis, et cito transitoriis inhiare divitiis, quae citissime velut volatiles recedunt umbrae, et ut, si quid supersit in eis necessario vitae vestrae stipendio, pauperibus erogare studeatis: quia, ut idem Salomon ait: Redemptio animae viri, propriae divitiae ejus.*¹¹³ (PL 100:410-11)

As this passage shows, in spite of his talk of flowery meadows and smooth sailing, Alcuin's Ecclesiastes is somewhat like Jerome's: a stern ascetic regime leading one to the heights of heavenly wisdom through the tangled and often frustrating text of Ecclesiastes.

¹¹⁰ See section 2.2.1 above.

¹¹¹ Citations for Alcuin refer to Alcuinus, *Commentaria Super Ecclesiasten*, in Migne's *Patrologia Latina*, volume 100, accessed through the *Patrologia Latina* database. Translations are my own.

¹¹² *Flumina qui metuat modica sulcare carina
Grandia, ne mergat turbidus Auster eam:
Iste suo placidas lembo pernaviget undas
Currentes inter florida prata pie.*

*Sic qui magnorum sensus rimare profundos
Doctorem timeat pectoris ingenio,
Nostra legat felix animo commenta sereno,
De gazis veterum quae tulit unca manus.* (PL 100:411)

“Who fears to plow with modest keel great currents,
Lest turbid Auster sink it:
May with that his boat sail through placid streams
Flowing among flowering meadows piously

Even so, who fears to open up, with the ingenuity of his breast,
the profound observations of the great doctor,
May, happy, read our contrivances with serene soul,
Concerning the treasures of old which the crooked hand brings.”

¹¹³ In which book, from little works of the holy Fathers, and largely from the commentary of blessed Jerome, I have composed a small breviary, because of you, dearest brother, in order that I might admonish with paternal solicitude your noble breast, lest with too much love you study fallen things, and too quickly gape at transitory riches, which most quickly recede like winged shades, and that if any in this goes beyond the necessary stipend of your life, you might study to distribute it to the poor, as that same Solomon says, “Redemption of the soul of man, redemption of his riches.”

2.2.4 The Heavenward End of Ecclesiastes

The final element in the rhetorical flow of Ecclesiastes is the stilling of the tumultuous voices by a turn to God and heaven at the conclusion. Gregory describes this final turn as the stilling of the tumult when Ecclesiastes finally produces the truth of God's judgement as the measuring rod by which all conversations in the book must be judged:

Ac þæt byð se soðsagola raciend 7 dema, se þe mid his aþenedre handa gestilleþ þa geruxl 7 þæt gehlyd eallra manna 7 hi þonne gespaneð 7 gelapað to anum dome. Eac in þære ylcan bec Salomones is gecweden: "gehyre we ealle samod þone ænde þissere spræce." 7 eac hit is gecweden: "ondræd þe God 7 heald his bebodu; þæt byþ soðlice ælc man, se þus deð." ¹¹⁴ (4.4.12-17)

Alcuin's introductory poem to his abbreviated commentary of Jerome similarly points to a Godward, particularly Christward, end for the reader of Ecclesiastes:

*Vos vivete (sic ms.) Deo semper, nam vivere mors est
Huic mundo; vera est vivere vita Deo.
Vos, rogo, conservet felices gratia Christi,
O dulces nati, sancta salutis ope.* ¹¹⁵ (PL 100:411)

Along similar lines, the Origenian approach iterated above, interpreting *Song of Solomon* as a mystical conclusion to the ascetic Ecclesiastes, also points to the Godward and heavenward orientation of the wisdom ascent in Ecclesiastes. This is the point where the ascetic toil pays off and those practising asceticism are rewarded by the mystical experience of intimacy with God.

¹¹⁴ Gregorius Magnus, *Bischofs Waerferths von Worcester Übersetzung der Dialoge Gregors des Grossen über das Leben und die Wunderthaten italienischer Väter und über die Unsterblichkeit der Seelen*, 265. But that is the truthful ruler and judge, who with his extended hand stills the tumult and that clamor of all men and entices and invites them to a single judgement. Also in that same book is the saying of Solomon: "Let us all together hear the end of this speech." And also it is said: "Fear you God and hold his commandment: that is truly each man, who thus does."

¹¹⁵ "Live you all always for God, for to live is death to this world; True life is to live for God. May you, I ask, remain blessed by Christ's grace, Oh, sweet ones born, ordained by work of salvation."

2.3 Job

2.3.1 Apparent Contradictions and Circuitous Hermeneutics in Job

As shown in the above discussion of Ecclesiastes, Gregory the Great's "voice theory" became instrumental in later interpretations of the book; arguably, though, this "voice theory" was in fact for Anglo-Saxon readers not only a rhetorical outline for Ecclesiastes, but also a rhetorical model for interpreting Job. The key text for discovering the rhetorical parallel between Job and Ecclesiastes is Gregory's interpretation of Job's imprecation against the day of his birth, a passage that is in many ways a case study and model for Gregory's treatment of other thorny passages in the text. Job is righteous, as God declares at the end of the book, and Gregory is well aware of this; but on the other hand, it is apparently self-evident to Gregory that no righteous person could utter the words that Job utters cursing his creation and literally mean them; the literal meaning for Gregory is both incoherent and sinful. This creates a problem for Gregory; of the content of verse 7:15, he queries:¹¹⁶

Qui rursum pressus percussione dicit: Elegit suspendium anima mea et mortem ossa mea. Et quis rectum sapiens credat uirum tanti praeconii, quem uidelicet constat ab interno iudice praemia pro patientiae uirtute recipere, decreuisse inter uerbera suspendio uitam finire? ("Ad Leandrum," 126-30)¹¹⁷

¹¹⁶ All citations from Gregory's *Moralia* are from Gregorius Magnus, *Moralia in Job*, ed. Marc Adriaen, vol. 143–143B, 3 vols., *Corpus Christianorum Series Latina* (Turnhout: Brepols, 1985). References are listed by section and line number following the quotation, and by page number in the bibliographic reference note. All translations are cited by section number with the volume and page numbers following the colon, in that order; translations are from Gregory the Great *The Book of the Morals of St. Gregory the Pope, or an Exposition on the Book of Blessed Job*. 3 vols., *A Library of Fathers of the Holy Catholic Church* (London; Oxford: J. G. F. and J. Rivington and John Henry Parker, 1844-50).

¹¹⁷ Gregorius Magnus, *Moralia in Job*, 4–5. "Again, under the pressure of calamities he exclaims, *So that my soul chooseth strangling, and death rather than life*. Now who that is in his right senses could believe that a man of so high praise, who in a word, we know, received from the Judge of that which is within the reward of the virtue of patience, settled amidst his afflictions to finish his life by strangling?" ("The Epistle," 3:1.7-8)

The way Gregory solves the problem of such a verse is by proposing that, where the historical sense of the passage contradicts other things one knows to be true through Scripture and tradition, one then turns to other senses of Scripture as well as a more circuitous hermeneutic to decipher the passage which “cannot” mean what it seems to mean at face value. As he notes:

Sed nimirum uerba litterae, dum collata sibi conuenire nequeunt, aliud in se aliquid quod quaeratur ostendunt, ac si quibusdam uocibus dicant: dum nostra nos conspicietis superficie destrui, hoc in nobis quaerite, quod ordinatum sibi congruens apud nos ualeat intus inueniri (“Ad Leandrum,” 157-62)¹¹⁸

This method of resolving apparent contradictions is one that Gregory uses throughout and applies rather liberally to navigate his way through cruces in the text. For instance, there is the problem of Paul's use of a wisdom saying of Eliphaz; on the one hand, Paul's unironic use of this saying suggests its truth,¹¹⁹ but this is hard to reconcile with its original placement in the mouth of Eliphaz,¹²⁰ which would seem to undercut its worth within the broader narrative of Job.

Gregory solves this by suggesting the error implied by the placement of this phrase in Eliphaz's mouth is not an error of content, but rather a category mistake - this saying would apply to some people (such as those to whom Paul is speaking), but Eliphaz has mistakenly applied it to Job, a righteous man, and not the kind of worldly “wise” person indicated in the saying.¹²¹ Similarly,

¹¹⁸ Gregorius Magnus, *Moralia in Job*, 5. “Yet doubtless whereas the literal words when set against each other cannot be made to agree, they point out some other meaning in themselves which we are to seek for, as if with a kind of utterance they said, Whereas ye see our superficial form to be destructive to us, look for what may be found within us that is in place and consistent with itself.” (“The Epistle,” 3:1.8-9)

¹¹⁹ 1 Corinthians 3:19.

¹²⁰ Job 5:13.

¹²¹ *Mira autem sunt multa quae dicunt, nisi in sancti uiri aduersitate dicerentur. In semetipsis igitur magna sunt, sed quia iustum uirum transfigere appetunt, eiusdem magnitudinis pondus perdunt. Quia et quamlibet forte, frustra iaculum mittitur ut dura saxa feriantur; eo namque obtusum longius dissilit quo intortum fortiter uenit. Igitur amicorum dicta licet in quibusdam ualde sint fortia cum tamen sancti uiri fortem uitam feriant, cunctum sui acuminis mucronem retundunt. Quia ergo et in semetipsis magna sunt sed contra beatum Iob nullo modo assumi debuerunt; et Paulus haec ex uirtute pensans in auctoritate proferat; et iudex quia incaute prolata sunt ex personae qualitate reprahendat.* (5.11.250-61). Gregorius Magnus, *Moralia in Job*, 236–7.

“And many things that they say are admirable, were they not spoken against the afflicted condition of the holy man. So that in themselves they are great, but because they aim to pierce that righteous person, that greatness loses its weight, for with whatever degree of strength, it is in vain that the javelin is sent to strike the hard stones, since it glances off the further with blunted point, the more it comes hurled with strength. Therefore, though the sayings of Job's friends be very forcible in some points, yet, since they strike the Saint's well-fenced life, they turn back all the

Job is seen both to repent and to be proclaimed righteous by God; Gregory explains this by saying that no one is so righteous that he need not repent before God, and this is why Job repents generally, but in comparison to his friends, Job does possess a greater degree of righteousness.¹²² Though these examples are ones that appear starkly as apparent contradictions in the literal text, Gregory does not reserve this method of interpretation only for such instances; indeed, the interpreter is responsible not only for harmonizing apparent contradictions, but for bringing out the most edifying meaning of the text:

Sic nimirum, sic diuini uerbi esse tractator debet, ut, cum de qualibet re disserit, si fortasse iuxta positam occasionem congruae aedificationis inuenerit, quasi ad uicinam uallem linguae undas intorqueat et, cum subiunctae instructionis campum sufficienter infuderit, ad sermonis propositi alueum recurat. (“Ad Leandrum,” 100-105)¹²³

Presumably, such a curatorial imperative meant that the Anglo-Saxon reader interpreting Job alongside Gregory was not only responsible for deciphering the riddling tangle of text that is the primary matter of Job - he was also responsible for harmonizing, contextualizing, and

point of their sharpness. And therefore because they are both great in themselves, and yet ought never to have been taken up against blessed Job, on the one hand let Paul, weighing them by their intrinsic excellence, deliver them as authoritative, and on the other let the Judge, forasmuch as they were delivered without caution, censure them in respect of the quality of the individual.” (5.xi.27:1.261-2)

¹²² *Quomodo enim superius beatus Iob reprehenditur, si in comparatione eius rectitudinis amici illius nequaquam coram Domino rectum locuti memorantur? An adhuc illa de eo sententia confirmatur, qua antiquo hosti dicitur: Vidisti seruum meum Iob, quod non sit ei similis super terram. Sed quid est hoc, quod et laudatur hosti et in seipso reprehenditur; in se autem ipso reprehenditur et tamen amicis loquentibus antefertur, nisi quod sanctus uir cunctos meritorum suorum uirtute transcendit, sed eo ipso quo homo fuit, ante Dei oculos esse sine reprehensione non potuit? In sancto quippe homine in hac interim uita comorante, diuini examinis regula habet adhuc quod iudicet, quamuis iam ex comparatione ceterorum hominum heabeat quod laudet.* (35.7.12-24) Gregorius Magnus, *Moralia in Job*, 1779.

“For how is it that blessed Job is blamed above, if, in comparison with his uprightness, his friends are said not to have spoken that which is right before the Lord? Is not this decision concerning him still further confirmed, in which it is said to the ancient enemy, *Hast thou seen My servant Job, that there is none like him upon the earth?* [Job 1:8] But what is this, that he is praised to the enemy, and reproved in his own person; reproved in his own person, and yet preferred to the friends who spake to him? Unless it be that the holy man surpassed all men by the virtue of his merits, and yet, inasmuch as he was man, could not possibly be without blame before the eyes of God. For in a holy man sojourning in this temporary state, the rule of the Divine judgment has still something to judge, though in comparison with the rest of men it has even now something to praise.” (35.vii.9:3.667)

¹²³ Gregorius Magnus, *Moralia in Job*, 4. “Thus unquestionably, thus should it be with everyone that treats of the Divine Word, that if, in discussing any subject, he chance to find at hand any occasion of seasonable edification, he should, as it were, force the streams of discourse towards the adjacent valley, and, when he has poured forth enough upon its level of instruction, fall back into the channel of discourse which he had proposed to himself” (“The Epistle,” 2:1.6-7).

complicating the voices in the texts such that they fit in details and doctrine not only with the rest of the book, but with the rest of Christianity; this is evident in Ælfric's articulation of his purpose in his sermon on Job, probably influenced by Gregorian reflection on the book:

*Mine gebroðra. We rædað nu æt godes ðenungum be ðan eadigan were Iob. Nu wille we eow hwæt lytles be him gereccan. For ðan seo deopnys ðære race / oferstihð ure andgit. And eac swiðor þæra ungelæredra; Man sceal læwedum mannum secgan be heora andgites mæðe. Swa þæt hi ne beon ðurh ða deopnesse æmode. Ne ðurh ða langsumnysse geaðrytte (1-6).*¹²⁴

Ælfric here articulates Gregory's understanding of the role of the reader of Job, which resembles that of the Ecclesiastean curator, dealing with the unruliness (or deepness) of the text's voices via the measuring rod of faith for the edification of the faithful.

2.3.2 Ecclesiastean Rhetoric in the book of Job

Indeed, such a parallel is not inexact, for at the very point where Gregory introduces this method - the point where Job curses his day of birth - he cites the Solomonic voice theory as an analogue to the riddling workings of the book of Job.

Qui textum considerat et sensum sacrae locutionis ignorat, non tam se eruditione instruit quam ambiguitate confundit quia nonnumquam sibi litterae uerba contradicunt; sed dum, a semetipsis per contrarietatem dissidunt, lectorem ad intellegentiam ueritatis mittunt. Quid est enim quod Salomon ait: Melius est comedere et bibere; et non longe post subicit: Melius est ire ad domum luctus quam ad domum conuiuii? Cur luctum conuiuio praetulit qui prius esum potumque laudauit? Si enim per electionem bonum est comedere et bibere, procul dubio esse melius debet ad domum gaudii, quam ad domum lamenti properare. Hinc est quod iterum dicit: Laetare, iuuenis, in adolescentia tua. Et paulo post subicit: Adolescentia enim et uoluptas uana sunt. Quid est hoc quod uel prius reprehendenda praecipit, uel post praecepta reprehendit, nisi quod ipsis litterae uerbis innuit ut qui difficultatem exterius patitur, ueritatis intellegentiam consideret, quam sequatur? Quae nimirum ueritatis intellegentia cum per cordis humilitatem quaeritur, legendi assiduitate penetratur. Sicut enim ignotorum hominum facies cernimus et corda nescimus, sed si familiari eis locutione coniungimur, usu colloquii eorum etiam cogitationes indagamus. Ita cum in sacro eloquio sola historia aspicitur, nihil aliud quam facies uidetur; sed si huic assiduo usu coniungimur, eius nimirum mentem quasi ex colloquutionis familiaritate penetramus. Dum enim alia ex aliis colligimus, facile in eius uerbis agnoscimus, aliud esse quod intimant, aliud quod sonant.

¹²⁴ Ælfric, "Dominica I in Mense Septembri Quando Legitur Job," in *Ælfric's Catholic Homilies: The Second Series: Text*, ed. Malcolm Godden, *SS (Early English Text Society)* no. 5 (London: Published for the Early English Text Society by Oxford University Press, 1979), 260. Translation mine.

"My brothers, we read now at God's church service concernng the blessed man Job. Now will we expound for you a little concerning him because the deepness of the exposition overreaches our understanding, and also more powerfully that of the unlearned; A man must speak to laymen according to the measure of their understanding, so that they will not be dismayed by the deepness, nor overwhelmed by the length."

Tanto autem quisque notitiae illius extraneus redditur quanto in sola eius superficie ligatur. (Book 4, “Praefatio,” 1-28)¹²⁵

Though this observation, cited just before Gregory's engagement with Job's birthday curse, does not go so far as to posit explicitly personae, voices, or a Solomon to sum things up at the end, it is grounded in the same problem of Ecclesiastes that Gregory notes in the *Dialogues*, and suggests that Job works in a way very similar to Ecclesiastes. Just as one must read through the entirety of Ecclesiastes to get past its apparently nihilistic and hedonistic surface to the truth, so one, encountering the “surface” of the scriptural narrative of Job, must press past these “surface” voices to get at the heart of the broader truth maintained by the rest of the book, Scripture, and Christian tradition.

2.3.3 Voices in Job

Once one realizes the analogue, it is fairly simple to chart out the way the Gregorian Job accords with, complements, and clarifies the Ecclesiastean ascent. Not only are the voices of debate demarcated much more clearly than those in Ecclesiastes due to the Jobean dialogues' more dramatic narrative context, but Gregory hears in this narrative a polyphony of voices that

¹²⁵ Gregorius Magnus, *Moralia in Job*, 158. “He who looks to the text and does not acquaint himself with the sense of the holy Word, is not so much furnishing himself with instruction as bewildering himself in uncertainty, in that the literal words sometimes contradict themselves; but whilst by their oppositeness they stand at variance with themselves, they direct the reader to a truth that is to be understood. Thus, how is it that Solomon says, *There is nothing better for a man than that he should eat and drink*; [Ecc. 2:24] and adds not long after, *It is better to go to the house of mourning than to the house of feasting*? [Ecc. 7:2] Wherefore did he prefer mourning to feasting, who had before commended eating and drinking? For if by preference it be good ‘to eat and drink,’ undoubtedly it should be a much better thing to hasten to the house of mirth than to the house of mourning. Hence it is that he says again, *Rejoice, O young man, in thy youth*; [Ecc. 11:9] yet adds a little after, *for youth and pleasure are vanity*. [Ecc. 11:10] What does this mean, that he should either first enjoin practices that are reprehensible, or afterwards reprehend practices that he has enjoined, but that by the literal words themselves he implies that he, who finds difficulty in the outward form, should consider the truth to be understood, which same import of truth, while it is sought with humility of heart, is penetrated by continuance in reading. For as we see the face of strange persons, and know nothing of their hearts, but if we are joined to them in familiar communication, by frequency of conversation we even trace their very thoughts; so when in Holy Writ the historical narration alone is regarded, nothing more than the face is seen. But if we unite ourselves to it with frequent assiduity, then indeed we penetrate its meaning, as if by the effect of a familiar intercourse. For whilst we gather various truths from various parts, we easily see in the words thereof that what they import is one thing, what they sound like is another. But everyone proves a stranger to the knowledge of it, in proportion as he is tied down to its mere outside” (Book 4, “The Preface”:1.177-8).

are presumably the basis for his understanding of the multiple senses. Explaining how the book of Job might have been written by Job himself in spite of the third person references to the character “Job,” Gregory elaborates the way that Scripture speaks in voices and ways other than those one might expect from a straightforward, “natural” text:

Hinc David ait: Attendite populo meus legem meam inclinate aurem uestram in uerba oris mei. Non enim lex David, aut populus David, sed personam eius, ex quo loquebatur, assumens, ipsius auctoritate loquitur, cuius inspiratione replebatur. Hoc cotidie fieri in Ecclesia cernimus, si uigilanter inuermur. Nam stans in medio populi lector clamat: Ego sum Deus Abraham, Deus Isaac et Deus Iacob. Et quod ipse Deus sit, uere profecto non dicit nec tamen per hoc quod dicit, ueritatis regulam deserit, quia cui ministerium lectione exhibet, eius dominium uoce praetendit. Itaque scriptores sacri eloquii, quia repleti sancto Spiritu super se trahuntur, quasi extra semetipsos fiunt et sic de se sententias, quasi de aliis proferunt. Vnde et beatus Iob sancto Spiritu afflatus, potuit sua gesta, quae erant uidelicet supernae aspirationes dona, quasi non sua scribere, quia eo alterius erant qua loquebatur quo homo loquebatur quae Dei sunt. Et eo alter quae erant illius loquebatur, quo Spiritus sanctus loquebatur quae hominis sunt. (“Praefatio,” 1.56-73)¹²⁶

This passage describes the exact converse of the way Ecclesiastes takes up personae; whereas Ecclesiastes takes on the persona of error to lead it to a higher truth, the author of Job, it would seem, can take up in his own humble voice the voices of God and the Holy Spirit. Ann Astell offers a useful description of this “mental movement from the slippery body of the literal text to its abiding spiritual meaning”: “Through a polysemous discourse Job thus combines in his person both the instructed and the instructor, the patient and the physician, the Boethius who weeps and the Philosophia who consoles.”¹²⁷ Such polysemic voicing in Job raises questions about who is speaking when, and how one ought to interpret the speaker; in doing this, the Job of

¹²⁶ Gregorius Magnus, *Moralia in Job*, 10. “Hence David exclaims, *Give ear, O my people, to my law; incline your ears to the words of my mouth*. For it was neither David’s law, nor David’s people, but he, assuming the character of Him from whom He spoke, speaks with His authority with Whose inspiration he was filled. This we perceive to be daily practised in the Church, if we regard the thing attentively; for the reader standing in the midst of the people exclaims, *I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob*. [Exod. 3:61] Yet that he is himself God, he says not certainly with truth, nor yet by saying what he does is the line of truth deviated from; for by his voice he first proclaims the sovereignty of Him, Whose minister he is in the office of reading. Therefore the writers of Holy Writ, because when full of the Holy Spirit they are lifted above their own nature, are as it were put out of themselves, and in this manner they deliver sentiments about themselves, as though about other persons. In this way Blessed Job also, being under the influence of the Holy Spirit, might have written his own acts, which were, for that matter, gifts of inspiration from above, as though they were not his own; for in so far as it was a human being, who spoke things which were of God, all that he spake belonged to Another, and in so far as the Holy Spirit spake of what is proper to a human being, it was Another that gave utterance to the things that belonged to him.” (“The Preface,” i.3:1.16).

¹²⁷ Ann W. Astell, *Job, Boethius, and Epic Truth* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994), 91.

Gregory's *Moralia* is much like Ecclesiastes with its multiplicity of voices that must be navigated.

Particularly worth noting is the distinction between these voices' inherent value as wisdom and the moral status of the attitude with which they are presented. This is particularly clear in Gregory's treatment of Elihu's words to Job just prior to the conclusion of the book. According to Gregory, Elihu, in contrast to the other "heretical" comforters, is in fact an orthodox believer and does speak truth. However, his delivery is less than desirable, for he delivers his speech with an attitude of pride; he represents those in the church who may be doctrinally correct but do not practice this correctness with humility.¹²⁸ This allows Gregory to make a distinction between the content of wisdom discourses and the manner in which this content is delivered: *Omne enim quod dicitur quadripertita potest qualitate distingui; se aut mala male, aut bona bene, aut mala bene, aut bona male dicantur* (23.1.141-3).¹²⁹ Such a

¹²⁸ *Post hos quoque Eliu iunior in beati Iob exprobratione subiungitur, ex cuius persona uidelicet species quorundam doctorum fidelium sed tamen arrogantium designatur. Cuius uerba non facile intellegimus, nisi ea ex susequenti dominica correptione pensemus. Ait namque de illo Dominus: Quis est iste iuoluens sententias sermonibus imperitis? Cum uero dicit sententias, sed non addit protinus quales, uult procul dubio bonas intellegi. Nam cum sententiae nominantur, nisi etiam malae dicantur, male sentiri non possunt. In bono enim semper sententias accipimus quae sine reprobationis adiectione ponuntur, sicut scriptum est: Sapientior sibi uidetur piger, septem uiris loquentibus sententias. Quod uero dicitur, quia eius sententiae imperitis sermonibus inuoluuntur, hoc summopere ostenditur, quia ab eo cum elationis fatuitate proferuntur. Magna quippe in eo imperitia est, humiliter dicere rescire quod dicit, et ueritatis sensibus elationis uerba miscere.* (23.1.125-40) Gregorius Magnus, *Moralia in Job*, 1146.

"After these also, Eliu, a younger person, is joined to them in their reproaches of blessed Job. In his person is represented a class of teachers, who are faithful, but yet arrogant. Nor do we easily understand his words, unless we consider them by the help of the subsequent reproof of the Lord. *Who is he that involves sentences in unskilful words?* [Job 38:2] For when He uses the word 'sentences,' but does not immediately subjoin of what nature they are, He intends the word without doubt to be understood favourably. For when 'sentences' are spoken of, unless they are said to be bad, they cannot be understood in a bad sense. For we always take the word in a good sense, if no unfavourable addition is made; as it is written, *A slothful man seems wiser in his own opinion than seven men uttering sentences.* [Prov. 26:16] But by its being said that his sentences are involved in unskilful language, it is plainly shewn that they were uttered by him with the folly of pride. For it is a great unskilfulness in him, to be unable to express himself with humility in what he says, and to blend with sentiments of truth the words of pride." (23.i.4:3.5)

¹²⁹ Gregorius Magnus, *Moralia in Job*, 1146. "For the nature of every thing that is said can be distinguished by four different qualities. If, for instance, either bad things are said badly, good things well, bad things well, or good things badly." (23.i.5:3.5)

distinction - between the validity of wisdom content on one hand and the attitude of approach to that content on the other - will become important in understanding the Old English wisdom literature, particularly in cases such as the Solomon and Saturn poems in which the most important aspect is not so much the precision of the data presented by each character as it is the purposes and intents behind their respective quests for wisdom.

2.3.4 Frustration in Job

As shown in the earlier part of this chapter, the ascent to wisdom in Ecclesiastes involves struggling through the vanity of earthly life. Though Job's scope is broader than mere vanity of the sort encountered in Ecclesiastes, the book nonetheless contains a similar component of frustration that one must fight through in the ascent to wisdom. However, this frustration is multifaceted and more difficult to sum up in a single word than the Ecclesiastean vanity. In some instances, it looks very much like the vanity of Ecclesiastes, with an emphasis on the cognitive frustration that one encounters in trying to understand the world.¹³⁰ However, Jobean frustration

¹³⁰ Consider, for instance, Gregory's paraphrase of Elihu's words, which interprets the complexity of creation as a humility inducing riddle in much the same way as Ecclesiastean vanity:

Ac si diceret: Ex ipsis creaturis intellege quas altiores te esse corporaliter uides, quantum a diuinae potentiae sublimitate disuingeris; atque ex hac tua consideratione collige quia Deum nec bene uiuendo adiuues, nec rursum malis actionibus graues. (26.12.70-74) Gregorius Magnus, *Moralia in Job*, 1279.

Understand from the very creatures, which thou seest by thy bodily senses, to be higher than thyself, how far thou art removed from the loftiness of the Divine Power, and conclude, from this thy consideration, that thou canst neither benefit God by thy good living, nor, again, injure Him by thy evil deeds. (26.xii.18:3.145-6)

Along similar lines, Gregory elsewhere suggests the complexity of the created world as a mirror of the complexity one ought to expect when encountering God and his wisdom:

Quid mirum si aeterna Dei sapientia conspici non ualet, quando ipsa quoque inuisibilia quae per eam sunt condita humanis oculis comprehendere non possunt? In rebus ergo creatis discimus creatorem omnium quanta humilitate ueneremur, ut in hac uita usurpare sibi de omnipotentis Dei specie mens humana nil audeat, quod solum electis suis praemium in subsequenti remuneratione seruat. (19.1.1-7) Gregorius Magnus, *Moralia in Job*, 956.

goes well beyond this. Kevin Hester has described this frustration as “pain,” and has done a thorough job explicating its varieties, including external bodily pain and inner pain (pain of the mind or soul);¹³¹ he has also examined a variety of purposes that Gregory assigns to this pain,¹³² the most important of which (for the purposes of this dissertation) is its pedagogical function.¹³³

What wonder is it if the Eternal ‘Wisdom’ of God is not able to be seen, when the very invisible things themselves as well, which were created thereby, cannot be embraced by the eyes of men? So then by things created we learn with what self-abasement to revere the Creator of all things; so that in this life the human mind should not dare to usurp to itself aught belonging to the Appearance of Almighty God, which He reserves for His Elect only as their reward in the ensuing Recompensing. (19.1:2.394)

A third instance of such “vanity” in Job includes Paul’s discussion of the creation as vanity, and the righteous person’s struggles with changeableness and the instability of life:

Cunctis diebus quibus nunc milito, exspecto donec ueniat immutatio mea. Qui itaque immutationem suam tanto desiderio exspectat, quam sit de resurrectione certus insinuat, et cursum uitae praesentis quantum despiciat innotescit, qui hunc militiam appellat. Per militiam quippe semper ad finem tenditur et cotidie conclusionis terminus exspectatur. Cursum itaque uitae huius despicit et statum soliditatis requirit, qui per hoc quod mutabiliter militat, ad immutationem suam peruenire festinat. Iusto quippe in hac uita ipsa sarcina suae corruptionis onerosa est. Quod uigiliae defatigant, somnus quaeritur ut uigiliarum labor atque anxietas temperetur. Sed nonnumquam etiam somnus occidit. Fames corpus atterit atque, ut eius necessitas repellatur, cibi requiruntur. Sed saepe et cibi grauant qui ad repellendum debilitatis grauamen quaesiti fuerant. Grauis itaque est sarcina corruptionis, quae nisi ita grauis esset, Paulus nequaquam diceret: Vanitati creatura subiecta est, non uolens, sed propter eum qui subiecit in spe, quia et ipsa creatura liberabitur a seruitute corruptionis, in libertatem gloriae filiorum Dei. Scimus enim quod omnis creatura congemiscit et parturit usque adhuc. Sanctus ergo uir incorruptionis statum desiderans, dicat: Cunctis diebus quibus nunc milito, exspecto donec ueniat immutatio mea. (12.13.1-23) Gregorius Magnus, Moralia in Job, 638–9.

He that waits for his change with such ardent longing, shews how great his certainty was of the Resurrection, and he makes it appear how greatly he looks down upon the course of the present life, who designates it a ‘service militant.’ For in the militant state there is the going on continually to an end, day by day the finishing of the conclusion is expected. Thus he despises the course of this life, and looks for the settling of fixedness, who hereby, that he is serving subject to changeableness, is in haste to attain to his change. For to the just man in this life the very load of his corruption is burthensome. Because watchings exhaust with weariness, sleep is sought, that the labour and harassing effect of watchings may be moderated: but sometimes even sleep kills. Hunger wastes the body, and that its craving may be banished, victuals are sought after: but frequently even the very victuals oppress, which had been sought in order to banish the oppression of debility. And so the load of corruption is a heavy burthen, which except it were so heavy, Paul would never have said, *For the creature was made subject to vanity, not willingly, but by reason of Him Who hath subjected the same in hope. Because the creature itself also shall be delivered from the bondage into the glorious liberty of the children of God. For we know that the whole creation groaneth and travaileth in pain together until now.* [Rom. 8:20-22] So let the holy man, longing for the state of incorruption, say, *All the days that I now serve militant will I wait till my change come.* (12.xiii.17:2.56)

¹³¹ Kevin L. Hester, *Eschatology and Pain in St. Gregory the Great: The Christological Synthesis of Gregory’s Morals on the Book of Job* (Bletchley, Milton Keynes ; Waynsboro, GA: Paternoster, 2007), 66–71.

¹³² *Ibid.*, 71–6.

¹³³ *Ibid.*, 82–6.

Carole Straw has looked at it under the loose term “imperfection,”¹³⁴ and shows how secular responsibilities and the trials of dealing with affairs of the world are frustrations that one can convert into a form of asceticism. Translation of such frustration into the wisdom ascent is at the very heart of Gregory's *Moralia*; as Gregory himself notes, even his own suffering is translated into a hermeneutic for understanding the book of Job.¹³⁵ Though it is hard to pin down an exact term to cover these frustrations, ranging as they do from pain through mental angst through encounters with a sinful world, they occupy the place that vanity occupies in Ecclesiastes - the thwarting thing experienced in earthly existence that is at once an impediment and an instrument for teaching one wisdom.

2.3.5 The Heavenward Orientation of the Wisdom Struggle

As in Ecclesiastes, this agon of ideas and voices in Job works its way upward toward God. Christ is the end of Job's struggles, a goal articulated not only in Gregory's interpretation of Job as a prophet looking toward Christ's incarnation and the bodily resurrection,¹³⁶ but also in

¹³⁴ Carole Ellen Straw, *Gregory the Great: Perfection in Imperfection, Transformation of the Classical Heritage* 14 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988).

¹³⁵ *Multa quippe annorum iam curricula deuoluuntur, quod crebris uiscerum doloribus crucior, horis momentisque omnibus fracta stomachi uirtute lassesco, lentis quidem, sed tamen continuis febribus anhelio. Interque haec dum sollicitus penso, quia scriptura teste: Omnis filius, qui a Deo recipitur, flagellatur, quo malis praesentibus durius deprimor, eo de aeterna certius praesumptione respiro. Et fortasse hoc diuinae prouidentiae consilium fuit, ut percussus Iob percussus exponerem, et flagellati mentem melius per flagella sentirem.* (“Ad Leandrum,” 189-97) Gregorius Magnus, *Moralia in Job*, 6.

“For many a year's circuit has gone by since I have been afflicted with frequent pains in the bowels, and the powers of my stomach being broken down, makes me at all times and seasons weakly; and under the influence of fevers, slow, but in constant succession, I draw my breath with difficulty; and when in the midst of these sufferings I ponder with earnest heed, that according to the testimony of Scripture, *He scourgeth every son whom He receiveth*; [Heb. 12:6] the more I am weighed down by the severity of present afflictions, from my anticipations for eternity, I gather strength to breathe with so much the better assurance. And perchance it was this that Divine Providence designed, that I a stricken one, should set forth Job stricken, and that by these scourges I should the more perfectly enter into the feelings of one that was scourged.” (“The Epistle,” 5:1.10)

¹³⁶ See Gregory's *Moralia* on Job 19:25-29 (14.54-9). Gregory takes these verses not only as a prophecy of Christ's incarnation, but also as an important piece of Biblical proof for the resurrection of the body; expounding on the doctrine of the resurrection of the body, he goes on at length about an argument he had with Eutychius on the matter, wherein the latter allegedly came to share Gregory's view before he died. Gregorius Magnus, *Moralia in Job*, 739-48.

Aelfric's identical emphasis on the resurrection-oriented verses 19:25-29 in his greatly abbreviated sermonic précis of Gregory's commentary:

Eft he cwæð; Ic wat soðlice. Ðæt min alysend leofað. And ic on ðam endenextan dæge of eorðan arise. And ic beo eft mid minum felle befangen. And ic on minum flæsce god geseo. Ic sylf and na oðer; þes hiht is. On minum bosme geled (171-5).¹³⁷

In addition to this prophetic focus on Christ and his resurrection, the heavenward orientation of the book of Job is evident in the end toward which the book works; just as Ecclesiastes brings the crowd to silence in the face of God's judgement, so, as Gregory specifies, God's judgement brings Job to silence after he has sifted through his multitude of challenging thoughts.¹³⁸ Finally, the heavenward ascent of the Jobean wisdom struggle is clear in the cycles of practical mysticism that occur throughout the text; the oscillations between an enviable contemplative stance and the cares and temptations of the world are part of a slow purgatorial process whereby one is (eventually) brought into heavenly perfection.¹³⁹ Just as Job shares similarities with Ecclesiastes in its depiction of struggle against frustration, so the Godward end of these struggles is the same.

2.3.6 Job and the Language of the Battlefield

What the Gregorian Job adds, however, is a direct articulation of what is only implicit in the Latin tradition of Ecclesiastes: the martial patience required in what one might call the “time between times” - the space of experience in which one finds oneself amidst the slings and arrows

¹³⁷ Aelfric, “Dominica I in Mense Septembri Quando Legitur Job,” 265. “Again he said; I know truly that my saviour lives, and I will again at my last day from earth arise, and I will again be clothed with my skin, and I in my flesh will see God, I myself and no other; this is promised, brought forth in my bosom.”

¹³⁸ See the quotation in Appendix A of this dissertation, which chronicles the silencing of Job in his encounter with God the judge.

¹³⁹ This more gradual process of cycles moving generally upward rather than in straight linear ascent reflects Gregory's own historical situation, in which he was not allowed to leap straight to the contemplative life, but oscillated between this and his papal duties to the Church and the world. For further explication of these upward moving cycles, see R. A. Markus, *Gregory the Great and His World* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 23–4.

of life before one has reached the divinely appointed end of this struggle. This, for Gregory, is a recurring space in human experience, and one which cannot be wholly gotten rid of this side of heaven, so that the bearing of the Christian *in medias res* becomes one of the most important if not the most important aspect of Gregory's Jobean mysticism. With regard to the element of patience in this mysticism, it is of the utmost importance to clear up any confusion associated with the more popular modern association of patience and limp passivity, for Gregory's *Moralia* presents a fighting Jobean patience, perhaps more like what modern speakers might mean by fortitude or endurance. This is manifest when Gregory in the same breath discusses the patience of Job and his assaults on the devil:

Quot enim uoces patientiae in laude Dei percussus reddidit, quasi tot in aduersarii pectore iacula intorsit et acriora ualde quam sustinuit infixit. Afflictus enim terrena perdidit, sed afflictionem humiliter sustinens caelestia multiplicauit. (2.18.40-45)¹⁴⁰

In this passage, one encounters instances that are paradoxically both words of patience and darts thrown at the devil, and Gregory gets a lot of mileage out of such images - the patient Job - perhaps better described as the fortitudinous Job - is often cast as a warrior engaging enemies on a battlefield. Gregory in one instance notes that *Ex bellis...exterioribus discimus quid de interioribus sentiamus* ("Praefatio," 4.19-20),¹⁴¹ and he relies often on this parallel; at one point, he conceives of Job's mind as a city under siege, defending itself against the various guises of its Satanic attackers:

Ecce ad feriendum inuictissimum robur inimicus saeuens, quot tentationum iacula inuenit; ecce quot obsidionum machinamenta circumposuit; ecce quot percussionum tela transmisit; sed in his omnibus mansit mens imperterrita, stetit cuitas inconcussa. ("Praefatio," 4.38-42)¹⁴²

¹⁴⁰ Gregorius Magnus, *Moralia in Job*, 80. "For whatever words of patience he gave forth to the praise of God, when he was stricken, he as it were hurled so many darts into the breast of his adversary, and inflicted much sorer wounds than he underwent; for by his affliction he lost the things of earth, but by bearing his affliction with humility, he multiplied his heavenly blessings." (2.xviii.32:1.91)

¹⁴¹ Ibid., 143-143B:15. "from external wars we are instructed how to think of those within." ("The Preface," iv.9:1.22)

¹⁴² Ibid., 143-143B:16. "Behold the enemy made to strike down his indomitable strength, how many the darts of temptation that he devised, see, what numberless beleaguering engines he set about him! See how many

Similarly, Gregory elsewhere speaks of the hope that Job recalls in his mind as a strong fortification against the devil's sieges:

Quod ergo bona sua ad mentem reuocat, non se per iactantiam eleuat; sed quasi collapsum inter uerba et uulnera ad spem animum reformat. Graui enim desperationis telo mens percutitur, cum supernae irae tribulationibus premitur et linguarum foris opprobriis arguitur. Beatus igitur Iob tot dolorum iaculatione confossus dum labefactari per opprobria timuit, ad statum se fiduciae ex anteacta uita confirmando reuocauit. ("Praefatio," 3.62-9)¹⁴³

These instances highlight an aspect of the *Moralia* that Ann Astell has chronicled thoroughly: for Gregory, Job is a wisdom hero in the classical epic tradition, who combines in himself the elements of a sage and a warrior.¹⁴⁴ This configuration of Job seems to have been one of the key aspects of Job in the Anglo-Saxon imagination, as suggested by Ælfric's inclusion of it in what is necessarily a very selective sermonic précis of the Moralian Job:

Mannes lif is campdom ofer eorðan. For ðan þan þe ælc ðæra þe gode geðihð bið on gewinne. Wið ðone ungesewenlican deofol. And on gean his agenum lustum. Ða hwile ðe he on life bið; And swa swa se hyrman his edleanes anbidað. Swa geanbidað se gastlica cempa his edleanes æt ðam ælmihtigum gode; Godes gecorenan sind on gewinne on ðyssere worulde. And ða arleasan on hire blissiað. Ac ðæra rihtwisra / gewinn awent to blisse. And ðæra arleasra bliss. To biterum sarnyssum on ðære ecan worulde þe gewelgað ða þolmodan. (150-60)¹⁴⁵

weapons of assault he let fly, but in all his mind continued undaunted, the city stood unshaken." ("The Preface," iv.10:1.23)

¹⁴³ Gregorius Magnus, *Moralia in Job*, 14–15. "whereas then he recalls his good deeds to mind, it is not that he lifts himself up in self applause, but sets anew his mind to hope, when as it were sunk down amid those reproaches and those strokes. For the mind is smitten with a heavy weapon of despair, when it is both hard pressed with the tribulations of wrath from above, and galled by the reproaches of men's tongues without. Blessed Job therefore, thus pierced with the darts of so many woes, when he now feared to be brought down by their reproaches, recalled himself to a state of confidence, by the assurance derived from his past life." ("The Preface," iii.8:1.21)

¹⁴⁴ Astell, *Job, Boethius, and Epic Truth*, 70–96.

¹⁴⁵ Ælfric, "Dominica I in Mense Septembri Quando Legitur Job," 265. "Man's life is military service throughout earth. Because each of those who prosper for God are at war with the invisible devil and against his own lust during the time which he is alive; and just as the hireling awaits his reward, so waits the ghostly champion for his reward from the almighty God; God's chosen are at war in this world, and the graceless have enjoyment in it. But the war of the righteous turns to bliss, and the bliss of the graceless to bitter soreness, in that eternal world which makes the righteous prosper."

Where Ecclesiastes only implies warlike struggle (in the Latin tradition), Job makes explicit the heroic elements of wisdom in a way that will help illuminate this dissertation's later analyses of Old English poetry that similarly blurs the lines between wisdom and warfare.

2.4 Conclusion

This chapter has identified a number of aspects of the ascent to wisdom common to both Job and Ecclesiastes, as understood through commentary material available to Anglo-Saxon readers. Reflecting the Platonic ascent to wisdom, Ecclesiastes in the Origenian tradition occupies a middle space of asceticism between the more simple morality of proverbs and the mystical ecstasy of the Song of Solomon; though Origen's work was probably not directly available to Anglo-Saxon readers, this interpretation influenced both Jerome and Alcuin, whom Anglo-Saxon readers had access to. More particularly, the space of asceticism represented in Ecclesiastes is further defined by Gregory the Great, who reads the book as a series of voices of varying truthfulness, brought to the truth at the end by Ecclesiastes. This interpretation is nuanced by Jerome and Alcuin, who further define both the frustration and the Godward end that one gains by grappling with this frustration.

Job features similar “voices,” not only because it is more overtly dramatic than Ecclesiastes, but also because, in Gregory's interpretation, the same Ecclesiastean “voice theory” is a means of navigating apparent contradictions in the book. Like Ecclesiastes, the book features numerous encounters with frustration, though this frustration is more broad than the primarily cognitive vanity of Ecclesiastes; it includes more external kinds of suffering, such as bodily pain. Like Ecclesiastes, the *telos* of the wisdom journey featured in Job is toward heaven and God via the thorny experience of suffering and the navigation of “voices.” But though similar in all these ways, Job differs from Ecclesiastes in that it (at least in the Gregorian commentary tradition)

makes overt the martial aspects of the ascent to wisdom that are only hinted at in the Ecclesiastean commentary tradition.

The following chapters discover this wisdom pattern repeated with variation in a variety of Old English poems. Some tend toward the martial imagery of Job, while others tend toward the more lonely and cognitive asceticism of Ecclesiastes. Some contain all elements of the ascent, while others - generally subgeneric wisdom such as riddles - particularly illuminate one specific part. Some are more heavily invested in the triumphant heavenly conclusion of the books, while others only imply it, if that. Though there are differences between each instance of Old English wisdom resembling this Biblical wisdom ascent, there are, I suggest, enough resonances between this ascent and the poems discussed in the following chapters to suggest plausibly this Biblical wisdom background as an important precondition for the development of Old English wisdom.

Chapter 3: *Beowulf*, Mourning, and Heroic Wisdom

Preface: Heroic Wisdom

In the following discussion of Old English wisdom, emerging from the prior analysis of Ecclesiastes and Job, I have decided for clarity's sake to divide the Old English wisdom poetry under discussion into three categories, roughly corresponding to three particular aspects of wisdom discovered in Job, Ecclesiastes, and their commentary traditions: the heroic motif found in the Jobean tradition; the riddling encounter with the frustration, vanity and stray “voices” in both traditions; and an ascetic sapiential rhetoric that facilitates the transition from the open and public heroic wisdom milieu to the more secretive and contemplative wisdom mechanics of poems such as *The Seafarer* and *The Wanderer*. The purpose of this division is not to construct three categories that are mutually exclusive and hermetically sealed against intercourse, for in many instances the poems in each category possess characteristics that might allow them to be categorized otherwise; rather, these distinctions between poems are based on each poem's most prominent features, and are designed to add clarity and organization to an argument that could otherwise seem to pile discussion upon discussion with little sense of connection or organization. Ideally, this organization via categories educed from Biblical wisdom will allow readers to know exactly which part of the Biblical text any given poem is being primarily compared to - though the complexity of the poems and their tendency to participate in multiple categories ensure that the parallel between Biblical and Old English text is never quite as simple as this one-to-one correlation might make it sound.

The first of the categories dealt with in this dissertation is the heroic wisdom, and that is the matter of the following three chapters. By heroic wisdom, I mean that wisdom shaped and

deployed in a context where the battlefield is the primary imaginative touchstone for understanding the rest of life. Gregory's many references to the wise Job in such heroic terms (chronicled above) presumably helped to legitimate the reception, invention, and adaptation of such wisdom in Christian literature. The nature of this heroic wisdom in Old English literature is borne out in the three texts explored below, with each text evidencing various degrees of “baptism” of this wisdom. *Beowulf*, with its certain but also often tight-lipped Christianity, is the most secular of these, and since its matter is monsters and battles rather than religious themes overtly, it offers perhaps the best instances of heroic wisdom in Old English poetry. On the other end of the spectrum, *Guthlac A & B* feature the rhetoric and language of heroic wisdom quite comfortably amalgamated with Christian faith via the belief that part of the Christian life involves warfare against the devils that seek to hijack it. Between *Beowulf* and the Guthlac poetry, *The Battle of Maldon*, a poem both hagiographic and heroic, has one foot in both camps - the wisdom is very closely associated with the literal battlefield fray, but it also looks toward the Christian heroic wisdom of the Guthlac poetry in a much more direct way than does *Beowulf*.

3.1 Critical History of Wisdom and *Beowulf*

The study of wisdom in *Beowulf* has a long history. It is firmly rooted in the classic and still very useful study by R. E. Kaske of *sapientia* and *fortitudo*,¹⁴⁶ and it has enjoyed continuing critical success. With regard to the more paremiological approach, Deskis's book-length¹⁴⁷ study is supplemented by articles such as that by Catherine Karkov and Robert Farrell.¹⁴⁸ Scholars adopting a more Kaskean discussion of wisdom's entanglement with the narrative of *Beowulf*

¹⁴⁶ R. E. Kaske, “*Sapientia et Fortitudo* as the Controlling Theme of *Beowulf*,” in *An Anthology of Beowulf Criticism*, ed. Lewis E. Nicholson (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1966), 269–310.

¹⁴⁷ Deskis, *Beowulf and the Medieval Proverb Tradition*.

¹⁴⁸ Catherine Karkov and Robert Farrell, “The Gnostic Passages of *Beowulf*,” *Neuphilologische Mitteilungen* 91, no. 3 (1990): 295–310.

include T. A. Shippey,¹⁴⁹ Robert Burlin,¹⁵⁰ and Peter Baker.¹⁵¹ As noted in the last chapter, my own approach is informed by this latter perspective, though with an eye toward proverbial forms and the way they work themselves out in the broader tapestry of the wisdom text that is *Beowulf*.

In terms of my overall discussion of *Beowulf*, I am not in this chapter proposing a radically new way of reading the poem, but rather am making explicit the role of wisdom in an interpretation of the text that is accepted by most critics. My purpose in doing this is twofold: to show how a discussion of wisdom might help us better navigate complex aspects of the text, such as the Christian/pagan dichotomy and the role of mourning; and to show how *Beowulf* participates in a larger textual conversation pertaining to wisdom and found in the Biblical exegesis explored in prior chapters as well as the Old English wisdom explored in later chapters.

Two interpretations in particular figure prominently in this exploration of wisdom. The first is the juxtaposition of pagan and Christian elements that nearly all critics assent to in some form;¹⁵² more particularly, my argument builds on an interpretation that conceives of a *Beowulf* that subtly shows pagan wisdom collapsing in anticipation of a salvific Christian wisdom often only implicit in the text. However, my interest is not so much in separating the wisdoms in the text into piles labeled “Pagan” and “Christian,” but rather in looking at the way that both categories participate in a broader continuum in which wisdom is conceived of in terms of the wisdom ascent manifest in the Ecclesiastean and Jobean traditions. These traditions allow for a

¹⁴⁹ T. A. Shippey, “Maxims in Old English Narrative: Literary Art or Traditional Wisdom,” in *Oral Tradition, Literary Tradition*, ed. Hans Bekker-Nielsen ([Odense]: Odense University Press, 1977), 38–46.

¹⁵⁰ Robert B. Burlin, “Gnomic Indirection in *Beowulf*,” in *Anglo-Saxon Poetry: Essays in Appreciation for John C. McGalliard*, ed. Lewis E. Nicholson and Dolores Warwick Frese (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1975), 41–49.

¹⁵¹ Peter S. Baker, “Beowulf the Orator,” *Journal of English Linguistics* 21, no. 1 (April 1988): 3–23.

¹⁵² For an overview of the ongoing discussion of Christian and pagan elements in *Beowulf*, see Edward B. Irving, “Christian and Pagan Elements,” in *A Beowulf Handbook*, ed. Robert E. Bjork and John D. Niles (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1997), 175–192.

confluence of pagan and Christian elements not unlike that found in *Beowulf*, where it is not entirely clear where this-worldly wisdom ends and heavenly wisdom begins.

The second interpretation that figures prominently in this chapter is the configuration of the poem as elegiac, with lament and mourning as some of its central subjects. Such a reading goes back as far as Tolkien's famous essay,¹⁵³ but other critics since Tolkien have further developed it so that it represents one of the main strains of the many stranded web that is *Beowulf* criticism; James Earl's psychoanalytic interpretation is the most prominent of these,¹⁵⁴ and his work on mourning has been further developed in radical postmodern directions by Eileen Joy.¹⁵⁵

3.2 Engaging Exegetical Criticism and Its Critics

Before getting more deeply into the textual specifics of this interpretation, however, I wish to situate my approach with regard to the broader critical history that constitutes the background of my argument. Particularly, given my proposal to interpret *Beowulf* as a participant in a tradition of Biblical and exegetical texts, it is useful to clarify where this dissertation is in agreement with and where it differs from other critics associated with such readings, particularly D. W. Robertson, Jr.¹⁵⁶ and Margaret Goldsmith,¹⁵⁷ who have become notorious exemplars of this school of reading. Their school of interpretation has become the object of legitimate critique

¹⁵³ J. R. R. Tolkien, "The Monsters and the Critics," in *An Anthology of Beowulf Criticism*, ed. Lewis E. Nicholson (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1963), 51–104. Tolkien asserts that "*Beowulf* is not an 'epic', not even a magnified 'lay'. No terms borrowed from Greek or other literatures exactly fit: there is no reason why they should. Though if we must have a term, we should choose rather 'elegy'. It is an heroic-elegiac poem; and in a sense all its first 3, 136 lines are the prelude to a dirge" (85).

¹⁵⁴ James Whitby Earl, *Thinking About Beowulf* (Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press, 1994).

¹⁵⁵ Eileen A Joy, "Introduction: Liquid *Beowulf*," in *The Postmodern Beowulf: a Critical Casebook* (Morgantown: West Virginia University Press, 2006), xxix–lxvii.; Eileen A Joy, "James W. Earl's Thinking About *Beowulf*: Ten Years Later," *The Heroic Age* no. 8 (2005), <<http://www.heroicage.org/issues/8/forum.html>>.

¹⁵⁶ D. W. Robertson, Jr., "The Doctrine of Charity in Mediaeval Literary Gardens: A Topical Approach Through Symbolism and Allegory," in *An Anthology of Beowulf Criticism*, ed. Lewis E. Nicholson (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1963), 165–88.

¹⁵⁷ Goldsmith, *The Mode and Meaning of Beowulf*.

to the point of caricature, but I hope to show that what I share with these critics is different from the target of this critique. Edward B. Irving is one of the best representatives of this critique:

Probably the great wave of exegetical criticism has by now passed over and spent its force, but it has left a great deposit of sea wrack on the shore. It has left in the minds of many students of *Beowulf* the odd conviction that the poem is a covert operation. Some painfully literate theologian-poet, an Anglo-Saxon Umberto Eco, has left instructive Christian messages hidden in hollow Germanic trees. One has to supply the concept of a body of original readers who found the decoding of this text stimulating relaxation from the usual daily labors in the monastic library. For such imagined readers and for their all too imaginable present-day descendants, the poem may cleverly pretend to be in a pagan/oral tradition, but that is only its cover. Behind the scenes the preacher-poet, like the later evangelizing friars, is writing new pious lyrics for the bawdy old tunes that draw the crowd.

But those who still remain converted to this approach cannot, alas, be preached to. Not very sensitive to poetry, they do not notice or care that their reductive *a priori* assumptions usually result in interpretations that stand the poem very awkwardly on its head. They are always serenely sure of finding what they have already decided they will find. Once established and in operation, the secret circle cannot be broken into by mere inconvenient fact.¹⁵⁸

After this assertion, Irving goes on to show in detail how Alvin Lee, whose archetypal criticism informed by Northrop Frye approaches exegetical criticism,¹⁵⁹ is in a number of instances guilty of exercising such ignorance toward the facts of the poem.

If exegetical criticism is in fact as Irving describes it - and indeed, some of the pioneers in this school were somewhat too eager to use patristic texts to produce cookie-cutter interpretations that they then ascribed to the conscious intention of authors, as Irving claims - then his critique is valid and the critically responsible thing to do would be to abandon it. However, a more nuanced understanding of allegorical criticism can answer such a critique. The first problem with this critique is that it assumes that exegetical criticism necessarily depends on the belief that a single artist conscious of his missiological task sat down and wrote *Beowulf* as a work of covert didacticism. Exegetical criticism need not depend on this, for one can just as easily imagine an oral story, of the kind Irving describes, being shaped, organized, and influenced gradually over time through the handling and preservation of a variety of Christians,

¹⁵⁸ E. B. Irving, *Rereading Beowulf* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1989), 8.

¹⁵⁹ Alvin A. Lee, *The Guest-hall of Eden* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1972).

no one of them having a single overarching purpose for the entire work, but each adding to it in his own way. One could then imagine it being received eventually as a work acceptable for Christians, even if many of the components employed are not Christian in origin.

Irving seems to allow for something like this - what he calls a “Christian coloring,”¹⁶⁰ borrowing from the classic article by Blackburn¹⁶¹ - but he seems to think that this final Christian patina colouring the work as it stands in the manuscript does not matter very much; in his own words, “I should state here my absolute conviction that an acceptance of the oral basis of *Beowulf* rules out of court altogether any conclusions about the poem's meaning that are based exclusively on the text in its present *written* state.”¹⁶² Rather, he is interested only in the oral-formulaic origins of the text. This, for Irving, somehow seems to pass as more meaningful, in a literary sense, than the way it might have been received by Christians, and it is not entirely clear how Irving determines this. Yes, one should not, as Irving accuses Lee of doing,¹⁶³ ignore the particulars of the literal text so as to make them fit into a certain interpretation. But one should also not ignore the problem that exegetical critics are trying to answer, which is the sheer oddness of the preservation of a poem like *Beowulf* in a society where the most literate of readers - the monastics - seem most interested in exegetical texts. Finding a heroic text like *Beowulf* in this context is a little like finding a whale in the middle of a desert. To extend the analogy, Irving would point out that when one brushes some of the sand off the whale one finds that it is nothing other than a common whale such as one might find in the ocean. What I and other exegetically inclined critics find more interesting, though, is the question of what the whale is doing in the

¹⁶⁰ Irving, *Rereading Beowulf*, 21.

¹⁶¹ F. A. Blackburn, “The Christian Coloring in the *Beowulf*,” in *An Anthology of Beowulf Criticism*, ed. Lewis E. Nicholson (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1963).

¹⁶² Irving, *Rereading Beowulf*, 15.

¹⁶³ *Ibid.*, 11.

desert in the first place. How was the preservation of *Beowulf* justified in Christian terms to those Christians who were almost undoubtedly involved in preserving it?

I do not see why this question is any less justifiable than Irving's question - that of the oral-formulaic elements of *Beowulf* - nor do I think that any Anglo-Saxon reader looking for a Christian meaning would have considered any oral-formulaic roots of *Beowulf* a problem. As demonstrated in the prior chapter on Biblical interpretation, scriptural texts might mean for an Anglo-Saxon reader things well beyond what they meant in those texts' original historical contexts to their original authors. One must be careful about suggesting that all texts were interpreted in the same way as Biblical texts - they were not after all God-breathed in the same way - but they might still have a surplus of divinely bestowed meaning - extra literal meaning, that is - insofar as they participate in the creation God has made. If the cosmos as part of God's message to humans can mean more than its mere literal text,¹⁶⁴ and if literature reflects in some way that cosmos, then from a Christian perspective it would be perfectly acceptable to read an earlier pagan version of *Beowulf* as an acute observation of a world and life that points to a God unknown to those who shaped the original poem, but nonetheless implicitly praised insofar as the poem is an accurate rendering of God's book of creation.

One other problem that critics seem to have - more often than not implicit rather than stated explicitly - is that exegetical criticism constitutes a reduction of textual complexity and nuance; Alvin Lee has helpfully identified the root of this problem:

from most modern or postmodern perspectives, the three spiritual levels of the ancient-medieval theory of polysemy are just as "literal," even "historical" in the old sense of a true sacred story, as the first or literal level is. In a confessional context of Christian belief, the four irreducible "facts," causally related in the four-level scheme, are these: what you read; what you believe; what you do (because you read and believe); and what result follows for your soul, eternally (because you have read, believed, and acted according to

¹⁶⁴ For an overview of this aspect of creation, see Ruth Wehlau, "*The Riddle of Creation*": *Metaphor Structures in Old English Poetry*, *Studies in the Humanities: Literature-Politics-Society*: 24 (New York, NY: Peter Lang, 1997), 8–13.

the rule of *caritas* or not). The problem for modern interpreters is not, as Greenfield thinks, that three of the old levels are too symbolic or allegorical but that they are too literal, not symbolic enough, for those of us who inhabit a post-Hegelian world and cannot be placed in a believing early medieval community.¹⁶⁵

From such modern and postmodern perspectives, exegetical critics are involved in collapsing texts from complicated objects of artistic production into straightforward morality plays. The problem though is that there is in fact no such thing as a “straightforward morality play” in the sense that such critics imply - morality is always complicated, and a consideration of literature in terms of Biblical exegesis involves a sophistication comparable and often surpassing that demanded of more literal readers. I would here turn to the work of Charles Taylor to illustrate my point. Taylor turns the usual modern interpretation of history on its head. Whereas typical modernity conceives of history in terms of progress - humans used to be simplistic barbarians but can now think in complex and nuanced ways - Taylor suggests a more complex history. For thinkers in an earlier age, the realm of the world was not (as in modern secularity) hermetically sealed against the interference of transcendence; interpreters were freer to produce polysemous interpretations of the world that ranged from earthly to heavenly things.¹⁶⁶ This freedom is what allowed Biblical interpreters to develop the idea of the “senses” of scripture, with some senses more akin to earthly matters and others more akin to the heavenly realms; rather than a delimitation of meaning, the further senses of Scripture were an expansive release from the

¹⁶⁵ Alvin A Lee, “Symbolism and Allegory,” in *A Beowulf Handbook*, ed. Robert E. Bjork and John D. Niles, (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1997), 246–7.

¹⁶⁶ Taylor's argument covers so wide a swath of history that it cannot be summarized or evaluated in its entirety here. A brief summary of the argument drawn upon here can be found at the beginning of *A Secular Age*; here Taylor lays out his thesis that the advent of secularity can be at least in part theorized as a loss of three aspects that premodern societies took for granted and that modern secularity does not: God's intertwinement with the workings of nature (e. g. weather, plagues etc. attributed to the wrath or pleasure of a divinity); God's intertwinement with the workings of politics (e. g. the idea that kingship is held by divine right.); and “enchantment,” a term broadly covering the premodern sense that the world had regular intercourse with angels, demons, magical beings etc. Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, Mass: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007), 25–6.

constraints of the letter, the most basic and earthly part of scripture.¹⁶⁷ Texts interpreted according to these multiple senses discover a complex set of truths simultaneously recognized; the skilled interpreter in this tradition works as a juggler working to keep all his hermeneutic balls in the air, and this is indeed an intricate task. One can perhaps get a sense of it if one imagines whether it would be easier to write a straightforward story or try to maintain like Gregory in the *Moralia* a multiplicity of truths in historical, allegorical, and moral spheres. Modern readers and writers may have lost the ability to appreciate such complexity and interpretive adroitness, but this does not make the practice any less sophisticated, so the very least critics can do is to stop talking about exegetical criticism as a way of “reducing” the meanings of texts.

A final objection might be that, while complex elaborations of the interpretive senses were perhaps useful for explaining difficult points of doctrine or Scripture, they were deployed as workarounds rather than ideals;¹⁶⁸ surely the Bible is hard enough to understand without adding to it the crypticism of *Beowulf*. Yet evidence from Anglo-Saxon culture suggests otherwise, conveying a general preference for thorny and hard things over easy and comfortable things. The speaker of *The Seafarer* detests the easy life on land. *The Battle of Maldon's* Byrhtwold insists that it is better to die than to take the easy route of saving one's life by fleeing the battle.¹⁶⁹ This taste for difficulty is in the Old English riddles, which lack the titular solutions of their Latin

¹⁶⁷ For a good overview of this spiritual interpretation of Scripture, see the section on Daniélou and De Lubac in Hans Boersma, *Nouvelle Théologie and Sacramental Ontology: A Return to Mystery* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 149–190.

¹⁶⁸ See William Whallon, Charles Donahue, and Margaret Goldsmith, “The Influence of Christian Doctrine and Exegesis on Old English Poetry: An Estimate of the Current State of Scholarship,” *Anglo-Saxon England* 2 (1973): 285–302. Donahue (293) argues that, since Augustine warns clerics against imitating the obscure passages of scripture, it is unlikely that poets set out with the deliberate intention to do so, and this is probably true. But there is a difference between being deliberately obfuscatory and using exegetical methods to deal with complicated realities that one doesn't want to curtail. It is this latter position that I argue informs Old English poetry.

¹⁶⁹ See Chapter 4.

counterparts,¹⁷⁰ and it is also in the practice of kenning, which involves saying things in a more circuitous way than necessary;¹⁷¹ related to this is Geoffrey Russom's discovery of the Old English poet's "avoidance of the useful" phrase as compared to typical oral-formulaic traditions.¹⁷² In *Solomon and Saturn II*, what is obscure and difficult becomes the very matter of the poem.¹⁷³ In *Vainglory*, the poem does not hesitate to describe the gruesomeness of death over against the less viscerally striking experiences of a good life. And this attraction to difficulty is in the Anglo-Saxon engagement with Scripture itself; as Wehlau has shown, *The Order of the World* generally paraphrases Psalm 18, excepting the passage where the scope of the sun's rays are described as cosmic; Wehlau notes that "where the Biblical version portrays the sun as inescapable heat, the Old English draws attention to the mystery and darkness of the sun's absence."¹⁷⁴ In this context, an Anglo-Saxon attraction to both *Beowulf* and the Bible as puzzles or riddles to be made sense of seems highly probable. Indeed, Daniel Pigg has argued for a reconciliation of Germanic and exegetical interpretations through a reading of *Beowulf* that interprets it in terms of "Biblical riddlings and symbolic touches which aid the poet in telling a story of ancient people to his audience."¹⁷⁵ It is in this spirit that I approach the poem, and suggest that the poem contains a Christian answer to this riddle, not made explicit through direct and heavy-handed allegory, but rather implied, much as the Exeter riddles imply unstated solutions.

¹⁷⁰ Tiffany Beechy, *The Poetics of Old English* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2010), 92–3.

¹⁷¹ On the artistic complexity of kennings, see Alvin A. Lee, *Gold-Hall and Earth-dragon* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1998), 53–83.

¹⁷² Geoffrey R Russom, "Artful Avoidance of the Useful Phrase in *Beowulf*, The Battle of Maldon, and Fates of the Apostles," *Studies in Philology* 75, no. 4 (1978): 371–390.

¹⁷³ See Hansen, *The Solomon Complex*, 148–52.

¹⁷⁴ Wehlau, "The Riddle of Creation," 36.

¹⁷⁵ Daniel F Pigg, "Cultural Markers in *Beowulf*: a Re-evaluation of the Relationship Between *Beowulf* and Christ," *Neophilologus* 74, no. 4 (1990): 601.

3.3 Heroic Wisdom

3.3.1 Defining Heroic Wisdom

Like the Gregorian Ecclesiastes, *Beowulf* speaks in a variety of wisdom voices; however, before analyzing this polyphony, it is necessary to draw a composite sketch of its general features and tendencies. As far as terminology goes, this wisdom can best be categorized as heroic, given the limitations imposed by the description of it as “Germanic” or “pagan.” With regard to the word “Germanic,” the problem is that it precludes the possible Latinate roots of some of the ideas. “Pagan” suggests that the wisdom in question is not Christian, when in reality much of the wisdom discussed in this dissertation can belong to pagans and Christians alike. The term, “heroic,” however, does not exclude Latin and Christian traditions, so it leaves open more possibilities for interpreting this wisdom. Moreover, it describes the basic function of this wisdom, which is to preserve as far as possible heroic society.

Though this heroic wisdom is formally discovered in the poem's maxims, the idea of wisdom in *Beowulf* goes well beyond the quoting of aphorisms, as Robert L. Kindrick has usefully outlined. In Kindrick's analysis, there are three spheres in which one finds this wisdom in *Beowulf*: the political, the tactical, and the rhetorical. The political is evidenced primarily in the poem's emphasis on good kingship and kinship.¹⁷⁶ Kindrick sees a form of tactical wisdom in the way *Beowulf* plans and executes his fight with Grendel; this, according to Kindrick, is the reason for Hrothgar's odd-sounding praise of Beowulf's wisdom after he has battled the monster.¹⁷⁷ Kindrick's third category is rhetorical, but his understanding of it must be supplemented by Carol Clover's and Peter Baker's work on the Unferth episode; where Kindrick

¹⁷⁶ Robert L. Kindrick, “Germanic *Sapientia* and the Heroic Ethos of *Beowulf*,” *Medievalia Et Humanistica: Studies in Medieval and Renaissance Culture* 10 (1981): 5–6.

¹⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 9–10.

sees *Beowulf* dealing with Unferth “reasonably,”¹⁷⁸ Clover more accurately places his exchange in the context of Germanic *flyting* traditions¹⁷⁹ - certainly “reasonable” from the perspective of Germanic *flyting*, but hardly reasonable in a modern society reluctant to appreciate rhetorical ostentation, as Baker shows.¹⁸⁰ To be sure, this is only one episode in the poem, but the critical argument highlights something readers must remember when speaking of Beowulf’s rhetorical wisdom; rhetorical wisdom practiced well in an Anglo-Saxon context might be different from what modern readers consider wisdom or good rhetoric.

Generally speaking, the purpose of the most straightforward version of this heroic wisdom is precisely the same as that of the *fortitudo* with which it is often paired in classical and medieval literature:¹⁸¹ survival and, if possible, flourishing, whether of one’s own life, the life of a community, or the memory of such lives and communities. Kindrick suggests something like this in his suggestion that wisdom arose from “the need for greater social coordination among the Germanic tribes” as “an essential social ethic” that helped curb the “dangerous individualism of the heroic ethic.”¹⁸² Aside from the main thrust of the text, explored below, there are two instances in particular that demonstrate this protective wisdom: the scene in which Beowulf encounters the coastguard, and Wealhtheow’s protection of her sons in Heorot.¹⁸³

Though Wealhtheow is not the most typical of Old English wisdom figures, the tact she shows in her navigation of the politically complex relations amongst Hrothgar, Beowulf, Hrothulf and her sons falls into the category of Old English wisdom. Earlier in the text, she is

¹⁷⁸ Ibid., 8.

¹⁷⁹ Carol J. Clover, “The Germanic Context of the Unferþ Episode,” in *Beowulf: Basic Readings*, ed. Peter Baker (New York; London: Garland Publishing, 1995).

¹⁸⁰ Baker, “Beowulf the Orator.”

¹⁸¹ Kaske, “*Sapientia et Fortitudo* as the Controlling Theme of Beowulf.”

¹⁸² Kindrick, “Germanic *Sapientia* and the Heroic Ethos of *Beowulf*,” 14.

¹⁸³ Citations from *Beowulf* refer to Fr Klaeber, ed., *Beowulf and the Fight at Finnsburg*, 3d ed. -- (Boston: Heath, 1950).

referred to in cognitive/wisdom related terms such as *mode gepungen*¹⁸⁴ (624) *wisfæst wordum*¹⁸⁵ (626), and *cynna gemyndig*¹⁸⁶ (613); furthermore, as Nathan Breen points out,¹⁸⁷ Wealhtheow's actions in the hall show her to be the exemplar of the wise queen prescribed in *Maxims I B*:

*Cyning sceal mid ceape cwene gebicgan,
 Bunum ond beagum. Bu sceolon ærest
 Geofum god wasan. Guð sceal in eorle,
 Wig geweaxan, ond wif geþeon,
 Leof mid hyre leodum, leohtmod wasan,
 Rune healdan, rumheort beon
 Mearum ond mapmum, meodorædenne
 For gesiðmægen symle æghwær
 Eodor æþelinga ærest gegretan,
 Formam fulle to frean hond
 Ricene geræcan, ond him ræd witan
 Boldagendum bæm ætsomne (11-22).*¹⁸⁸

Critics are divided concerning the purpose of Wealhtheow's wisdom; for instance, Michael Drout sees her protecting the claims of her own bloodline against the potential interloper, the “adopted” Beowulf;¹⁸⁹ Breen sees beyond this mere interest in her own bloodline an interest in protecting the affairs of the kingdom, an interest determined by her queenly capacity as royal counselor;¹⁹⁰ and William Cooke, contra these critics, sees Wealhtheow's speech as a way of reminding

¹⁸⁴ “prospered in mind”

¹⁸⁵ “wise in words”

¹⁸⁶ “mindful of kin”

¹⁸⁷ Nathan Breen, “The King’s Closest Counselor: The Legal Basis of Wealhtheow’s Comments to Hrothgar, *Beowulf* 1169-87,” *The Heroic Age* no. 14 (November 2010): 26, <<http://www.mun.ca/mst/heroicage/issues/14/breen.php>>.

¹⁸⁸ Shippey, *Poems of Wisdom and Learning in Old English*, 66–70. “A king shall pay bride-price for a queen, with rings and goblets. Both must first of all be free with gifts. The nobleman must have fighting-spirit, his courage must grow, and his wife be a success, liked by her people; she must be cheerful, keep secrets, be generous with horses and precious things; at mead-drinking she must at all times and places approach the protector of princes first, in front of the companions, quickly pass the first cup to her lord's hand, and know what advice to give him as joint master and mistress of the house together” trans. *ibid.*, 69. With regard to Wealhtheow's character and the sapiential implications of this passage associating a queen with wisdom, four in particular are noteworthy: *geþeon* in line 14 is the same verb used in the modifying phrase *mode gepungen*; *leohtmod* in line 15 concerns the condition of the site of wisdom, the *mod*; the ability *rune healdan* (6) is often associated with the secrecy associated with wisdom (cf. *Maxims I C* 1); and the expectation that she shall *him ræd witan* (21) of course describes the sapiential act of giving counsel.

¹⁸⁹ Michael D. C. Drout, “Blood and Deeds: The Inheritance Systems in ‘Beowulf’,” *Studies in Philology* 104, no. 2 (2007): 201–2.

¹⁹⁰ Breen, “The King’s Closest Counselor: The Legal Basis of Wealhtheow’s Comments to Hrothgar, *Beowulf* 1169-87.”

Hrothulf to treat her sons well when he (legitimately, for Cooke) ascends the throne, as well as a way of implicitly appealing to Beowulf as a potential protector should Hrothulf fail her sons.¹⁹¹ Regardless of which critic one follows, however, the wisdom deployed by Wealhtheow is used as a means of protection, whether for her sons or the kingdom more generally, against a threat, whether that threat be Hrothulf or Beowulf himself.

The second instance of wisdom as a protective factor in *Beowulf* is the hero's exchange with the Coastguard. More pertinent for this dissertation than the much discussed meaning of the Coastguard's maxim¹⁹² is the very fact that he uses a maxim in his capacity as coastguard. What this suggests is the importance of wisdom as a means of exercising power protective of the Danish society. Though such a reading of this maxim may seem like an exaggeration of its function, the reading is confirmed by the theoretical reflection on the purpose of maxims by Jennifer Neville and Paul Cavill. Neville asserts that

By locking the natural world in the shackles of dactyls and spondees, enclosing it within rhetorical figures and literary allusions and limiting it to an inherited structure of one hundred riddles, all contained within the stated purpose of illustrating metre, Aldhelm achieves a victory similar to that of Beowulf over Grendel: he reduces the natural world to human scale and human terms.

This literary enclosure of the natural world prevails throughout Old English wisdom literature.¹⁹³

Cavill corroborates this

Anything that can be typified, measured, located, compared or contrasted with other things, and related to human life can be comprehended by the form of the maxim and the gnome. The shock of the new can be diminished by simply applying one of these relativising descriptions, and a sense of cognitive control regained.¹⁹⁴

¹⁹¹ William Cooke, "Hrothulf: A Richard III, or an Alfred the Great?," *Studies in Philology* 104, no. 2 (April 1, 2007): 180–2.

¹⁹² For a survey of the ongoing attempts to translate this grammatically complex maxim, see Stanley B Greenfield, "Of Words and Deeds: The Coastguard's Maxim Once More," in *The Wisdom of Poetry: Essays in Early English Literature in Honor of Morton W. Bloomfield* (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, Western Michigan University, 1982), 45–51, 270.; R. E. Kaske, "The Coastwarden's Maxim in Beowulf: a Clarification," *Notes and Queries* 229, no. 1 (1984): 16–18; and Baker, "Beowulf the Orator."

¹⁹³ Jennifer Neville, *Representations of the Natural World in Old English Poetry*, Cambridge Studies in Anglo-Saxon England 27 (Cambridge, U.K. ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 195.

¹⁹⁴ Cavill, *Maxims in Old English Poetry*, 181.

Embodied in the Coastguard's maxim, and theoretically articulated by Neville and Cavill, is the practice of wisdom as a form of protective power. Like Wealhtheow, the Coastguard uses wisdom to protect his kingdom, and it is this protective power/wisdom as well as its failure that will be the matter of the rest of this chapter.

3.3.2 Heroic Power/Wisdom in Hrothgar

Turning from these comparatively minor instances, this heroic and protective power/wisdom is evident in two of the main figures in the text, Hrothgar and Beowulf. The nature of Hrothgar's protective wisdom is discovered by Neville through a comparison of Heorot's creation to the creation story in the Old English metrical *Genesis*. Neville finds that “like God, Hrothgar first considers creation in his mind after quelling his enemies (in God's case, the rebel angels; in Hrothgar's, neighbouring kingdoms); like God, Hrothgar can carry out his plan because of the power of his word.”¹⁹⁵ As Neville further notes, the purpose of the newly created Heorot is to set up an island of human civilization in the midst of a chaos that threatens it: “the conspicuous proximity of God's example to Hrothgar's creation of Heorot reveals from the beginning that the standard to be achieved and the stakes at risk are both very high; though human beings cannot presume to equal God's power, failure means a return to chaos, the disintegration of society.”¹⁹⁶ Heorot, conceived in the mind of Hrothgar as a fortification against the incursions of chaos and dissolution, thus represents the protective wisdom seen in the examples of the Coastguard and Wealhtheow.

¹⁹⁵ Neville, *Representations of the Natural World in Old English Poetry*, 64.

¹⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 67–8.

3.3.3 Heroic Wisdom in Beowulf

As Neville further shows, Beowulf is similarly protective; in his fight with Grendel, he “re-asserts the value and re-establishes the stability of the society initially created by Hrothgar.”¹⁹⁷ The association of this stance with wisdom, however, is not as clear as in the mind-conceived stance of Hrothgar, and so it is worth surveying proof that Beowulf’s protection of Heorot is in fact related to his wisdom. The examples of wisdom offered by Kaske in relation to Beowulf’s episode with the Grendelkin are helpful here. Just after his defeat of Grendel, Beowulf is described as *snotor ond swyðferhð*¹⁹⁸ (826); Wealhþeow publicly recognizes his wisdom when she requests that he be *lara liðe*¹⁹⁹ (1220) toward her sons; following the death of Grendel’s mother, Hrothgar tells Beowulf that he holds *mægen mid modes snyttrum*²⁰⁰ (1706); and upon Beowulf’s departure, Hrothgar imparts this sentiment in a more elaborate way: *þu eart mægenes strang, and on mode frod,/wis wordcwida*²⁰¹ (1844-5). Such instances, Kaske argues, show the importance of wisdom in the defence of Heorot.²⁰²

Kaske’s argument is further supported by the many cognitive and council-oriented words used regarding the events prior to Beowulf’s defeat of Grendel. The question of the wisdom behind Beowulf’s mission to destroy Grendel rises early in the text’s assertion that the sages in Geatland approve of his mission: *þone siðfæt him snotere ceorlas/lythwon logon, þeah he him leof wære*²⁰³ (202-3). It continues in Denmark prior to the fight with Grendel; following the aforementioned wisdom challenge provided by the Coastguard, Beowulf and his company encounter Wulfgar, regarding whom the poem asserts: *wæs his modsefa manegum gecyðed,/wig*

¹⁹⁷ Ibid., 81.

¹⁹⁸ “wise and strong-minded”

¹⁹⁹ “gentle of counsel”

²⁰⁰ “strength with mind’s wisdom”

²⁰¹ “you are strong in might, mature in mind, and wise in speech”

²⁰² Kaske, “*Sapientia et Fortitudo* as the Controlling Theme of *Beowulf*,” 275.

²⁰³ “Little the wise men begrudged him that journey, though he was dear to them”

*and wisdom*²⁰⁴ (349-50). More than a passing reference, this description shows the importance of wisdom in one such as Wulfgar who, like the Coastguard, protects the kingdom from malicious strangers. After receiving the approbation of Wulfgar's wisdom and proceeding into Hrothgar's court, Beowulf is further careful to relate to Hrothgar the approbation of the wise men of his own kingdom concerning his endeavour: *Pa me þæt gelærdon leode mine, / þa selestan snotere ceorlas, / þeoden Hroðgar, þæt ic þe sohte, / forðan hie mægenes cræft mine cuðon* (415-8).²⁰⁵ On the heels of this justification follows Beowulf's *flyting* match with Unferth and, though it is not in the style usually considered typical of wisdom literature, it nonetheless approaches such literature, as demonstrated further on in this chapter. Thus, even before he encounters Grendel, Beowulf must successfully answer various figures who either explicitly or implicitly test his wisdom, further corroborating Kaske's argument for the importance of this heroic wisdom in his successful war against the Grendels.

3.4 Challenges to Heroic Wisdom

3.4.1 The Challenge of Grace

Atop the simple depiction of the power ideally achieved by such straightforward heroic wisdom - to create through construction and recreate through the defeat of monsters - the poem positions two other layers that complicate such simplicity; the first two victories of Beowulf point to the intervention of God's grace in the world, which cannot be manipulated in the same way as wisdom technique; and the thwarted Hrothgar points to experiences that frustrate and thereby implicitly question the salvific capacity of wisdom. The poem is quite explicit about God's involvement in Beowulf's first two victories, and the execution of both involves elements

²⁰⁴ "his character was known to many, his wisdom and war-skill"

²⁰⁵ "Me they exhorted - my people, those wisest of men - since they knew my skill in strength - that I should seek you, King Hrothgar"

that could not be planned prior, which might have been attributed to luck in a more pagan rendition of the story, but which represents providence in the current more Christian version. In the episode with Grendel, Beowulf's decision to face the monster unarmed and armorless is reminiscent of the Biblical David who refuses Saul's armour and weaponry in favor of trusting God for his victory (see 1 Samuel 17). By chance/providence, this counterintuitive means of assault ends up being an asset because the previously unrecognized invulnerability of the monster to weapons makes Beowulf's method the only workable one (791-805). Though Beowulf himself does not fully recognize the workings of grace in this unanticipated but very fortuitous decision against weapons, they are implied by the poet's constant reminders that Beowulf overcomes Grendel *þurh Drihtnes miht*²⁰⁶ (940); not only is this made clear by Hrothgar²⁰⁷ and the poem's "authenticating voice,"²⁰⁸ but Beowulf himself sees God at work even in the intimate details of what did and did not happen in the fight: *Ic hine ne mihte, þe Metod nolde,/ganges getwæman, no ic him þæs georne ætfealh,/feorhgeniðlan*²⁰⁹ (967-69). Similarly, when Beowulf encounters Grendel's mother in the mere, the otherwise trustworthy Hrunting fails him, and he just so happens to find a suitable alternative lying close by, an ancient and seemingly charmed weapon; this means of victory could not have been plotted in battle strategies prior to the encounter, and it therefore must be attributed to the workings of the grace specified as the metaphysical backdrop of the mere-scenario by the poet:

*Hæfde ða forsiðod sunu Ecgþeowes
under gynne grund, Geata cempa,
nemne him heaðobyrne helpe gefremede,
herenet hearde, - ond halig God.*

²⁰⁶ "through God's might"

²⁰⁷ *a mæg God wyrca/wunder æfter wundre, wuldres Hyrde* (930-931) "always can God, guard of glory, work wonder after wonder"

²⁰⁸ For instance: *Soð is gecyþed, / þæt mihtig God manna cynnes/weold wide-ferhð* (700-702) "It is a known truth, that mighty God ever has rule of mankind." On the poem's "authenticating voice," see Stanley B. Greenfield, "The Authenticating Voice in *Beowulf*," *Anglo-Saxon England* 5 (December 1976): 51-62.

²⁰⁹ "I could not hinder from going whom God did not will, not firmly enough did I hold him, the death foe."

*geweold wigsigor witig drihten,
rodera Rædend; hit on ryht gesced
yðelice, syððan he eft astod.*²¹⁰ (1550-56).

Indeed, Gernot Wieland has plausibly identified the sword as a remnant of the flood left specifically for the purpose of carrying out its judgement on the remainder of Cain's kin,²¹¹ and if this is so, Beowulf does not simply get lucky, but becomes the final catalyst in a long overdue judgement set in place at the time of the flood itself. The fact that Beowulf requires such intervention for success in his victories shows that, wise though he is, his heroic wisdom only takes him so far, and that, for ultimate victory, he must depend on the intervention of God's grace, even if he may not always recognize or know what to call such grace.

3.4.2 The Challenge of Frustration

But while these examples of grace in Beowulf's heroism show the shortcomings of heroic wisdom insofar as it requires divine supplement, Hrothgar's experiential failures and the wisdom borne out of these failures demonstrate the shortcomings of "natural" wisdom in a more negative way. Like Ecclesiastes, Hrothgar, the patriarch of Heorot, has experienced enough evil to know that the success granted by certain kinds of wisdom is slippery and often treacherous; this is particularly manifest in the wisdom that he conveys to Beowulf in the passage that has become known as "Hrothgar's Sermon."

Since this "sermon" has become something of a Rorschach blot for critics, I will begin by critically situating my own interpretation. For critics interested in the overall moral scope and didacticism of the poem, this sermon becomes the lens through which the entire poem is

²¹⁰ "The warrior Geat might have perished then,/Ecgtheow's son, somewhere under the earth,/had not his war-shirt given good help,/hard ring-netting, and holy God/controlled the fight, the mighty Lord,/Ruler of skies, decided it rightly,/easily, once he stood up again." Howell D. Chickering, *Beowulf: A Dual-Language Edition* (Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor Books, 1977), 1550–56.

²¹¹ Gernot Wieland, "The Unferth Enigma: The *Byle* Between the Hero and the Poet," in *Fact and Fiction: From the Middle Ages to Modern Times. Essays Presented to Hans Sauer on the Occasion of His 65th Birthday – Part II*, ed. Renate Bauer and Ulrike Krischke (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 2011), 43n28.

interpreted; the most extreme exemplar of this kind of criticism is Margaret Goldsmith, who devotes an entire chapter to it in *The Mode and Meaning of Beowulf*.²¹² Conversely, those more interested in downplaying the religious and moral elements of the poem are rather dismissive. Hansen downplays its significance in the broader narrative by discussing its function as a “‘set piece’ of wisdom literature,”²¹³ and Irving is particularly biting in dismissing Hrothgar's “usual preaching tone,”²¹⁴ suggesting with reference to his *Rereading Beowulf*²¹⁵ that Hrothgar is unheroic and therefore unworthy to expound the theme of the poem.

As an alternate to these somewhat extreme interpretations, this chapter roughly follows James Earl,²¹⁶ who sees the passage as a hinge in the poem suggesting a means of interpreting history. This interpretation has on its side the fact that Hrothgar does in fact use his hermeneutic as a way of interpreting his own experience with Grendel, as Earl notes.²¹⁷ Furthermore, Hrothgar at least suggests it as a hermeneutic for understanding the future as well; readers and Beowulf are not to be like the unwise person who *þa forðgesceaft/forgytedð ond forgymedð*²¹⁸ (1750-51). The wisdom offered here, then, is forward looking, and not simply a performance to be given in the hall and then forgotten. Through this wisdom pointing both backward and forward, Hrothgar traces a theme important in the wisdom ascent - the realization of the powerlessness of human wisdom in the face of death.

The theme begins even before Hrothgar begins to speak, as he meditates on the *or.../fyrngewinnes*²¹⁹ (1688-9) graven on the hilt; this refers most immediately to the story of the flood, but it also fills in a conspicuous omission in the creation song that provoked Grendel, that

²¹² Goldsmith, *The Mode and Meaning of “Beowulf”*, 183–209.

²¹³ Hansen, *The Solomon Complex*, 64.

²¹⁴ Irving, “Christian and Pagan Elements,” 190.

²¹⁵ Irving, *Rereading Beowulf*.

²¹⁶ James Whitby Earl, *Thinking About Beowulf* (Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press, 1994).

²¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 93.

²¹⁸ “forgets and neglects the future state”

²¹⁹ “the origin of ancient strife”

is, the fall of creation, which could indeed be described in theological terms as the origin of ancient strife. This reference therefore serves to remind readers that, alongside the Biblical insistence on a wisdom that can be grounded in creation, there is also an insistence that something has happened (the Fall) that can contort and thwart such wisdom. What is notable for the purposes of the wisdom scholar, however, is that Hrothgar's subsequent exploration of this theme²²⁰ does not focus on monsters, as prior events in the narrative might lead one to expect, but rather on natural wisdom and its limitations. There are numerous aspects of this speech that point to its function as a wisdom poem, such as Hrothgar's introduction as *se wisa*²²¹ (1698), his reference to himself as *wintrum frod*²²² (1724), and his use of the term *gid* (1723) to describe his speech, a generic category often used to denote wisdom.²²³ However, the most prominent wisdom feature of his speech is his insistence that the *mod*, guided by natural wisdom, must not overstep its bounds. The very name of the foil Hrothgar proposes as a negative model for *Beowulf* immediately draws one's attention to this feature; the name Heremod, although presumably best translated as "battle courage," still points through the use of the word *mod* to the site of cognito-emotional response so important in Old English wisdom generally and a leitmotif

²²⁰ There has been some debate over the degree to which Hrothgar, who is not a Christian, can understand the Christian elements of this story; for a good introduction to this debate and ways of responding to it, see Seth Lerer, "Hrothgar's Hilt and the Reader in *Beowulf*," in *The Postmodern Beowulf: a Critical Casebook* (Morgantown: West Virginia University Press, 2006), 587–628. To clarify my own position, I am not here claiming that Hrothgar sees the hilt and proceeds in his speech equipped with a full Augustinian metaphysics. Rather, he sees something that might be discussed by Christians and pagans alike - the idea that evil might have a beginning somewhere (*or*) - and so in his pre-Christian wisdom anticipates what a Christian audience can almost certainly identify as an instance of Original Sin.

²²¹ Though this word can simply mean leader, as listed in Klaeber's dictionary, its roots probably lie in the fact that one who is wise (*wis*) or able to know (*witan*) things is a fitting leader. If this word generally has such overtones, they are presumably emphasized here, as Hrothgar prepares to give a wisdom speech.

²²² "mature in winters"

²²³ Alice Sheppard, "A Word to the Wise: Thinking, Knowledge, and Wisdom in *The Wanderer*," in *Source of Wisdom: Old English and Early Medieval Latin Studies in Honour of Thomas D. Hill*, ed. Frederick M. Biggs et al., Toronto Old English Series (University of Toronto Press, 2007), 130–5.

of this passage specifically.²²⁴ Heremod is *bolgenmod*²²⁵ (1713); in his gloss on the story, Hrothgar delineates the way that God *Hwilom on lufan læteð hworfen/monnes modgeþonc mæran cynnes*²²⁶ (1728-9) so that it forgets that its seemingly natural *snyttru*²²⁷ (1726) is really from *mihtig God*²²⁸ (1725), and thereby falls into a state of *unsnyttrum*²²⁹ (1734). And even when the word *mod* is not overtly used, Hrothgar makes further reference to its thinking capacity; he warns Beowulf to beware *oferhyda*²³⁰ (1760), and the latter part of this word, which is in the nominative *oferhygd*, evokes *hyge* (mind) and *hycgan* (to think). Like the positive events of God's interventions in Beowulf's heroism, Hrothgar's exploration of the negative effects of a heroic wisdom grown too rash clearly demarcate the limits of such wisdom; it is useful, but those who exercise it must never be lulled into complacency or the illusion of self-sustenance; for the worldly wise person *se slæp to fæst*²³¹ (1742) can only be interrupted by a higher intervention from God or an experience of suffering (which are not mutually exclusive).

Intriguingly, Hrothgar emphasizes his point by elliptically intimating that his own experience of Grendel was, paradoxically, both his punishment for and his means of salvation from such self-contented complacency. His use of *swa* (1769) as a means of transition into the story of his own woes indicates that his life shares a pattern similar to that of the aforementioned Heremod and the hypothesized Beowulf who could too easily become proud after his exploits.

²²⁴ For a useful study of the polysemous slippage that occurs amongst various definitions of *mod*, see Soon-Ai Low, "Pride, Courage, and Anger: The Polysemousness of Old English *Mod*," in *Verbal Encounters: Anglo-Saxon and Old Norse Studies for Roberta Frank*, ed. Antonina Harbus and Russell Gilbert Poole (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005), 77-88.

²²⁵ "mind-swollen"

²²⁶ "Sometimes in love lets the mind-thought of men of illustrious kin rove about"

²²⁷ "wisdom"

²²⁸ "mighty God"

²²⁹ "unwisdom"

²³⁰ "of pride"

²³¹ "the sleep too fast"

But the significant difference between Hrothgar's story and these other stories of actual and potential pride is succinctly conveyed in a matter of a few lines:

*ic þære socne singales wæg
modceare micle. Þæs sig Metode þanc,
ecean Dryhtne, þæs ðe ic on aldre gebad,
Þæt ic on þone hafelan heorodreorigne
Ofer eald gewin eagum starige*²³² (1777-81).

These three lines nicely capture the primary distinction between a character like Hrothgar and a character like Heremod. The *bolgenmod* of the latter is replaced by Hrothgar's *modceare micle*, and this leads him not to pride, but to praise for God and his mercy; the appearance of Grendel and God's intervention in the person of Beowulf have pointed him toward his dependence on grace, which he may not have understood had his successful reign continued uninterrupted. One need not gather from this that Hrothgar was notoriously bad and that Grendel was necessarily a divine punishment,²³³ for, as Gregory so clearly highlights in his *Moralia*, even good men such as Job must be refined through suffering,²³⁴ and Hrothgar's virtuous paganism in some ways resembles that of Job. However, it is clear that the Grendel-Beowulf event has catalyzed for Hrothgar a movement from a good if somewhat superficial wisdom technique grounded in creation, toward a deeper wisdom that both recognizes and depends upon forces beyond this order. In the paradoxical way typical of Biblical thought, Hrothgar's loss and suffering is here translated into an experience of victory and gain – grace is discovered when natural wisdom technique no longer has the capacity to defend one against the whips and scorns of time.

And this Hrothgarian movement from successful heroic wisdom to higher wisdom, catalyzed by suffering, is a synecdoche for the movement of the entire work, which is shot

²³² "I bore great heart-care, suffered continually/from his persecution. Thanks be to God,/the Eternal Lord, I came through alive,/and today may look at this huge bloody head/with my own eyes, after long strife! Chickering, *Beowulf*, 1777–81.

²³³ See Earl, "The Necessity of Evil in *Beowulf*," 93–4.

²³⁴ Hester, *Eschatology and Pain in St. Gregory the Great*, 82–6.

through with “natural” wisdoms that are being dismantled and complicated by sites of suffering and conflict, though the happy ending granted Hrothgar is implicit or perhaps even absent in parallel examples. To be clear, heroic wisdom is not in any way inherently evil or useless, although it can certainly become so if it usurps the place of higher forms of wisdom. However, in the world of *Beowulf*, heroic wisdom (most often conveyed in maxims) – while able to facilitate the general maintenance of society and its basic morality – is inadequate to encounter some of the more complicated and dark forms of experience that would seem to challenge the straightforwardness of such wisdom; like the mead hall in Bede's parable of the sparrow, such structures can usefully protect one from the outside darkness for a time, but something else altogether is required to engage the darkness outside.

3.4.3 Identifying *Wyrð*

As a way of defining this darkness and unpredictability, it is useful to introduce the Old English concept of *wyrð*. There are a variety of definitions one could use, and Jon C. Kasik has listed differences in the way the word is used throughout *Beowulf*.²³⁵ However, this chapter is chiefly interested in that definition most pertinent to the world of heroic wisdom, the definition that is not at least explicitly subjugated to Christianity, since it is this that heroic wisdom must battle and lose in order to discover the higher heavenly wisdom it must turn to that encompasses and redefines *wyrð* itself. Kasik offers such a definition in his commentary on the maxim in line 455: “This line contains the full impact which the idea of fate must have had on the pagan Anglo-Saxon who thought about the universe. It was something against which he was helpless. It organized everything in the world from births and deaths to the outcomes of battles, even those

²³⁵ Jon C. Kasik, “The Use of the Term *Wyrð* in *Beowulf* and the Conversion of the Anglo-Saxons,” *Neophilologus* 63, no. 1 (January 1979): 128–135.

in which the gods intervened.”²³⁶ In this definition, *wyrd* is the arch-enemy of heroic wisdom, the thing it cannot overcome regardless of its cleverness.

3.5 Instances of the Interplay Between Heroic Wisdom and Its Challenges

With regard to the aforementioned forces in the text, the narrative world of *Beowulf* cannot be wholly equated with either a wholly manipulable creation or a wholly unassailable *wyrd* – rather, it is a *middangeard* between the two, and it is this intersection that opens a creative space for both the construction and dismantling of creational wisdom; on the one hand, heroic wisdom works because God's creation works, but, on the other hand, overweening attempts to comprehend or control too much via creational wisdom – or even sometimes innocuous attempts plain and simple – can be thwarted by the counter effects of *wyrd*. This positioning of the wisdom tradition between Edenic perfection on one hand and dissolution on the other is what gives it its dynamism and impetus, for those who wield wisdom must be driven neither by blind optimism nor pessimistic fatalism, but must grapple their way through a tangled world that sometimes permits the human initiative or will encouraged by wisdom traditions, but at other times thwarts such initiative. This grappling – which incidentally mirrors the classical theological discussion of predestination and free will – is perfectly summed up in the sentence which asserts that *wyrd oft nereð/unfægne eorl, þonne his ellen deah*²³⁷ (572-3). The first part of this statement is almost a truism – of course the man not fated to fail will not fail. However, the proverb is paradoxically qualified by the assertion that such favoring of fate is conditional upon the human maintenance of *ellen*. To be sure, *ellen* is a quality native to the battlefield rather than the didactic field of

²³⁶ Ibid., 130.

²³⁷ “*Wyrd* often spares the unfated man, when his courage avails”

proverbial discourse, but, even if one of these fields were not a typological shadow of the other, both are still grounded in the causality presupposed by divine creation and order, and in the premonition that this causality can in some way be harnessed by the individual to ensure a positive outcome for him/herself. Thus, this proverb nicely embodies the central tension of the Old English wisdom tradition; one must not simply stop trying to find out how the world works and how one can be successful in it – *ellen* is imperative – but one must always recognize the role of the inscrutable *wyrd* in such success; to esteem one's successes too highly, whether in the battlefield or the didactic enterprise, is to forget that one's fate could easily have been different, and that it may indeed be different next time regardless of one's efforts. Arguably, the aforementioned proverb uses *oft* rather than *a* precisely to ensure that it maintains the creative and uncertain tensions of wisdom rather than evoking the more simplistic, formulaic, and mechanical overtones of a charm. Hence, the Old English wisdom represented in *Beowulf* navigates the tension between the comprehensible world fashioned and ordered by God, and the more inscrutable ambivalence of *wyrd*, and it can be assessed and analyzed in terms of these apparently polarized forces, particularly insofar as the proverbs and gnomes that convey it relate to the larger narrative contexts in which they are embedded.

In *Beowulf*'s representation of this sapiential tension between proactive wisdom and the helpless passivity heralded by fate, there are two instances that make this tension particularly clear. The first is the poem's opening assertion that

*Swa sceal (geong g)uma gode gwyrcean,
fromum feohgiftum on fæder (bea)rme,
þæt hine on ylde eft gewunigen
wil-gesiþas, þonne wig cume
leode gelæsten; lofdædum sceal*

*in mægþa gehwære man geþeon*²³⁸ (20-25).

Admittedly, the benefits of this wisdom are generally borne out in the narrative through both positive and negative exemplars; the Scylding Beowulf, of whom this wisdom is spoken, is a *leof leodcyning*²³⁹ (54), and figures like Heremod demonstrate the converse – kings who are stingy with gifts are not held in high esteem (1718-23), and are presumably therefore more likely to be deserted. Yet if this pattern which associates gift-giving and loyalty holds true ninety percent of the time in the narrative, *wyrd* spectacularly frustrates it when most of Beowulf's retainers fail to come to his aid when he most needs it in his battle with the dragon, as Wiglaf notes (2864-2891). Thus, while this proverb suggests a generally valid causal connection between the king's gift-giving and the thanes' loyalty, there is always the chance that *wyrd* will intervene and it will not guarantee the expected outcome. If the world and society were merely sustained and influenced by laws and order implemented by an orderly God, then the proverb would work for kings much as a computer program works for a programmer; however, the uncertainties that accompany *wyrd* make unpredictable the workings of the world, and thus facilitate events such as Beowulf's desertion in his fight against the dragon.

To simply abandon proverbial wisdom altogether – to shrug one's shoulders and suggest that fate will be fate – is not a suitable way to respond to this uncertainty, as Beowulf makes quite clear in his proverbial response to Hrothgar's lamentation after the second attack, which is indeed the second proverb that nicely situates itself between the tensions of creation and *wyrd*: *Selre bið æghwæm/þæt he his freond wrece, þonne he fela murne*²⁴⁰ (1384-5). The can-do attitude expressed in this proverb reflects the confidence of a heroic wisdom tradition that is

²³⁸ “So ought a [young] man, in his father's household,/treasure up the future by his goods and goodness,/by splendid bestowals, so that later in life/his chosen men stand by him in turn,/his retainers serve him when war comes./By such generosity any man prospers” Chickering, *Beowulf*, 20–25.

²³⁹ “dear people-king”

²⁴⁰ “Better is it for anyone/to avenge his friend than to mourn much”

fairly optimistic about its ability to take charge and remedy troublesome matters. However, the audience of this passage might have had dual reasons to wonder about the extent of the trustworthiness of this proverb; as Susan Deskis notes in her attempt to explain the reason for few extant analogues to this proverb, Christians preferred to leave vengeance to God, while a more heroic audience, though grounded in the vengeance code, might have had mixed feelings about this too ready proverb on the grounds that vengeance is never quite as simple as this and it is seldom without consequences: “mixed feelings,” Deskis concludes, “do not create successful proverbs.”²⁴¹

Indeed, such mixed feelings nicely describe the tenor of the broader narrative context of *Beowulf*, which does much to undercut the more general applicability of this proverb. Certainly, in the instance in which the proverb is spoken, it is more prudent to get rid of the immediate problem than to wring one's hands about it. But throughout the poem, one encounters many situations that cannot be as easily helped – mourning is seemingly the only option left. Within the cultural context that he is speaking, the last survivor can do nothing either to revive or avenge his tribe; the text describes how he *unbliðe hwearf/dæges ond nihtes, oððæt deaðes wylm/hran æt heortan*²⁴² (2268-70). The father whose son is hung *symble bið gemyndgad morna gehwylce*²⁴³ (2450) of his loss, even as is Hrethel concerning the accidental death of Herebeald.²⁴⁴ The earlier part of the text is haunted by the image of Heorot's fiery demise, and the latter part by the eventual destruction of the Geats, and the advice of Hrothgar to Beowulf even at the height of his success is bleak: *semninga bið,/pæt ðec, dryhtguma, deað oferswyðeð*²⁴⁵

²⁴¹ Deskis, *Beowulf and the Medieval Proverb Tradition*, 125.

²⁴² “went unblithely/day and night, until death's flood struck at his heart.”

²⁴³ “always is reminded each morning”

²⁴⁴ For an extended explication of the way these episodes constitute a critique of heroic action such as that embodied in Beowulf's advocacy of active vengeance over mourning, see Linda Georgianna, “King Hrethel's Sorrow and the Limits of Heroic Action in *Beowulf*,” *Speculum* 62, no. 4 (1987): 829–850.

²⁴⁵ “presently will it be, warrior, that death overcomes you”

(1767-8). All these strands of lamentation reach their culmination in the mourning that accompanies Beowulf's ultimate funeral. Hence, while action may be preferable to mourning when there is action that can be done, the hope offered by the proverb is limited only to those instances where something can be done – where nothing can be done, mourning reigns, and it seems to me that one of the primary cruxes in the poem is the matter of what the text is doing with this unresolved mourning. However, before turning to the discussion of this matter of the second half of the poem, I wish to add one further important example of the function of wisdom in the first half; this is the *flyting* match between Beowulf and Unferth.

3.6 Wisdom and the Unferth Episode

Beowulf's *flyting* episode with Unferth is a partial synecdoche of the wisdom movement of the entire poem. Particularly, the two components that highlight the human need for something higher than earthly wisdom figure prominently: *wyrd* and God's grace. As well, the function of wisdom alongside weaponry as a means of protective warfare is particularly clear in this passage, given that *flyting* is a verbal alternative to physical fighting. Not only, then, does this passage highlight the agonistic nature of wisdom so important in the wisdom ascent, but it also touches on most of the key elements in this ascent.

With regard to critical context, I am not here rejecting Carol Clover's widely accepted explanation of this episode with regard to Germanic *flyting*,²⁴⁶ but am rather seeking to reveal a sapiential strand of meaning woven into this war of words. The strong critical reaction against Bloomfield's heavy-handed allegorical interpretation of Unferth²⁴⁷ has led critics to shy away from the exploration of such a didactic layer in the speech, but it is important to realize that

²⁴⁶ Clover, "The Germanic Context of the Unferth Episode."

²⁴⁷ Morton W. Bloomfield, "Understanding Old English Poetry," in *Essays and Explorations; Studies in Ideas, Language, and Literature* (Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press, 1970), 71–2.

Bloomfield's approach is not the only way of discussing such didacticism. Though there is no proof for Kaske's claim that Unferth plays a lapsed *sapientia* to Beowulf's *sapientia*, I do think his parallel suggestion is worth pursuing, that this episode is a test of Beowulf's *sapientia*.²⁴⁸ However, whereas Kaske claims that the point of this wisdom contest is for Beowulf to beat Unferth (and in its most immediate dramatic context, it is), I suggest that the broader sapiential point of the story is to pit Beowulf's wisdom against the forces of *wyrd* that threaten all his plans, including those plans to kill Grendel.

One of the most overt clues in the text that this exchange evokes Old English wisdom is the reference to Unferth's initial volley of insults as a *beadurune*²⁴⁹ (501); in particular, the use of the word *rune* here demarcates a foray into the generic territory of wisdom literature. On the more figurative side – interpreting *rune* as counsel, or meditation, as in *The Wanderer* (111) – this denotes some kind of recounting or grappling with the stuff of wisdom. However, on the more literal side, runic figures were themselves considered to have certain powers of protection and assault in battle, as demonstrated in *Solomon and Saturn I*, in which the letters of the *Pater Noster* paralleled by some of their runic equivalents²⁵⁰ attack the devil in particularly violent ways.²⁵¹ Thus, for an Anglo-Saxon audience, a *beadurune* presumably occupied an imaginative space somewhere between literal battle and the metaphorical verbal and psychological “battles” more typical of wisdom literature. It is thus an extremely astute word to use with regard to an exchange such as that between Beowulf and Unferth, which is more barbed than some of the tamer examples of Anglo-Saxon wisdom, but which still relies on words rather than weapons as instruments of battle.

²⁴⁸ Kaske, “*Sapientia et Fortitudo* as the Controlling Theme of Beowulf,” 278–9.

²⁴⁹ “battle-rune”

²⁵⁰ See Anlezark, *The Old English Dialogues of Solomon and Saturn*, 28–31.

²⁵¹ For a study of the graphic violence associated with these figures, see John P. Hermann, *Allegories of War: Language and Violence in Old English Poetry* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1989), 32–6.

The content of this word-battle involves Unferth unsettling Beowulf by exposing him to the truth behind the Ecclesiastean maxim: “The race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong...but time and chance in all” (9:11, Douay-Rheims). Breca lasted in the water till the eighth day of the contest, while Beowulf only lasted till the sixth,²⁵² yet, given the circumstances, it is not as if Breca necessarily proved stronger when faced with the same conditions as Beowulf – given the fact that the two were inadvertently separated from each other, Beowulf could only have won by arbitrarily guessing when Breca would emerge from the water and staying in longer, an act that would not only be perhaps foolhardy after expending all of one's strength on underwater battles with sea monsters, but may indeed have seemed pointless – presumably the separation rendered the original terms of the contest null and void. Thus, what is disturbing about the events that Unferth raises in the hall is not simply that Beowulf lost a contest – it is that certain powers exist in the world beyond the initiatives of heroism, and not even a Beowulf or a Breca could control the sea storm that drove them apart. And although Unferth himself only raises this question in a very surface way by an elliptical reference to Beowulf's “loss,” Beowulf himself fills in the details of this “loss” that presumably have raised doubts in Unferth's mind – even if Beowulf's “loss” is excusable in technical terms due to circumstances beyond his control, what is to prevent similar circumstances from intervening in his proposed assault on Grendel?

Indeed, the issue that Unferth and Beowulf raise here is the perennial issue of *wyrd*. However skilled a warrior may be, there are always aspects of reality - the way things are - that he cannot anticipate or account for. In the Ecclesiastean account, vanity is often the term used to denote this barrier insurmountable by human effort. In the Old English context, *wyrd* is the party behind such frustration. It does not mean exactly the same thing as vanity; the actual Old English

²⁵² For a helpful overview of the contest, see Wieland, “The Unferth Enigma: The *Byle* Between the Hero and the Poet.”

word used to translate the Ecclesiastean *vanitas* in Werferth's translation of the dialogues is *idelnesse* (4.3.23).²⁵³ However, the words overlap in their function as markers of things beyond human control that no amount of effort can overcome. Though there is more to the meaning of *wyrd* than this, it is this most basic sense that matters in understanding its role in the *flyting* match with Unferth. *Wyrd* is the thing that drives Beowulf and Breca apart despite their best efforts, and it is the spectre of this uncontrollable *wyrd* that looms over Beowulf's impending fight with Grendel.

However, if Unferth's question implicitly raises the adverse specter of thwarting *wyrd* and the potential jeopardy in which it puts Beowulf and by extension Heorot and those within it, Beowulf commendably faces this question squarely and answers it in terms typical of the wisdom tradition; even if human heroism is unable to trump the inscrutable forces of *wyrd* that often work against it, it is ultimately safeguarded by another uncontrollable power even higher than *wyrd*, a power which can transform the ostensible “losses” caused by *wyrd* into alternate forms of victory. This is the point of Beowulf's description of his sea battle. Like any man, his fate might not be entirely in his own hands, but, when it comes to battling monsters, fate – or more properly speaking, God's grace – is on his side. Although he does attribute his victories in the most immediate sense to his own effort – he uses the phrase *purh mine hand*²⁵⁴ (558) – he insists that a broader force is guiding him, as indicated by his statement in the passive voice that victory *gyfeþe wearð* (555).²⁵⁵ The divine backing for his sea battle is further highlighted by his

²⁵³ Gregorius Magnus, *Bischofs Waerferths von Worcester Übersetzung der Dialoge Gregors des Grossen über das Leben und die Wunderthaten italienischer Väter und über die Unsterblichkeit der Seelen*, 264.

²⁵⁴ “through my hands”

²⁵⁵ Though Battaglia (52) comes up with a complicated theory regarding this passage wherein it constitutes the assertion of Woden/Othin's power over against that of the sea goddess Gefion, it seems far more simple and therefore probable to attribute the activity in this passive construction to either God or *wyrd* or both, given their immediate appearance in lines 569-74. Frank Battaglia, “Gifeðe as ‘Granted by Fate’ in *Beowulf*,” *In Geardagum: Essays on Old and Middle English Language and Literature* 23 (2002): 52.

description of sunrise as the *beorht beacen Godes*²⁵⁶ (570), and, in case the audience should miss his point that *wyrd* has worked for him in the service of grace, he overtly draws attention to its role in his victory through the maxim he cites, which also implies that, when it comes to monster battles, he is an *unfægne eorl*²⁵⁷ (573) and thus favoured by *wyrd* (572). Even his weary surrender to sea currents can be possibly interpreted as a typological nod to the grace of God; in Biblical books like Jonah and the Psalms, the currents of the sea are themselves directed by God, so that passive submission to these currents can symbolize submission to the broader workings of God – the Psalmist tells God that “Deep calleth on deep, at the noise of thy flood-gates. All thy heights and thy billows have passed over me.” (Psalm 41:8, Douay-Rheims) Clearly some later Christians took the divine inspiration of waves and sea-currents quite seriously, as demonstrated by the monastics who washed up on the English shores in a boat without oars or rudders, as indicated in the Anglo-Saxon chronicle entry for year 891.²⁵⁸ Thus, if Unferth's speech explicitly brings up a swimming match that was perhaps foolishly undertaken by Beowulf and Breca when they were younger, it implicitly brings up deeper issues concerning the role of *wyrd* in a heroism that has no recourse against its potentially disastrous workings; however, Beowulf skillfully answers this concern not by foolishly denying a realm of fortune beyond his control, but rather by suggesting that he is backed by this realm which is in turn backed by God – just as the Biblical David cites the success God has given him against animal predators as justification for a seemingly foolish attack on Goliath (1 Samuel 17:34-7), so Beowulf cites his encounter with the monsters as proof that God/fate has given him success in such enterprises and presumably will continue to do so – and as this attack is completely unplanned within the terms of the swimming

²⁵⁶ “bright guarantee of God”

²⁵⁷ “unfated earl”

²⁵⁸ Michael Swanton, trans. and ed., *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 82.

match, it exemplifies the way that grace in the wisdom tradition can often redeem instances that are ostensibly losses by numerous other standards of judgement.

According to this interpretation, Unferth's role in the text is to raise the spectre of an inexorable *wyrd* so that Beowulf can explain how his heroism deals with forces beyond its control, an explanation which is necessary for the reinforcement of his heroism both in the minds of the Danes and the audience of the poem. Given this role, one can speculate – but perhaps do little more than speculate – about the ways that other aspects of Unferth's character fit into this discovery of wisdom themes in his exchange with Beowulf. Firstly, Hrothgar's character is not in the least suspect for letting Unferth sit at his feet (500) for, on a typological level, this permission reflects the character of God himself. Just as God permits what seems to be a rather chaotic and uncontrollable *wyrd* to control the earth – one might even say, to “sit at his feet,” since the earth is his footstool²⁵⁹ – so Hrothgar gives the unpredictable spokesman of *wyrd* free reign to interrogate a stranger in his court. Moreover, just as *wyrd* on the surface seems to move in ways contrary or ambivalent to God's will, but in reality serves his purposes, so Unferth, while he hardly embodies the graciousness and circumspection that Hrothgar seems to possess, does after all end up serving Hrothgar through his “rudeness,” by discovering to Hrothgar and his retainers the very pith of Beowulf's heroism.

The Unferth episode thus parallels the wisdom ascent in at least three ways. First, it traces, if circuitously, a path from the threat of *wyrd* to a confidence in heavenly power. Second, its agonistic element is reminiscent of the martial agon often used to typify the struggle for wisdom. Third, Unferth plays a persona, speaking in an at least somewhat artificial voice as a way of leading those in the hall to a better grasp of the truth of Beowulf's nature; this is reminiscent of the technique of Solomon in Ecclesiastes.

²⁵⁹ See Isaiah 66:1, Matthew 5:35, and Acts 7:49.

3.7 Critical and Theoretical Responses to Mourning

3.7.1 Critical Response to Mourning

Whereas the wisdom seen in the Unferth episode and more broadly the first half of the poem is comic in the technical sense of the word, the second part turns to the exploration of unanswered mourning. Sensing the power of this deep current of mourning to eclipse meaning and worth in other aspects of the poem, some critics seek explanations that minimize it. Such explanations are not only found as one might expect in interpretations that read the poem as a highly didactic work,²⁶⁰ but also in other interpretations as well; Fred Robinson, for instance, interprets the poem as nearly comic in his suggestion that Beowulf is possibly being divinized at the conclusion of the poem.²⁶¹ Such critical attempts to “contain” the mournful strains of *Beowulf* emerge at least in part from the real critical threat that the issue of mourning poses; mourning disorients and deconstructs, making the subjective mourning self rather than any external arbiter the rule and gauge of interpretations - one can justify nearly any reading on the grounds that a work of mourning is an interruption of whatever “normal” historical processes surrounded the original text, and so it exists by its own rules, appropriable by anyone. Though Earl is generally fairly well grounded in historical context, his psychoanalytic discussion of mourning in *Beowulf* comes close to such appropriation in his narration of two of his dreams, which he justifies on the following grounds: “In short, who we are means quite a lot to our interpretations, and the best we can do is account for ourselves every step of the way. In this regard, the neuroses I bring to *Beowulf* are neither religious or heroic; but scholarship has its own

²⁶⁰ See, for example Goldsmith, *The Mode and Meaning of Beowulf*, 210–44. Goldsmith finds the primary matter of the conclusion to pertain to Divine judgement, and so the poem becomes more of an *exemplum* than a work of mourning.

²⁶¹ Fred Robinson, “The Tomb of *Beowulf*,” in “*The Tomb of Beowulf*” and *Other Essays on Old English* (Cambridge, Mass: Wiley-Blackwell, 1993), 3–19.

neuroses, so it might be pertinent here to report two recent dreams.”²⁶² Following this lead, his student, Eileen Joy, introduces the idea of a “liquid Beowulf” infinitely manipulable by modern critics. The justification for reading this “liquid Beowulf,” it would seem, is as an alternate way of talking about ourselves and our own mourning; by some critical sleight of hand, *Beowulf* becomes a way of talking about our own modern trauma, such as the Holocaust and the Gulf War.²⁶³ This seems to me to do a disservice not only to modern trauma and to *Beowulf*, but to the critic him/herself. To conflate the trauma of the modern and Beowulfian worlds seems to me to miss the particularities of each of these worlds, to heap all the bodies of the past into a mass unmarked grave; though well-meaning, it makes a category mistake like that made by Fortinbras in *Hamlet*: Hamlet the scholar is borne like a soldier from the stage. For the critic, it reduces criticism to a stilted and posturing way of talking about oneself; there is no *Beowulf* “out there” to talk about. Given the stakes, it makes sense why some of the critics mentioned above feel the need to historicize and thereby contain mourning in the text of *Beowulf*, but the problem then becomes a matter of knowing how to do this without reenacting the tendency of modernity to paper over problems in the universe.

3.7.2 Augustinian Response to Critics

One way of the dealing with the problems of both extremes can be found in the work of St. Augustine, an early Christian author who encountered mourning and its threatening demeanour. In Augustine, one discovers instances of mourning as deep as that in *Beowulf*, a searing mourning that allows for a merciless dismantling of the norms and constructions around him; one also finds the narcissism that mourning leads to:

²⁶² Earl, *Thinking About Beowulf*, 171.

²⁶³ Joy, “Introduction,” lv.

O madness, which knowest not how to love men, like men! O foolish man that I then was, enduring impatiently the lot of man! I fretted then, sighed, wept, was distracted; had neither rest nor counsel. For I bore about a shattered and bleeding soul, impatient of being borne by me, yet where to repose it, I found not. Not in calm groves, not in games and music, nor in fragrant spots, nor in curious banquetings, nor in the pleasures of the bed and the couch; nor (finally) in books or poesy, found it repose. All things look ghastly, yea, the very light; whatsoever was not what he was, was revolting and hateful, except groaning and tears. For in those alone found I little refreshment. But when my soul was withdrawn from them, a huge load of misery weighed me down. To Thee, O Lord, it ought to have been raised, for Thee to lighten; I knew it; but neither could nor would; the more, since, when I thought of Thee, Thou wert not to me any solid or substantial thing. For Thou wert not Thyself, but a mere phantom, and my error was my God. If I offered to discharge my load thereon, that it might rest, it glided through the void, and came rushing down again on me; and I had remained to myself a hapless spot, where I could neither be, nor be from thence. For whither should my heart flee from my heart? Whither should I flee from myself? Whither not follow myself? And yet I fled out of my country; for so should mine eyes less look for him, where they were not wont to see him.²⁶⁴

In this passage that reads like a parable on the history of modern literary theory, Augustine begins by mourning another and ends up being stuck with his own naked self and its illusions; in the very next section, he talks about various discursive and literary activities that served escapist purposes for him and his friends.²⁶⁵ What for Augustine guards against this narcissistic proclivity is the God that haunts every sentence he writes. This God, more primary and powerful than any force of mourning, cannot be possessed or controlled by Augustine, and so continually serves as a check on the solipsism that simple mourning would bring about. This is something exemplified particularly in one of Augustine's best students, Boethius. At the beginning of the *Consolatio*, the fictional Boethius is in danger of lapsing into such self-centred mourning, and it takes Philosophy - a handmaid of the same God worshiped by Augustine - to shake him out of this narcissism. Such an Augustinian pairing of mourning and faith gives Augustine a remarkable hermeneutic for interpreting the world around him; on one hand, he can allow for the disruptive and deconstructive nature of mourning - mourning brings into question everything that humans

²⁶⁴ Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. Edward Pusey (London: Watkins Publishing, 2008), 4.12.

²⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 4.13.

cling to. On the other hand, this mourning is kept from solipsism by the outside influence of God.

And this, I suggest, is precisely what is happening in *Beowulf*. The author can afford to be so deconstructive without lapsing into narcissism or silence just to the degree that the poem presupposes a God beyond the world of mourning to which people can turn once this world of mourning is fully collapsed. My contention is that, in terms of its use of wisdom, *Beowulf* is indeed a work of mourning, as Earl argues,²⁶⁶ but it is a mourning qualified by and working toward the (paradoxically) dynamically stable truth of God. By the end of the poem heroism dies, and the Geats will die - their fate will be similar to that of the unremembered and nameless last survivor. What will not die is the truth behind the maxim: *Metod eallum weold/gumena cynnes, swa he nu git deo*²⁶⁷ (1057-8). The rest of this chapter will trace the way this Godward mourning works itself out throughout the poem.

3.8 Mourning and Wisdom: A Synthesis of Earl's and Kaske's Interpretations of *Beowulf*

3.8.1 Earl's Interpretation

One of the best means of discussing this counter to the more optimistic heroic wisdom is Earl's paper on the subject. Earl makes a connection between the humbling experience that Hrothgar has undergone with the Grendel-kin and Beowulf's own humbling death at the hands of the dragon; the point of this comparison is that Hrothgar and Beowulf, both good people, suffer and die, even when they may not have merited this (except by their participation in Original Sin). The purpose of these deaths and sufferings is not to raise the question of what particular thing

²⁶⁶ Earl, *Thinking About Beowulf*.

²⁶⁷ "God ruled all the race of men, even as he still does now".

Hrothgar or Beowulf did to deserve suffering and death, but rather to drive home the point that everyone at some point or another must undergo these things; like Job or Augustine's treatment of the sack of Rome in *The City of God*, *Beowulf* teaches us that we will in fact die, and that we must make sense of this as best we can²⁶⁸ - indeed, the following argument traces the way that *Beowulf* makes sense of this inevitable doom, associated with *wyrd*.

3.8.2 Kaske's Interpretation

If the earlier portions of *Beowulf* are characterized by the triumphant heroic wisdom outlined above, the later portions feature not only the tomb of beowulf, but the tomb of heroic wisdom - here is the arena where this wisdom must face its own death. That Beowulf's wisdom is one of the primary foci of this latter section is a point that Kaske has argued, convincingly I think (296-308); one of the epithets by which Beowulf is introduced in this section is *se wisa* (2329), and it does seem probable that such a description is an invitation to read the latter portion through the lens of Hrothgar's sermon, though this need not be particularly in the form of Kaske's debatable argument concerning *malitia*²⁶⁹ or Goldsmith's overdetermined interpretation via patristic sources.²⁷⁰ What requires further analysis, however, is the way that the ambiguous outcome of the dragon fight raises questions about Beowulf's wisdom; why is it that, in the earlier episodes, his wisdom is triumphant, but in the later episodes so focused on wisdom, this wisdom is only partially successful and sufficient, exacting the life of the hero and requiring more preparation than the fights with either of the Grendels?

²⁶⁸ Earl, "The Necessity of Evil in *Beowulf*," 91-5.

²⁶⁹ Kaske, "*Sapientia et Fortitudo* as the Controlling Theme of *Beowulf*," 282-3 and 303-6.

²⁷⁰ Goldsmith, *The Mode and Meaning of Beowulf*, 183-209.

3.8.3 Synthesis of Kaske and Earl

By way of response to this question, the poem features different levels of wisdom with varying capacities to deal with different levels of evil, but to understand this and its implications, one must first understand the differences between the Grendel-kin and the dragon, and the varying levels of evil they represent. The Grendel-kin clearly represent a more surface, bodied, and “obvious” form of evil; it does not take a professional ethicist to determine that Grendel's actions are evil, and even the ambiguity surrounding the morality of Grendel's mother is not, I think, that ambiguous - her murder of Aeschere is not just a tit-for-tat application of a Germanic vengeance code, but is in fact the equivalent of a vengeance murder on behalf of a person condemned by law to die (as a mass murderer) - the ethically proper response, by Anglo-Saxon standards, is the perpetual mourning of the hung criminal's father in lines 2444-2459, and not that of Grendel's mother.

However, the dragon represents an evil that is deeper, more internal and more cognitive, as Kaske discovers: “Just as Grendel is an embodiment of external evil, or violence, the dragon represents the greatest of internal evils, the perversion of the mind and will, *malitia*.”²⁷¹ Though Kaske defines the dragon perhaps too narrowly via a particular patristic understanding of *malitia*, his point about the externality of Grendel and the internality of the dragon is well made, and is the key to the difference between the wisdom in the first part of the poem and the wisdom in the second is the development of this difference between Grendel and the dragon. Whereas the heroic wisdom of the first section of the poem is very external and performative, the wisdom of the second section is more introspective in tone and depends on a more sophisticated understanding of the inner-self; in this, it is not unlike the elegies. Whereas public exchanges

²⁷¹ Kaske, “*Sapientia et Fortitudo* as the Controlling Theme of Beowulf,” 302–303.

with figures such as Unferth and the Coastguard characterize the first section, such interlocutors become more sparse in the second section. In their place the poem features development of the kind of contemplative stance that develops in the wisdom ascent of Job and Ecclesiastes; very open public debate is replaced by something more interior and more private, resembling the *Soliloquies* of Augustine.

This turn is evident at a number of sites in the second section. Whereas the events at Heorot are initiated in a very public manner, the dragon-fight is instigated quietly and furtively by a thief (2220). Whereas the test of Beowulf's wisdom is in the first section very publicly put on display by Unferth, it is introduced in this section through Beowulf's introspective assessment of his moral standing, and also by what seems to be an overheard soliloquy that he gives before he goes down to the dragon's cave (2425-2509). Whereas in the first section Beowulf's speech and action are almost always public and presented before great bodies of people, he is distanced from his people in this section; his conversation and interaction is more private, as evidenced by the set of exchanges between Beowulf and Wiglaf (2631-2820); his death moreover is not witnessed directly by his army, but announced by a herald (2892-2910). "Digressive" episodes such as the story of the mourning Hrethel (2425-2459) and the Lay of the Last Survivor (2247-2266) contribute to this overall mood resisting externality and public display, for the problems raised in these episodes are not ones that can be conquered by the open fortitude that destroyed Grendel,²⁷² but rather ones that want a psychological or philosophical cure like those found in *The Wanderer* and *The Seafarer*.²⁷³

²⁷² On the critique that such mourning poses for the heroic action of the poem, see Georgianna, "King Hrethel's Sorrow and the Limits of Heroic Action in *Beowulf*."

²⁷³ See Martin Stevens, "The Structure of *Beowulf* from Gold-Hoard to Word-Hoard," *Modern Language Quarterly* 39, no. 3 (January 1, 1978): 219-38. Stevens argues that "as the *gyltspræce* of Part 1 have disappeared, so has the song of adventure and joy. All that remains is *sarigne sang* (2447), *sorhleoð* (2460), *giomorgyd* (3150). The sound of the harp, as the poet tells us repeatedly, has been silenced (2262, 2458, 3023). The view in Part 2 is retrospective; the dialectic is gone." (236)

Alongside these clues of a heroic turn away from publicity toward interiority and privateness, the dragon stands as the arch instance of these qualities in their negative form. Whereas the Grendels are in some very twisted way social creatures - they live in familial community and make their target the centre of sociality, the mead hall - the dragon is private. What he is protecting is his own isolated brooding over the treasure, and his attacks, though very public, are undertaken under the cover of night - it seems that during the publicity of the day he returns to his cave (2302-3). To be sure, the Grendels also retreat at night and so share to a certain degree his shyness, but what sets the dragon apart from the Grendelkin is his cognitive sophistication. Whereas the poem gives only fleeting glimpses of the psychology of the Grendels when they appear in fights, and whereas this psychology seems to be a fairly simple matter of stimulus and response, the dragon, independent of such immediate stimulus, broods over the loss of his treasure (2293-2302); he is described as *hreomod* (2296). The poem grants the dragon a psyche in a way that it does not for the Grendels; one might say that the dragon plays an Iago to the Grendelkin's MacBeth.

It is this internal, psychological evil of the dragon, and its difference from the more surface evil of the Grendels, that explain the success of heroic wisdom against the latter but not against the former. In the case of the Grendels, the poem depicts a relatively straightforward form of evil that can be dealt with in fairly blunt terms, such as Beowulf's strength guided by a heroic wisdom. A model for such treatment of evil would have been as readily available to Anglo-Saxons as the God in Old Testament narrative who uses such similar means to deal with external violences and oppressions; for instance, God's temporary fix for worldly evil during the time of

Noah is to wipe out most of its inhabitants with the flood, a parallel particularly apt given the Grendels' relation to the diluvian lineage.²⁷⁴

But floods and violences do not in fact solve the problem of evil once and for all, nor do they get at the more nuanced problems of evil, the ones that exist in the human head and heart, and this is why Beowulf cannot defeat the dragon as simply as he could the Grendels. Surface evils can be dealt with by surface means. But the heroic wisdom of Beowulf has only partially prepared him to deal with the deeper and more wily vices and evils that lurk in hearts and minds, and that are embodied in the dragon. For this, it takes someone who can not only stop sin in the more gross and outward sense, but someone who can in fact deal with it as a matter of the heart.

Though Beowulf acts as well as he can given his circumstances, the hero at the end of the poem comes face to face with a serpent too subtle to be dealt with through heroic wisdom, a serpent that, according to Christian theology, must be conquered by a wisdom sharper than any double-edged sword, sharp enough to divide soul from spirit and joint from marrow. Though he is as wise as he can be in terms of heroic wisdom, his victory and the salvation that he leaves his people can only be a partial one that gives the last word to stances of mourning. The gold that Beowulf trusted as the salvation of his people ends up *eldum swa unnyt swa hyt (æro)r wæs*²⁷⁵ (3168). The most the Geats can expect is an outcome like that experienced by the Last Survivor; the poem makes it clear, albeit in litotes, that the unnamed herald predicting Geatish doom at the end of the poem *ne leag fela/wyrda ne worda* (3029-30).²⁷⁶ The voice of wisdom is replaced by the voice of the keening *g(eo)meowle*²⁷⁷ (3150) at the end of the poem. And whatever one makes

²⁷⁴ Again, see Wieland, "The Unferth Enigma: The *Pyle* Between the Hero and the Poet," 42n28.

²⁷⁵ "as useless to men as it was before"

²⁷⁶ "lied not much in words and predictions"

²⁷⁷ "old woman"

of the final word of the poem, *lofgeornost*²⁷⁸ (3182), it is clear that the latter part of this word reflects an unfulfilled longing rather than the conclusive respite of death; it is reminiscent in particular of the cry of the *anfloga*²⁷⁹ (*Seafarer* 62) in *The Seafarer* and the *longunge* (47) it must always undergo.

This ultimate stance - one of mournful yearning in the face of a heroic wisdom that can only deal incompletely with the *wyrd* of the world - leaves readers in much the same position as Beowulf in the lair of Grendel's mother, groping about for a functional sword to replace the original heroic one that does not work. The difference is that, whereas for Beowulf a sword is ready at hand, readers or listeners only encounter snatches and glances of a more thorough answer, delivered by scripture and the church and explored more thoroughly in other wisdom poems. Such snatches and glances include the reference to the Biblical Cain and Abel; the Old Testament-like God who fights for his people; the typological connections which may not be integral to the main narrative but which some readers nearly inevitably drew; and the description of *wyrd* on occasion as subservient to God (e. g. 1055-8), a premonition of a Boethian reconciliation of even apparently evil fortune with God's providence.

3.9 Conclusion and Summary

Given this data, if one were to map the wisdom of *Beowulf* on a spectrum ranging from practical, this-worldly wisdom, to the higher reaches of spirituality and allegory, much of it, like the weapons it parallels, remains grounded in an earthly vision of flourishing, and only implies a heavenly grace that cannot be fully articulated within the metaphysical confines of the poem. Indeed, it is in many ways like an extended Old English riddle. Paradoxically, Old English riddles resemble a ring - they circle a centre that is clearly defined yet materially *in absentia*; this

²⁷⁸ "most eager for fame"

²⁷⁹ "lone-flier"

centre is of course the unspoken solution to the riddle. If the prior argument has been successful, this chapter has shown that deciphering the wisdom of *Beowulf* is like deciphering an Anglo-Saxon riddle with an apophatically understood God as the centre that the poem's contours define. This centre is not so apophatic that one cannot see hints of it, whether in the tantalizing references to God in the text or in the knowledge of the almost certainly monastic context in which the text was copied. Nonetheless, it pushes the limits of heroic speech in its attempts to speak of the Christian God through silence concerning him, and it is therefore not surprising that there is still considerable critical debate concerning the degrees of Christianity and paganism found in the poem.

In this riddling treatment of God and theology, the wisdom of *Beowulf* evokes that of both the Ecclesiastean and Jobean traditions. As in the Jobean tradition, distinctions between weaponry and words of wisdom are blurred, and ironies suggested by the broader situations in which wisdom is placed invite readers and listeners to delve deeper than mere surface interpretation of this often minimalist proverbiousness. Various wisdom “voices” come into play, and if those public and open voices in the former half of the poem find correspondence in the basic vehicle of Jobean mystical wisdom - a public debate amidst various parties - the more private voices in the latter half correspond more closely to the ruminative mood of Ecclesiastes, wherein a single speaker or voice takes into itself, with little disambiguation, a variety of voices and perspectives in an attempt to navigate their latent tensions. As with these Biblical texts, the burden of *Beowulf* is not the immediate relief of these tensions, but the ponderous weight felt amidst these tensions. Ecclesiastes will not let us fly vanity easily; if Job lets us for a moment get away from the deep impress of suffering, it is only by the skin of our teeth; and *Beowulf* makes us feel the death not only of the hero, but of heroism itself. In *Beowulf*, Job and Ecclesiastes, this

burden lies at the very root of wisdom, a wisdom wrought of fear, though not yet necessarily articulated clearly as the implicit fear of God that is at the bottom of it all. And just as such articulation is reserved for the traditional development of interpretations of Ecclesiastes and Job within the aegis of a broader Christian framework, so, in the works explored in the following chapters, *The Battle of Maldon* and *Guthlac A & B*, Old English poetry takes up the task of articulating a *Beowulfian* doom and warlikeness in the context of a more eschatologically hopeful Christian spirituality, articulated explicitly rather than implicitly.

Chapter 4: The Interplay of Heroic and Hagiographic

Wisdom in *The Battle of Maldon*

4.1 The Genre of *Maldon*: Heroic, Hagiographic, or Sapiential?

The Battle of Maldon has long been a critical touchstone for discussing the genre of heroic poetry. Regarding genre, Renée Trilling notes that *The Battle of Maldon* “serves to codify the heroic ethos for most Anglo-Saxon scholars”;²⁸⁰ indeed, one could say the same for teachers of the poem, for whom the heroic ethos of *Maldon* is often the most accessible introduction to the subject.²⁸¹ However, in spite of this agreement concerning the heroic genre, critics are also uncomfortable speaking of *Maldon*'s world as heroic in the same sense that *Beowulf*'s world is heroic; much of this discomfort presumably has to do with the fact that *Maldon*'s heroism is in part an artificial gloss fissuring along the faultlines produced by a less-than-heroic historic present, a fissure poetically embodied in a variety of ways. In his seminal paper on the poem, Edward B. Irving clearly articulates one of the main factors responsible for this fissuring, one that critics still grapple with albeit in more poststructuralist ways; this factor is the tension between fictional narrative and historical realism:

All heroic poetry has some relationship to history, either genuine history or what is believed to be genuine history; but only in *Maldon* is the history so recent as to make the account of the battle almost a news story. It is true that English chroniclers and Scandinavian skalds often produced occasional verse in celebration of particular events, but such verse is likely to be a collection of the facile phrases of official court eulogy or of patriotic propaganda. In none of this verse is there the same powerful sense of verisimilitude that is felt

²⁸⁰ See Trilling's extensive footnote on this comment iterating instances of critics who read *Maldon* in these heroic terms. Renée R. Trilling, *The Aesthetics of Nostalgia*, Toronto Anglo-Saxon Series (University of Toronto Press, 2009), 126.

²⁸¹ I speak here from experience; the other best example of the heroic ethos is Wiglaf's speech after Beowulf's death (2864-2891), though that is usually studied near the conclusion of a semester-long term, and so does not work well as an introductory text.

in *Maldon*. It appears in the unflinching account of English cowardice on the part of Godric and some of the others, in the clinical detail of some of the infighting, in the consistent minor awkwardnesses which suggest a poet struggling with fact rather than reproducing legend. What poet would ever choose to have two characters named Godric, one a hero and one a coward?²⁸²

More recently, this feeling of tension is represented in the title of the recent collection of essays on the poem, *The Battle of Maldon: Fiction and Fact*.²⁸³ Following another critical vein, similar tension is evident in the perennial critical discussion of the thorny word *ofermod*;²⁸⁴ if Byrhtnoth is the exemplar of a heroic ethos, then why is he accused of what seems to be overweening pride? And even beyond such critical questions, one wonders why a poet might celebrate the heroic ethos through a complex poem memorializing a battle that was lost rather than one that was won. Though it has never been a majority reading, the interpretation of *Maldon* as hagiography emerges from time to time,²⁸⁵ a critical emergency valve that helps disperse the critical discomfort felt when *Maldon* is discussed as a heroic poem.

For the purposes of this dissertation, the most interesting treatment of this tension is M. J. Swanton's thoroughgoing and often excessive critique of the poem, which nonetheless contains a clue pointing toward a fruitful way of understanding this tension. In his scathing interpretation of the poem, Swanton critiques everything from the anticlimactic tidal delay to the acknowledgement of cowardice in the release of the horses at the beginning of the poem; this latter instance, for Swanton, is an admission of cowardice unforgivable in the heroic mode, and paints a picture wherein

the poet has let slip a hint that he was really very well aware of the actual nature of late tenth-century society. At the same time this has ironically cut away the entire basis of the subsequent assumptions on

²⁸² E. B. Irving, "The Heroic Style in *The Battle of Maldon*," *Studies in Philology* 58, no. 3 (1961): 458.

²⁸³ Janet Cooper, ed., *The Battle of Maldon: Fiction and Fact* (London; Rio Grande: Hambledon Press, 1993).

²⁸⁴ For an overview of this discussion, see Helmut Gneuss, "The Battle of Maldon 89: Byrhtnoð's *Ofermod* Once Again," *Studies in Philology* 73, no. 2 (April 1, 1976): 117-37.

²⁸⁵ See Paul Cavill, "Heroic Saint and Saintly Hero: The *Passio Sancti Eadmundi* and *The Battle of Maldon*," in *The Hero Recovered: Essays on Medieval Heroism in Honor of George Clark*, ed. Robin (ed.) Waugh and James (ed.) Weldon, xi, 263 pp. vols. (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute, Western Michigan University, 2010), 110-124.

which Byrhtnoth dies, and the more faithful of his followers strut and puff to their deaths. The whole is seen to have been built up on false foundations, a travesty of antique heroic values.²⁸⁶

Such considerations lead Swanton to the caustic conclusion that

heroic material in the absence of heroic style inevitably falls flat, and the poem leaves one with the impression of striking all the old heroic attitudes without the traditional vocabulary which made the earlier heroic verse emotionally valid. Maldon has all the appearance of a subject executed in the wrong materials: a poem composed in an heroic vein in an age that was no longer heroic. Re-reading the poem, then, leaves one with a sense of falseness, and an inability to accept an unequivocally realistic view. In view of the fallaciousness of speculation as to the poet's "intention," we must rely simply on a critical examination of the words of the poem alone. Whether or not as a result we ascribe ambivalent social attitudes to the poet of Maldon we must conclude that significant and disturbing ambiguity exists within the poem itself.²⁸⁷

But despite this searing interpretation that few contemporary critics would wholeheartedly espouse, one of Swanton's complaints reflects an astute observation about the poem; this is his complaint about its rhetoric:

While possibly mentioned in the missing opening lines, any names of opposing leaders are certainly omitted from the body of the poem, and the enemy throughout is delineated only in terms of non-particularised disparagement. Instead a great deal of space is given to stating the apparent motives of those who take part in the action of the poem. We are intended not to concentrate on the action of the battle, nor on its consequence, but on the exact nature of what it is that leads the English party to act in the way it does. It is possible, of course, that the poem was written as a deliberately nostalgic exercise intended to embarrass the corruption of Ethelred's court. But if this was the case, then it is curious that the poet should not have chosen a current victory to elaborate the theme of "virtue rewarded."²⁸⁸

In this comment, Swanton with particular astuteness observes an emphasis on articulated cognition that he later refers to pejoratively as "speechifying."²⁸⁹ Though he is excessive in his insistence on incompatibility between the heroic and a "speechifying" mode, I do think he is correct in reading such speeches as the centre of the poem. This becomes obvious when the poem is considered against the backdrop of the "speechifying" in *Beowulf* (explored in the prior chapter), as well as significant work that has been done on this "speechifying" since Swanton

²⁸⁶ M.J. Swanton, "The Battle of Maldon: A Literary Caveat," *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 67, no. 3 (1968): 448.

²⁸⁷ Ibid., 449–50.

²⁸⁸ Ibid., 443.

²⁸⁹ Ibid., 448.

wrote his article - most notably, Paul Cavill's work on the maxims in the poem.²⁹⁰ These contexts suggest that what was for Swanton a “disturbing ambiguity” (see above) is in fact the sapiential heart of the poem.

In understanding this sapiential heart of *Maldon*, it is instructive to compare the poem to *Beowulf*, in which warfare of both the literal and “speechifying” kind eventually gives way to a higher yet greatly understated metaphysic. The Beowulfian world serves as a useful foil for *Maldon*, which cannot afford the luxury of such silence, so that through gaps in the heroic genre one sees more of the metaphysic that the poem points to. Indeed, the wisdom in the poem functions as a transitional agent between the literal warfare and the more religious aspects of the poem; where physical force flags, the verbal force of wisdom steps in, and where that flags, the poem suggests that it has paradoxically given way to a higher if somewhat inscrutable divine purpose. The role that wisdom plays in this ascent and its concordance with the broader wisdom traditions set out in this dissertation will be the matter of the remainder of this chapter.

4.2 The Mechanics of Wisdom in *The Battle of Maldon*: A

General Introduction

4.2.1 Heroic Wisdom in *Maldon*

Regarding the defence of *Maldon*'s “speechifying” as commendably interesting wisdom, this dissertation is greatly indebted to Paul Cavill, who has done much of the work in this area. Exploring the formal structure of the maxims in this poem, Cavill concludes that wisdom is one of the issues at stake in the poem in both negative and positive exemplars. Regarding the infamous sons of Odda, Cavill notes that “The sanction for physically backing out of the battle in

²⁹⁰ Cavill, *Maxims in Old English Poetry*, 117–31.

the second of Byrhtwold's maxims is not physical but mental suffering. The cowards may have saved their lives, but they have prostituted their minds: they did not concentrate, did not remember, they abandoned goodness and rectitude along with Byrhtnoth and their duty."²⁹¹ Conversely, he asserts of the other of Byrhtwold's maxims that it "emphasizes the mental over against the physical, and in this it follows the pattern of the whole poem."²⁹² Cavill's suggestions are insightful, but most of his argument follows the details of the formal maxims; other wisdom related elements in the narrative are beyond the scope of his argument. This chapter elaborates on Cavill's insightful suggestions by treating the function of a more broadly identified wisdom within the broader narrative of *Maldon*, as well as the similarity of this function to that of wisdom in other Old English poetry explored in prior and later chapters, roughly correlative to the wisdom discovered in Job and Ecclesiastes.

In addition to the maxims iterated by Cavill, the wisdom contours of the poem are particularly manifest in the poem's frequent use of words connected to thinking and the mind. There is the (in)famous discussion of *ofermod* at the centre of critical debate concerning this poem, and, as Michael Matto has shown, one cannot discount the idea that this word may in fact refer to the typical Old English configuration of the mind-as-container overflowing itself to the detriment of the battle's outcome.²⁹³ Moreover, Lines 122-9 of the poem particularly emphasize the mental aspects of the battle.²⁹⁴ The warriors are *stiðhicgende*²⁹⁵ (122) and they therefore *hogodon georne*²⁹⁶ (123) toward the battle; these descriptions emphasize the importance of the kind of thought and mindfulness characteristic of wisdom, for both contain permutations of the

²⁹¹ Ibid., 126.

²⁹² Ibid., 127.

²⁹³ Michael Matto, "A War of Containment: The Heroic Image in *The Battle of Maldon*," *Studia Neophilologica* 74, no. 1 (January 2002): 66–70.

²⁹⁴ Citations for *The Battle of Maldon* refer to Scragg, *The Battle of Maldon, AD 991*.

²⁹⁵ "stout-thinking"

²⁹⁶ "thought eagerly"

verb *hycgan*, which means “to think.” And as if to further underscore the importance of thought to the action of the poem, Byrhtnoth a few lines later instructs his warriors such that each *hogode to wige*²⁹⁷ (128). Still a few lines later, Byrhtnoth faces his enemy, and the poem describes how each *yfeles hogode*²⁹⁸ (133) against the other, and this again emphasizes the importance of thought and intention.

The poem similarly privileges the importance of the mind as the site where one resolves one's intentions and therefore one's actions. For example, Dunnere presumes that each of his fellow warriors *wrecaþ þenceð*²⁹⁹ (258) even as he does, and his words highlight the process of mustering mental resolve to accomplish what needs to be accomplished. Later in the poem, however, it is revealed that one has the potential to “think” dishonorably as well; Byrhtwold, presumably with Godric and crew in mind, wishes perpetual sorrow on the one who *wendan þenceð*³⁰⁰ (316), and contrasts this position with his own resolve: *ic me be healfe minum hlaforde!...licgan þence*³⁰¹ (318-9). Again, this demonstrates that the mental component of the battle is as important, if not more important, than the physical components; before something is enacted on the external battlefield – whether it be bravery or cowardice – it begins internally, in the thoughts and intents of the soldiers. By Kaske's definition of *sapientia*, outlined in the preceding chapter on *Beowulf*, such a focus qualifies this poem to be read as a participant in the wisdom genre.

The poem's wisdom, like that of *Beowulf*, is primarily heroic in genre, serving within *Maldon* the same protective and aggressive capacities of the Coastguard's wisdom and the *flyting* with Unferth respectively. Cavill hints at this in his assertion that Byrhtnoth's first maxim with

²⁹⁷ “thought toward war.”

²⁹⁸ “intended harm” trans. *ibid.*

²⁹⁹ “thinks to avenge” trans. *ibid.*,

³⁰⁰ “thinks of turning away” trans. *ibid.*

³⁰¹ “I beside my own lord...intend to lie” trans. *ibid.*

the “rest of his reply...shows Byrhtnoth's mastery of words as well as weapons”;³⁰² Cavill here touches on something that characterizes the wisdom throughout the poem, which is used in various ways in the offensive against the Vikings. For all the individual nuances that Cavill dissects in each of the maxims in the poem,³⁰³ their unified purpose, as he notes, is to support its heroic ethos, whether this ethos ends in victory or noble death.³⁰⁴

4.2.2 Frustration of Heroic Wisdom

Even more than *Beowulf*, *Maldon* underscores the limitation and overthrow of such heroic wisdom by forces beyond the wield of weaponry and words. This is particularly manifest in the poem's use of the much debated word *ofermod*.³⁰⁵ While Byrhtnoth has received no end of criticism for this quality, the broader celebration of Byrhtnoth as a hero³⁰⁶ and near-saint can hardly permit us to interpret this as Pride with a capital P. Rather, I suggest that, just as Ecclesiastes uses the term vanity not so much as individual pompousness but as part of the general cycle of dissolution of the world, so the *ofermod* here is not so much a personal tragic flaw on the part of Byrhtnoth, but something he necessarily participates in by virtue of being a warrior – all on earth are caught up in some degree of *ofermod* even as Ecclesiastes finds them caught up in some degree of vanity, and the more secular one is, the more vanity and *ofermod* one finds oneself in. For example, when *The Wanderer* speaks of warriors falling *wlonc bi wealle*³⁰⁷ (80), the poem is not necessarily condemning them personally – as soldiers they are simply caught up in the world of vanity. And the fact that *ofermod* is on occasion glossed as

³⁰² Cavill, *Maxims in Old English Poetry*, 131.

³⁰³ *Ibid.*, 117–30.

³⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 130–31.

³⁰⁵ For details of the debate, see Gneuss, “*The Battle of Maldon* 89.”

³⁰⁶ On this celebratory attitude of heroism that suggests a less-than-negative interpretation of *ofermod*, see George Clark, “The Battle of Maldon: A Heroic Poem,” *Speculum* 43, no. 1 (January 1, 1968): 52–71; and George Clark, “The Hero of Maldon: Vir Pius Et Strenuus,” *Speculum* 54, no. 2 (April 1, 1979): 257–282.

³⁰⁷ “proud by the wall”

*superbia*³⁰⁸ does not necessarily help either, as there are Latin instances that refer to *superbia* in a positive sense.³⁰⁹ Even in modern language, the word pride can be slippery; Gerard Manley Hopkins, for instance, uses it in *The Windhover* as an arguably praiseworthy quality but one that still must necessarily be humbled, even if its practioner is not the villain one might usually associate with the word “pride.”³¹⁰ Similarly, when one speaks of being “proud of one's team,” it is quite a different thing than saying that one is proud according to the theological definition of the term. Byrhtnoth may be brashly proud in the sense that the Windhover is impetuously proud, but in both cases the result of gashing gold vermillion is not necessarily a punishment as much as it is the next stage in a progression from earthly to spiritual things. Hence, *ofermod* can be taken as cognate with vanity, and signifies the way the world seems booby-trapped against the workings of heroic wisdom.

Indeed, part of Byrhtnoth's wisdom is his recognition of precisely this indeterminacy. Rather than presuming to predict the outcome of the battle, Byrhtnoth recognizes an unpredictable reality ultimately under the aegis of God: *God ana wat/hwa þære wælstowe wealdan mote*³¹¹ (94-5). This wisdom is effectively like that which Hrothgar offers *Beowulf* in his sermon: one is ultimately not in control of one's fate, so one must live and act as best one can while one is still alive. Yet even this best is not enough, and the tension between wisdom technique and the unpredictabilities that can thwart it raises questions that point beyond mere

³⁰⁸ Gneuss, “The Battle of Maldon” 89,” 172.

³⁰⁹ See Yelena Baraz's fascinating study of the evolution of this word's meaning, which had negative connotations until Horace and other Augustan poets began to use it in a more ambiguous and even positive sense. Yelena Baraz, “From Vice to Virtue: The Denigration and Rehabilitation of Superbia in Ancient Rome,” in *Kakos: Badness and Anti-Value in Classical Antiquity*, ed. I. Sluiter and Ralph Mark Rosen. *Monographs on Greek and Roman Language and Literature* v. 307 (Leiden ; Boston: Brill, 2008), 363–98.

³¹⁰ “Brute beauty and valour and act, oh, air, pride, plume, here/Buckle! And the fire that breaks from thee then, a billion/Times told lovelier, more dangerous, O my chevalier!” Gerard Manley Hopkins, *The Poems of Gerard Manley Hopkins*, ed. W. H. Gardner and N. H. MacKenzie, 4th ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970), 69.

³¹¹ “God alone knows who will control the battlefield” trans. Scragg, *The Battle of Maldon, AD 991*.

success and mere fatalism, as will be seen in the following brief assessment of wisdom's role in the narrative flow of the poem.

4.3 Characterising the Mechanics of Wisdom in *Maldon*

Considered with regard to the matter of the prior chapter, *The Battle of Maldon* is very much like *Beowulf* insofar as the hero's recognition of indeterminacy is eventually confirmed in the rest of the poem in a way that little detracts from his heroism. Yet where *Beowulf* only implies a grace and internal wisdom that might redeem the catastrophes wreaked by *wyrd*, *Maldon* offers something more tangible that shifts the grounds of the battle's success from an exterior forum to the interior forum of the mind/will and, ultimately, the ulterior forum of the spiritual realms. Hence, the sapiential movement of the poem is nicely summarized in the justly famous proverb: *Hige sceal þe heardra, heorte þe cenre,/mod sceal þe mare þe ure mægen lytlað*³¹² (312-13). This assertion recalls the wisdom ascent explored in earlier chapters, with its inward turn in response to suffering, replicated with variation in the Anglo-Saxon reception of Job and Ecclesiastes; it also recalls Hrothgar's discovery of wisdom via his losses to Grendel. Shifting attention away from the realm of *mægen*, a realm more relative to heroic warrior culture with its preference for standard physical victory, it focuses on the *loci* where wisdom takes place, *Hige, heorte, and mod*. In doing so, it gives a clue about how an audience is to evaluate the actions of the central characters. Critics are used to thinking of them in relation to heroism and hagiography, but, as this clue suggests, one might aptly consider them as sages as well; much of their heroism depends on the terminology and value-scale proper to wisdom literature.

³¹² “The spirit must be the firmer, the heart the bolder,/courage must be the greater as our strength diminishes” trans. *ibid*.

4.3.1 The Wisdom of Age and Youth, with Ælfwin and Byrhtwold

The sapiential grain of the poem is nowhere more evident than in the justification for fighting given by both the young and elderly characters in the poem. Ælfwin is *wintrum geong*³¹³ (210) and his speech conveys exactly the mentality proper to a young and less-experienced man according to the Old English wisdom tradition. From line 212 onward, he recites memories,³¹⁴ which, in the Old English wisdom tradition, comprise one of the mental arsenals from which one should draw wisdom in difficult situations.³¹⁵ In line 215, he conceives of the battle as a way of testing one's boasts of loyalty: *nu mæg cunnian hwa cene sy*.³¹⁶ His use of the word *cunnian* here is particularly noteworthy, as it is the same word used in *The Wanderer* (line 29) to denote the wise person's experiential knowledge of the world. To be sure, wisdom never emerges from pure experience – it often consists as a dialogue between experience and tradition – and so this young man cites the example of his *ealda fæder Ealhelm*³¹⁷ (218), a *wis ealdorman woruldgesælig*³¹⁸ (219) from whom Ælfwin presumably learned wisdom. Moreover, as in much of the Old English wisdom literature, Ælfwin's reflections and subsequent actions are catalyzed by immediate and intense suffering; he is moved to action through reflection upon *þæt... hearma mæst*³¹⁹ (223), that

³¹³ "young in winters"

³¹⁴ "*Gemun[aþ] Ða mæla Ðe we oft æt meodo spræcon,/Ðonne we on bence beot ahofon,/hæleð on healle, ymbe heard gewinn:/nu mæg cunnian hwa cene sy.* (212-15) "Remember the times that we often made speeches over mead,/when we raised pledges while sitting on a bench, warriors in the hall, about fierce encounters:/now we can test who is brave." trans. Scragg, *The Battle of Maldon, AD 991*.

³¹⁵ The importance of memory in Old English wisdom is evident, for instance, in *The Wanderer*; the role of memory in this poem is explained particularly well in J. L. Selzer, "*The Wanderer* and the Meditative Tradition," *Studies in Philology* (1983): 227–237.

³¹⁶ "now we can test who is brave." trans. Scragg, *The Battle of Maldon, AD 991*.

³¹⁷ "grandfather...Ealhelm" trans. *ibid.*

³¹⁸ "wise and prosperous ealdorman" trans. *ibid.*

³¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 222–223. "That...greatest anguish" trans. *ibid.*

his *ealdor ligeð/forheawen æt hilde*.³²⁰ Thus, through a complex dialogic synthesis of memory, tradition, experience, and suffering, Ælfwin enacts wisdom in a way befitting his youth.

In contrast to Ælfwin, who is young and in the process of learning wisdom, Byrhtwold, an *eald geneat*³²¹ (310), speaks as one who has earned the right to be considered a sage. The poem tells us that he *lærde*³²² (311) the men, a term associated with the passing-on of wisdom in the Old English wisdom tradition, as exemplified in the first line of *Precepts*: *Ðus frod fæder freobearn lærde*³²³ (1). Moreover, Byrhtwold, like the father in *Precepts*, identifies himself as *frod feores*³²⁴ (317). Fittingly, then, he opens with his proverbial exhortation (dealt with above) that spirit and heart must grow greater as might wanes (312-13). Since he is a sage, it is also fitting that he should pronounce what is either an imprecation or a bleak prediction regarding those who, like Godric, flee the battle: *a mæg gnornian/se ðe nu fram þis wigplegan wendan þenceð*³²⁵ (315-6). This statement, which presumably shares the ambiguity of the ending of *The Wife's Lament* – it is either a curse or a gnome³²⁶ – conveys a reflection upon potential suffering and the actions proper to it, and it therefore accords with the sapiential interest in relationships between causality, suffering, and agency. Hence, whereas Ælfwin, a young man, properly conceives of the battle as an arena for testing, sharpening, and practicing wisdom, Byrhtwold, speaking with the authority of a lifetime behind him, asserts that wisdom in this situation involves fighting to the end of the battle. This double justification of the fight, from the

³²⁰ “leader lies dead/cut to pieces in battle.” trans. *ibid.*

³²¹ “old retainer” trans. *ibid.*

³²² “instructed” trans. *ibid.*

³²³ “This is how the father...taught his noble son” trans. Shippey, *Poems of Wisdom and Learning in Old English*, 49.

³²⁴ “wise in years”

³²⁵ Scragg, *The Battle of Maldon, AD 991*, 315–16. “He will have cause to mourn for ever/who thinks of turning away from this battlegame now” (or, as a curse, “May he have...”) trans. Scragg, *The Battle of Maldon, AD 991*.

³²⁶ See John D. Niles, “The Problem of Ending of *The Wife's Lament*,” *Speculum: A Journal of Medieval Studies* 78, no. 4 (2003): 1107–50.

perspective of both an old man and a young man, ensures that the actions of deserters such as Godric and his companions can be justified in neither sapiential terms appropriate to youth nor sapiential terms appropriate to old age.

4.3.2 Godric and Unwisdom

If the examples of Ælfwin and Byrhtwold represent the positive embodiment of wisdom in the poem, Godric and those who flee with him represent failure in the wisdom enterprise. Perhaps the clearest indication of this is the fact that their flight is attributed to a failure to remember their lord's kindness: *wendon fram þam wige and þone wudu sohton,/flugon on Bæt fæsten and hyra feore burgon/manna ma þonne hit ænig mæð wære,/gyf hi þa geearnunga ealle gemundon/þe he him to duguðe gedon hæfde*³²⁷ (193-7). Just as the recollection of memories plays an important part in Ælfwin's sapiential heroism, so a failure of memory here leads to negative behavior in battle, in this case, flight. The wisdom overtones of the flight from the battle are also manifest in the terms with which the deserters are reproved. Intriguingly, it would be difficult to criticize their desires from a Christian perspective, as the poem asserts that they fled because *guþe ne gymdon*³²⁸ (192). From a Christian perspective, one can hardly critique this apathy toward battle, for, even for supporters of just-war theory, soldiers are not supposed to consider war an ideal, but rather a necessary evil.³²⁹ Fully recognizing this, the critique which the poem levels at the deserters is not directed against their lack of care for war, but rather toward a failure to enact the patient suffering prized by the wisdom tradition and embodied in characters like Job; through the mouth of Offa, they are critiqued for being among those

³²⁷ Scragg, *The Battle of Maldon, AD 991*, 185–7. “they turned from the fight and sought the wood, they fled into that place of safety and saved their lives,/more men than was at all fitting,/if they had all called to mind the favours/that he had done for their benefit” trans. Scragg, *The Battle of Maldon, AD 991*.

³²⁸ “they cared not for battle”

³²⁹ See St. Augustine’s *City of God*, Book XIX, Chapter 7. Augustine, *City of God*, trans. Henry Bettenson (Penguin: London, 1984), 861-2.

*þæt...modelice...spræcon/þe eft æt þearfe þolian nolde*³³⁰ (200-201). Thus, whereas they are not necessarily critiqued for maintaining a dislike of war, they are critiqued for trying to evade the suffering appointed to them, since grappling with such suffering constitutes the core of the wisdom tradition.

4.3.3 Byrhtnoth's Spiritual Wisdom

In contrast, the final speech of Byrhtnoth represents the positive sapiential correlative to Godric's negative flight; just as Biblical typology discovers positive and negative meanings for the same imagery – e. g. the Lion of Judah and the devil that prowls about like a lion - so Godric's shameful flight is the negative foil for Byrhtnoth's positive flight to heaven. Godric and his companions seek *þæt fæsten*³³¹ (194) of the woods, which is reminiscent of the positive heavenly *fæstnung*³³² (115) sought at the close of *The Wanderer*. Likewise, they *hyra feore burgon*³³³ (194), and this reference to salvation is reminiscent of the Christian promise that Christ came to earth to save the lives of humans. Of course, in the case of Godric and his companions, the salvation and fastness that they seek are gross, earthly parodies of the real heavenly things, and they therefore act as a parallel for Byrhtnoth's final speech, which reflects similar sentiments but in a more spiritually proper manner.

Unlike those deserters who disastrously forgot their lord's kindness, Byrhtnoth opens his ultimate prayer with the memory of God's kindness to him: *[Ic] Gepance þe, ðeoda Waldend,/ealra þæra wynna þe ic on worulde gebad*³³⁴ (173-4); as mentioned previously, such remembrance is a staple of the wisdom tradition. Another significant staple of the wisdom

³³⁰ “that...spoke bravely/who would not hold out later in time of need” trans. *ibid.*

³³¹ “that shelter”

³³² “stability”

³³³ “saved their lives” trans. *ibid.*

³³⁴ “Thank you, O Lord of Hosts,/for all the joys which I have experienced in this world” trans. *ibid.*

tradition in this passage is the way that Byrhtnoth – like *The Wanderer* and *The Seafarer* – describes the journey of his soul to heaven in terms proper to traveling, using words and phrases such as *siðian*³³⁵ (177) and *fripe ferian*³³⁶ (179); like *The Wanderer*, his goal is to reach the eternal fastness, here denoted (with reference to God) as *þin geweald*³³⁷ (178). And as if to emphasize the way that the wisdom tradition ambiguates between earthly and heavenly affairs, the *helsceaðan*³³⁸ (180) whom Byrhtnoth petitions God to thwart could refer either to demons after his soul or the literal enemies that he is leaving (through death) for his followers to deal with;³³⁹ likewise, Byrhtnoth's prayer to the *þeoden engla*³⁴⁰ (178) brings to mind the pun connected with Gregory's discovery and subsequent mission to the Angles, so that in a sense Byrhtnoth's prayer addresses both the earthly (Lord of Angles) and the metaphysical (Lord of Angels) capacities of God. Thus, through his final prayer, Byrhtnoth invites his subjects and the poem's listeners to conceive of him as a figure in a wisdom tradition that specializes in discovering the ways that literal loss can be turned to gain in a more metaphysical sense (e. g. Job and *The Wanderer*), thus paving the way for an interpretation of the poem that conceives of Byrhtnoth's army as heroic in spite of its loss.

4.4 Conclusion: *Maldon* Between *Beowulf* and *Guthlac*

Where, then, is *Maldon* situated with regard to *Beowulf* and the Biblical wisdom discussed prior? With regard to *Beowulf*, it resembles this poem in its transition from public speech-act toward introspection; gradually, the poem works its way from the very public face-off with the Vikings toward sententious reflection on the mood and manner of fighting. But if it is like *Beowulf* in this

³³⁵ “journey” trans. *ibid.*

³³⁶ “to travel with peace”

³³⁷ “your dominion” trans. *ibid.*

³³⁸ “thieves from hell” trans. *ibid.*

³³⁹ Though Scragg interprets the phrase *hynan ne moton* with Byrhtnoth's soul as the object, the phrase literally involves Byrhtnoth asking that “they may not destroy”; what is or is not being destroyed is left ambiguous.

³⁴⁰ “Lord of angels” trans. *ibid.*

way, it goes one step beyond it in its explicit upward turn, a step that can best be understood by recalling the inward and upward turn discovered by Phillip Cary in Augustine and discussed in Chapter 1.³⁴¹ In this process, Augustine turns inward - a move consistent with prevailing classical philosophy - but then follows the scansion of this inward landscape upward, toward God, thus adding a Christian element to the mandate, “Know thyself.” Using this model, one can articulate the difference between wisdom in *Beowulf* and *Maldon* as a function of the degree to which this “upward turn” is articulated. Both poems become more introspective, but in elements such as Byrhtnoth’s prayer before his death, the turn toward heaven following the inward turn explicitly articulates what is only implied in *Beowulf*.

This difference determines as well the relation of *Maldon*’s textual geography to that of Ecclesiastes and Job. As with *Beowulf*, the weight of frustration, difficulty, and complication reflect the Jobean and Ecclesiastean refusal to let humans get away with a too easy practice of wisdom. However, moving one step beyond *Beowulf*, *Maldon* qualifies despair by pointing toward heaven in much the same way as do the exegetes explored in Chapter 2; as Job’s prophecy of Christian resurrection functions for medieval readers as a lifeline leading out of the book’s dismal immediacy of suffering; and as Ecclesiastes’ gesture toward God at the conclusion of the book opens a way beyond the world under the sun, a way beyond the clamouring voices of the folk; even so, aspects of *Maldon*, such as Byrhtnoth’s dying prayer, point outside the world of the immediate battle - indeed, outside the world of Æthelred’s much vexed kingdom - toward a more enduring realm where the rules are different and loss itself can be construed in some odd, paradoxical way, as gain. In *Maldon*, then, one encounters wisdom as prefatory to a rent curtain of heaven beginning to shed light even on secular matters such as skirmishes with Vikings. That it is just a beginning and not a full development of such intercourse between heaven and earth

³⁴¹ See section 1.6.2 above.

will be seen clearly by its contrast with *Guthlac A & B*, which, comparatively speaking, tears the veil of heaven wide open and allows for an even more integrated commingling of wisdom and the revelation toward which it points.

Chapter 5: Baptizing Heroic Wisdom in *Guthlac A & B*

5.1 Introduction to Monastic Wisdom

The prior chapters have explored poems that, while not wisdom literature proper, nonetheless work elements from the wisdom genre into narrative poetry; though one must be reluctant to think of such poetry as an exact mimesis of the historical conditions in which it was produced, it does nonetheless reflect aspects of the culture in which Old English wisdom was forged - in these prior cases, the more secular aspects of this culture. Generally, the pattern of the wisdom in these pieces involves working one's way from a lower earthly wisdom toward a higher heavenly one. However, given the probable monastic provenance of most Anglo-Saxon manuscripts (as discussed in Chapter 1), this secular milieu was not the only culture that affected these texts; the prior chapters have discovered wisdom as an approach to deeper Christian truth and faith, but once this truth and faith are taken for granted (as in monasteries), what is the place of wisdom? The Guthlac poetry helps answer this question, given that it is particularly sapiential in its hagiography.

5.1.1 Defining the Guthlac Poetry

The Guthlac poetry consists of *Guthlac A & B*, compiled in the Exeter book; this dissertation interprets these as two parts of a single text. To be clear, this does not entail the assumption that both poems were written by the same author; indeed, scholarship is fairly united in agreeing that they were not.³⁴² Rather, the interest of this dissertation is their back-to-back inclusion in the Exeter book, and the implicit assumption in this arrangement of narrative continuity between the two poems. As with other texts dealt with in this dissertation, the purpose

³⁴² Robin Jinnett Norris, "Deathbed Confessors: Mourning and Genre in Anglo-Saxon Hagiography" (Ph.D., University of Toronto, 2003), 55.

of the following argument is not to track down the original sources of the Guthlac poems, but rather to analyze the cultural forces and assumptions that caused at least one reader/scribe to mesh them together, if somewhat awkwardly, in the same manuscript. Though the following chapter treats *Guthlac A* and *Guthlac B* respectively, it does not treat them as separate texts, but rather as two parts of a Guthlac narrative.³⁴³

5.1.2 Wisdom Affinities in *Guthlac A & B*

Although there is a marked difference between the revealed sources of wisdom in the Guthlac poetry and the more heroic and folk-based wisdom of *Beowulf* and *Maldon*, the Guthlac poetry nonetheless contains textual clues that it is to be interpreted with respect to wisdom, and further confirms this in its alignment with the pattern of wisdom agon and ascent explored in the prior chapters. *Guthlac A* has distinct overtones of sapiential literature, and *Guthlac B* explores the suffering and death of a righteous man, a topic with particular affinities to the Jobean tradition. Between the two poems, one encounters wisdom used successfully to fend off demons, as well as the humbling of this wisdom through the unavoidable human encounter with death.

5.1.2.1 *Guthlac A*

That *Guthlac A* is a hagiography with a particular focus on the mental and psychological aspects of spiritual warfare has been shown by a variety of critics. Daniel Calder, for instance, elides Guthlac's opponents with his personal "demons," as understood by modern psychology.³⁴⁴

³⁴³ Critics have been reluctant to treat the poems together; reasons for this include the different authorship of the poems and the (relatively) clear division between the two poems in the manuscript (See Norris, 55-9). However, Olsen, and Norris more recently, have insisted on reading the poems as a composite text in terms of the ways that readers might have encountered them rather than in terms of original sources. Norris, "Deathbed Confessors"; Alexandra Hennessey Olsen, *Guthlac of Croyland: A Study of Heroic Hagiography* (Washington, D.C: University Press of America, 1981).

³⁴⁴ Calder asserts that "In *Guthlac A* the devils do not have a separate and external reality; the number of times the poet uses Old English words for Guthlac's heart, mind, soul, and spirit cancels even the possibility of a discrete existence for the demons." Daniel Calder, "Guthlac A and Guthlac B: Some Discriminations," in *Anglo*

T. D. Hill, tempering this extreme demythologizing, still allows for a predominantly psychomachic interpretation of the poem: “To debate whether Guthlac's demons were 'real' or whether they exist as aspects of his consciousness is to miss the point. For the *Guthlac A* poet, as for the early medieval world in general, demons are indeed real, but they are an aspect of spiritual reality which impinges most significantly upon our consciousness.”³⁴⁵ Marshalling a variety of textual and critical evidences, Antonina Harbus shows that the poem's “manner of expression is more explicitly mind focused than in non-Old English saints' lives,”³⁴⁶ and concludes that “the narrative of *Guthlac A* is predicated on the ideas that the mental life is at the heart of spiritual existence, and is the site of grace and therefore of commerce with the divine. The text contains many references to the mental world and in turn the saint's struggles are presented as emphatically psychological in nature.”³⁴⁷ Given such assertions, it is hardly a stretch to suggest as does Kathleen Dubs that the poem should be read at least in part as a wisdom poem.³⁴⁸

Textual evidence for this approach is plentiful. As Dubs notes, wisdom is specifically referenced twelve times throughout the poem,³⁴⁹ and wisdom is the saint's reward for overcoming the demons:

The substance of this poem is Guthlac's struggle to fend off the demons and to accept martyrdom. In both he succeeds through fear of God, constant faith, and the support of a comforting spirit. In this regard *Guthlac A* is typical hagiography. But rather than the climactic martyrdom characteristic of typical hagiography,

Saxon Poetry: Essays in Appreciation for John C. McGalliard, ed. Lewis E. Nicholson and Dolores W. Frese (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1975), 72.

³⁴⁵ Alice Sheppard, “A Word to the Wise: Thinking, Knowledge, and Wisdom in *The Wanderer*,” in *Source of Wisdom: Old English and Early Medieval Latin Studies in Honour of Thomas D. Hill*, ed. Frederick M Biggs et al., *Toronto Old English Series* (University of Toronto Press, 2007), 130–5.

³⁴⁶ Antonina Harbus, *The Life of the Mind in Old English Poetry* (Rodopi: Amsterdam-New York, 2002), 103.

³⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 107.

³⁴⁸ Kathleen E. Dubs, “*Guthlac A* and the Acquisition of Wisdom,” *Neophilologus* 65, no. 4 (October 1981): 607–613.

³⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 610.

Guthlac's reward in this poem is wisdom: first Guthlac accepted and prepared for martyrdom; then, as a result, God rewarded him with wisdom.³⁵⁰

Other aspects of the poem support Dubs' interpretation; in his answer to the demons regarding corrupt clergy, Guthlac describes their reclamation in terms of a process resembling the ascent to wisdom typical in wisdom literature, as explored in prior chapters. And if Hill is right – that a monastic *stabilitas* is the goal of Guthlac's fighting³⁵¹ – the poem fits well in a tradition that favors the stolid patience of Job so important in the *Moralia*. All these aspects point to the fact that wisdom and the sapiential tradition are caught up in this hagiography as a leitmotif, even as they are caught up in the texts of *Beowulf* and *Maldon*.

5.1.2.2 *Guthlac B*

So much for *Guthlac A*; but what of *Guthlac B*, which critics have not so thoroughly dealt with as wisdom literature? Arguably, *Guthlac B* fits the previously established wisdom paradigm not so much because of its wisdom *per se*, but rather because of its embodiment of the kind of failure and death that even the wisest of men must confront; in many ways, *Guthlac B* plays Hrothgar's Sermon to *Guthlac A*'s spiritualized Beowulfian confidence. Recent criticism on the poems confirms this; Robin Norris argues that *B* is a corrective to *A*, insisting that Guthlac is a real person who does in fact die a real human death, rather than a martyr assumed into heaven.³⁵² Norris investigates the poems as narratives of deathbed confessors rather than as wisdom *per se*, but her point about the generic relationship between *A* and *B* is equally applicable in this chapter's argument - a genre that is triumphalistically terse is counter-balanced by one that delves more deeply into the reality of suffering. So if *Guthlac A* showcases heroic wisdom in the cycle, *B* is the harbinger of a more complex understanding of the tragedies and sufferings in the

³⁵⁰ Ibid.

³⁵¹ Hill, "The Middle Way."

³⁵² Norris, "Deathbed Confessors," 92–3.

surrounding world - what prior chapters have discussed as *wyrd*, but what here might be read more aptly as death, kept under God's aegis, but necessary because of sin's presence in the world.

5.2 *Guthlac A*

5.2.1 Guthlacian Wisdom as Riddling Warfare

That *Guthlac A*³⁵³ uses heroic language to discuss hagiographic material is a fairly standard argument.³⁵⁴ What this chapter adds to this argument is the fact that this alleged “spiritualization” is in fact not quite that, but rather a “sapientialization,” that is, the battle-play denoted by Guthlac's name is not replaced by a verbal agon that is purely spiritual (he does not after all cite scripture as does Christ during his desert temptation), but one that in fact has many elements of the wisdom battles that are the matter of this dissertation. The form this wisdom battle takes is grounded in the heroic practice of *flyting*, but gestures strongly toward a version of these verbal battles in which contestants use riddles as a means of overcoming their opponents, much as Beowulf and Unferth use their words.³⁵⁵ The encounters with the devils have a riddling quality, in that Guthlac encounters theological puzzles posed by the demons, usually concerning situations where the responses demanded of Christian wisdom are less than straightforward. In fact, the demons' own assessment of these situations is usually not obviously wrong; unlike the stock reprobates described in other Old English poetry such as *Vainglory*,³⁵⁶ one can imagine a theological justification for some of their assertions. Guthlac's war against the demons, then, involves discernment between wisdom that *looks* true and wisdom that *is* true.

³⁵³ Citations are from Jane Roberts, ed., *The Guthlac Poems of the Exeter Book* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979), 83–107. Translations are my own.

³⁵⁴ For a useful summary of this argument, see John Edward Damon, *Soldier Saints and Holy Warriors: Warfare and Sanctity in the Literature of Early England* (Aldershot, Hampshire, England ; Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2003), 137–47.

³⁵⁵ See Chapter 8 below on *Solomon and Saturn II*, which is one of the best examples of the practice of Old English riddle contests.

³⁵⁶ For analysis of this stock characterization, see Hansen, *The Solomon Complex*, 75–76.

Such Guthlacian discernment of riddling words is evident in a number of examples from the text, particularly the words exchanged between Guthlac and the demons. What follows is an analysis of Guthlac's three exchanges with the demons, each of which deals with different temptations not obviously evil, but riddling insofar as the saint must be particularly discerning and equally elliptical in his responses to them. This set of exchanges is capped off by the intervention of Bartholomew, who represents the heavenly wisdom of incarnation that is more powerful even than the best of Guthlac's responses.

5.2.2 The Riddle of Prideful Christians

In their first set of temptations, the puzzle with which the devils confront Guthlac is the question of whether his radical asceticism exhibits a prideful scorn for a wisdom focused naturally enough on loyalty to regular human society. This charge is reflected in their assertion concerning Guthlac that *no we oferhygdu anes monnes/geond middangeard maran fundon*³⁵⁷ (269-70). From a Christian perspective, such a concern in itself is rightly grounded in a wisdom that insists that humans should not seek to transcend their created limitations, and readers themselves are invited to entertain the question of whether the phrase *for wlence*³⁵⁸ (208) spoken of Guthlac is indicative of condemnable pride or of the more heroic variety attributed to *Beowulf*.³⁵⁹ Guthlac, according to this charge, is showing no respect for what he owes to and requires from his community; the demons charge *þæt his earfeþu eal gelumpe,/modcearu, mægum*³⁶⁰ (194-5), and they imply that he would be more considerate if he were *his sibbe ryht/mid moncynne maran cræfte/willum bewitigan*³⁶¹ (197-9). A subset of this “unnatural”

³⁵⁷ “we have not found the pride of any man greater throughout the earthly realm”

³⁵⁸ “for pride”

³⁵⁹ See, for instance, *Beowulf*, line 340.

³⁶⁰ “that his misery would completely bring about grief for his kinsmen”

³⁶¹ “to attend with a will and with greater industry to his familial duty in the midst of mankind”

disregard for human society is critiqued in the demons' charge that Guthlac is cutting himself off from the usual means of getting food:

*Bi hwon scealt þu lifgan þeah þu lond age?
Ne þec mon hider mose fedeð;
beoð þe hungor 7 þurst hearde gewinnan
gif þu gewitest swa wilde deor
ana from epele: nis þæt onginn wiht*³⁶² (273-7).

In a culture where starvation seems to have been a real threat,³⁶³ the demons accuse Guthlac of being like *wilde deor/ana from epele* and of scorning his source of daily bread no less than the *wræcmæcgas*³⁶⁴ (129) at the beginning of the text whose likeness Guthlac ostensibly rejected. Indeed, as with the question of *wlence*, readers are perhaps invited by the narratorial voice itself to wonder about Guthlac's behaviour: he is after all *epelriehte feor*³⁶⁵ (216), and along with this phrase's primary meaning concerning heredity, the *-riehte* in *epelriehte* may have overtones of the modern sense of "right," that is, proper, correct, and fitting. Such an implication seems to support further the demons' charge that he is not living in accord with the fitting order of things.

This accusation presumably echoes a broader complex of fears concerning the relation of hermits to monastic communities. As shown by Christopher Jones, Anglo-Saxon theology coming out of the Benedictine reform had increasing misgivings about the isolated spirituality of eremitic practice, which sometimes seemed to fly in the face of a Benedictine insistence on order and obedience. Bede is uncomfortable enough with it to exclude it from his life of Cuthbert, as Christopher Jones points out, and Jones skillfully shows how communal orientation colours the language of *Guthlac A* such that the story of Guthlac, hermit though he was, could be better

³⁶² "Though you possess the land, how will you live? No man will sustain you here with food; hunger and thirst will be to you hard enemies if you go out alone from your home-land like the wild beasts: that plan is nothing."

³⁶³ See *Maxims I A*, 36-9.

³⁶⁴ "exiles"

³⁶⁵ "far from [his] hereditary land"

appreciated by cenobitic monastics.³⁶⁶ Against this cenobitic backdrop, the demons' accusation could in fact sound Benedictine: is it right to abandon the structured institution of the monastery for an untempered theology in the wilds?

In addition to these shades of a Benedictine critique of hermits, the rhetorical force of the demons' argument is further enhanced by the fact that their advice, apparently concerned about practicing asceticism beyond what is prudent, actually reflects theological advice considered valid in some contexts. For instance, Sarah Downey chronicles a Christian tradition of condemning too severe monasticism, and in fact resisting the temptation to such severity; this is a tradition she discovers in the Latin *Vita*, when the demons tempt Guthlac to fast too much.³⁶⁷ The Old English *Guthlac A* thus embodies the converse of this theme in the *Vita* and broader Christian literature; the demons accuse him of pridefully practicing a too severe asceticism and making his headstrong way without the aid of community. What they are saying then is riddle-like insofar as it is not obvious and immediately recognizable evil, but rather a parody of theological arguments valid in some contexts and situations.

Guthlac's reply is as elliptical as the assault of his enemies, and part of it is simply the kind of *ad hominem* counter-attack typical of Old English *flyting*. Yet, even as Beowulf's response to Unferth does contain a more logical answer hidden within the theatrical showiness of the *flyte*, so Guthlac's response does implicitly address the demons' charge. Wisely, he does not simply prove their point by completely scorning community, a position reflecting the exact fear of Bede and the cenobitically oriented Benedictines. Rather, he simply points out that, even in his hermitage, he is dependant on a broader community, though not of the mere earthly sort proposed by the

³⁶⁶ See Christopher A. Jones, "Envisioning the Cenobium in the Old English *Guthlac A*," *Mediaeval Studies* 57 (1995): 259–291.

³⁶⁷ Sarah Downey, "Too Much of Too Little: Guthlac and the Temptation of Excessive Fasting," *Traditio* 63 (2008): 89–127.

devils. God is the authority in this community, as Guthlac himself states quite directly: *Is min hyht mid God*³⁶⁸ (318). However, God does not always work directly, but through his servants, and Guthlac lists two categories of these servants from whom he derives help. One category consists of the spiritual beings most often seen in scripture and tradition as the supernatural intermediaries of God, angels; Guthlac asserts of God that *he mec þurh engel oft aþrefeð*³⁶⁹ (315). But Guthlac is not so foolish as to assume that God works only through such supernatural means, and so also notes acts of God performed for him by more this-worldly servants of God: *ac he me dogra gehwam dryhten sendeð/þurh monnes hond mine þearfe*³⁷⁰ (321-2). Though other accounts make it clear that Guthlac did at times have people around him - for instance, his unnamed companion in *Guthlac B* - the reference here is properly ambiguous, as it more probably refers to the general help that God gives Guthlac through humans than to any specific situation. As if to further drive home the truth of Guthlac's assertion of his paradoxically communitarian eremiticism, the text after this speech notes the reciprocity of Guthlac's relationship with the outer world; if Guthlac on occasion benefits from the outside world insofar as God helps him by the hand of man, he prays for the souls of those in the outside world: *no he hine wið monna miltse gedælde/ac gesynta bæd sawla gehwylcre/þonne he to eorðan on þam anade/hleor onhylde*³⁷¹ (331-4). The point, though camouflaged amidst various rhetorical furnitures of *flyting*, is nonetheless a consistent and effective response to the demons' riddle: Guthlac has not rejected Christian community, and so is not subject to the charges of headstrong pride advanced against him by the devils.

³⁶⁸ “my hope is with God”

³⁶⁹ “He often comforts me through an angel”

³⁷⁰ “but the lord supplies my need each day through the hand of a man”

³⁷¹ “he abandoned not mercy toward men, but prayed for success for every soul when he bowed his face to the earth in that solitary place”

5.2.3 The Riddle of Pharisaical Holiness

Like his first temptation, Guthlac's second temptation is riddling insofar as the demons' motive looks on the surface to be particularly holy, directed as it is against legitimately problematic corruption in monastic orders:

*In þam mægwlite monge lifgað
Gyltum forgiefene, nales Gode Þigað,
Ac hy lichoman fore lufan cwemað
Wista wynnum: swa ge weorðmyndu
In dolum dreame dryhtne gieldað.
Fela ge fore monnum miþað þæs þe ge in mode gehycgað,
Ne beoð eowre dæde dyrne þeah þe ge hy in dygle gefremme.*³⁷² (460-66)

Whether this is a temptation to judgemental vainglory in general,³⁷³ or more specifically a temptation to pridefully judge too harshly youths who cannot be blamed for the impotence of their non-Benedictine rule,³⁷⁴ it is clear that this exchange is the opposite of the former; whereas the demons in the former temptation accuse Guthlac of pride, they here try to tempt him to become proud. Guthlac's response is both implicit and explicit in his speech, and the implicit material forms the backdrop for the more explicit response. This implicit response is latent in the anti-schismatic overtones of his speech; whereas the demons seek to instigate division in the church, setting Guthlac against his monastic brothers, Guthlac forcefully repudiates what he considers a demonic impulse toward division and disruption of community. His opening charge *Ge sind forscadene*³⁷⁵ (478) highlights the anti-communal underpinnings of the demons' rhetoric, for the root of the final word, *sceaden*, denotes division or separation – in this case the demons have separated themselves from the holy communion of saints. Moreover, while *duguþe* in the

³⁷² “In that guise live many given over to sin, not at all devoted to God, but they for love of body indulge the joys of feasting: in this way you yield glory to God in foolish joy. Much of what you think in mind you conceal from men, and your deeds are not hidden though you bring them about in secret.”

³⁷³ Hill, “The Middle Way,” 184.

³⁷⁴ Patrick W Conner, “Source Studies, the Old English *Guthlac A* and the English Benedictine Reformation,” *Revue Bénédictine* 103, no. 1 (1993): 106.

³⁷⁵ “you are scattered”

next line can refer to glory or illustriousness, it can also refer to a group of warriors or, in more theological contexts, the heavenly host. Guthlac's assertion to the demons, *Ne cunnon ge dryhten duguþe biddan*³⁷⁶ (479), indicates not only the fact that the demons cannot pray to God for salvation, which is one way of translating *duguþe*, but also that they cannot be bound together by the *are*³⁷⁷ (480) of a lord; the *duguþe* of course also denotes the group of loyal thanes in a *comitatus*, and Guthlac's observation that they cannot *mid eaðmedum*³⁷⁸ (480) ask God for such community highlights their anti-communal mindset. This theme continues throughout Guthlac's response, so that it is once again highlighted in his charge to the devils that *frofre ne wenað/þæt ge wræcsiða wyrpe gebiden*³⁷⁹ (509); like the previous passages, the use of the term *wræcsiða* evokes the theme of exile, and therefore further emphasizes that a schismatic temperament is the primary error of the devils in this temptation. Thus, by subtly reinforcing the importance of community through his condemnation of the schismatic devils, Guthlac follows the wisdom pattern established long before in Job's patience toward the so-called friends attacking him – even when those in the community break faith, responding in kind by breaking faith with the community is a temptation that must be resisted.³⁸⁰

Such maintenance of faithful community requires Guthlac to recognize the deep patience necessary for bearing with others, and therefore a conception of the acquisition of wisdom as a process rather than something that is acquired instantaneously or not at all. Paraphrasing the transition from a simplistic and more confident (or prideful) earthly wisdom to a more complicated and suffering-borne wisdom, Guthlac explains how he *eaðe forbær/rume regulas* 7

³⁷⁶ “You cannot ask God for *duguþe*”

³⁷⁷ “grace”

³⁷⁸ “with humility”

³⁷⁹ “You have no hope of comfort, that you might change your endurance of exile-paths”

³⁸⁰ Such an interpretation accords well with Jones’ theory of *Guthlac A* as a poem that subtly appropriates the eremitic life for the communal cenobitic ideal. Jones, “Envisioning the Cenobium in the Old English *Guthlac A*.”

*reþe mod geongra monna in Godes templum*³⁸¹ (489-90) on account of confidence that experience and age will eventually wean the youthful monks of their folly: *þeodum ywarp/wisdom weras, wlencu forleosað,/siððan geoguðe geað gæst aflihð*³⁸² (502-4). This emphasis on the time and patience required to bring wisdom to fruition in a person is further highlighted by the typically Anglo-Saxon assertion that, in order for spiritual novices to learn to appreciate the *onsyn 7 ætwist ylðran hades*³⁸³ (500), they must wait *oððæt wintra rim/gegæð in þa geoguðe*³⁸⁴ (448-9). If the demons' representation of sin is much like the too obvious answers to the double entendre riddles - there are sinners in the church, and therefore one should be rid of them - Guthlac is much like the clean-minded reader who presses through the most obvious but less correct answer to articulate the truer and more complex picture. The riddling here, then, is not unlike the witty warfare that goes on within double entendre riddles - the riddler tries to trick the reader into practicing simplistic and unscrupulous thinking, while the riddlee seeks to conquer the riddler by getting past the "obvious" and unholy meaning.³⁸⁵ As with the former temptation, this temptation instances the motif of sapiential warfare, even if the thread of argument is admittedly somewhat obscure.

5.2.4 The Riddle of Humility and Despair

In understanding Guthlac's third temptation and its riddling qualities, T. D. Hill's interpretation is particularly helpful. Hill draws attention to the fact that, as the text itself notes, the demons' intent is to cause Guthlac to despair. This temptation is riddling because, as Hill

³⁸¹ "easily forbore lax rules and the savage spirit of young men in God's temple"

³⁸² "The men reveal wisdom to people, lose their pride, when their spirit flees the foolishness of youth"

³⁸³ "appearance and substance of a more mature rank"

³⁸⁴ "until a number of winters has passed for those youths"

³⁸⁵ See the following chapter, on the Exeter riddles.

notes, there is often a fine line between despair and humility in Christian thought, even as there is between the pride and righteousness that is the riddling matter of the former temptation:

If he allows himself to rejoice in the special austerity and rigour of his life, then he is drawn into pride and his endeavour is fruitless. If on the other hand, his humility is genuine and he is fearful for his salvation, he may be brought to despair by his sense of his own unworthiness and the memory of his sins.³⁸⁶

Hence, just as the riddle of the former temptation involves telling the difference between a proper appreciation of righteousness and spiritual pride, so the riddle of this temptation is the distinction between humility and despair, a distinction that presumably has a myriad of sources beyond reckoning, but that can be traced back to Paul's distinction between despair and repentance in 2 Corinthians 7:10.

As Hill also notes, Guthlac solves this riddle by following the example of other saints tempted to despair on account of their sin; he flies to the illustrious refuge that is the justice and mercy of God, who is ruler over all.³⁸⁷ And Guthlac's is no barren, tight-lipped response; rather, his words dazzle with the magnificent glory and complexity of the trinitarian Godhead and His church. In what is a fairly rare instance in Old English literature, all three persons of the Trinity - whom he evokes as *torhtestan/prynesse þrym*³⁸⁸ (645-6) - redound through his response. Guthlac speaks specifically of *dryhten Crist,/lifes leohtfruma*³⁸⁹ (592-3), and many of the other titles attributed to God can refer either to the Father or the Son: *weoruda waldend*³⁹⁰ (594), *lifes leohtfruman* (609), *heofenrices weard*³⁹¹ (611), *heofoncyninges*³⁹² (617), *liffroman*³⁹³ (637) and

³⁸⁶ Hill, "The Middle Way," 185.

³⁸⁷ Hill notes this solution as Gregory's proposed response to despair in Gregory's Moralian commentary on Job 34:14 (36.19.36, *PL* 76, 370) See *ibid.*, 184n1.

³⁸⁸ "the power of the most bright trinity"

³⁸⁹ "lord Christ, life's light source."

³⁹⁰ "Lord of hosts"

³⁹¹ "keeper of heaven"

³⁹² "heaven-king"

³⁹³ "life giver"

*ryht cyning*³⁹⁴ (682). Even the Holy Spirit, more rarely referenced in Anglo-Saxon poetry because of His abstraction from the usually more concrete style of this poetry, presumably appears in Guthlac's description of His indwelling:

*...Eom ic soðlice/
leohte geleafan 7 mid lufan dryhtnes
fære gefylled in minum feorhlocan,
breostum inbryrde to þam betran ham,
leomum inlyhted to þam leofestan
ecan earde þær is eþellond
fæger 7 gefealic in fæder wuldre*³⁹⁵ (651-7).

By way of complementing this ghostly invocation, Guthlac further expands this Trinitarian communion to include the whole communion of saints in lines 680-4:

*...ic dreama wyn
agan mid englum in þam uplican
rodera rice þær is ryht cyning,
help 7 hælu hæleþa cynne,
duguð 7 drohtað.*³⁹⁶

This constitutes a response to the demons' temptation, for it reorients the conversation such that it is no longer Guthlac-focused but rather focused on the cosmic scope of God, the angels, and the communion of saints. Despair is simply the converse of pride - a narcissism focused on one's failings rather than one's merits - and the self-centred nature of despair is cured when one turns one's gaze away from oneself and toward God, as is evident in Guthlac's redirection of the conversation toward God and his glory, presumably borrowed from the model of Christ's desert asceticism. Guthlac thus solves the demons' "riddle" of despair by drowning it in the more infinite glories of God.

³⁹⁴ "proper king"

³⁹⁵ "Truly I am beautifully filled with the light of belief and love of God in my breast, my mind inspired for a better home, my light enlightened for the land of loveliest eternity where is the homeland fair and joyous in the glory of the Father"

³⁹⁶ "I will possess the joy of joys with angels in the kingdom of celestial heaven where is the proper king, help and salvation for the kin of men, glory and fellowship."

5.2.5 Giving Way to Grace in the Form of Bartholomew

Though Guthlac's wisdom is spectacularly successful against the devils, there is still the moment when his wisdom must give way to heavenly intervention. This intervention is Bartholomew, and the saint's appearance recalls those moments in *Beowulf* when the hero cannot depend on his own wisdom, and depends rather on a certain amount of luck or providence; Bartholomew's arrival is the Christian equivalent of these moments. For despite all Guthlac's verbal wisdom, the foundational wisdom of Christianity is the incarnation, a bodied wisdom that cannot be reduced to instruments of war, verbal or otherwise. The bodily appearance of Bartholomew, then, is necessary as the deepest kind of wisdom response to Guthlac's situation, and this is presumably why Bartholomew's rebuke to the demons emphasizes incarnational intercourse between heaven and earth. His opening charge emphasizes God's concern for the created physical body, describing Guthlac's physical wounds in concrete details that resist a gnostic rejection of creation: *Ne sy him banes bryc ne blodig wund,/lices læla ne lapes wiht/pæs þe ge him dare gedon motan*³⁹⁷ (698-701). Moreover, Bartholomew situates both himself and Guthlac in the communion of saints bound together on account of the Christ who came to earth *under monnes hiw*³⁹⁸ (710); Bartholomew himself is *para twelfa sum*³⁹⁹ (709), referring to Christ's twelve apostles. Finally, Bartholomew tells those on earth, demons and Guthlac alike, that they *min onsynn oft sceawiað*⁴⁰⁰ (718); conversely, God in heaven will see Guthlac's *word* (word) and *weorc* (work) (720). Not philosophical abstraction or confusing ruses, but rather the incarnational entanglement of heaven with earth, is Christianity's ultimate answer to evil, and

³⁹⁷ "For him there may be neither breaking of bones, nor bloody wound, nor wounds of body, nor anything of evil by which you can do him harm"

³⁹⁸ "in the form of a man"

³⁹⁹ "one of the twelve"

⁴⁰⁰ "will often see my face"

more important than what he says is what Bartholomew is: a tangible instance of God's power over and redemption of creation, a redemption that leaves no earthly place for the demons who torment Guthlac.

As Manish Sharma has shown,⁴⁰¹ *Guthlac A* is a poem about spiritual ascent, and the prior argument demonstrates the particularity of this ascent in relation to Biblical and Old English wisdom. Via the torments of the demons, Guthlac confronts a set of riddling frustrations that he must disentangle, distinguishing things that look like wisdom from things that are in fact wisdom. His responses to the demons successfully do this, and the dialogic exchange is not straightforward, but rather elliptical, like the dialogue this dissertation treats below in the *Solomon and Saturn* poems. However, even overt Christian wisdom deployed as weaponry must at some point give way to the higher wisdom of God, and this wisdom is Christ's incarnation, underscored by the appearance of Bartholomew. Where *Beowulf* and *Maldon* situate the Ecclesiastean/Jobean wisdom ascent in the milieu of the secular battlefield, *Guthlac A* situates it on the spiritual battlefield encountered by monastics.

5.3 *Guthlac B*

5.3.1 *Guthlac B*'s Typical Sapiential Use of *Wyrð*

If the conclusion of *Guthlac A* upstages Guthlac's wisdom weaponry through the grace represented in Bartholomew, *Guthlac B*⁴⁰² does the opposite, for it does so through the common wisdom theme of mortality; all men, no matter how holy or unholy they are, will eventually experience death, as Hrothgar points out to Beowulf. This pattern of following a successfully

⁴⁰¹ Though he does not discuss the poem in terms of its wisdom aspects, Sharma's study of spiritual ascent in the poem corroborates this "upward turn." Manish Sharma, "Heroic Subject and Cultural Substance in *The Wanderer*," *Neophilologus* (June 16, 2011).

⁴⁰² Citations are from Roberts, *The Guthlac Poems of the Exeter Book*, 108–24. Translations are mine.

deployed wisdom tradition with its overthrow by powers even beyond the control of wisdom – death and *wyrd* – is quite typical of wisdom literature, both Anglo-Saxon and Christian. As shown earlier, *Beowulf* juxtaposes the hero's earlier sapiential success with his later inability (although it is not therefore necessarily a failure) to avoid death when he encounters the dragon; similarly, Byrhtnoth knows that a straightforward wisdom tradition ought to guarantee him, as the more just of the contenders, victory over the Vikings, yet he also recognizes that this formula cannot always defeat the unpredictability of death, as indeed the events of the poem show. Hence, *Guthlac B*, though its juxtaposition with *Guthlac A* is probably due to a compiler rather than an original author, nonetheless follows a traditional Old English literary formula that caps a tale of success with a tale of the death and failure that even the most successful persons must undergo.

5.3.2 Establishing the Universality of Death at the Beginning of *Guthlac B*

There is general critical agreement that *Guthlac B* is a poem about death. Explaining Felix's innovation to the hagiographic genre as a rendering of “the saint's concern with death introspective and analytical,”⁴⁰³ James Rosier finds that the *Guthlac B* poet elaborated on this innovation so that “*Guthlac B* might as readily be termed a poem on the subject of death, or the coming of Death, as a poetic account of the last days of a particular saint.”⁴⁰⁴ Following Rosier's lead, Stephen Powell comes to a similar conclusion, demonstrating in particular the association of death and an elegiac tone in the poem:

⁴⁰³ James L. Rosier, “Death and Transfiguration: *Guthlac B*,” in *Philological Essays: Studies in Old and Middle English Language and Literature, in Honour of Herbert Dean Meritt*, ed. James L. Rosier (The Hague: Mouton, 1970), 84.

⁴⁰⁴ Ibid.

But the *Guthlac A* poet does use word choice as a way of drawing an implicit parallel between death and the elegiac exile, as a way of creating an elegiac mood in his saint's life. He is, in short, influenced by certain lexical and rhetorical conventions common to poems of other genres, and he benefits from this cross-fertilization and makes what is outwardly a saint's life into a complex treatise on death and the human grief and doubts that - with so few tangible proofs of resurrection - accompany it. He recasts his saint's life, substituting for the familiar moral, didactic and biographical conventions of the genre the potentially cathartic elegiac understanding of the difficulties of living and dying, not as a saint, but as a typical human being with a faith perhaps less secure than Guthlac's.⁴⁰⁵

These more general assessments of the theme are particularly clarified by Harbus in terms relevant to the sapiential subject matter of this thesis: "Despite the contention of many critics that this poem is about death, it might more appropriately be described as dealing with mental attitudes toward death."⁴⁰⁶ In the face of this extended encounter with death, the wisdom technique of *Guthlac A* breaks down, even as the mourning and death in *Beowulf* overwhelms the more optimistic wisdom in that poem. And just as this breakdown gives way in *Beowulf* to two stances, helpless mourning and an implied transcendent wisdom, so *Guthlac B* polarizes into similar stances. The first is that of the saint himself, which consists in an upward spiritual turn not unlike that seen in *Maldon*. The second is the stance of mourning represented in Guthlac's bereaved disciple.

Whereas the wisdom of *Guthlac A* consists in debate configured as external *flyting* assaults (not unlike the Beowulf/Unferth exchange in *Beowulf*), the wisdom of Guthlac in *B* is more guarded and internal, as shown by Soon-Ai Low. Referring to imagery depicting the shiplike steerage of the mind in both *The Seafarer* and Alfred's *Pastoral Care*, Ai describes an internal control that is the converse of the less restrained argumentation of *Guthlac A*:

Gnomic verses expressing wisdom of this sort characterise both *The Wanderer* and *The Seafarer*, but are entirely absent in *Guthlac B*. Yet the same notions occur: in preparation for his death, Guthlac *ongon his mod stapelian/leohte geleafan* ('(he) began to stabilise his mind in the pure faith'; ll. 1110–1111). *Stapolian*

⁴⁰⁵ Stephen D. Powell, "The Journey Forth: Elegiac Consolation in *Guthlac B*," *English Studies* 79, no. 6 (November 1998): 500.

⁴⁰⁶ Antonina Harbus, *The Life of the Mind in Old English Poetry* (Rodopi: Amsterdam-New York, 2002), 108.

is defined by Bosworth-Toller as 'to make steadfast, confirm, endow with steadfastness' and it occurs variously with *mod*, *hyge* and *ferþ* in *The Seafarer* and, interestingly, in the saints' lives *Elene*, *Juliana* and *Andreas*. Guthlac also 'trims' his mind:

He his modsefan
wið þam færhagan fæste trymede
feonda gewinna. (959–961)

(He 'trimmed' his mind fast against the terror of the devils' attacks.)

The verb *trymman* means, specifically with regard to mental or moral strength, 'to confirm, establish, give strength to mind or heart' (Bosworth- Toller). Guthlac's saintliness expresses itself by his ability to *trymman* and to *stapolian* his *mod*.⁴⁰⁷

As Low describes, Guthlac, in the face of death, finds that his mind, heart, spirit, and courage must strengthen as his physical health wanes; thus, his encounter with death drives him toward a wisdom of the inner person, described as less external and public than the give-and-take arguments between Guthlac and the demons in part *A*.

But this is not the only inward turn caused by the encounter with death, for Guthlac's servant also experiences an inward turn, though it is one of an elegiac rather than sapiential strain:

Rosemary Woolf's assessment that *Guthlac B* reconciles "the Anglo- Saxon melancholy sensitivity to transience and the Christian confidence in the Resurrection" remains an accurate summary of the poet's achievement. The two world-views find their respective embodiments in the thane and in Guthlac, but are linked through the poet's insistence on inner cultivation.⁴⁰⁸

As Low suggests here, the thane, like Guthlac, experiences a more deeply internalized state of heart; the difference is that whereas Guthlac abandons *A*'s give-and-take world of public sapiential *flyting* to move on to something higher, the thane is shocked into a state of mourning unremedied and untempered by wisdom, much like that of Hrethel in *Beowulf*. The immediacy of death in the poem leaves no room for the kind of wisdom that might help his grief - one might imagine a dialogic treatment like that in *The Wanderer* or Boethius's *Consolatio* - and so the poem presents a frustrating incommunicability between the state of the saint and the state of his

⁴⁰⁷ Soon-Ai Low, "Mental Cultivation in *Guthlac B*," *Neophilologus* 81, no. 4 (1997): 630.

⁴⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 635.

servant. Wisdom technique in this poem is noteworthy by its absence - the theme of death blasts through the text like a cannonball, destroying any potential for the dialogic ascent to wisdom, and leaving only Guthlac's internal and more transcendent wisdom alongside the unconsolated lament of his servant. The rest of this section focuses on the textual details of *Guthlac B* that set the stage for this exploration of death so different from *Guthlac A*.

Whereas *Guthlac A* begins with a précis of the power of and victory of God, thereby setting the scene for a more intense focus on how this power works itself out in Guthlac's particular vocation, *Guthlac B* opens with the theme that haunts the rest of the work, the universality of death. In its opening statement, the poem stakes out its broad scope through the far-reaching phrase *Ðæt is wide CVD* (819).⁴⁰⁹ The word *cuð* here denotes an experiential knowledge of the antecedent of *þæt*, and, while its antecedent consists in a rather long exposition on the story of the Fall, the culmination of this story demarcates the theme of a death which has been or will be experienced quite intimately by everyone alive:

*Nænig monna wæs
of þam sigetudre sibþan æfre
Godes willan þæs georn ne gynnwised
Ðæt he bibugan mæge þone bitran drync
Done Eue fyrrn Adame geaf,
Byredlade bryd geong: Ðæt him bam gescod
In þam deoran ham.*⁴¹⁰ (865-70)

Following this morbid lead, the rest of the poem is so steeped in death and suffering that these features are nearly as prevalent as the characters.⁴¹¹ Lines 982-96 more or less repeat the same story of humankind's fall, and the inescapability of death. And if it would be perhaps misleading

⁴⁰⁹ "That is known widely."

⁴¹⁰ "Ever since, no man of that victorious race was so eager for God's will or so knowledgeable that he could avoid this bitter drink which Eve formerly gave Adam, the young bride brewed: that scathed them both in that dear home."

⁴¹¹ Some critics, such as Roberts, have gone as far as to argue for the personification of death in the poem. Roberts, *The Guthlac Poems of the Exeter Book*, 37-40.

to suggest that the saint himself is made to feel the full weight of death in this poem - he himself seems remarkably happy and calm for a dying man - the reader, like the saint's servant, is certainly made to feel the weight of death, as outlined by Powell in his study of the elegiac theme in this poem.⁴¹² Although the saint does not feel it much, all these instances are nonetheless best summed up in the substantive reference to Guthlac as *fægum*⁴¹³ (1058); even as there is a contrast between the young and successful Beowulf and the elderly dragon fighter for whom death is imminent, so the fated *Guthlac B* faces an inevitable death that the younger Guthlac of *A* can only understand speculatively: *Ne mæg min lichoma wið þas lænan gesceaft/deað gedælan ac he gedreosan sceal swa þeos eorðe eall þe ic her on stonde*⁴¹⁴ (371-2). Thus, *Guthlac B*, like the latter portion of *Beowulf*, abandons an earlier discussion of wisdom that “works” in a more earthly sense, and turns its attention to the wisdom *in extremis* of an *ars moriendi* tradition that shifts its focus from the preservation of safety to the discussion of sapiential responses proper to the failure of more straightforward wisdom.

5.3.3 The Victorious Guthlac

In the face of this death, Guthlac's holy battle-play gives way to a wisdom more internal and transcendent, and perhaps the best way to understand this is through comparison to other Old English figures, such as the Wanderer and Byrhtnoth. Like the *anhaga* in *The Wanderer*, he *are gebideð*⁴¹⁵ (1), and seeks a fastness even amidst his suffering: *Him færinga/adl in gewod – he on elne swa þeah/ungeblyged bad beorhtra gehata, bliþe in burgum*⁴¹⁶ (939-42). Later, he suggests that he is about to fight a battle with death that he will inevitably lose - *wiga nealæceð,/unlæt*

⁴¹² Powell, “The Journey Forth.”

⁴¹³ “a fated one”

⁴¹⁴ “My body cannot against this transitory creation avoid death, but it must fall like all this earth which I stand on here.”

⁴¹⁵ “receives grace”

⁴¹⁶ “Suddenly a sickness penetrated him - though he with courage undismayed awaited the bright promise, blithe in the burg”

*laces*⁴¹⁷ (1033-4) – yet like the dying Byrhtnoth, his focus is on the Christian truth that can turn apparent defeat into victory; he is eager to experience this victory, as expressed in lines 1038-47.⁴¹⁸ Lines 1076-93 are sustained by the same hope for a *lean unhwilen*,⁴¹⁹ as is Guthlac's promise to his sister that he will see her in heaven (1175-96). Indeed, Guthlac's ultimate posture as he dies subtly alludes to that of Stephen's heroic martyrdom, and is described in such victorious terms that one nearly forgets the text is speaking of the saint's death:

*Ahof þa his honda, husle gereorded,
Eaðmod þy æpelan gyfle; swylce he his Eagan ontynde,
Halge heafdes gimmas, biseah þa to heofona rice,
Glædmod to geofona leanum 7 þa his gæst onsende
Weorcum wlitigne in wuldres dream.*⁴²⁰ (1300-04).

Hence, Guthlac, confronted by death, embodies the victory that comes about when earthly things are abandoned for heavenly riches.

5.3.4 Guthlac's Lamentive Servant

But if Guthlac embodies an upward movement toward higher wisdom in the face of death, his servant, like the cross in the first portion of *The Dream of the Rood*, embodies an elegiac dross not yet transmuted through the ascetic rigours of a Jobean/Ecclesiastean wisdom ascent; perhaps the best way of understanding this disciple's lament is to imagine it as *The Wanderer* with its central journey through various stages of wisdom muted. Lines 1047 onward are an elegy in little, inflecting many of the themes in the elegiac wisdom texts: the loss of the

⁴¹⁷ “The warrior approaches, not late for battle”

⁴¹⁸ *þonne dogor beoð/on moldwege min forð scripen,/sorg gesweðrad, 7 ic sippan mot/fore meotudes cneowum meorda hleotan,/gingra geafena, 7 Godes lombes/in sindreamum sippan awo/forð folgian. Is nu fus ðider/gæst sipes georn, nu þu gearwe const/leoma lifgedal: long is þis onbid/worulde lifes.* “Then my days on earth will be passed away, my sorrow abate, and I will be able to obtain rewards, new gifts, before the knees of God, and follow God's lamb away forever in eternal joy. My spirit is now eager, desirous of journey, now you well understand the life-parting of limbs: long is this wait in the world of life.”

⁴¹⁹ “eternal reward” (1096)

⁴²⁰ “Then he lifted his hands, humble, refreshed by the Eucharist, by that noble food: so he raised his eyes, holy head-gems, saw then into the kingdom of heaven, glad-minded for the gift of gifts, and then sent his ghost fair in works to the joy of glory.”

*mondryhtne*⁴²¹ (1061) and *hlaford*⁴²² (1053); the way that the servant's *hred̥er innan swearc*⁴²³ (1052); the leitmotif of death as a journey (*forðsipes*,⁴²⁴ 1050); the inability to stoically restrain one's emotions;⁴²⁵ and the spectral influences of *wyrd* (1057), of being *fæge*⁴²⁶ (1058), and of the divine predestiny that *him gedemed wæs*⁴²⁷ (1059). As in the earlier part of *The Wanderer*, there is considerable emphasis on the unresolved workings of sorrow on the mind; whereas Guthlac himself is paradoxically described as *fusne.../meðne*, and *modglædne*⁴²⁸ (1158), it is the servant who is described as *hygegeomer, freorig 7 ferðwerig*⁴²⁹ (1156). Later in the text, the poem describes how his *modgeþanc* is *miclum gebisgad*⁴³⁰ (1197) and *þream forþrycced*⁴³¹ (1198). At the end of the poem, the servant is again cast as a figure in the elegiac wisdom tradition; as in *The Wanderer* and *The Seafarer*, the sea becomes an apt backdrop for and outworking of his internal turmoil, a theme nicely summarized in the beautifully brief assertion: *gewat þa ofestlice/beorn unhyðig þæt he bat gestag,/wæghengest wræc; wæterþisa for/snel under sorgum*⁴³² (1329-30). Though one need not necessarily understand the disciple's lament via reference to a poem such as *The Wanderer*, such a comparison does usefully highlight the kind of raw sorrow that *Guthlac B* treats.

Unlike *The Wanderer*, however - and perhaps in part due to the loss of its conclusion – *Guthlac B* gives only the premonitions of satisfaction. Such premonitions are evident in a

⁴²¹ “master”

⁴²² “lord”

⁴²³ “breast darkened inside”

⁴²⁴ “journey forth”

⁴²⁵ *he þæs onbæru/habban ne meahte ac he hate let/torn þoliende tearas geotan,/weallan wægdropan.* (1054-7) “He had no strength for composure, but hot he let the grief of suffering pour forth tears, well with waterdrops.”

⁴²⁶ “fated”

⁴²⁷ “Was deemed for him”

⁴²⁸ “eager, tired,” and “glad-minded”

⁴²⁹ “sad-minded, frigid and soul-weary”

⁴³⁰ “thought” “much busied”

⁴³¹ “cruelly oppressed”

⁴³² “The man departed then most quickly, unhappy that he was boarding a boat, an exile ship: the ship travailed forth, keen under sorrow”

number of examples from the text, including descriptions of the disciple in the poem, his pre-mortem exchanges with Guthlac, and most notably his iteration of gnomic wisdom as he seeks to make sense of the saint's death near the end of the poem:

*Ellen biþ selast þam þe oftost sceal
Dreogan dryhtenbealu, deope behycgan
Þroht, þeodengedal, þonne seo þrag cymeð
Wefen wyrdstafun. Ðæt wat se þe sceal
Aswæman sarigferð, wat his sincgiefan
Holdne biheledne; he sceal hean þonan
Geomor hweorfan þam bið gomenes wana
ðe þa earfeða oftost dreogeð
on sargum sefan.⁴³³ (1348-56)*

Though this initially may sound bleak, the text contains further clues that it might, like the sorrow of *The Wanderer*, blossom into something greater. The servant clearly has the capacity to grow in wisdom, since he is initially described as a *deophydig gleawmod*⁴³⁴ (1001-2), and later as a *snotter hæle*⁴³⁵ (1145). He presumably has a store of wisdom built up from his discipleship with his sapiential “father” Guthlac, and he has the potential to draw eventually on this in his grief. One might even take Guthlac's parting offer to *A...sibbe wiþ þe/healdan*⁴³⁶ (1262-3) as a parallel to Bartholomew's interest in friendship with Guthlac; just as Guthlac's spiritual progress depended in part on the intervention of a sainted Bartholomew, so his servant's progress will be blessed and furthered by the intervention of Guthlac. Thus, although the ending of the poem is lost, such examples suggest that just as *The Wanderer* and *The Seafarer* work through temporary and tempestuous (but not necessarily evil) emotions toward a heavenly resolution, so *Guthlac B*

⁴³³ “Courage is best for the one who most often must undergo lord-bale, deeply consider oppression, separation from his lord, when the time comes woven by the decree of fate. He knows that who has to grieve sad-minded, he knows his gracious treasure giver buried; he must bowed and sad go thence for lack of joy, he who most often undergoes sorrow in a sore mind.”

⁴³⁴ “deeply considerate, prudent-minded one”

⁴³⁵ “prudent youth”

⁴³⁶ “always keep friendship with you”

intimates a sapiential future for the disciple, which may or may not have been included in the now missing conclusion.

5.3.5 Conclusion

As demonstrated by the prior discussion, *Guthlac A & B* (as a unit), the last of the heroic texts dealt with in this dissertation, follows a pattern similar to that traced in *Beowulf* and *The Battle of Maldon*, a movement from external and public wisdom toward deepened interiority that in turn points upward to the wisdom of heaven. Where it differs is precisely where one might expect a hagioheroic text to differ, that is, in the degree to which the gates of heaven are thrown open and allowed to commingle with the more earthly processes of wisdom. Where *Beowulf* and *Maldon* see a largely secular heroic wisdom give way to something more heavenly, the stuff of *Guthlac*'s wisdom is thoroughly Christian from the beginning, though the mechanism of wisdom is the same. In its intense psychological focus, this set of poems resembles *Ecclesiastes* such that the "voices" it deals with - literally the voices of demons - must be disentangled much as the voices of the "folk" in *Ecclesiastes*, almost as if they are personae, extended functions of the self.⁴³⁷ In its heroic aspects it resembles the text of *Job* taken more allegorically and typologically than literally; *Guthlac* is the wisdom warrior fighting his battles with words. The ubiquitous presence of death in part *B* underscores the flagging of wisdom technique (even that infused with revealed truth) that is the lot of all humans. Within categories of Christian wisdom there are still degrees, and just as even a figure as righteous as *Job* must eventually concede to God,⁴³⁸ and even a Christian must reckon with a vanity that gestures toward the deeper rhetoric of the *Song of Solomon*,⁴³⁹ so *Guthlac B* points toward a transcendence, certainly present but

⁴³⁷ See section 2.2.2 above.

⁴³⁸ See section 2.3.5 and Appendix A.

⁴³⁹ See section 2.2.1.

underdeveloped, probably due to the loss of the poem's conclusion. *Guthlac A & B*, then, the most Christian of the three poems explored prior, enters the territory of Christian revelation in a way that *Beowulf* and *Maldon* do not. Nonetheless, the mechanism deployed in approaching even a wisdom so liberally endowed with revealed truth is remarkably similar to that discovered in Job, Ecclesiastes, and the exegetes that shaped the tradition that received them.

Chapter 6: Riddling Wisdom

Preface: From Hagioheroic Wisdom to Riddling Wisdom

The prior chapters are an assessment of the wisdom in poems of other genres, existing on a generic continuum between heroic poetry on one hand and hagiographic poetry on the other. In *Beowulf*, the public and external speech-act of wisdom gives way under pressure to a more monologic and private voice aching for something more than the heroic milieu that it deconstructs. *Maldon* offers more of an answer to this ache, with glimpses of a spiritual realm, and a hagiographic heroism that steps in when a commendable though insufficient heroic wisdom begins to flag. The Guthlac poetry transliterates into the hagiographic tradition this ascent from heroic to higher, more spiritual wisdom; the saint in the first portion exercises a spiritual bravado that looks much like a spiritualized version of the wisdom in the first part of *Beowulf*, and the second portion conveys the less public and more heavenly wisdom implied at the end of *Beowulf*, and discovered if only in a patchy way through the failing fabric of the heroic wisdom that comprises *Maldon*.

These three instances are different in kind from the wisdom poetry proper dealt with in following chapters, and before proceeding to discuss this wisdom poetry, an assertion of the way this heroic-hagiographic wisdom overlaps with the Jobean and Ecclesiastean wisdom is helpful in situating the dissertation's argument thus far. The first point of overlap is the idea of wisdom ascent. Job is an ascent from a more earthly wisdom toward a higher spiritual wisdom, and Ecclesiastes is the midpoint of the Solomonic version of the Platonic ascent, perceived in Proverbs, Song of Solomon, and Ecclesiastes. Another point of overlap is the rockiness of this ascent; Job experiences suffering and enacts the toils of a soldier, while the Ecclesiast

experiences the frustration of *Vanitas*. All three of the Old English texts share the military resonances of wisdom, and the characters in each face some form of trial or frustration that deepens the overall conception of wisdom in the poem: Beowulf faces the dragon, Byrhtnoth fights and loses against the Vikings, and Guthlac encounters demons and death. Like the Ecclesiastean version of the wisdom ascent, all three of these poetic traditions feature a play of wisdom voices striving toward something higher and deeper at the end. And this end of the Anglo-Saxon poetry does in fact gesture toward the concluding mysticism at the end of both Ecclesiastes and Job; public and open debate is replaced by a more spiritual and more private kind of wisdom. Though none of the poems discussed above are wisdom poems proper, their conception of the wisdom ascent overlaps with that of Ecclesiastes and Job, and anticipates the more focused version of this ascent found in the wisdom poetry proper that is the matter of the following chapters, beginning with what I call “riddling wisdom.”

In discussing the frustration found so often in Job and Ecclesiastes, I find the concept of riddling useful, where the “riddles” one encounters consist in general worldly frustrations ranging from physical pain to weary cognition, as well as the sometimes surprising blessings that can equally frustrate one's sense of control. As riddles frustrate a readerly sense of understanding and control, so various forms of frustration serve in a sense as God's riddles to be grappled with by humans as they configure and reconfigure them via riddling wisdom poetry.

All the poems discussed in this dissertation - and to a certain degree, all Old English poems - contain some degree of riddling, but what this section looks at particularly is poems with a tendency to leave more unanswered than answered. Just as a riddle gives readers everything except what they want - the solution itself - these poems raise instances of frustration but offer little closure, leaving them suspended in the reader's mind for him/her to figure out as s/he has

leisure. They thus differ from the poetry dealt with in the final chapters, which lead one to some form of closure and transcendence of an apparently chaotic dialogue, often via an Ecclesiastes-like deferral to an authoritative person or voice.

The most thorough and sophisticated representation of this riddling wisdom in the Old English wisdom corpus is *Solomon and Saturn II*. However, before discussing this poem, it will be instructive to analyze two other sub-generic wisdom poems, *Solomon and Saturn I* and the *Exeter Riddles*, which will help to delineate further the critical vocabulary needed to discuss this poem. The exploration of the riddles shows how riddles can function as a challenge to conventional wisdom, either by confronting it with the frustration of trying to understand things, or, alternately, by confronting it with a wonder beyond its ken; this will become important not only for the later discussion of *Solomon and Saturn II*, but also for discussion of the riddlic creation in poems such as *The Wanderer* and *The Seafarer*. The exploration of *Solomon and Saturn I* - which is a wisdom poem by virtue of its Solomonic motif, but which is more so charmic by virtue of its use of the Pater Noster - will help elaborate irony in the wisdom tradition; in the prior chapters such irony has been broached in the devils' "wisdom" in *Guthlac A* - not all "wisdom" is wisdom - but *Solomon and Saturn I* makes this a good deal clearer, with its juxtaposition of the centred Solomonic and the frantic Saturnine approaches to wisdom.

6.1 Context and the Evaluation of Wisdom

As demonstrated in the prior chapters, wisdom in heroic poetry takes on the martial colouring of its context and can be either used well or abused, but cannot be relied upon for all purposes. In heroic poetry such as *Maldon* and *Beowulf*, the background foil of grace to which this natural wisdom gives way is implicit or only partially asserted, so that the primary dichotomy of these poems is between a useful earthly wisdom that nonetheless ultimately fails

and the heavenly intervention that answers the problems that earthly wisdom cannot. The wisdom of *Guthlac B* serves much the same function as this failure-inducing *wyrd* in *Maldon* and *Beowulf*, demonstrating that even the holiest and wisest of Christians must also die. However, the particular focus of the next few chapters is the riddling wisdom not unlike that discovered in the demonic temptations of *Guthlac A*. As exemplified by the demons in this poem, even statements that have no offensive content and would be perfectly wise in one context are not so in every context, and Guthlac's heroism involves unriddling the problems with these wisdom-like statements that are not in fact wisdom. Even good sapiential weaponry can be put to bad use, just as ostensibly abrupt wisdom can have a higher purpose than its initial delivery might suggest, as is evident in the following discussion of Old English riddles.

6.2 Old English Riddles as Subgeneric Wisdom

Turning to the Exeter Riddles, the first question that must be clarified is the reason for discussing these riddles alongside wisdom literature at all, given that they are not wisdom in the self-evident way as is (for example) a poem such as *Maxims I*. In spite of the riddles' lack of such self-evident wisdom, however, most critics of wisdom literature recognize a close affinity between riddles and the wisdom texts, some going even as far as including them in the wisdom canon. Hansen, though she is careful to make a generic distinction between riddles and wisdom, nonetheless sees in the riddles' approach to hidden knowledge a close affinity to wisdom.⁴⁴⁰ Paul Cavill devotes an entire chapter to the relation between wisdom and riddle.⁴⁴¹ Most recently, Rafal Boryslawski has convincingly argued for an overlap between the genres of wisdom and

⁴⁴⁰ Hansen, *The Solomon Complex*, 126–52.

⁴⁴¹ Cavill, *Maxims in Old English Poetry*, 60–82.

riddle in the Exeter riddle corpus in general,⁴⁴² and in a particular set of riddles that he identifies as a subcategory of wisdom-riddles.⁴⁴³ Perhaps most significantly, Russell Poole includes riddles in his bibliography on Old English wisdom texts.⁴⁴⁴ In discussing the riddles alongside wisdom, then, this dissertation follows such prominent scholars in the field.

But if such critics afford precedent for considering the riddles as wisdom, their inclusion in this dissertation's argument depends on the content and forms of the riddles involved in the exploration of power relations. This is of interest because riddles, as loci exploring power, function in two of the capacities encountered in prior chapters. In the hands of a manipulative riddler, they can function as weapons that allow mastery over another person through mystification. However, they can also play the function that *wyrd* has played in prior chapters; by confronting self-confident persons with riddles that tie into God's broader riddle of creation, the riddle serves to humble them and ideally causes them to rely on God rather than their own understanding.

6.3 The Play of Power in Riddles

6.3.1 Some Textual Examples

Old English riddles are experiments in power relations and the violence and suffering that accompanies such relations. This well documented interest in suffering and violence⁴⁴⁵ is woven into the textual fabric of most of the riddles; when taken as a group, the number of examples and passages exploring such powers and violences far outweigh the passages favouring peace or

⁴⁴² Rafal Boryslawski, *The Old English Riddles and the Riddlic Elements of Old English Poetry* (Berlin: Peter Lang, 2004), 112–119.; Rafal Boryslawski, “The Elements of Anglo-Saxon Wisdom Poetry in the Exeter Book Riddles,” *Studia Anglica Posnaniensia: An International Review of English Studies* 38 (2002): 35–47.

⁴⁴³ Rafal Boryslawski, *The Old English Riddles and the Riddlic Elements of Old English Poetry*, 121–72.

⁴⁴⁴ Poole, *Old English Wisdom Poetry*.

⁴⁴⁵ On the literature dealing with violence and suffering in the Exeter riddles, see Megan Cavell, “Looming Danger and Dangerous Looms: Violence and Weaving in Riddle 56,” *Leeds Studies in English* no. XLII, New Series (2011): 29n1.

stasis. Glancing through the riddles, one quickly becomes aware that this is one of the more violent Old English genres in spite of the fact that most of the “violence” discussed is usually symbolic code for much more innocuous societal affairs. In terms of the suffering of the riddle's fictive “I,” the ubiquitous speaker suffers everything from imprisonment to torture and mutilation.⁴⁴⁶ The storm tells how its *frea fæste genearwað*⁴⁴⁷ (1.31), and asserts: *nah ic hwyrftweges/of þam aglace*⁴⁴⁸ (1.36); the bell is *winterceald*;⁴⁴⁹ (2.7); like *The Wanderer*, the shield is an *anhaga*⁴⁵⁰ (3.1) who concludes with the dark omen that *me ecga dolg eacen weorðað/þurh deaðslege dagum ond nihtum*⁴⁵¹ (3.13-4); the plow describes how *me þurh hrycg wrecen, hongap under/ an orþoncpil*⁴⁵² (19.11-12); the bow describes his master's use of him in terms of torture, referring to *se waldend, se me þæt wite gescop*⁴⁵³ (21.6); and in the onion's shocking description of its treatment, *æghwa mec reafað,/hafað mec on heardre, on min heafod scireþ,/biteð mec on bær lic, briceð mine wisan*⁴⁵⁴ (63.2-4). Alternately, the speaker of the riddle can seem quite violent, cruel and capricious with power. Much of the storm riddle (Riddle 1) contains such threatening passages, and the conclusions of both the Cuckoo and the *ballista* riddle have particularly sinister overtones; in the former, the Cuckoo's displacement of other nestlings is alluded to in the speaker's cryptic assertion about his foster parent: *heo hæfde swæsra þy læs/suna ond dohtra, þy heo swa dyde*⁴⁵⁵ (7.11-12); while the *ballista* asserts in an excellent

⁴⁴⁶ Citations for the Exeter Riddles refer to Craig Williamson, ed., *The Old English Riddles of the Exeter Book* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1977).

⁴⁴⁷ “lord confines [it] fast”

⁴⁴⁸ “I cannot escape from this torment”

⁴⁴⁹ “winter-cold”

⁴⁵⁰ “solitary one”

⁴⁵¹ “for me increased sword wounds come about through death blows day and night”

⁴⁵² “for me a cunning dart hangs under, driven through my back”

⁴⁵³ “The master, who shaped for me that punishment”

⁴⁵⁴ “everyone ravages me, has me in hardness, cuts into my head, bites me on bare body, and breaks my stalk”

⁴⁵⁵ “she had fewer sons and daughters of her own because she did so”

example of Old English understatement, *men gemunan þæt me þurh muþ fareð*⁴⁵⁶ (15.11). A particularly notable poem that deals with themes of enacting and suffering violence is the Lot riddle (44), for all parties seem both violated and guilty of violation; Lot allows himself to become drunk enough to commit incest, while his daughters are responsible for conniving the affair, so that all parties are culpable, as is (presumably) the sexually violent culture of Sodom which fostered Lot's family. Like the other examples, this riddle demonstrates that, in spite of the fact that many of the riddles deal with everyday situations far less brutal than they appear from their descriptions, the very language and imagery they use demonstrates a particular alertness to the way that violence, warfare, and the use of power (whether used well or abused) works its way (at times almost invisibly) into the fabric of everyday life and speech.⁴⁵⁷

6.3.2 The Implied Social Context

Arguably, the recurring theme of power and violence in the riddles reflects the power and violence of the social contexts that gave rise to them; here, it is particularly instructive to consider Hansen's interpretation of these contexts. For Hansen, the riddles imply a world where the riddler meets the riddlee halfway; the riddler has power over the riddlee, but if he does not accommodate his own secret knowledge enough to make his riddle appealing to the riddlee, he loses his audience altogether. This means that riddling involves power-mystification not unlike the power-knowledge used in proverbial form in wisdom literature. Hansen articulates this particularly well in her description of the way that “the riddle reverses the roles of speaker and addressee in a genuine or normal question”:

⁴⁵⁶ “men remember what fares through my mouth”

⁴⁵⁷ For a more thorough theoretical and critical discussion of violence as the overarching theme of the riddles, see Wehlau's *The Riddle of Creation*. Wehlau argues that riddles are versions of play-violence reflecting more serious counterparts in other Old English poems, including hagiographic torture, sexual violence, and heroic warfare. Wehlau, *The Riddle of Creation*, 101–123.

In a riddle, on the contrary, the speaker knows the answer and depends on the fact that the addressee does not. The riddler devises a question precisely intended to expose the addressee's ignorance, and so at the outset the riddling situation violates a rule of politeness that normally governs communicative exchanges and guarantees co-operation and good will: speakers are supposed to act inferior. The addressee of a riddle, however, is willy-nilly cast in the inferior position; the speaker asserts power over the addressee and calls attention to the limitations of the addressee's knowledge and imagination."⁴⁵⁸

As Hansen discerns, the riddler, like a type of Unferð, harangues the riddlee with superior knowledge, putting riddlees in a position where they must defend themselves. In the mouth of such a riddler, riddles potentially can be used as a form of despotic verbal weaponry, enacting violences similar to those reflected in their content, a martial wisdom untempered and unhumbled by softening grace. As Wehlau notes, "in certain contexts riddles are a means of maintaining real power; by virtue of their ability to make mysteries, they are weapons."⁴⁵⁹

6.4 Riddles, Humility, and the Riddle of Creation

However, it would be too simplistic to read riddles as mere instances of negative power-knowledge used to garner control for manipulative riddlers, since the hidden knowledge embedded in riddles can also serve a positive function. This positive function becomes manifest when one imagines creation itself, and more indirectly the sociopolitical milieu, to be a set of riddles constructed and controlled by God himself; as Boryslawski notes in his invaluable recent study of the riddles, "The Christian confidence in God's personal participation in the process of creation and the necessity to discern and understand His ubiquitousness in every being, hidden there as a part of His divine scheme, might have been, and indeed was, interpreted as resembling

⁴⁵⁸ Hansen, *The Solomon Complex*, 131.

⁴⁵⁹ Wehlau, *The Riddle of Creation*, 203. See also Louise O. Vasvari. Though writing about Middle English riddling, Vasvari's description of power plays in riddle games is an apt description of the workings of Old English riddles as well: "Riddling is an exercise of intelligence, or a *jeu aggresif*, proposed by one speaker to another. Although the listener is invited to recognize the playful transition from one semantic field to another, the riddler's aim is to gain power by confounding and deceiving his adversary, whose role consists precisely in allowing himself to be deceived." Louise O. Vasvari, "Fowl Play in My Lady's Chamber: Textual Harassment of a Middle English Pornithological Riddle and Visual Pun," in *Obscenity: Social Control and Artistic Creation in the European Middle Ages*, ed. Jan M. Ziolkowski (Brill, 1998), 113.

a riddle posed by Him to mankind.”⁴⁶⁰ In such a reading, riddles work in the same way that they do when used by humans as a form of power-knowledge; the riddle is designed to disrupt the riddlee's “normal” understanding of the world, thereby demonstrating to him/her the limitations of his/her own knowledge as well as opening his/her eyes to aspects of the world previously unnoticed because familiarity has bred contempt. To be more precise, what is challenged by the riddle is the audience's pride in the Augustinian sense, usefully defined by Bonnie Kent:

Augustine describes the rebellious angels who founded the earthly city as motivated not by self-love but rather by *pride*, a perverse and highly specific kind of self-love that leads one to arrogate oneself a place that properly belongs to God alone. Cain, described by Augustine as the human founder of the earthly city, largely followed the angelic precedent. Cain was so consumed by the destructive lust of envy, so eager to glory in the exercise of his own power, that the very thought of having to share power, even with a human partner, was intolerable to him. He killed his own brother in a futile effort to establish himself as the sole ruling power.⁴⁶¹

Such a power-mongering pride precludes the practice of humble (one might even say “worshipful”) admiration, and when the riddle is read as directed toward a proud person – and indeed, from a Christian perspective, this quality besets every person to some degree this side of heaven – then creation itself and those socioeconomic realms over which God is sovereign become riddles that thwart and humble the pride of such wonderless persons.

Such an interpretation of the Anglo-Saxon view of creation as God's great riddle is certainly not an original idea; indeed, Ruth Wehlau has written an entire book (*The Riddle of Creation*) carefully tracing the development of such an idea throughout Old English theology and poetry. Where my argument differs from Wehlau's, however, is in emphasis and direction. This difference is particularly clear in her understanding of the relation between riddles, creation, and Christian faith; according to her, the riddles celebrate Creation as

⁴⁶⁰ Rafal Boryslawski, *The Old English Riddles and the Riddlic Elements of Old English Poetry*, 47.

⁴⁶¹ Bonnie Kent, “Augustine’s Ethics,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Augustine*, ed. Eleonore Stump and Norman Kretzmann (Cambridge, UK ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 218.

a palpable good, worthy of praise, a view which is at odds with the ascetic view of the world and the body, also found in the poetry. In this, Old English poetry reflects contradictory impulses that exist within Christianity as a whole, since the religion has a tendency to both dualism and materialism.⁴⁶²

Wehlau's own interest is clearly in the creational rather than ascetic aspects of the riddles, as is further clarified in her distinction between exegetical and poetic texts:

Old English poetry proclaims the mystery of the body through its concreteness and its focus on the creation; neither the metaphorical language, nor the praises of the creation treat the physical world as a transparency. In this, the poetry is to be distinguished from exegetical commentary. Although exegetes use metaphors, their chief concern is with the meaning of the words, not with the images produced.⁴⁶³

The intention in this dissertation is hardly to deny a distinction between poetry and exegesis, and it is certainly not to fault critics such as Wehlau for focusing primarily on the poetic celebration of creation - all studies are in some way limited in their scope, and Wehlau covers more than enough material without treating exegesis or the ascetic attitudes usually implied therein.

However, I do wonder if there is not a little more slippage between heaven and earth going on in the riddles than Wehlau suggests, a slippage that implies the need for a higher metaphysic, the kind precisely afforded by exegesis. Hence, whereas Wehlau focuses on the celebration of creation in the riddles, this dissertation focuses on the ascetic impulse in the riddles - the restlessness in them that points to something beyond them, most immediately a concrete solution, but more globally the kind of metaphysic by which *The Wanderer*, *The Seafarer*, or *Ecclesiastes* solve their own more serious riddles.

Given Wehlau's worldly focus, riddles are largely conceived of as the tools and subjects of earthly power;⁴⁶⁴ indeed, at one point, Wehlau describes them as weapons.⁴⁶⁵ My interpretation,

⁴⁶² Wehlau, *The Riddle of Creation*, 10.

⁴⁶³ *Ibid.*, 12.

⁴⁶⁴ Hence, riddles take on a God-like power: "Riddlers, like poets, imitate God by creating their own cosmos; they re-create through words, making familiar objects into something completely new, re-arranging the parts and pieces of things to produce creatures with strange combinations of arms, legs, eyes and mouths. In this transformed world, a distorted mirror of the real world, the riddle is in control, but the reader has the ability to break the code and solve the mystery." *Ibid.*, 99–100.

⁴⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 107.

outlined as follows, moves in the direction opposite to hers; riddles escape being survivalist and anthropocentric just to the degree that they participate in the cosmic power structures that serve as checks on exactly the kind of power-plays identified by Wehlau. As shown in the outline of the Platonic ascent in Chapter 1, the cosmos and divine truth challenge and frustrate the manipulative rhetor, and the philosophical and theological legitimacy of such a challenge allows for riddles that are more than mere manipulative play with sinister undertones. In the Platonic ascent, the riddle, properly understood, is not so much an enigma created to thwart people as it is the discovery of a mystery already extant in the world. Riddles do not *make* the world strange, but rather put in words a strangeness that is already there.⁴⁶⁶

Though she does not discuss them in theological terms such those which I use, Tiffany Beechy's intriguing recent work on the riddles helps to elucidate the way that God's riddle - the book of creation - might challenge the overweening person; differentiating amidst laws, charms, and riddles, Beechy finds that:

The laws order human beings in relation to one another through the ordered language they all share. The charms substitute the plane of language for the referential plane, allowing the order of poetic form to suffice, to stand in for an ordered cosmos. The riddles grapple with the very ontological premises on which the other two genres operate. The riddles consider again and again, turning over and over, the imaginary fusion of the sign, foregrounding the dynamics of slippage as the ultimate episteme.⁴⁶⁷

Such slippage of the ordering of reality (as represented in law texts and charms) looks much like the factor of frustration in the wisdom explored in prior chapters; it also looks very much like the elusive *vanitas* that so frustrates Ecclesiastes. The capacity of such slippage to challenge and change the riddlee's perspective is chronicled by Craig Williamson:

What they mean is that reality exists and is at the same time a mosaic of man's perception. What they mean is that man's measure of the world is in words, that perceptual categories are built on verbal foundations, and that by withholding the key to the categorical house (the entitling solution) the riddlers may force the

⁴⁶⁶ See Daniel Tiffany, "Lyric Substance: On Riddles, Materialism, and Poetic Obscurity," *Critical Inquiry* 28, no. 1 (October 1, 2001): 72–98.

⁴⁶⁷ Beechy, *The Poetics of Old English*, 98.

riddle-solver to restructure his own perceptual blocks in order to gain entry to a metaphorical truth. In short the solver must imagine himself a door and open in.⁴⁶⁸

From such premises that riddles exist in the tension between word and thing, and that a consideration of this tension can in fact significantly change a person's "perceptual blocks," it does not seem unreasonable to think that, from a medieval Christian perspective, riddles, as extensions of the creation featured therein, might serve to chasten and humble a bloated human pride.

6.4.1 Humility Through Wonder

If creation can help check the pride of humans, then Old English riddles, for their part, participate in the translation of the divine riddles of creation into the literary milieu. In a society prone to reducing the world about it to a barren utilitarianism,⁴⁶⁹ riddles expose readers to the strange and uncontainable "otherness" embedded in the world, and thereby bring them to a state of awe and humility toward the creator of this world. In some instances, this exposure to "otherness" occurs through the elliptical perspective of the riddles, which highlights the complexity and nuance of "everyday" objects; for insight into this process, it can be helpful to think of riddles in the terms used by G. K. Chesterton to describe the effects of fairy tales: "...even nursery tales only echo an almost preternatural leap of interest and amazement. These tales say that apples were golden only to refresh the forgotten moment when they were green. They make rivers run with wine only to make us remember, for one wild moment, that they run with water."⁴⁷⁰ In a similar manner, the unusual descriptions of everyday items and occurrences in the riddles compel readers to consider the complexity of creation and the wonder proper to it.

⁴⁶⁸ Williamson, *The Old English Riddles of the Exeter Book*, 25.

⁴⁶⁹ See, for instance, the discussion of *Maxims I* below in Chapter 9, where plague is pragmatically attributed to God's role in population control.

⁴⁷⁰ G. K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy* (Garden City, N.Y.: Image Books, 1959), 51.

No object is ever simply itself, but is rather caught up in a web of broader societal and creational association; in many ways, riddles are secular parallels of the Eucharist, for they attach a surplus of meaning to a single object, and thereby evoke pauses in systems that can only conceive of objects as instrumental. A common seller of garlic can become a fascinating monster (82). The simple act of churning butter becomes as ribald as sex (52). And perhaps in the best instance of this, the simple freezing of ice is recognized for the miracle that it is: *Wundor wearð on wege: wæter wearð to bane*⁴⁷¹ (66.3).

6.4.2 Humility Through *Wyrd*

However, complexity and wonder are not the only means through which riddles translate the overwhelming “otherness” of the world, for this is also accomplished by exposing the riddlee to figures and tropes that emphasize the mortality of humans and thereby decenter anthropocentric accounts of the world. Like the fatalism of Hrothgar's sermon and Unferth's unsettling point about nature trumping even the best and most firm intentions of warriors, the riddles open a world where the inevitability of death, suffering, and pain are described as basic facts rather than exceptional events in human drama. The storm (Riddle 1) simply does what it does because it is a storm, with little expressed concern regarding the humans who get in its path. The rainswept weathercock (Riddle 77) is not, like *The Wanderer*, permitted to share metaphysical and psychological intricacies, but simply exists in the midst of them.⁴⁷² The vellum of the book in Riddle 24 is killed and tormented as a matter of course, and not only is this torture presented as perfectly natural, but this savage behaviour even accords with the plans of God, the

⁴⁷¹ ”A wonder came to be on the way: water came to be bone.

⁴⁷² *Aglac dreoge, / þær mec wegeð se þe wudu hrereð, / ond mec stondende streamas beatað, / hægl se hearda, ond hrim þeceð, / [.]orst [.....]eoseð, ond fealleð snaw / on þyrelwombne; (77.6-11) “Misery I suffer, where he who stirs woods moves me, and streams beat me standing, the hard hail and hoar covers, frost freezes, and snow falls on the belly-pierced one.”*

*dryhtfolca helm*⁴⁷³ (24.17). Unlike the rood in *Dream of the Rood*, the battering ram (Riddle 51) is not inducted into a broader theological system that makes sense of its suffering, but rather the ram must simply abide it. Because these deaths and sufferings very often happen to non-human speakers, the riddles generally give these topics none of the “special” consideration that they might receive were they referring to sentient victims; Beowulf has mourners, and even Grendel's pain and death are lamented by his mother and empathetic audiences; but, contrary to what one might expect from texts deploying a typical Old English vocabulary of death and suffering, there is no one to lament the speakers of the riddles, for their suffering and death is naturalized and “normal.” While the detachment with which these events are described is not in itself surprising insofar as the application of elaborate systems of mourning and grief to innocuous objects could not but seem bathetic (e. g. an elegy for a weathercock), the fact that these sufferings and deaths are completely naturalized with little ceremony implicitly questions the societal systems that produce such ceremony; if humans are part of a fallen creation where death and suffering are natural, might it not be somewhat presumptuous to imagine special and poetic treatment for these instances in human affairs rather than treat them as brute and ambivalent facts shared amongst all creatures? If a poem like *Beowulf* does, if ever so slightly, point toward heaven and the possibility that humans are set apart from the beasts, the riddles point earthward to emphasize what *Ecclesiastes* 3:19 notes: *idcirco unus interitus est hominis et iumentorum et aequa utriusque condicio sicut moritur homo sic et illa moriuntur similiter spirant omnia et nihil habet homo iumento amplius cuncta subiacent vanitati*.⁴⁷⁴ To be clear, the argument here is not that riddles necessarily pretend to be a final word that subverts the Christian doctrine differentiating

⁴⁷³ “protector of people”

⁴⁷⁴ “Therefore the death of man, and of beasts is one, and the condition of them both is equal: as man dieth, so they also die: all things breathe alike, and man hath nothing more than beast: all things are subject to vanity.” (Douay-Rheims)

humans from animals and situating the former as eternal beings. Rather, it is that riddles are a rhetorical rung on a ladder of mystical ascent toward God. Just as the pessimism of Ecclesiastes is hardly the final word on relations between humans and God, but is only a stage through which one must pass before one reaches the glorious love of the Song of Solomon, so the riddles must not be read as the last word on the subject of God, creatures, and humans, but only as a stepping stone toward full revelation – in order to see that they have the potential to become saints, humans must first acknowledge that they are originally creaturely dust.

6.5 Hierarchy in the Riddle World

The tendency of riddles to “put humans in their place” accords perfectly well with the themes of many of the riddles, for while they certainly question both the perceived mundanity of the world and the proud anthropocentrism of humans, they do not question a hierarchical perspective on the cosmos, but rather underwrite it. Perhaps the most obvious example of such hierarchy is the fire riddle, in which the subject becomes destructive if it is permitted to pridefully transcend its proper place: *Leanað grimme/þam þe hine wloncne weorþan læteð*⁴⁷⁵ (48.9-10). However, there are other less obvious if equally good examples of this hierarchy. Both the mead riddle (25) and the more mysterious Riddle 9 (wine or gold?) indicate negative and even fatal consequences for those who mistake the riddle's speaker as a master rather than a servant. In the Soul and Body riddle (41), the latter ought to remain properly subservient to the former; there will be *care, gif se esne/his hlaforde hyreð yfle*⁴⁷⁶ (41.8-9). In the moon and sun riddle (27), the world of the uncanny night-thief, the moon, is put back in order by the reasonable clarity of the sun. And while such reinscription of hierarchy may seem counterintuitive to the previously discussed instances of subverted anthropocentrism, a dual subversive/hierarchical

⁴⁷⁵ “It repays grimly who lets it wax proud”

⁴⁷⁶ “sorrow, if he hearkens ill to his lord”

approach makes perfect sense in terms of the Biblical account of humans and the Christian tradition that redacted this account. From the Genesis story onward, the Biblical account insists on a proper recognition of one's creaturely place in creation and a proper subversion of the creaturely pride that would seek to master creation. Hence, when the Bible underwrites hierarchy, it does so insofar as this hierarchy is understood to reflect the original and divinely ordained ordering of creation; but when it seems to subvert order (e. g. the story of Babel), it does so because the creaturely orders it subverts are prideful and do not reflect creational order. Both the Biblical and riddling accounts of this are nicely summed up in Psalm 8:5-6, which asks and asserts: *quid est homo quoniam recordaris eius vel filius hominis quoniam visitas eum minues eum paulo minus a Deo gloria et decore coronabis eum*.⁴⁷⁷ This dual perspective on humanity offers insight into the ways that the Solomonic wisdom can hit extremes ranging from near-fatalism to lavish erotic bravado grounded in Edenic imagery, as well as the ways that *Job* both justifies the preciousness of creaturely existence even while undertaking a thoroughgoing critique of mortality. Those who forget that they are crowned with glory and honour become nihilists, while those who forget that they are a little lower than the angels become narcissists; the purpose of wisdom and riddles is to remind humans of both, that is, to make them Christians.⁴⁷⁸

⁴⁷⁷ “What is man that thou art mindful of him? or the son of man that thou visitest him? Thou hast made him a little less than the angels, thou hast crowned him with glory and honour.” (Douay-Rheims)

⁴⁷⁸ To clarify, I am not here claiming that this is the only purpose of the Exeter riddles; indeed, given that pagan culture itself was not bereft of wonder, the riddles might have served a similar purpose in their pre-Christian history. However, this dissertation undertakes to treat the riddles as they appear in their manuscript context, which depended on the scribal technology of monastics, and so its interest is particularly in this Christian context.

6.6 Case Study: The Double Entendre Riddles

The function of riddles, then, depends largely on the social context in which they appear and the purpose for which they are used. Riddles can, as Hansen argues,⁴⁷⁹ act as a means whereby a human riddler can exercise power-knowledge over the riddlee. Yet insofar as they are tied to the greater “riddle of creation,” riddles might also act as means of humbling proud persons and pointing them toward God. Indeed, to make things even more confusing, the same situation could facilitate both functions. Even if a riddle is used by someone seeking power-knowledge, it can still have the unintended effect of serving God's purpose as a means of humbling the proud.

A further demonstration of the insight that this model can offer in the interpretation of riddles is available in what might seem an unlikely source for such proofs, the double-entendre riddles. Arguably, these riddles, like the more obscure and potentially ethically questionable passages of the Bible, act as a test and a means of exercise for the reader who must humbly learn to follow the spirit of the text in charity, rather than the letter pridefully and with concupiscence.⁴⁸⁰ From Augustine onward, there is a hermeneutic tradition that suggests that

⁴⁷⁹ Hansen, *The Solomon Complex*, 131.

⁴⁸⁰ Asiedu describes this hermeneutic well in his summary of Origen's proposed means of interpreting the *Song of Solomon*: “Here and there questions about the propriety of the nuptial or erotic imagery come to the surface. Origen had a way of dealing with the apparent difficulties surrounding what the Song of Songs self-evidently seemed to be talking about and what it took to transpose it into an allegorical frame of reference. Origen places the Song of Songs at the third level of instruction into things divine, behind Ecclesiastes and Proverbs. Adopting the three-fold division of philosophy into physics, ethics, and metaphysics, Origen divides the wisdom of Solomon into three levels corresponding to the natural, moral and the mystical. For Origen, the allegorical reading of the Song is reserved for those who have advanced through the first two stages. Consequently, only a mind trained in the other disciplines of the soul, able to overlook the obviously evocative language of the Song, can transcend the primary level of the text into the deeper contemplation that yields the mystical meaning of the Song. The asceticism involved is both intellectual and moral, since it requires an effacement of the text as something other than what it appears. Whether this involved a certain amount of cognitive displacement seems altogether probable. The mystical reading of the Song of Songs as a description of the individual soul's union with God entails a preliminary “overwrite” of the text, so that in the end ascetic, mystical exegesis of the Song of Songs involves the interpretation of a palimpsest.” F. B. A. Asiedu, “The Song of Songs and the Ascent of the Soul: Ambrose, Augustine, and the Language of Mysticism,” *Vigiliae Christianae* 55, no. 3 (2001): 312.

certain Biblical passages, particularly those which literally seem to advocate immorality and uncharitableness, can be taken in two ways. The way of charity follows the spirit of the text and, usually through allegory and typology, opens the literal text to a broader Biblical and theological vista, a process that both defuses the potentially deconstructive capacity of the passage and forces the reader to engage with the breadth and depth of rich theological complexity.⁴⁸¹ The way of pride, however, uses the text instrumentally, to fulfil the interpreter's own selfish desires.⁴⁸²

It is not plausible to suggest that the double entendre riddles were written or composed with such a high allegorical purpose in mind - they would seem in any case to be an odd way of expressing religious devotion - and they were probably written or composed as a form of entertaining bawdiness. Nonetheless, there was presumably a reason that these poems were included in the Exeter book. One could chalk it up to a scribe who could not in fact read what he was inscribing well enough to censor it. One could similarly posit a scribe whose desire to copy a complete manuscript of collected riddles outweighed his desire to remove or censor certain riddles. But regardless of these practical considerations, I suggest that a plausible way of justifying these riddles for at least some readers is found in the allegorical method - if allegory could be exalted as a way of getting around and justifying the thorny double entendres of the Song of Solomon, surely it could also be used to justify the inclusion of these riddles in the collection.

Indeed, one might posit that the double-entendre riddles are, in a sense, “practice questions” in which readers learn to properly interpret the riddles of nature's book as a precursor for learning to read the riddling passages of a more directly inspired book, the Bible. Just as the proper spiritual interpretation of the Song of Solomon can come about only through the

⁴⁸¹ Cf. Gregory's treatment of “thorny passages” in Scripture in Chapter 2 of this dissertation.

⁴⁸² See Thomas Williams, “Biblical Interpretation,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Augustine*, ed. Eleonore Stump and Norman Kretzmann, 1st ed. (Cambridge University Press, 2001), 66–8.

purgation and humbling process applied to the reader through Ecclesiastes, so one must learn patience fostered by charity and humility in order to get at the more innocuous answers to the riddles. However, a hermeneutic of pride will naturally see itself reflected in the language of the riddles, and so the “plain reading” of the riddles – that is, a reading originating from fallen humanity rather than inflected through the interstices of grace – gives the proud reader exactly what he wants: the selfish violence of concupiscence, which, for Augustine, always accompanies the sexual act.⁴⁸³ Thus, the double entendre riddles are indicators for readers of how far they have progressed along the road of humility fostered through the riddle tradition; if they are attracted to the sexual answers to the riddles, they are presumably still in a state of prideful lust for mastery, and therefore the sorts of persons interested in riddles for the gnostic power it can grant them; conversely, readers drawn to the alternate answers have presumably come further in terms of humility and charity insofar as they are ready to discard the “husk” of concupiscence for the germ of creation hidden within.⁴⁸⁴ That the riddles seem so overtly sexual to most modern readers (and probably many Anglo-Saxon readers) merely underwrites an Anglo-Saxon monastic perspective on the ubiquity of concupiscent pride and the lustful curiosity it invokes; the fault is not in the riddles but in ourselves.

While this may not be the way that most readers are used to interpreting the double-entendre riddles, there is recent critical precedent for such an interpretation. In her article concerning the sexual components of Exeter riddles 42-6, Mercedes Salvador ingeniously argues that, “instead of being regarded as a sample of pornographic material deliberately concealed in

⁴⁸³ See the section on “Sexual Ethics” in Gerald W. Schlabach and Allan D. Fitzgerald, “Ethics,” *Augustine Through the Ages: An Encyclopedia* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999).

⁴⁸⁴ In case one wonders why the matter of sex might be brought up at all by Christians only interested in immediately discarding it for a more edifying matter, I would suggest that it directly reflects the problem of sex in Augustinian theology. Sex is required for procreation, so one cannot ignore it. Yet one must also strive to procreate with as little concupiscence as possible. This presumably created situations where one was both to think and not think about sex at the same time. So the riddles could be mimetic of this problem. On the Augustinian problem of sex, see again “Sexual Ethics” in *ibid.*

the obscure context of a riddle collection, this series could have been designed to be read allegorically, presenting a warning against the dangers of the body, as expressed in Riddle 43...the reading of these poems according to the allegorical method of interpretation may justify the presence of explicit descriptions of body parts and sexual intercourse in the Exeter anthology.”⁴⁸⁵ Salvador even more explicitly corroborates the above argument in her conclusion: “In sum, the sequence formed by riddles 42-46 seems to have been conceived as a section focused on the body, ultimately warning a potential audience against the dangers of relying on the carnal/literal dimension of the texts and, by extension, of life.”⁴⁸⁶ Such an object-lesson in learning and practicing humility by approaching texts that are less than straightforward is in many ways a synecdoche for the broader function of the Exeter riddles: to expose proud humans to the riddlic nature of creation, and thereby teach them to exercise a humbler hermeneutic.

6.7 Conclusion

Thus, riddles can function either as forms of power-knowledge wielded by the human riddler over the riddlee, or alternately, as forms that revivify the world by making it strange with regard to typical societal categories, thereby subverting these categories and demonstrating the power of the creator God that trumps human naming and categorisation. The former response is generally driven by the desire for human mastery, and the purpose is not so much to explore and appreciate mystery as it is to gnostically learn the secrets of mysteries so that those in the know can wield it over the uninitiated. The latter response, however, is one of humility directed immediately toward the complexities of the world and therefore indirectly toward the creator

⁴⁸⁵ Mercedes Salvador, “The Key to the Body: Unlocking Riddles 42-46,” in *Naked Before God: Uncovering the Body in Anglo-Saxon England*, ed. Benjamin C Withers and Jonathan Wilcox, 1st ed, Medieval European Studies 3 (Morgantown: West Virginia University Press, 2003), 63.

⁴⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 96.

who sustains this complex world; for those practicing this response, mystery is not an obstacle for mastery but a rung on the ladder of mystical ascent toward God.

The affinity here to an Ecclesiastesan and Jobean rhetoric is clear, for such issues of comprehension and control are at the very root of both books; for both, the fulcrum point is the matter of who will be in control of the world - humans or God. Ecclesiastes is a series of tensions between the speaker, who sets out *quaerere et investigare sapienter de omnibus quae fiunt sub sole*,⁴⁸⁷ and his God, who *mundum tradidit disputationi eorum ut non inueniat homo opus quod operatus est Deus ab initio usque ad finem*.⁴⁸⁸ Job similarly is a debate over where power, control, and responsibility reside, with each interlocutor offering a different response. And if the primary Biblical texts offer what one might call “natural riddles” - things in the world that frustrate a straightforward interpretation - then these are only complicated by the exegetical glosses. With his three volumes of commentary, Gregory, in any case, does not make interpretation simpler. Thus, the riddling impulse in Old English - as identified particularly in the riddles explored above - is the Old English correlative to the puzzling frustrations encountered so often in Job, Ecclesiastes and the commentary traditions.

As will be demonstrated in the following chapters, such power-plays and encounters with mystery are hardly particular to the riddles alone, but rather thrive at the very heart of the Old English wisdom corpus, for it is by this process of riddling that Old English wisdom deals with the frustration, vanity, and “warfare” so central to the wisdom traditions represented in Ecclesiastes and Job. Intriguingly, this process is neatly highlighted in the less often discussed instance of Old English Solomonic poetry; *Solomon and Saturn I*, a Christian poem that redacts a

⁴⁸⁷ Ecclesiastes 1:13 “to seek and search out wisely concerning all things that are done under the sun” (Douay-Rheims)

⁴⁸⁸ Ecclesiastes 3:11 “hath delivered the world to their consideration, so that man cannot find out the work which God hath made from the beginning to the end.” (Douay-Rheims)

runic tradition for the purposes of discussing the power of the Pater Noster, offers a nice contrast between technologies of mastery and humility-inducing mystery.

Chapter 7: *Solomon and Saturn I*

7.1 *Solomon and Saturn I: A Critical Survey*

Solomon and Saturn I,⁴⁸⁹ in spite of its Solomonic interlocutor, is generally not considered part of the primary wisdom canon. Shippey⁴⁹⁰ does not include it in his collection, and Hansen⁴⁹¹ does not pay it much attention. However, this poem is integral for this dissertation's discussion of Old English and Biblical wisdom, for it is, at least intellectually if not necessarily historically, a transition piece between the more overt power-knowledge of the charmic and runic traditions and the subtler power-knowledge of the Solomonic wisdom tradition. As a poem in which the more elemental charmic desire for power intersects with more complicated matters of power, wisdom, and truth, an understanding of the way it functions is particularly helpful in understanding the power dynamics of more complex wisdom (such as *Solomon and Saturn II*) that retains only palimpsestically the charmic bid for power. In particular, this poem usefully sets out two different approaches to wisdom and power, with the Saturnine position representing an excessive lust for power, and the Solomonic position representing a more chastened relationship with it. This chapter's focus, then, is not on the more typical critical interest in this poem, the curious fighting letters or the identification of obscure references; rather, its burden is to show that through a comparison of the telling albeit brief vignettes of Solomon and Saturn, one can discern contrasting ways of understanding power-knowledge relationships.

⁴⁸⁹ Where possible, citations used are from Anlezark's edition of Cambridge, Corpus Christi College 41 (60-64). Where the version in Corpus Christi 422 differs in ways pertinent to my argument, I note the differences in a footnote. As my argument focuses largely on the characterization of Solomon and Saturn prior to their discussion of the Pater Noster, it does not depend on numerous references from the latter part of the poem, but any citations from line 94 onward are from Anlezark's edition of Corpus Christi 422 (64-71). Anlezark, *The Old English Dialogues of Solomon and Saturn*.

⁴⁹⁰ Shippey, *Poems of Wisdom and Learning in Old English*.

⁴⁹¹ Hansen, *The Solomon Complex*.

Critics rarely write about *Solomon and Saturn I*, and when they do, they rarely agree; what most critics seem to agree upon, however, is that the poem is an exploration of power and violence. Marie Nelson sees the poem as an appropriation of a pagan charmic tradition which replaces runic power with the power of the letters of the Pater Noster.⁴⁹² Katherine O'Brien O'Keeffe, in a complex interpretation of the poem, sees the poem as an exploration of the tension between an oral and written understanding of language, with letters representing a latent power that is not equivalent to the spoken word, which latter makes this power present; from her perspective, Solomon teases a Saturn vested in the written text by offering him the signs of the Pater Noster, but not in fact the actually powerful spoken text of the prayer.⁴⁹³ For John P. Hermann, the text reflects a violence emerging from an oppressive Christianity: "True wisdom is the destruction of all that lies outside the margins of true speech. By relying upon the language of destruction associated with Germanic epic, Old English poetry reduplicates the Prudentian strategy of turning a warlike classical epic against itself."⁴⁹⁴ More recently, Peter Dendle has investigated the demonological aspects of this power struggle, finding the struggle between the Pater Noster and its demonic opponents to be an odd amalgam of theological and folkloric elements.⁴⁹⁵ These conclusions are disparate, but what they all have in common is an emphasis on the power struggles in the text.

Taking up this motif of power, the following argument attempts to do what Dane did for *Solomon and Saturn II* in his study of the poem as narrative rather than mere dissociated

⁴⁹² M. Nelson, "King Solomon's Magic," *Oral Tradition* 5 (1990): 20–36.

⁴⁹³ Katherine O'Brien O'Keeffe, *Visible Song: Transitional Literacy in Old English Verse*, *Cambridge Studies in Anglo-Saxon England* 4 (Cambridge [England] ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 47–76. Her interpretation thus differs from that of Nelson, who sees power in the letters rather than the prayer itself.

⁴⁹⁴ Hermann, *Allegories of War*, 36.

⁴⁹⁵ Peter Dendle, "The Demonological Landscape of the 'Solomon and Saturn' Cycle," *English Studies* 80, no. 4 (1999): 281–292.

arcana;⁴⁹⁶ this is something that has not, I think, been done for *Solomon and Saturn I*. In the critical ethosphere, the poem remains a grab bag of critical curiosities, populated by figures that are supporting props rather than complex characters. To be sure, such critical oversight is understandable given the rudimentary sketches of the characters and their dwarfing by the dazzling power-letters of the Pater Noster. Nonetheless, this chapter contends that on close inspection one can find a dramatic differentiation between the characters, more subtle than that taken for granted by those who read Solomon and Saturn as stock characters. As one might expect from the critical agreement iterated above, this differentiation concerns power and the approaches to power embodied by each character. These approaches to power contain rudiments of the elements of the Jobean/Ecclesiastean wisdom ascent, and they are embryos of the distinctions further clarified in the poem's more fully fleshed-out cousin, *Solomon and Saturn II*.

7.2 Saturn's Manipulative Quest for Wisdom

Although Saturn, like his *alter ego* in *Solomon and Saturn II*, does make some spiritual progress throughout *Solomon and Saturn I*, he primarily typifies a technocrat who treats the Pater Noster as a power no different than any other he has unlocked for his own purposes; as with the other powers and lore he has collected, he simply needs to find the right technique or pay the right price to empower himself through the prayer. For Saturn, the Pater Noster is not categorically different from other items in his arsenal, and this ignorance of its theological distinctiveness is reflected in his lack of knowledge about its specific purpose: *Ic sohte þa git hwylc wære modes oððe mægenprymmes,/elnes oððe æhte {oððe} eorlscipes:/se gepalmtwigoda*

⁴⁹⁶ J. A. Dane, "The Structure of the Old English *Solomon and Saturn II*," *Neophilologus* 64, no. 4 (1980): 592–603.

Pater Noster (9-12).⁴⁹⁷ The terms of his transaction smack of simony; like the Biblical Simon Magus,⁴⁹⁸ Saturn attempts to access *Cristes linan*⁴⁹⁹ (17) through socioeconomic exchange, and even the prices he offers (lines 14-15) hint at suspicious typological overtones; the willingness to give up his sons for the sake of this power may reflect the practice of child sacrifice, condemned and associated with non-Judaic Near Eastern cultures in the Bible (see Leviticus 18:21), while the 30 pounds of gold, offered by an already untrustworthy character and referenced in juxtaposition with the son of David, king of Israel, almost certainly has overtones of the price (albeit in silver) that Judas received for betraying Christ (see Matthew 26:15).

To be sure, Saturn, like the Saturn of *Solomon and Saturn II*, does rectify his ignorance to a certain extent; his interest in opening the doors of heaven (36-8) and in purging his ghost of murder, sorrow, and sin (54-6), would seem to indicate that he is on the right track in comprehending the purpose of the *Pater Noster*. Yet other aspects of these passages complicate Saturn's ostensible progress. For instance, his interest in whoever might *ða haligan duru heofna rices/torhte ontynan on getales rime*⁵⁰⁰ (37-8) shows an interest in occult technique – the opening of doors in ordered succession – that misses the broader spiritual point made by Solomon (as explored below). Similarly, the curiosity that Saturn conveys has overtones of negative excess; that Saturn is *bisi æfter bocum*⁵⁰¹ (61) is reminiscent both of the Ecclesiast's warning against

⁴⁹⁷ “Then I still sought the thing that would be for the mind or virtue, or courage, or power, or nobility: the palm-twigged *Pater Noster*.” trans. Anlezark, *The Old English Dialogues of Solomon and Saturn*, 61.

⁴⁹⁸ On Simon Magus and the derivative word “simony,” see Acts 8:9-24, and also Dominic Manganiello, “Simon Magus,” in *A Dictionary of Biblical Tradition in English Literature*, ed. David L. Jeffrey (Grand Rapids, Mich: W.B. Eerdmans, 1992), 714–5.

⁴⁹⁹ “Christ's line” trans. Anlezark, *The Old English Dialogues of Solomon and Saturn*, 61. There is some critical debate over the meaning of line. Anlezark, finding a parallel in Exeter Riddle 42, suggests that it refers to “letters arranged in a line.” For a summary of the debate, see *ibid.*, 100n17b. Regardless of meaning, the importance of this phrase for my argument is that this *linan*, whatever it is, is a form of power accessible to the Christian Solomon.

⁵⁰⁰ “brightly open up the holy gates of the kingdom of heaven in numbered succession” trans. *ibid.*, 63.

⁵⁰¹ “busy in pursuit of books” trans. *ibid.*

excessive lust after books⁵⁰² and Martha's busy-ness which distracts her from the more perfect contemplative stance of her sister, Mary.⁵⁰³ The frenzy brought about in Saturn through this business becomes a secular inversion of the Holy Spirit; just as tongues of fire in Acts incite the holy zeal of Pentecost, so Saturn's less holy anxiety is typified by fire; he is driven by *fyrwit*⁵⁰⁴ (58), and he asserts that *hwylum me bryne stigeð*⁵⁰⁵ (61). Even the use of the adverbial *hearde*,⁵⁰⁶ (62) referring to the welling up of the *heortan*⁵⁰⁷ (62) has overtones of the hardened heart, typically associated with spiritual darkness in the Biblical imagination. Saturn's ignorance is not akin to the hardened heart of someone like the Pharaoh of the Exodus story, for he is at least interested in spiritual things such as the Pater Noster. Nonetheless, his primary interest in technocracy and the instrumental manipulation of power-knowledge blinds him to the hidden spiritual significance behind the external forms of the Pater Noster; he can perceive its *wlite*⁵⁰⁸ (57), which is associated with the verb *wlitan* (to look) and therefore is associated with literal things that can be perceived with the eyes; he is blind to the less obvious spiritual import, as shown by the question he needs to ask: *hulic is se organan ingemyndum/to beganganne*⁵⁰⁹ (53-4).

⁵⁰² Ecclesiastes 12:12.

⁵⁰³ See Luke 10: 38-42.

⁵⁰⁴ “fire-wit”

⁵⁰⁵ “at times a burning rises in me” trans. *ibid.*

⁵⁰⁶ “hard” There is a discrepancy here between the two manuscripts in which this poem is found. One manuscript has *hædre* while the other has *hearde*. Anlezark, the most recent editor of the poem, suggests the latter as the more probable original, while Daniel O'Donnell argues for *hædre*. Even if the original is *hædre*, though, the variation supports my argument here (and I am not sure why the “original” should have precedence anyway, given that there is a clear meaning for both variations). The brightness referred to by *hædre* in the other version would then accord to the surrounding imagery of burning and fire. See *ibid.*, 105n62b. and Daniel Paul O'Donnell, “*Hædre* and *Hædre Gehogode* (Solomon and Saturn, Line 62B, and Resignation, Line 63A),” *Notes and Queries* 46 (244), no. 3 (1999): 312–13.

⁵⁰⁷ “heart”

⁵⁰⁸ “appearance”

⁵⁰⁹ “how is the organ to be practiced in memory?” trans. Anlezark, *The Old English Dialogues of Solomon and Saturn*, 63.

7.3 Solomon's Alternate Use of Wisdom

In contrast to Saturn's understanding of the Pater Noster as yet another treasure to be collected, Solomon is primarily interested in the sanctified “otherness” of the prayer and the humility proper to approaching it. This prayer is of such a different order from natural human wisdom that those without a proper spiritual knowledge of it, no matter how clever, are beastlike in their ignorance and *unlæde*⁵¹⁰ (22), *unit*⁵¹¹ (22), *wesðe wisdomes*⁵¹² (23), and *windes full*⁵¹³ (25). With a single sentence, Solomon dismisses Saturn's wealth of worldly wisdom, suggesting with regard to Doomsday that

*Donne him bið leofre ðonne eall ðeos leohte gesceaft
gegoten fram ðam grunde goldes and silofres,
feðerscette full fyrngestreona,
gif he æfre ðæs organes owiht cuðe*⁵¹⁴ (30-33)

Significantly, the Pater Noster is so different from the kind of wisdom familiar to Saturn that even the means of exercising it is different; rather than being the kind of power-knowledge that one can wield and manipulate instrumentally, the Pater Noster exercised properly paradoxically positions its powerful “wielder” in the position of a humble supplicant who uses the prayer *Crist geherian*⁵¹⁵ (24). Indeed, the instigation of such humility is the purpose of Solomon's subsequent swift and catalogic survey of the Pater Noster's powers; an odd amalgam of obvious spiritual benefits and cryptic near-riddling qualities, this barrage is presumably designed to thwart any straightforward attempts to appropriate or master God's power through technique; echoing St. Paul and Augustine, Solomon retains love as the only means of approaching and enmeshing

⁵¹⁰ “unhappy”

⁵¹¹ “useless”

⁵¹² “devoid of wisdom” trans. *ibid.*, 61.

⁵¹³ “full of air” *Ibid.*

⁵¹⁴ “Then will it be dearer to him than all this radiant creation, cast from the foundation of gold and silver, the four corners full of ancient treasure, if he ever had known anything at all of the canticle” trans. *ibid.*

⁵¹⁵ “to worship Christ” trans. *ibid.*

oneself in such a vista of holy power – the agency and calculations of someone like Saturn are far too crude to successfully approach it. Such is evident in the specification that the Pater Noster is not simply a charm with latent power that works for everyone, but one that must be approached in a particularly holy way by those who wish *lufian*:

*And se ðe wile geornlice Þone⁵¹⁶ Godes cwide
singan smealice and hine symle
lu{f}ian wile butan leahtrum, he mæg Þone laþan gesið
feohten{d}e feond fleande gebringan⁵¹⁷ (84-7).*

7.4 Examples of the Contrast Between Saturnine and Solomonic Wisdom

There are two moments in this poem that in particular clarify the differences between Saturn's search for power-knowledge and the humility that Solomon demands as a necessity for approaching the Pater Noster. Near the end of the poem, the audience is offered a curious picture regarding the power of runes; apparently, if one idly draws one's sword to admire it, one runs the risk of allowing fiends to inscribe it with harmful or fatal runes (160-63). While this is indeed a curious passage, it nicely typifies the differing attitudes of Saturn and Solomon, as well as some of the contrasting attitudes toward power highlighted in the prior chapter on riddles. The person susceptible to such runic attack seems almost uncritically enamoured with the military power embodied in the sword; he draws it *orðances*⁵¹⁸ (164) and seemingly with no particular purpose; and just as Saturn could only conceive of the Pater Noster in terms of external and worldly

⁵¹⁶ Here, I have followed Corpus Christi 422 rather than 41; 422 offers the more plausible *þone* in place of 41's *þono*.

⁵¹⁷ “And he who will eagerly sing the utterance of God carefully and will cherish it always without misdeeds, he can cause the hated companion, the fighting enemy to flee” trans. *ibid.*, 65.

⁵¹⁸ “thoughtlessly”

categories, so this victim cares only for the sword's *wlite*⁵¹⁹ (165). Because the fault here is a superficial and thoughtless approach to weaponry and therefore war, it is quite appropriate that the remedy for the warrior is that *symle he sceal singan, ðonne he his sweord geteo,/Pater Noster, ond ðæt palmtreow/biddan mid blisse*⁵²⁰ (166-8). Entailed in this recitation is the humble and loving mindfulness necessary for proper deployment of the prayer (as iterated by Solomon earlier); and the recitation of this prayer, which nuances its request for delivery from evil by also insisting on forgiveness of enemies, presumably guards against an idly romantic glorification of war. Not only does this passage clarify the differences between Solomon and Saturn, but it nicely intersects with a number of the themes dealt with earlier in the heroic poetry. For example, the difference between the Viking weapons and the weaponry of Byrhtnoth's men is precisely the difference outlined here: the Vikings, interested in power, are exactly the sort of warriors liable to lust after their swords and all they represent, while Byrhtnoth and company retain a degree of mindfulness regarding their approach to warfare. And if wisdom is, as suggested in earlier chapters, the verbal equivalent of weaponry, then it is possible to conceive of it being both lusted after and mindfully loved, depending on the attitude of those who wield it and seek to obtain it; indeed, this possibility has already been partially explored with regard to the riddles, and will become crucial in the forthcoming discussion of wisdom literature proper.

Alongside this memorable word-picture of runes and warfare, the topos of the palm tree is the other key symbol of the distinction between Saturn's power-knowledge and Solomon's more mystical dissertation of the prayer. Significantly, the Pater Noster is described as “palm-twigged” by both characters,⁵²¹ yet there seems to be a wide chasm between the way that each uses it, and

⁵¹⁹ “appearance” trans. *ibid.*, 71.

⁵²⁰ “ever must he sing, when he draws his sword, the Pater Noster, and pray to that palm tree with bliss” trans. *ibid.*

⁵²¹ See lines 12 and 39.

this chasm depends upon the dual-meaning of this symbolism in broader Christian and classical lore. In the classical world, the palm tree denoted victory in the literal sense;⁵²² hence, when Saturn speaks of the palm twiggled Pater Noster, he is presumably thinking of it in classical terms – it will bring about literal victory understood in terms of worldly power. The alternate Christian meaning of the palm tree, however, is much more polyvalent, for it is caught up in the imagery of Palm Sunday, which partially inverts the meaning of the symbol. To be sure, the palm on Palm Sunday does represent Christ's victory over hell, but the narrative details in the Gospels show this process to be less than straightforward on account of the paradox of this victory through death; like the scenario in *The Dream of the Rood*, this ostensibly heroic scene is complicated by its premonitions of a cross that fits uncomfortably at best within the heroic tradition. Presumably, this is the symbolism behind the palm twig, as used by Solomon.

7.5 Critical Implications

Bringing this duality of meaning to bear on the shocking violence that has troubled critics such as John Hermann, one can discern the difference between the warfare passages of *Solomon and Saturn I* and the lust for violence of a secular warrior culture. Whereas Hermann situates this poem as one of many in which Christianity simply redacts secular violence,⁵²³ we can posit that the exact opposite is happening. As with the symbolism of the palm tree, Christianity in this poem takes up the grammar of a secular military. However, this redaction of military grammar does not mean that there is no difference between the secular and Christian use of the terminology, for, just as the palm tree is won by Christ and Christians in a way counter-intuitive to the classical use of the trope, so the harsh violence against the devil is set in motion not by the

⁵²² See Robert James Menner, *The poetical dialogues of Solomon and Saturn*, (Millwood, N.Y.: Kraus Reprint Co., 1973), 43.

⁵²³ Hermann, *Allegories of War*, 32–6.

cultivation of a warlike spirit, but paradoxically by the humility, love, and mindfulness advocated by Solomon. One of the key principles of paremiology is that the same proverb, in different mouths, can have very different social functions, and this is precisely what Hermann overlooks; though the difference may only be contextual rather than textual, both palm trees and graphic violence, in Christian grammar, have connotations far different from those of the secular grammar with which Hermann attempts to conflate them.⁵²⁴ And these differences must come into play when one is evaluating Old English wisdom.

Because they will be evident in the more dramatically defined sapiential power plays of *Solomon and Saturn II*, the present chapter on *Solomon and Saturn I* need not except very generally draw attention to the overarching parallels between this prototypical poem and the Ecclesiastean and Jobean traditions; aside from the most obvious Solomonic affinity to Ecclesiastes, the most prominent of these are the Job-like conflation of words and weapons and the importance of discernment in navigating the only subtly portrayed moral differences between two “voices” that both seek to use the Pater Noster’s power; this latter is not only reminiscent of the discernment amidst voices in Ecclesiastes, but it particularly resembles the distinction made - with reference to Elihu - between attitudes of humility and pride in approaching wisdom.⁵²⁵ As will be explored in the next chapter, these affinities are amplified, with sententiousness replacing the charmic letters of the Pater Noster, and the bare fact of such power-letters replaced by a more cogent (if very arcane) flow of narrative and dialogue; what *Solomon and Saturn I* hints at by way of affinity with the Biblical texts, *Solomon and Saturn II* elaborates, if in a way that sometimes involves more mystification than clarification.

⁵²⁴ As stated in his introduction, Hermann’s purpose is to argue “that the Old English representation of spiritual life as a violent conflict is complicitous with social violence. Ibid., 1-2.

⁵²⁵ See section 2.3.3.

Chapter 8: The Wisdom Ascent in *Solomon and Saturn II*

In contrast to the poetry dealt with in prior chapters, *Solomon and Saturn II* is a central text in the wisdom canon. It is included in the canons of both Shippey⁵²⁶ and Hansen,⁵²⁷ and the reasons for this inclusion go well beyond a mere traditional association of wisdom with the figure of Solomon. In her detailed linguistic analysis of the poem, Antonina Harbus shows how the particular wisdom-related words in the poem set it apart from other Old English poems in its sophisticated treatment of the subject.⁵²⁸ Along more philosophical, psychological, and rhetorical lines, Mary Wallis has devoted an entire dissertation to detailing the wisdom themes of the poem.⁵²⁹ What this chapter adds to the discussion is an iteration of the alignment of the poem's critically established wisdom themes with the rhetorical patterns discovered in Job and Ecclesiastes. *Solomon and Saturn II*, perhaps more than any other Old English poem dealt with in this dissertation, reads like a mimesis of key features of Jobean and Ecclesiastean wisdom: the dialogic wisdom of these books; their struggles with frustration and vanity; their turn toward a more interior and spiritual kind of wisdom; and finally the conscious Jobean awareness of the parallelisms between wisdom and warfare.

With regard to the narrative flow of *Solomon and Saturn II*, critics are generally in agreement: Solomon, the spokesman of the Christian perspective in the poem, debates Saturn, who is not entirely stupid, but nonetheless seems to indulge in some form of wisdom inferior to that of Solomon.⁵³⁰ For readers following Shippey's and Anlezark's adoption of the fragmentary

⁵²⁶ Shippey, *Poems of Wisdom and Learning in Old English*.

⁵²⁷ Hansen, *The Solomon Complex*.

⁵²⁸ Antonina Harbus, "The Situation of Wisdom in *Solomon and Saturn II*," *Studia Neophilologica: A Journal of Germanic and Romance Languages and Literature* 75, no. 2 (2003): 97–103.

⁵²⁹ Wallis, "Patterns of Wisdom in the Old English *Solomon and Saturn II*."

⁵³⁰ Though critics are fairly consistent in interpreting Solomon as a Christian figure, if technically an anachronistic one, they are divided concerning the nature of Saturn's wisdom. The most recent editor of the poem, Daniel Anlezark, finds him to be "implicitly associated with pagan philosophy and science, and perhaps with

“stray ending” in the Solomon and Saturn manuscript as the conclusion of *Solomon and Saturn II*,⁵³¹ the poem thus features a Christian Solomon overcoming the more worldly Saturn in debate.⁵³² And even if one does not accept arguments for this fragment as the poem's conclusion, there is enough internal evidence in the rest of the poem to establish Solomon as the more victorious figure. Where critics differ is in their interpretation of the mechanics of this debate; how exactly Solomon's wisdom is wiser than that of Saturn, and how this wisdom successfully counters some of Saturn's questions, are mystifying questions that have been answered variously by critics, both in piecemeal articles and more overarching interpretations of the poem, as outlined in the following chapter.

8.1 Critical Context

One of the most significant critical debates over the mechanics of wisdom in *Solomon and Saturn II* concerns the degree of intentionality behind the obscurity of the poem. Unsurprisingly given his pioneering role in Old English wisdom studies, T. A. Shippey was one of the first

astrology and magic” (32), but others are more reluctant to characterize Saturn's wisdom as pagan. Dane suggests that Saturn's wisdom may represent a Manichaean dualist perspective (600), and Shippey finds “Solomon standing generally for a Christian world-view, Saturn, not for paganism exactly, but for doubt” (62). Wallis critiques interpretations of the poem grounded in a Christian/pagan dichotomy on the grounds that they “draw a line both too bold and too superficial between pagan and Christian, as if the poet held a modern distinction in his mind between the two, and constructed his poem from a perspective beyond both” (9); she further argues that the poem “can best be understood not strictly as a debate between a Christian and a “pagan” but as a dialogue that both draws from and responds to the very traditions of wisdom to which it is related” (10). Anlezark, *The Old English Dialogues of Solomon and Saturn*.; Dane, “The Structure of the Old English *Solomon and Saturn II*.”; Shippey, *Old English Verse*.; Wallis, “Patterns of Wisdom in the Old English *Solomon and Saturn II*.”

⁵³¹ Daniel Anlezark, “The Stray Ending in the Solomon Anthology in Cambridge, Corpus Christi College, MS 422,” *Medium Aevum* 80, no. 2 (2011): 201–16. ; Shippey, *Poems of Wisdom and Learning in Old English*, 1076n27.

⁵³² Though see Boryslawski, who interprets the poem as giving equal weight to the authority of Solomon and the deconstructive tendencies of Saturn, and thereby reaching a synthesis of their mutual wisdoms. In my opinion, though, there are too many textual markers suggesting that readers are supposed to consider Solomon the hero; from a (post)modern perspective we are liable to have more sympathy with Saturn, but an Anglo-Saxon reader or audience would have to be fairly subversive to read the poem against the textual indices that Solomon is in the right. Rafal Boryslawski, “Alfred Jewel and the Old English ‘Solomon and Saturn’ Dialogues: Wisdom and Chaos in Old English Gnomic,” in *Fire and Ice: The Dialectic of Order and Chaos*, ed. Piotr Dziedzic and Małgorzata Nitka (Katowice: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Śląskiego, 2008), 34.

scholars to suggest the artificiality of the matter that the poem refers to as if it were common knowledge:

The poet then, was not alluding to accepted, if recondite, knowledge (as in *Beowulf*), still less trying to transmit information (as in the Cotton Vitellius prose dialogue). He was instead laying down a veneer of precision which would both mystify and reassure his readers as to the degree of wisdom the mythical sages possessed; and he was doing it in a way which deserves literary consideration.⁵³³

Shippey is hesitant about this conclusion, asserting that “such a hypothesis can of course never be proved, only disproved e. g. by further and more successful source-study”;⁵³⁴ Hansen, however, is willing to take such a hypothesis further, in part because her argument allows that such mystification has its place in discourse and may not constitute the unjustifiable deceit that seems to make Shippey uncomfortable with the poem. Whereas Shippey implies deceit,⁵³⁵ Hansen praises the poem for its self-referential meta-discussion of the difficulties of language and the navigation of its (de)constructions.⁵³⁶ Between these two interpretations of the “shock and awe” quality of *Solomon and Saturn II* lies the interpretation of Mary Wallis, the critic followed most closely in the following chapters. Like Hansen, Wallis allows for the challenges the poem poses to the complexities of language and communication, describing the determinism of language as a trap that Saturn must escape from.⁵³⁷ However, Wallis’s is what might be called a limited deconstruction - the Christian sort found in St. Augustine - that deconstructs earthly things with regard to heavenly things, but still reserves a place for some meaning and truth

⁵³³ Shippey, *Poems of Wisdom and Learning in Old English*, 24.

⁵³⁴ Ibid.

⁵³⁵ “The drift of this argument is to suggest that the author of *Solomon and Saturn II* was playing, on a larger scale, something like the trick mentioned before, that of inventing a sage or prophet to give authority to his own opinions; and the success of the trick cannot be doubted, for the poem does indeed, by its human drama and combination of detail and mystery, create an impression of profundity beyond any of the other didactic poems” Ibid., 25.

⁵³⁶ “I believe that the audience is meant to be mystified, to some extent, or more precisely to perceive that the traditional communicative process in which Solomon and Saturn are engaged always reflects the very uncertainty, the limitation, the impossibility of knowing fully, that the process itself seeks simultaneously to (re)solve and transcend.” Hansen, *The Solomon Complex*, 149.

⁵³⁷ See Wallis’s section, “The Journey Through Language,” Wallis, “Patterns of Wisdom in the Old English *Solomon and Saturn II*,” 196–236.

beyond language games. Thus she avoids the fear implicit in Shippey, that a too appreciative reading of the poem might involve affirming the deceptions of a poetic con-man. Because she recognizes the important challenge to wisdom language suggested by Hansen, but also addresses Shippey's fear of a descent into rhetorical deceit, I largely follow Wallis's interpretation, though with nods to Hansen's interpretation as means of remembering the exotic otherness of the poem.

For while Wallis does a fine and largely plausible job of exploring the philosophical seeds that lie behind the strange sentences that comprise the poem, her argument has a little difficulty dealing with the more performative and just plain weird aspects of the poem, as exemplified in her interpretation of the ever elusive *Vasa Mortis* figure. Though it would be unfair to simply say that Wallis doesn't "get" the exotic character of the *Vasa Mortis* - she does after all mention in passing its performative purpose⁵³⁸ - her focus is on the more philosophically weighty import of the image: "The interpretive burden for the audience in the *Vasa* passage is to recognize that Saturn's own fetters of worldly curiosity will fall away as he perceives in his growing wisdom that spiritual realities are the only true knowledge."⁵³⁹ Such an interpretation favours the gravitas of the philosophy toward which the *Vasa* allegedly gestures, but does not deal with the exotic strangeness of the passage. This chapter will therefore recall in places the mystification discovered by Hansen, which tries to preserve some of the bald surface absurdities in the poem; yes, the characters are presumably, as Wallis points out, highly philosophical, but there is also something in them that resembles the absurd excesses of the later holy fool characters in Shakespeare, or the character of Thursday in Chesterton's *The Man Who Was Thursday* - for that matter, there are in this poem already seeds of the buffoonery of the Solomon and Marcolf tradition.

⁵³⁸ Ibid., 209.

⁵³⁹ Ibid., 210.

8.2 Competing Wisdoms in *Solomon and Saturn II*

*Solomon and Saturn II*⁵⁴⁰ certainly provides more complex portraits of the two title characters than *Solomon and Saturn I*; while the basic values they typify do not change, Saturn's desire for power and lore is presented more sympathetically in terms of his fear of mortality, and Solomon is less aloof, even if the riddling interest he shows in Saturn's spiritual development is not much less cryptic than the catalogue of the Pater Noster's powers in *Solomon and Saturn I*. The overall flow of the poem is typical of the ascent to wisdom found in Job and Ecclesiastes. The student, Saturn, learns through his struggles against frustration in the world that his own limited perspective and might cannot save him; this failure of worldly wisdom gives way to a deeper wisdom offered by Solomon and gladly accepted by Saturn. This movement of the work will be traced in three parts: the frustration and vanity encountered by Saturn, an outline of Saturn's insufficient response to these frustrations, and an outline of the kind of deeper wisdom that Saturn's earthly wisdom gives way to.

8.2.1 Saturn's Problem of Mutability

The root of Saturn's queries, like the undertones of Unferth's verbal assault on *Beowulf*, lies in a fear of mutability and unpredictability; in many instances, he cuts the figure of a too narrow logician attempting to discern controllable and predictable patterns in the world, only to be constantly frustrated by a creation more complex than his logic. This frustration with a world beyond one's control is perhaps most clear in what is usually considered one of the least clear passages in the text, the *Vasa Mortis* section (75-103). That the inability to comprehend and master the *Vasa Mortis* (whatever it represents) is Saturn's concern is manifest from the very

⁵⁴⁰ Citations are from the most recent edition, Anlezark, *The Old English Dialogues of Solomon and Saturn*, 78–95.

words he uses to introduce the mysterious subject that Solomon even more mysteriously guesses; Saturn's description of his feverish quest points to a form of curiosity negatively defined much like that discovered in the *Vanitas* of Ecclesiastes:

*An wise is on woroldrice
Ymb ða me fyrwet bræc .L. wintra
Dæges ond niehtes ðurh deop gesceaft:
Geomrende gast*⁵⁴¹ (69-72).

This passage not only conveys all the negative overtones associated with *fyrwit* (as outlined in section 7.2 above) and highlights the *geomrende gast* typically associated with those who, Biblically speaking, are always seeing but never perceiving (Mark 4:12);⁵⁴² but it even possibly follows *Solomon and Saturn I* in alluding to the busy-ness of Martha and the contemplation of Mary insofar as Christians know from Luke 10:42 that the “one thing” to be concerned about is Christ, rather than the *An wise* introduced by Saturn.

The *Vasa* itself, whatever else it might be, is certainly an embodiment of the unruly parts of creation or the psyche that humans must contain for the purposes of survival. Just as the wanderer fears the chaos and unpredictability that may ensue if he fails to practice the manly and civilized code of containing the passions beating in his heart, so the description of the *vasa mortis* conveys a fear⁵⁴³ so similar that one is tempted to conceive of the chained bird as a type of the wanderer's soul before he unlocks the fetters of his heart:

ligeð lonnum fæst, locað unhiere

⁵⁴¹ “There is one condition in this worldly kingdom concerning which my curiosity has disturbed me for fifty years, by day and by night, throughout deep destiny: a sorrowing spirit.” trans. *ibid.*, 83.

⁵⁴² See Dane, “The Structure of the Old English *Solomon and Saturn II*,” 594–5. “Although Saturn's question about a *wise on woruldrice*, ‘creature in the world’ (line 247) is obscure and syntactically ambiguous, considering the question in relation to its response (e. g., Saturn's *geomrende gast*, ‘lamenting spirit’ [line 268]) we can take Saturn's ‘lamenting spirit’ as referring to *fyrwet*, ‘curiosity, the curious one’ (line 248) and Solomon's description of *Vasa Mortis* as a representation of the very curiosity that plagues Saturn.”

⁵⁴³ See Anlezark, *The Old English Dialogues of Solomon and Saturn*, 124–5. “A noteworthy feature of the *Vasa Mortis* passage is intense emotion in the fear, grief, and desire of the chained bird, and the fear of the Philistines; the parallel between these and the *perturbationes* discussed by Jerome (in a commentary certainly known to the poet), may explain the emphasis on the number four, and its association with human frailty and death.”

*swiðe swingeð ond his searo hringeð,
 gilleð geomorlice ond his gyren sefað,
 wylleð hine on ðam wite, wunað unlustum,
 singgeð syllice; seldum æfre
 his leoma licggað*⁵⁴⁴ (88-93).

Although it is impossible to say whether either *The Wanderer* or the *Solomon and Saturn II* poet(s) (could have) had in mind the poetry of the other(s), it is clear that the cultural anxieties underlying the description of the *Vasa Mortis* are not unique to this poem, but emerge in the many instances of Old English literature that show concern for the binding of unpredictable emotions, often evoked in turn by an unpredictable environment or social setting. In this cultural context, the wages of giving oneself over to such emotions (and by extension the contexts that evoke them) could be a serious threat to one's wellbeing or even life; *The Wanderer's* stoic mandate to lock one's thoughts in one's heart may not only stem from a misplaced sense of manliness, but may actually be a survival technique that keeps him from the dangerous moodiness of a Heremod (*Beowulf*, 709-23) or a Hrethel (*Beowulf*, 2425-2459). As these examples suggest, it is not at all surprising that the repressed bird is called the *Vasa Mortis* insofar as it is the containment and control of an unruliness that is a threat to one's being and potentially one's life, should it make one reckless.⁵⁴⁵

If the *Vasa Mortis* section constitutes a rather elliptical reference to the forces that Saturn seeks to control via sapiential means, the following riddles that Saturn introduces describe forces

⁵⁴⁴ "It lies fast in chains, gazes fiercely, strongly beats its wings and its gear rattles; it cries out sorrowfully and unhappily, sings strangely; its limbs seldom ever lie still" trans. *ibid.*, 83.

⁵⁴⁵ For confirmation of the *vasa mortis* as a psychospiritual threat, see Joseph Dane, who asserts that "Menner's emphasis on the Hebrew analogues and the binding of the devil Asmodeus is, I believe, misleading; what is functional to the poem is not the particular legendary demon, but rather the clear association of *Vasa Mortis* with spiritual danger. "In contrast to Dane, though, I am a) not certain that the yearning of the bird is entirely a bad thing, and b) of the opinion that this odd representation need not be confined merely to psychic attitudes, but to anything uncontrollable that must be contained for the sake of safety. Dane, "The Structure of the Old English *Solomon and Saturn II*," 595.

more straightforward and more commonly feared; his fear of the answer to his riddle, *Yldo*, is conveyed in his description of its aggression in destroying life, for it

*styrnenga gæð, staðolas beateð,
aweceð wopdropan, winneð oft hider...
Ne mæg hit steorra ne stan ne se steappa gimm,
Wæter ne wildeor wihte beswican,
Ac him on hand gæð heardes ond hnesces,
Micles <ond> mætes⁵⁴⁶ (105-10).*

Saturn also brings up various natural correlatives to the tyranny of old age, and while I will not here explore the issue of whether these should be taken as metaphors or literal observations about nature, it is clear that the mutability and non-programmatic nature of the world concerns him.⁵⁴⁷ For example, he raises the question of why death in the form of winter seems to be written into nature in the form of seasonal cycles:

*Ac forhwon fealleð se snaw, foldan behydeð,
Bewrihð wyrta cið, wæstmas getigeð,
Geðyð hie ond geðreatað, ðæt hie ðrage beoð
Cealde geclungne?⁵⁴⁸ (124-7)*

Similarly, Saturn expresses concern over the fact that not all parts of the earth are equally fertile and sunny, but rather vary depending on climate:

*Ac forhwon ne mot seo sunne side gesceafte
Scire geondscinan? Forhwon besceadeð heo
Muntas ond moras ond monige ec
Weste stowa? Hu geweorðeð þæt?⁵⁴⁹ (163-5)*

⁵⁴⁶ “sternly goes, beats the foundations, arouses tears, often forces its way here...Neither star nor stone nor the broad gem, water nor wild beast can deceive it, but into its hand go hard and soft, the great and small.” trans. Anlezark, *The Old English Dialogues of Solomon and Saturn*, 85.

⁵⁴⁷ This is confirmed by Wallis in her assessment of what she calls the *Yldo-Snaw* passage: “The *Yldo-Snaw* passage affords us only a glimpse of man, but what we do see, in the midst of unrelenting assaults by an *Yldo* whose ultimate victory is assured, is human consciousness reflecting feebly on itself. Rhetorically almost submerged in the catalogue of nature is a generalized humanity whose grip on itself is correspondingly slight and who, despite its achievements in the arts of war and civilization, imagines itself enclosed and fettered within the physical world, destined to be carried from the battlefield in chains along with everything else.” Wallis, “Patterns of Wisdom in the Old English *Solomon and Saturn II*,” 124–5.

⁵⁴⁸ “But why does snow fall - it covers the earth, encloses the shoots of plants, binds things that grow, crushes and inhibits them, so that for a long while they are withered with cold?” trans. Anlezark, *The Old English Dialogues of Solomon and Saturn*, 85.

Moreover, as is typical in wisdom literature,⁵⁵⁰ these natural imbalances in the world point to other more societally driven imbalances that are nonetheless presented as equally natural. Instances that blur boundaries between the workings of nature and societal events include Saturn's concern for the restlessness of the mysterious water that also *cristnað ond clænsað* (218)⁵⁵¹ in what is presumably an ecclesial setting, and lines 134-5 which place the more anthropocentric matters of *sorg*, *wyrda heardost*, and *ned*⁵⁵² alongside natural events such as *nieht*, *wedera diestrost*, *slæp*, and *deaðe*.⁵⁵³ Solomon even encourages Saturn's conflation of these things in a limited way when he responds to one of Saturn's theological questions with imagery involving, fire, sun, snow, and frost (77-8); and when he rephrases Saturn's questions about the unequal sunlight in the world in terms of the unequal distribution of goods among its inhabitants (166-8).

But while Solomon, like his interlocutor, goes a certain way toward interpreting society and human existence in natural terms, he stops short of the thoroughgoing “naturalism” of Saturn, which this dissertation is now in a position to outline. For Saturn, there is seemingly little beyond the causal natural world governed by *wyrd*.⁵⁵⁴ Implied in many of Saturn's questions is a certain external causality, as though everything can be explained in terms of such influence; Saturn's questions concerning the long lives of wicked people (181), universalism (175-6), the

⁵⁴⁹ “But why can't the sun shine brightly across the ample creation? Why does it shade mountains and moors and many other deserted places as well? How does that happen?” trans. *ibid.*, 87.

⁵⁵⁰ Examples of a nearly seamless transition between the arenas of what modern thinkers would distinguish respectively as scientific (natural) and social (constructed) include the opening chapters of Ecclesiastes, which equate natural cycles with a cyclicity of time and experience, and the Old English *Maxims I*, which can so easily transition from the necessities of natural phenomena to the necessities of good kingship: frost must freeze (*B* 1) and the king must pay a bride-price for the queen (*B* 11).

⁵⁵¹ “cristens and cleanses” trans. *ibid.*, 91.

⁵⁵² “sorrow,” the hardest of fates,” and “need.”

⁵⁵³ “night,” darkest of weathers, “sleep,” and “death.”

⁵⁵⁴ For an extensive discussion of Saturn's underlying assumption of a deterministic cosmos with an inflexible *wyrd* at the top, see Wallis, “Patterns of Wisdom in the Old English *Solomon and Saturn II*,” 107-54.

fate of twins (186-92), and the confused wheat and tares of weeping and laughter (170-72) all imply a desire for a causal explanation – one senses that Saturn would be satisfied if Solomon simply gave him the formulae that cause such events to happen. This intimation that Saturn's perspective lies in a narrowly causal system with an arbitrary *wyrd* at the top is further confirmed by a number of eschatological statements that he makes. Unlike the Christian depiction of a Doomsday that actually involves divine judgement of human behaviour throughout history, Saturn's depiction seems to be simply a creative recasting of Ragnarokian chaos; it is up to Solomon to supplement his account with the Christian doctrine that Christ is creator rather than created, and so beyond the reach of such chaos (160-161). Saturn's question concerning *hwa demedð ðonne Dryhtne Criste/on domes dæge*⁵⁵⁵ (158-9) also has Ragnarokian overtones insofar as it casts Christ in the same position as the Norse gods and heroes – powerful but ultimately subject to the caprices of fate, or “judgement.” Such implications are made explicit later in the text when Saturn, at the peak of frustration with an unpredictable world, rails with passion against an overarching and tyrannical fate:

*Ac hwæt witeð us wyrd seo swiðe,
eallra fyrena fruma, fæhðo modor
weana wyrtwela, wopes heafod,
frumscylda gehwæs fæder ond modor,
deaðes dohtor?*⁵⁵⁶ (265-9)

Arguably, it is this expressed concern over the apparently capricious workings of *wyrd* that lies behind much of Saturn's grilling of Solomon.

This is perhaps most evident in Saturn's question about *wyrd* and *warnung*,⁵⁵⁷ clearly, the concern that lies behind this question is a search for techniques of mastery that will help one in

⁵⁵⁵ “who will then judge the Lord Christ on Doomsday” trans. *ibid.*, 87.

⁵⁵⁶ “But why does Fate the Mighty accuse us, the beginning of all torments, mother of all hostility, root of woe, source of weeping, father and mother of each ancient wickedness, daughter of death?” trans. *ibid.*, 93.

one's struggle to survive in the face of *wyrd*.⁵⁵⁸ However, reading the rest of the poem via the clues offered by this passage demonstrates that this search has lain behind Saturn's part of the dialogue all along. He is a child of the Chaldeans of Babel (29-33), who tried to escape the outworkings of fate by building a tower; and Solomon's reminder of the story of Wulf, the land where no one may step, and the folly of overreaching and crossing boundaries, serves as a warning against the pride to which such a search for mastery can lead (34-46).⁵⁵⁹ Though his interest in books looks initially like an interest in righteousness, it becomes manifest that he is not interested in salvation and consolation, as is Solomon, but rather in the wielding of bookish power, as conveyed through his description of books via words typically associated with battle and weaponry, *bald*⁵⁶⁰ (65) and *geweald*.⁵⁶¹ (66) Even Saturn's question about the possibility of dying earlier than decreed by fate shows an interest in calculating the time of one's death (298-302) in a futurological manner similar to the over-inquisitiveness checked in Ecclesiastes with regard to this issue.⁵⁶² The common theme of all these instances is that Saturn wants a form of *warnung* that will allow him, as far as possible, to evade the crushing blows of *wyrd seo swyðe*⁵⁶³ (265) embodied in experiences as natural as time⁵⁶⁴ and as startling as those represented

⁵⁵⁷ *Full oft ic frode menn fyrn gehyrde/secggan ond swerian ymb sume wisan,/hwæðer wære twegra butan tweon stren{g}ra,/wyrd ðe warnung, ðonne hie winnað oft/mid hira ðreamedlan, hwæðerne aðreoteð ær. (247-51)* "Very often of old I heard wise men speak and avow concerning a certain matter, whether without doubt either of two things was stronger - fate or foresight - when they struggle often with each other, with their mental oppression, which of the two becomes tiresome first." trans *ibid.*, 91.

⁵⁵⁸ Of *warnung*, Wallis notes that "It suggests alertness, the kind of defensiveness we would expect in a poem so concerned with assault and conflict, and also the reserve and skill in judgement characteristic of the wise man. Thus the opposition is not really between fate and the ability to deter or prevent events, but between the onslaught of Wyrd and the man who strives to protect himself and his *staðolas* against it" Wallis, "Patterns of Wisdom in the Old English *Solomon and Saturn II*," 147.

⁵⁵⁹ On this section as a critique of Saturn's heroic ideals, see *ibid.*, 178-80. Wallis argues that, from Saturn's perspective, the story of Wulf is an exemplar while, from Solomon's perspective, it is a warning.

⁵⁶⁰ "bold"

⁵⁶¹ "power"

⁵⁶² See Ecclesiastes 9:12.

⁵⁶³ "Fate the Mighty" trans. Anlezark, *The Old English Dialogues of Solomon and Saturn*, 93.

⁵⁶⁴ Wallis in fact suggests that the poem equates time, the *Ylðo* of one of the initial riddles, and the later-mentioned *wyrd*. Wallis, "Patterns of Wisdom in the Old English *Solomon and Saturn II*," 120.

metaphorically through the *Vasa Mortis* section; his continuing interest in sapiocracy reflects a desire to control and/or evade the mortalities and mutabilities that seem set against survival and post-mortem fame.⁵⁶⁵

Given that Saturn restlessly casts about for something akin to heroic wisdom as a way of fending off a mutability ultimately too powerful to fight, it is not unfair to describe Saturn's character as a conflation of the wisdoms of the younger and elder *Beowulf*. Like the younger Beowulf, he has a marked confidence in earthly wisdom technique as a way of dealing with problems; however, like the elder Beowulf, the problems he faces are far too overwhelming to be contained or controlled by such wisdom. His tone, elegiac and cocksure by turns, is particularly reminiscent of the tone that Gregory discovers in Ecclesiastes, at times aiming to excel all others in wisdom, and at other times encountering the impossible distance between this wisdom and the mundane matters that choke it.

8.2.2 Critical Context for Solomon

Turning to the representation of Solomon, the first matter to clear up is how “high” one's interpretation of him should be: is Solomon a type of Christ with a metaphysic well above that of the earthly Saturn, or something else? Wallis at least to a certain degree opts for a fairly “high” interpretation of the poem,⁵⁶⁶ and while I do not dispute that Solomon is the authority figure in this poem, the interaction between the two figures is more rhetorically messy than she presumes. Solomon does, to be sure, lead Saturn to the answers he is looking for, but he does not disdain to

⁵⁶⁵ I here interpret *warnung*, given the context of its discussion amidst the Philistines, as a kind of natural wisdom not specifically Christian, much like that of Beowulf. As part of creation, it is not inherently evil, but it cannot be relied upon alone (which is why Solomon in the following passage goes on to emphasize the workings of grace).

⁵⁶⁶ See her discussion of Solomon as the *Rex Iustus* figure, *ibid.*, 180–90.

take on some of the mannerisms and behaviours appropriate in the heroic context of *flyting*,⁵⁶⁷ and the topics the debaters discuss verge dangerously on occult territory.⁵⁶⁸ Here one does not encounter a wholly Christlike Solomon, but rather a figure more like that in Biblical and traditional accounts - a very wise man, but one who has questionable intercourse with the matter of pagans and demons and the occult. As shown in the following discussion, Solomon has no qualms about playing the rhetor, though he never goes so far as to make the worse appear the better reason.

8.2.3 Solomon's Response to Saturn's Problem

Solomon's response to Saturn's fear and search for sapiential survival techniques is twofold. As Shippey notes,⁵⁶⁹ he does little to comfort Saturn by offering him the kind of answers for which he seems to be searching. He does nothing to mitigate Saturn's fear of old age, but exacerbates it through his thoroughgoing description of its tyranny over creatures. Solomon's terrifying description of the *Vasa Mortis* presumably does little to calm the unnamed fears raised by Saturn. If Saturn was, as is possible, hoping for means of evading the *feowere fægæs rapas*⁵⁷⁰ (155), Solomon's description of them in the past tense, as *gewurdene wyrda*⁵⁷¹ (156), makes their inexorability clear. Nor does Solomon immediately or directly correct the fatalism lying behind Saturn's assertions about night, weather and fate, but initially only adds to his observation by

⁵⁶⁷ For instance, Solomon's evocation of Saturn's angry and evil lineage (152-3) is reminiscent of the insults exchanged between Unferth and Beowulf that hinge on "digging up dirt" on one's opponent's personal history - for instance, Beowulf's offhand remark that Unferth killed his brothers (*Beowulf* 587-8).

⁵⁶⁸ Solomonic material often verges on such occult lore deemed questionable by the church, as suggested by the Gelasian Decretal's condemnation of the now unknown *Contradictio Salomonis*, often brought up in relation to this poem (Anlezark, 12-13). The occult matter of *Solomon and Saturn II* leads Anlezark to suggest attribution of the poem to St. Dunstan, who seems to have had an unhealthy interest in such matters in his youth. Anlezark, *The Old English Dialogues of Solomon and Saturn*, 53.

⁵⁶⁹ Shippey, *Old English Verse*, 64. "What he wants to know is whether Solomon, as proponent of Christian wisdom, has any cogent answer to the problems of evil and suffering. Naturally, there can be no brief answer; and indeed Solomon often seems to confirm Saturn's doubts rather than disperse them, occasionally adding a veiled threat of divine justice to come."

⁵⁷⁰ "four ropes of the fated man" trans. Anlezark, *The Old English Dialogues of Solomon and Saturn*, 87.

⁵⁷¹ "accomplished fates" trans. *ibid.*

noting the autumnal death built into the very seasons themselves. But perhaps the strongest critique of Saturn's search for sapiocracy occurs in Solomon's discussion of the parents who have no control over the fates of their children; in a typically Ecclesiastean turn (Ecclesiastes 2:19), Solomon undermines the stability of wisdom against the world's mutability by asserting that one can never ensure that one's offspring inherits practiced wisdom: *Forðan nah seo modor geweald, ðonne heo magan cenneð,/bearnas blædes*⁵⁷² (206-7).

If this were all Solomon said, he would be more of a nihilist than Saturn, as would be the Solomon of the Biblical tradition if his only testimony were Ecclesiastes. He instead proceeds beyond this exploration of mutability to suggest that, while one may not be able to outwit fate, one does have a degree of control concerning one's response to and interpretation of the workings of *wyrd*. For Solomon, it is true, as Saturn argues, that *wyrd bið wended hearde, wealleð sið geneahhe;/heo wop weceð, heo wean hladeð,/heo gast scyð, heo ger byreð*⁵⁷³ (258-60). Yet the wisdom which one cultivates and the communities (both divine and human) in which one participates do affect the ways that one inflects one's interpretations and responses to this inexorability, as is made clear by the caveat that a man is able *gemitigian*⁵⁷⁴ (262) his fate only *gif he bið modes gleaw/ond to his freondum wile fultum secan,/ðehhwæðre godcundes gæstes brucan*⁵⁷⁵ (262-4). Two men may encounter very similar fates – they may be in unjust exile for instance – but, depending on the varieties of wisdom they have cultivated and the communities that have shaped their formation, the results will vary; to continue with the present

⁵⁷² “Therefore the mother does not have control, when she gives birth to her son, over her child's success” trans. *ibid.*, 89.

⁵⁷³ “Fate is turned with difficulty, it surges up very often; it calls forth weeping, it loads up woe, it harms the spirit, carries the years.” trans. *ibid.*, 93.

⁵⁷⁴ “to moderate”

⁵⁷⁵ “if he is prudent in mind and will seek help from his friends, and moreover enjoy the divine spirit.” *Ibid.*

example, exile may produce poetry as different as the emotive *Tristia* of Ovid and the philosophical rigours of Boethius's *Consolatio*.

This allowance – that while one may have very little control over events fated to happen, one does have control over their response to and reception of these events – opens for Solomon a space wherein he can discuss Christian virtue and faith as a plausible alternative to Saturn's tactical attempts to thwart fate. Where Saturn is concerned about survival in the face of the end of all things, Solomon is concerned about those who, like Saturn and his race (150-3), fail to undertake the proper ethical response to a consideration of apocalypse and death:

*Swa ðonne gefeallað ða ðe fyrena ær
lange læstað, lifiað him in mane,
hydað heahgestreon, healdað georne
on fæstenne feondum to willan,
ond wenað wanhogan ðæt hie wille Wuldorcining
ælmhtig God ece gehiran*⁵⁷⁶ (139-44).

Whereas Saturn is concerned about the question of why different fates come to different people at different times – and seemingly in unjust ways (162-84) – Solomon corrects him; he should not be worrying over the intellectual puzzle of why the world seemingly does not make sense, but rather considering the inevitability of fate for everyone and how one *hine adreogan sceall*⁵⁷⁷ (185). Solomon's insistence on the importance of one's response to *wyrd* is further emphasized in his implicit assertion that certain kinds of unrelenting misery emerge from a conscious decision: *Unlæde bið ond ormod se ðe a wile/geomrian on gihðe*⁵⁷⁸ (173-4). Even ostensible “facts” and concrete objects such as books under the aegis of the world's *wyrd* take on different colourings depending on the one who uses and interprets these things; for Saturn, the story of Wulf (34-46)

⁵⁷⁶ “Just so, then, fall those who earlier persist for a long time in their sins - they live in crime, they hide great treasures, they hold them eagerly in strongholds, to the delight of the enemies - and the fools expect that the King of glory, almighty God, will always listen to them.” trans. *ibid.*, 85,87.

⁵⁷⁷ “must endure it” trans. *ibid.*, 89.

⁵⁷⁸ “He is miserable and despairing, he who always wishes to be sad in grief” trans. *ibid.*, 87.

is yet another curiosity and an answer to a riddle, presumably like those he has encountered in the many other countries he has visited; for Solomon, however, it is a warning concerning attempts to overstep one's proper mortal limitations.⁵⁷⁹ Likewise, books, which, for Saturn, are instruments of power,⁵⁸⁰ are for Solomon aids in moderating the mind, and the resources offered by these aids can only be gotten at when they are tempered by the theological virtues of love and righteousness: *Sige hie onsendað soðfæstra gehwam,/hælo hyðe, ðam ðe hie lufað*⁵⁸¹ (67-8).

This raises the question of Solomon's consistency: How can he be so bleak about the possibility of changing fate, yet so apparently optimistic about the possibility of changing one's response to fate? The answer, I think, lies in the Augustinian concept of prevenient grace.⁵⁸² The natural man, fallen as he is, has no means of escaping the vanity of the world – his will is fallen, and the most he can do is bring about his own destruction. Prevenient grace, however, restores the capacity of the will so that the will can once again function. This is precisely why, as Solomon notes, *him mæg eadig eorl eaðe geceosan/on his modsefan mildne hlaforð,/anne æðeling*⁵⁸³ (212-14), while *Ne mæg don unlæde swa*⁵⁸⁴ (214); the man *eadig* by prevenient grace has the capacity of choice, while the *unlæde* man has not. The choice, of course, is rather different than those choices desired by Saturn, for the *eadig* man is hardly choosing any radical external action against *wyrd*, but rather making an alteration in *his modsefan* – as argued prior,

⁵⁷⁹ See Wallis, "Patterns of Wisdom in the Old English *Solomon and Saturn II*," 178–80.

⁵⁸⁰ His interest is in the one *ðe hira gewald hafað* (66) "who has control of them" trans. Anlezark, *The Old English Dialogues of Solomon and Saturn*, 83.

⁵⁸¹ "They present victory to each of the righteous, a harbour of safety for those who love them" trans. *ibid.*

⁵⁸² "Prevenient grace: The Latin term *preveniens* means "going ahead." In speaking of "prevenient grace," Augustine is defending his characteristic position, that God's grace is active in human lives before conversion. Grace "goes ahead" of humanity, preparing the human will for conversion: the process leading up to that conversion is one of preparation, in which the prevenient grace of God is operative" Alister E. McGrath, *Christian Theology: An Introduction*, 5th ed. (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), 356.

⁵⁸³ "a blessed man can easily discern in his mind a kind lord, a prince" trans. Anlezark, *The Old English Dialogues of Solomon and Saturn*, 91.

⁵⁸⁴ "The unfortunate man cannot do so." trans. *ibid.*

one may not be able to change fate, but one can change one's mind.⁵⁸⁵ This is perhaps most manifest in the alternate rubric Solomon offers Saturn for understanding the workings of the world; instead of simply railing against an inexorable and inscrutable fate, Saturn must learn not only to interpret it in terms of the theological categories offered by the story of the fall ("bad" fate is ultimately the result of sin rather than the workings of a fickle fortune) (272-97), but must also realize that this story is not only a distant metaphor, but for all practical purposes occurs daily in each person's life, as exemplified in the passage concerning the quarrel between the devil and the angel for the soul's allegiances (303-27).⁵⁸⁶

Moreover, Solomon's use of fire to metaphorically reach toward an explanation of change in the cosmos very nicely highlights his view of the posturing of the will within the bounds of grace. Light, particularly in the essential form discussed here, does not necessarily change the workings of fate in the world; after all, things happen regardless of whether they do so amidst darkness or light. Light, however, does affect the way one perceives the world, so that a person

⁵⁸⁵ Both Shippey and Wallis interpret Solomon's implication that will can overcome misery as one of the primary "take home messages" that Solomon gives to one in the condition of Saturn. My argument, however, differs slightly from their positions. Shippey writes as though what the poem is advocating is a pure act of stoic will; for Shippey, the poem is about "the immensely high value that might be set on traditional expressions of wisdom, a virtue not to be confused with the accidental attribute of intelligence or the purely acquired state of knowledge, but instead a condition of mind inseparable from such concepts as resolution, power, and foresight" (Shippey, *Old English Verse*, 67). This, however, ignores the references to a Christian metaphysic - if one can simply will oneself into happiness, then the references to the Christian metaphysic become superfluous (why are God, heaven, blessedness etc. part of the answer is one can simply fix oneself?). On a different note, Wallis interprets the poem's position on the will as one that categorically censures mourning: "Solomon, however, implies that mourning is an action of the mind and as such is subject to control by the will. The king seems, moreover, to be establishing a cause and effect relationship between mourning and the condition of misguidedness and mental dejection and despair. What is hateful to God is not simply the mourning man, but the fact that excessive grief does not, indeed cannot, exist in a wise mind." (Wallis, "Patterns of Wisdom in the Old English *Solomon and Saturn II*," 225). In my opinion, this does not pay careful enough attention to the text. The one whom Solomon condemns is not simply one who *wile/geomrian on gihðe*, but rather one who *a wile geomrian on gihðe*. The inclusion of the adverbial *a* indicating a perpetuation of grief suggests that the problematic person is not simply one who mourns, but one who prolongs mourning for too long. As seen elsewhere in this dissertation, mourning can be an important reminder of the frailty of one's own strength and an impetus to seek something more. In cases like this, willing misery away would not be salvific but would in fact be contrary to one's spiritual health. As mentioned earlier, the important matter is not so much willing all sorrow away as it is paying attention to how one ought *dreosan* well - whether this involves willing the emotions away or pointing up the problems they may gesture toward.

⁵⁸⁶ As Wallis notes, this image "plants the cosmic drama in the individual mind" such that "the end of the debate recalls other works [such as Augustine's *Soliloquia* and Boethius's *Consolatio*] in which the student's lively dialogue evolves finally into silent contemplation of truths given in the teacher's monologues." Ibid., 230.

guided by light might much more readily comprehend and thoughtfully respond to the realities around him/her than could a person in darkness.⁵⁸⁷ In many ways, light, here, can be interpreted as a metaphor for the mind enlightened by God's grace, which may not be able to change its situation but can change its posture.⁵⁸⁸ There is a certain kinship between the lighted mind and the fire that dwells in all creation and points it back to heaven,⁵⁸⁹ so that whatever happens, the lighted mind can have affinity with the heavenward direction of the world.⁵⁹⁰

Of course, light itself can sometimes be threatening, and the consuming fire described here⁵⁹¹ has many of the restless qualities that frighten Saturn about the *vasa mortis*. Yet it remains the case Biblically – as the writer of *Solomon and Saturn II* almost certainly knew – that the quest for control begun and thwarted at Babel was only fully redeemed and inverted by the intervention of the uncontainable flame of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost.⁵⁹²

⁵⁸⁷ On the light and fire imagery here as a representation of clear discernment and perception, see *ibid.*, 230–32.

⁵⁸⁸ Anlezark notes that “the poet suggests a causal connection between sharing in the race of fire - a nature shared by humanity with all things - and the human ability to understand both this fact and share in God's light.” Anlezark, *The Old English Dialogues of Solomon and Saturn*, 134n231–9.

⁵⁸⁹ *cunnað hwænne mote/fyr on his frumsceaft on Fæder geardas,/eft to his eðle, ðanon hit æror cuom.* (237-9) “it searches out the moment when fire might come back to its homeland, to its point of origin in the courts of the Father” trans. *ibid.*, 91.

⁵⁹⁰ *Hit bið eallenga eorl to gesihðe,/Ðam ðe gedælan can Dryhtnes ðecelan,/Forðon nis nænegu gecynd cuiclifigende,/Ne wæteres wylm ne wudutelga,/Ne munt ne mor ne ðes middangeard,/Ðæt he forð ne sie fyrenes cynnes.* (240-6) “It is entirely visible to a man, to him who is able to share in the Lord's lantern, because there is not any vital nature - neither bird nor fish nor stone of the earth, nor surge of water nor tree-branch, nor mountain nor moor nor this middle-earth - that is not of the fiery race.” trans. *ibid.*

⁵⁹¹ *Gif hit unwitan ænige hwile/healdað butan hæftum, hit ðurh hrof wædeð,/bryceð ond bærneð boldgetimbru,/seomað steap ond geap, stigeð on lenge,/clymmeð on gecyndo, cunnað hwænne mote/fyr on his frumsceaft on Fæder geardas,/eft to his eðle, ðanon hit æror cuom.* (240-6) “If an unwise person holds it for any length of time without encasing it, it proceeds through the roof, breaks and burns the house timbers, swings steep and high, ascends in height, climbs according to nature, it searches out the moment when fire might come back to its homeland, to its point of origin in the courts of the Father.” trans. *ibid.*

⁵⁹² On the popularity of the Babel/Pentecost connection amidst Anglo-Saxon Biblical interpreters, see Tristan Gary Major, “Literary Developments of the Table of Nations and the Tower of Babel in Anglo-Saxon England” (Ph.D., University of Toronto, 2010), 138–48, <<https://tspace.library.utoronto.ca/handle/1807/26294>>.

8.2.4 Summary of Sapiential Movement

The complicated labyrinth of wisdom through which Solomon leads Saturn thus proceeds along the following lines. Saturn, seeking a wisdom of mastery and technique that will protect him as long as possible against the unpredictability of the world, is challenged by Solomon's iteration of the sheer impossibility of fighting fate this way. However, while one might expect such an iteration to lead to a pessimistic fatalism, the intervention of Christian theology averts this conclusion by suggesting a sense of powerlessness as a precondition for grace; Saturn thus learns powerlessness as the first form of wisdom because it is only through the recognition of such powerlessness that he can perceive and open himself to other forces beyond his control, namely the grace and redemption of God; in many ways, Solomon's imagery of uncontrollable fire becomes the *in bono* image to Saturn's *in malo* image of *wyrd*, and while powerlessness does not in itself help Saturn personally overcome the forces of *wyrd*, it does conceivably open for him the possibility of submitting himself to an equally uncontrollable force that trumps *wyrd*, which is the fire of God's spirit (which presumably is ultimately synonymous with *wyrd*). To open oneself to this spirit is the substance of the blessedness that is for Solomon the prevenient precondition for a functional will that allows one, in the face of apocalypse, to consider humanity's moral status rather than survival techniques that must be mastered.

8.2.5 Saturn's Warlikeness, Solomon's Passivity

The difference between the rhetorical postures of Solomon and Saturn further illuminates the differences between the passivity or non-violence of Solomon and the more militant interest in action associated with Saturn. The lines missing at the beginning of the poem certainly introduce some ambiguity, but it seems that Solomon's initial engagement with Saturn clarifies

that he may end up exhibiting a sort of passivity or silence that Saturn and his clan might misinterpret as Solomon's loss.⁵⁹³ This theme harkens back to the many instances mentioned earlier in this dissertation in which victory is accomplished through situations that are apparently losses from a worldly perspective; the story of the cross and the story of Job (which become conflated for Gregory) are indeed two examples of this theme. Solomon's stance of non-violence (which accords fittingly with the meaning of his name) is similarly manifest in the pastoral way that he speaks to Saturn; rather than attempting to rile his opponent as one might expect from a *flyting* scenario such as the Beowulf/Unferth episode, Solomon actually restrains himself from expounding upon the problems of the Chaldean race seemingly out of concern for the spiritual state of his *broðer*⁵⁹⁴ (153). Solomon, then, is more interested in Saturn's wellbeing and “losses” that lead to greater goods, than he is in victory *per se*; Saturn, at least at the beginning, resembles more the Philistines who go to great and seemingly absurd military lengths to contain the *vasa mortis*, and thereby achieve victory against death and loss as long as they are permitted through technologies of force.⁵⁹⁵

8.2.6 Frustration and Turn to Grace

Though the conclusion assigned to *Solomon and Saturn II* in Shippey's edition is in fact a fragment rather than something that follows in the immediate manuscript context, the most recent editor of the poem has shown through a variety of similarities between this fragment and

⁵⁹³ *** *Oððe ic swigie,/nyttes hycgge, ðeah ic no spr{e}c{e}./Wat ic ðonne, gif ðu gewitest on Wendelsæ/Ofer coforflod cyððe seccan,/Ðæt ðu wille gilpan ðæt ðu hæbbe gumena bearn/Forcumen ond forcyððed.* “ (24-9)***Or I shall be silent, think of something worthwhile, though I do not speak. I know, then, if you journey on the Mediterranean beyond the River Chobar to seek your homeland, that you will boast that you have overcome and rebutted the children of men.” trans Anlezark, *The Old English Dialogues of Solomon and Saturn*, 81.

⁵⁹⁴ “brother”

⁵⁹⁵ Hence Wallis's argument that Solomon enters the mode of *flyting* but challenges the terms set by Saturn's heroic quest for glory. Wallis, “Patterns of Wisdom in the Old English *Solomon and Saturn II*,” 107–112.

Solomon and Saturn II that the fragment is most likely the proper conclusion.⁵⁹⁶ Thematically, it fits probably with the rest of the poem, for conceivably it would be a great relief for Saturn to set aside his frantic and self-involved quest for survival in favour of a Solomonic theology that may not necessarily eliminate the threats that he faces, but that might grant the ability to “fail well” insofar as even in the face of an apparently malignant *wyrd*, the similarly uncontrollable power of God's Spirit ensures the ultimately good working out of things in the world. This conclusion would also give him a more practical response to the chaotic world, for the practice of doing good according to a will rehabilitated by God's grace is much more readily practicable and accessible than the arcana through which Saturn vainly seeks to trump death. Given that, in comparison to Saturn's perspective, Solomon's is good and anxiety-reducing news, it would not be surprising if, in response to this life-giving news, Saturn laughs for the first time from his heart.

8.3 Conclusion

Considered as a piece, the prior halting explication of sub-units of this poem reveals a remarkable similarity to the Jobean and Ecclesiastean conceptions of wisdom that are the matter of this dissertation. As in *Ecclesiastes*, the poem features voices by no means self-evidently true; as in the case of Elihu in *Job*, much of the evaluation of these voices depends on the rhetorical posture of the interlocutors rather than direct evaluation of the subject of their wisdom.⁵⁹⁷ Like both books, *Solomon and Saturn II* confronts issues of vanity and frustration; like *Job*, it does so via martial technique mapped onto a context where words replace weapons. Like both books, it uses such vanity and frustration to direct both readers and Saturn toward a more heavenly

⁵⁹⁶ Anlezark, “The Stray Ending in the Solomonic Anthology in Cambridge, Corpus Christi College, MS 422.”

⁵⁹⁷ See section 2.3.3.

wisdom beyond that of earth. Yet as helpfully clear as this assessment of parallels is, it does something to detract from the deliberate obscurity in some passages, and it is perhaps fitting to conclude with a brief acknowledgement of this.

As evident in the primary text of Ecclesiastes and the Anglo-Saxon reception of the book, part of the Ecclesiastean encounter with vanity is an encounter with the riddles that surround a person in creation. Prior chapters show how riddles mimetically represent the riddlingness of the world, and so through shock of absurd and unexpected connections remind readers that the entire world is made of such difficult to understand connections - so called “normality” is a riddle that has grown too familiar. Arguably, *Solomon and Saturn II* works in a similar way via the jarring, erratic, and surprising aspects of the poem. The prior explication has (like the explication of Wallis) so to speak tamed these aspects to draw out their rhetorical implications, but one must never forget that this rhetoric is anything but smooth, punctuated as it is by odd whining birds, ropes that bind doomed men, and a Chaldean prince inexplicably bearing the name of a Roman divinity and holding discourse with Philistines. Like riddles, these flourishes highlight, in a way, the frustrations one is up against when one goes about interpreting the world; after we have wrestled thoroughly with them, it makes us ask, not why we encounter such abnormal figures, but rather the reasons for which we consider anything else normal.

Chapter 9: The Public Wisdom Debate and Its Vestiges in

Maxims I & II and *The Fortunes of Men*

9.1 Introduction

As shown in the prior chapters, much of the evaluation of wisdom depends not so much on its content as on its rhetorical deployment. This rhetoric of wisdom is foregrounded most elaborately in *Solomon and Saturn II*, which pairs verbal sparring worthy of Beowulf and Byrhtnoth with the sensitivity to rhetoric manifest in the Exeter riddles and *Solomon Saturn I*. Moreover, it typifies the pattern found in Job and Ecclesiastes, which sees earthly wisdom encounter a *wyrd* or suffering it cannot overcome, and consequently sees this earthly wisdom give way to a heavenly grace that can paradoxically turn “natural” loss into gain; Saturn’s actively defensive wisdom eventually gives way to Solomon’s passive reception of grace. Because this poem brings together so many elements typical of the Old English wisdom tradition, the following chapters use its form as a rough guide for delineating the various points of the “wisdom journey” associated with the poems in *Maxims I & II*, *The Fortunes of Men*, and *Vainglory*.

In terms of the pattern discovered in *Solomon and Saturn II*, the *Maxims* poetry represents the Saturn-like indiscriminate collection of knowledge, or *warnung*, as well as the verbal warfare and violence latent in the *warnung* driven quest to understand the world and so stave off the effects of the death-dealing *wyrd* as long as possible; to explore each maxim of *Maxims I & II* would constitute redundancy, so a few examples from each poem will suffice for the present argument. Because of the general trend of this argument from natural/heroic to spiritual things, it deals with *Maxims II* first, as it is more secular and less complicated by syncretism than *Maxims*

I. After looking at the way that *wyrd* is dealt with in the world of mere survival represented in *Maxims II*, it turns to *Maxims I* to account for the complicating factor of theology that makes this latter a good transition piece between the Saturnine world of public and secular wisdom *flyting*, and the breakdown of this public wisdom mechanics in *The Fortunes of Men*.

With regard to the Biblical texts, these poems correspond primarily to the particularly dialogic aspect of these texts. The open play of wisdom is reminiscent of that hosted by Solomon in Ecclesiastes as well as that featured in Job, whether amongst the immediate interlocutors that are the primary matter of the book or the multitude of secondary interlocutions introduced by Gregory. Moreover, the play of these wisdom voices does not shy away from death, suffering, and hardship even as Ecclesiastes and Job refuse to do this; where these texts differ from the Biblical texts is in the way they generally stop short of the extension into heavenly consolation that exegetes discover in their interpretation of Job and Ecclesiastes.

9.2 *Maxims II*

Central to the rhetoric of the *Maxims* is the tension in these poems often noticed by critics;⁵⁹⁸ the themes of these poems indeed are so disparate that they seem ready to fly apart due to their incongruity, and there are grave critical doubts about whether all the king's horses and all the king's men could put this humpty dumpty together again should such an event happen. Nicholas Howe, for instance, argues that the Old English maxims owe their disparate, chaotic, and non-linear arrangement to a catalogic impulse to collect wisdom, often grouped somewhat

⁵⁹⁸ For a good overview of this tension, see the section on Issues of Coherence and Unity in Poole's bibliography (205-6), and also Greenfield and Evert's (337-40) critique of what was then a near universal critical concordance regarding the disparateness of the *Maxims*, particularly *Maxims II*. Stanley B Greenfield, "Maxims II: Gnome and Poem," in *Anglo-Saxon Poetry: Essays in Appreciation: For John C. McGalliard*, ed. Lewis E. Nicholson and Dolores W. Frese (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1975), 337-354.

arbitrarily rather than according to themes or subjects.⁵⁹⁹ In the following argument, I suggest that such tension amidst sententious phrases is a mimetic representation of the already disparate nature that surrounded Anglo-Saxon poets, even as its continence in a poem is an attempt to tame this disparate chaos that threatens every moment to overwhelm humans. These poems mime the chaotic frenzy of nature, and so in fighting the dragon become the dragon - the result in any case is the Saturnine indiscriminate wisdom pulled about oneself as a protective cloak.

Perhaps one of the most useful pieces of criticism in understanding this mimesis of the chaos of nature is T. D. Hill's "Notes on the Old English *Maxims I & II*," in which he suggests Proverbs and Ecclesiasticus as sources for this poem. Particularly relevant to the argument in this chapter is the way he sees the passages from Ecclesiasticus working themselves out in the poem. According to Hill, Ecclesiasticus allows for a disorganized creation that exists in a state of dynamic but also chaotic play under the overarching aegis of God. It is this state of natural play that the *Maxims* highlight, or, to use my terminology, mimetically reproduce.⁶⁰⁰ Hill's argument, which closely accords with the argument of this dissertation, is further reinforced by the work of Hansen, who leaves her discussion of the *Maxims* until the conclusion of her book because she reads them as in many ways the *least* straightforward of the Old English wisdom poems.⁶⁰¹

But if the *Maxims* reproduce a natural chaos, they also suggest a desire to have some kind of control over this chaos through their capacity to limit and define the world through the power of words. Particularly helpful in understanding this is Jennifer Neville's description of the matter in her excellent but far too short treatment of wisdom literature at the conclusion of

⁵⁹⁹ "With its striking absence of transitions between entries, with its emphasis on copiousness and its resultant lack of closure, the catalogue can easily accommodate the precept and maxim without obscuring their value as discrete statements. These poems have little sense of sustained progression simply because one is brought to a full stop every line or two by the conclusion of a given maxim or precept." Howe, *The Old English Catalogue Poems*, 140.

⁶⁰⁰ T. D. Hill, "Notes on the Old English *Maxims' I and II*," *Notes and Queries* 17, no. 12 (December 1, 1970): 445.

⁶⁰¹ Hansen, *The Solomon Complex*, 153–77.

Representations of the Natural World in Old English Poetry. Quoting Pavlovskis's work on Aldhelm's *Enigmata*,⁶⁰² Neville goes on to apply this to Old English poetry:

In this context the natural world, however it is described, retains no threatening force: in his *Enigmata* Aldhelm

“ban[s] violence and danger from his surroundings by relegating them onto the page and into clearly designated compartments of verse, embedded moreover in a scholarly treatise that has little to do with problems of actual survival. He seldom makes any sort of danger the topic of a riddle, but menace lurks somewhere in the text, confined by it and held subordinate to the main subject, which is most often innocuous. A long invocation to God in the prologue and a no less extensive praise of nature, His immediate creation, in the final riddle, establish further limits to keep in check a seething, tormented world.”

By locking the natural world in the shackles of dactyls and spondees, enclosing it within rhetorical figures and literary allusions and limiting it to an inherited structure of one hundred riddles, all contained within the stated purpose of illustrating metre, Aldhelm achieves a victory similar to that of Beowulf over Grendel: he reduces the natural world to human scale and human terms.⁶⁰³

Neville further suggests that this technique of seeking control over nature through words is evident in the Old English *Maxims*:

Through such literary enclosure one can stand far from the natural world, safely abstracted from its dangers, and yet know it in what is proclaimed to be its entirety. The comments on the natural world in *Maxims I* and *II* can be seen in the same way: although they may merely form a part of a miscellaneous collection, they appear to convey an understanding of the whole of the universe. Just as Old English poets accomplish the impossible task of expressing the ineffable power of God through the literary conventions of describing the creation of the universe, so these writers limit the expanse of the natural world through their apparently all-encompassing lists. By creating these lists, they not only limit the extent of the natural world but also transform its overwhelming and chaotic abundance; that is, they can begin to represent, or better create in writing a natural world like the perfectly balanced harmony envisaged by Boethius.⁶⁰⁴

Though I disagree with Neville's implication that the *Maxims* create an illusion of successfully imposed order (indeed I think they deliberately explore the failure of this illusion), her assessment of the *Maxims*' attempt to empower humans against the world around them is an apt description of their purpose.

⁶⁰² Zoja Pavlovskis, “The Riddler’s Microcosm: From Symphosius to St. Boniface,” *Classica et Mediaevalia* 39 (1988): 242.

⁶⁰³ Neville, *Representations of the Natural World in Old English Poetry*, 194–5.

⁶⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 196.

Neville's theory that maxims might have been used to both embody and control a chaotic world is useful in describing the dynamic of the *Maxims* in terms more concordant with the rest of this dissertation. There is a sense in which the chaotic way things are - a nature that is the way it is regardless of apparent incongruity - embodies what former chapters describe as *wyrd* - nature will be nature regardless of what one might wish it to be. But there is also a sense in which this mimetic poetic embodiment of *wyrd* is at the same time an attempt to use wisdom to fight against this *wyrd* as far as possible. The chaotic way things are may not be changeable, but surely being able to codify parts of reality gives one a leg up in dealing with it; as Kenneth Florey notes of the sometimes apparently mundane Anglo-Saxon maxims, "the poets were somehow re-affirming the *permanency* and *universality* of the concept. In a world subject to constant change, the idea that fire always burns wood must have been re-assuring indeed."⁶⁰⁵ Thus, the *Maxims* read very much like the rhetoric of Saturn - a grasping for sapiential power to use against *wyrd* that nonetheless has overtones of desperation and disparation determined by the formidable and omnipresent nature of the foe being fought.

In this chapter's interpretation of the *Maxims*, my methodology follows that of Hansen and Sealy Ann Gilles, though with some important differences. Gilles makes the excellent point that *Maxims I* is dialogic,⁶⁰⁶ and this is an aspect of her argument that I use in my approach to both *Maxims I & II*. However, some of her claims represent the poem as much more neatly structured in theme than it in fact is, particularly the claim that *Maxims I* shows evidence of debate between a pagan and a Christian voice. On this point, she makes too many unspoken assumptions about

⁶⁰⁵ Kenneth Florey, "Stability and Chaos as Theme in Anglo-Saxon Poetry," *Connecticut Review* 9, no. 2 (1976): 85n7.

⁶⁰⁶ Sealy Ann Gilles, "Lyric and Gnome in Old English Poetry" (Ph.D., City University of New York, 1985), 31-75.

what constitutes either, and many of the lines that are ostensibly pagan might belong equally to Christians, who had also to get by in a world of warfare and politics as much as pagans.⁶⁰⁷

Hansen's interpretation, then, is a corrective to such a reading, for it emphasizes the way that the *Maxims* fly apart at the seams rather than the way the poems hold together; for Hansen, it seems that every statement is an entity unto itself, infinitely interpretable and ready at every moment to upset and challenge what is initially mistaken for the stability of wisdom.⁶⁰⁸ The benefit of this perspective is that it avoids simplistic readings that are too tidy in their parsing of the poem, but the cost is that the *Maxims* become an instance of self-referential rhetoric wherein the particularities of the content and the interaction of these particularities are generally overlooked. I am in agreement with Hansen insofar as she claims that the *Maxims* challenge and thwart modern and linear expectations of the flow a poem "ought" to have. However, I suggest that this is a staged incoherence, and a common part of the ascent to wisdom as surveyed in the prior chapters; though the *Maxims* may not be dialogic in quite the way Gilles argues, I argue that they are dialogic insofar as they represent the frustration of the world that pricks one in the wisdom process to seek higher wisdom.

⁶⁰⁷ For instance, she attributes to a pagan speaker the first four lines, encouraging an exchange of wisdom, and then interprets the next line as a Christian admonition not to begin with wise words, but with praising God. Ibid., 41. Regarding lines 18-23, she reads as pagan the admonition for wise men to hold meetings, settle disputes, and teach peace. There is in fact no contradiction between these ideals and Christianity, as Gilles implies - a pagan as well as a Christian might be equally interested in the exchange of wise words and the discussions of wise men. Ibid., 47.

⁶⁰⁸ "Although it sounds authoritative, the gnomic voice as we have heard it throughout this study is open to human experience and hence to conflicting perspectives, and it insists that in the poem as in life its listeners take part in a mutual performance through which meaning is made." Hansen, *The Solomon Complex*, 176.

9.3 War against *Wyrd* as Theme of Maxims

The clearest example of this is in *Maxims II*,⁶⁰⁹ which is more secular than *Maxims I* and therefore not complicated by as many religious overtones as *I*. The tone for this collection is set by the first line, *cyning sceal rice healdan*⁶¹⁰ (1). Unlike the Solomonic wisdom that involves controlling one's mind, this collection, as delineated in this line, is about survival in the physicality of an hostile world, what Hobbes much later described as the “war of all against all.” That this line is spoken in terms of the king's struggle to survive with his kingdom against *wyrd* as long as possible is manifest in the very next lines, which contrast the image of the king holding his kingdom with the ruins of *orðanc enta geweorc*, *Pa ðe on Þysse eorðan syndon, / wrætlic weallstana geweorc*⁶¹¹ (2) - even the work of giants must fall. By juxtaposing these two images at the beginning of the poem, the poet suggests that, in the face of such mutability, a king must do everything he can to hold onto his kingdom as long as he can – and that he must eventually lose it just as the giants lost their stone buildings.

That the purpose of wisdom is, like the king, ideally protective against the caprices of a chaotic world is highlighted in the poem's description of the function of the wise person: *A sceal snotor hycgean / ymb þysse worulde gewinn*⁶¹² (55-6). As this line makes clear, the necessity of dealing with strife and conflict is what makes such a wisdom poem necessary, and the shades of such strife lie behind many of the poem's lines. For instance, the *geongne æpeling sceolan gode gesiðas / byldan to beaduwe*⁶¹³ (14-15). Numerous implements of battle are listed, including the

⁶⁰⁹ Citations refer to the edition in Shippey, *Poems of Wisdom and Learning in Old English*, 76–9.

⁶¹⁰ “A king is to guard his kingdom” trans. *ibid.*, 77.

⁶¹¹ “the skillful work of giants, which remain in this world, the splendid stone-walled forts” trans. *ibid.*

⁶¹² “The wise man must always consider this world's conflicts” trans. *ibid.*, 79.

⁶¹³ “young prince ought to be encouraged in war...by good companions” trans. *ibid.*, 77.

ecg, the *helme*⁶¹⁴ (16), the *darod*⁶¹⁵ (21), the *sweord*⁶¹⁶ (25), and the *scylde*⁶¹⁷ (37). Various other passages highlight sites of non-military violence: the *wulf*⁶¹⁸ (18), the *eofor*⁶¹⁹ (19), the *bera*⁶²⁰ (42), the *þyrs*⁶²¹ (43), the *þeof*⁶²² (42), the *wearh*⁶²³ (56) – even perhaps the wily woman with her *dyrne cræfte*⁶²⁴ (44). This motif of the fight that is daily life is nowhere better summed up than in the lines that assert: *God sceal wið yfele, geogoð sceal wið ylde, /lif sceal wið deape, leoht sceal wið þystrum, /fyrð wið fyrde, feond wið oðrum, /lað wið laðe ymb land sacan, /synne stælan* (51-5).⁶²⁵ Clearly, both the warrior and the wise person are involved in similar battles against the mutability, death, and loss in the world, as implied in lines that set them alongside each other, or perhaps even equate the two through apposition: *Treow sceal on eorle, /wisdom on were* (32-3).⁶²⁶

War therefore, literal or verbal, is the leitmotif of these maxims, and the reason for this becomes manifest when one considers the dangerous world in which the warriors and sages are acting. Two lines in particular summarize these dangers. In the fifth line, the inexorability of *wyrd* is introduced, and is in fact conceived of as the *swiðost* (5)⁶²⁷ over against a Christ whose *þrymmas syndan...myccle* (4);⁶²⁸ thus, instead of the comparatively more comforting Christian narrative wherein God reveals to humans a character that will always seek the greatest good for

⁶¹⁴ “sword,” “helmet”

⁶¹⁵ “spear”

⁶¹⁶ “sword”

⁶¹⁷ “shield”

⁶¹⁸ “wolf”

⁶¹⁹ “boar”

⁶²⁰ “bear”

⁶²¹ “monster” trans. *ibid.*, 79.

⁶²² “thief”

⁶²³ “outlaw”

⁶²⁴ “secret art” trans. *ibid.*

⁶²⁵ “Good must be against evil, youth against age, life against death, light against darkness, army against army, one enemy against another, foe must fight against foe for land, pursuing violence” trans. *ibid.*

⁶²⁶ “Loyalty must be in the warrior, wisdom in the man”

⁶²⁷ “most mighty”

⁶²⁸ “powers are great” trans. *ibid.*, 71.

all creation, the sages and warriors fight against the backdrop of a vague, inexorable, and ambivalent *wyrd*.⁶²⁹ To make this scenario more threatening, the implements of the “wisdom weaponry,” like Beowulf’s sword, are far from infallible. *Soð bið swicolost* (10),⁶³⁰ indicating that the very truths upon which the wisdom tradition depends are not always easily attainable or easily retained – finding wisdom is more like hunting a wily animal than it is like the immediate intuition of common sense. And even though it may not seem as obviously threatening, the perception that *wea bið wundrum clibbor*⁶³¹ (13) articulates the very real threat of emotional incontinence assumed in Anglo-Saxon culture.⁶³³ To be sure, the poem ends with the typical Old English “turn-to-God,” but the characterization of God, which differs greatly from such instances in *The Wanderer* and *The Seafarer*, reveals him and the afterlife to be nearly as vague as the mysterious *wyrd*; thus, this poem depicts warriors – both of the literal and wisdom variety – fighting for survival in a harsh and hostile world that is made more ominous by the unknown forces and metaphysical spaces that loom darkly beyond its borders – in some ways it is God himself who is the *mearcstapa* of this poem, mysteriously haunting the borders of a creation he is largely omitted from.⁶³⁴

⁶²⁹ Greenfield and Evert offer a survey of critics who have been similarly troubled by the apparent comparison of Christ and *wyrd*, with *wyrd* seeming to come out on top. While Greenfield and Evert resolve this by interpreting *miccle* as “many” rather than “great,” so that *wyrd* simply becomes one of these many powers, the phrase is ambiguous and could go either way. My argument is that such ambiguity is at the heart of the *Maxims*; there is nothing to keep them from being Christian, but not enough didacticism to ensure Christian interpretation. Greenfield, “*Maxims II*,” 342–4.

⁶³⁰ “Truth is trickiest”; there has been considerable debate concerning the translation of this line, mainly with regard to whether the seemingly contradictory *swicolost* should be emended to *switolost* or *swutolost*, which renders the less uneasy meaning of “most evident.” I here follow Robinson, who makes a good case for accepting the unemended form. See Fred Robinson, “Understanding an Old English Wisdom Verse: *Maxims II*, lines ff,” in “*The Tomb of Beowulf*” and *Other Essays on Old English* (Cambridge, Mass: Wiley-Blackwell, 1993), 87–97.

⁶³¹ “woe is wondrously clingy”

⁶³³ Presumably the impulse behind this maxim is the same that causes *Beowulf* to pre-empt such crippling grief in Hrothgar when he advises him that it is better to avenge one’s friends than mourn too much. See section 3.5 of this dissertation..

⁶³⁴ See Loren C. Gruber, who argues that *Maxims II* is an agnostic aesthetic appropriation of ancient wisdom, such that “the executive God of Christianity seems to be an intruder.” Loren C. Gruber, “The Agnostic Anglo-Saxon Gnomes: *Maxims I* and *II*, Germania, and the Boundaries of Northern Wisdom,” *Poetica: An International Journal of Linguistic-Literary Studies* 6 (1976): 39.

9.4 More Subtle Examples of Wisdom's War against *Wyrð*

And it is as a means of coping with this darkness and this absentee God that this poem not only employs the more overt instances of sapiential warfare, but even those that initially may seem inert. For example, there are a number of maxims in the poem that purport to convey a certain degree of normativity in the world. Some of these are more axiomatic in character, as, for example, the observations about weather in lines 5-9, or the other natural observations, such as those concerning creaturely habitats (38-40). However, other assertions are less certain; for instance, one can only hope that a monster's place is outside the community, *on fenne*,⁶³⁵ (43) but there are instances, particularly those witnessed in *Beowulf*, in which monsters, both literal and metaphorical, do not stay in the space ideally fixed for them. Nonetheless, both kinds of assertions – the axioms and what one might call “desired normativity” – consist as ways of anchoring a person's or society's survival and existence. In order to sustain itself and the persons within it, a society must ground itself in a perceived normativity that legitimates its continuing existence and makes that existence intelligible; hence, while these maxims are not quite the offensive weapons encountered so often in the previously discussed poems, they do represent a bulwark of defense against the incursions of chaos, and so they are defensive rather than offensive in their character. Just as weaponry consists as much in fortifications and shields as it consists in swords and spears, so the weaponry of wisdom not only consists in the offensive sort employed by Solomon and Saturn, but also in defensive gestures such as those deployed here as a means of conceiving the world as controllable insofar as it is predictable – the norms of nature and culture ideally offer a shelter behind which one can hide over against the fatal certainty of *wyrð*, though only for a while.

⁶³⁵ “in fen”

9.5 *Maxims I*

9.5.1 Introduction to *Maxims I* and Its Differences

With a few important caveats, *Maxims I*⁶³⁶ functions in a manner similar to *Maxims II*. As in the latter, *Maxims I* juxtaposes physical battle with sapiential battle and wise man with warrior; and, like *Maxims II*, *Maxims I* justifies the sapiential agon on the same grounds that it justifies physical agon, as a means of staving off the *wyrd* to which all living things and societies eventually fall prey. However, there are two very important differences that make this at least a conceptual transition-piece⁶³⁷ between the public and more secularly flavored battles of *Solomon and Saturn* and the *Riddles*, and the theological interiority epitomized in *Precepts* and explored creatively and at length in *The Wanderer* and *The Seafarer*. These two differences are the introduction – though it might equally be called an appropriation - of higher theological metaphysics into the sapiential agon; and the foregrounding of the public verbal exchanges wherein wisdom takes place.

9.5.2 *Maxims I* and Theology

Two instances in particular exemplify the way theology is used in these *Maxims*, the theological discussion of the plague near the beginning, and the discussion of Cain and Abel as the source of evil near the end; what they demonstrate is that the speaker/collector of the maxims, like Saturn, recognizes the power and wisdom of Christian theology, but for him it

⁶³⁶ Citations for *Maxims I* refer to Shippey, *Poems of Wisdom and Learning in Old English*, 64–75.

⁶³⁷ By “conceptual transition-piece,” I mean a poem that conceptually occupies a midpoint between the metaphysics implied in the public-debate poems explored prior and the more contemplative, inward-looking wisdom explored in the following pages. Beyond such organization, it is difficult to speculate about the actual historical development of these types of poems; although it is tempting to posit a scenario in which the former corresponds to an oral warrior culture and the latter to a monastic culture cultivating meditation and writing, the question mark that is the oral prehistory of these works makes it impossible to tell how they developed prior to their inclusion in their manuscript contexts.

seems to be sapiential “furniture” accrued as a means of survival rather than a revealed order of wisdom that for a Guthlac or a Solomon becomes the controlling force that determines and organizes the rest of one's wisdom. For instance, with regard to the poem's explanation of the plague, a serious theologian in the Anglo-Saxon period would presumably have pursued some form of Boethian consolation/explanation, grave and leaving gaps for the mystery of the thing; however, the speaker is quite happy to attribute to God a rather pragmatic and (as Shippey comments)⁶³⁸ proto-Malthusian explanation, in which the preservation of God's character, as revealed in Christianity, is not as important as his function in practically explaining the existence of plague: *ne sy þæs magutimbres gemet ofer eorþan,/gif hi ne wanige se þas woruld teode*⁶³⁹ (*I A* 33-4). Similarly, near the end of *Maxims I*, the quarrel of Cain and Abel is cited as the root of subsequent violences (*I C* 58-66). But instead of introducing any of the usual theological solutions to this problem – solutions that might include the peace bought by Christ on the cross or even a version of Christian just-war theory – the poem uses this violence as a justification for a heroism so unchecked by Christian moderation that the person *heanan hyge*⁶⁴⁰ (*I C* 70), whom Christ calls blessed in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5:3), is merely dismissed as the one who will have *hord unginnoſt*⁶⁴¹ (*I C* 70). In these examples then, ostensibly Christian wisdom is indiscriminately amalgamated with other forms of wisdom, much as one might find the Pater Noster used as a source of power in a magical charm, as in *Solomon and Saturn I*.

When considered against the backdrop of these two theological examples, the pragmatism behind the rest of the theology in the poem becomes evident – God in this poem is not the complex threeness of Guthlac, but rather a placeholder that helps shore up the comprehensibility

⁶³⁸ Ibid., 16.

⁶³⁹ “There would be no limit to the number of children on earth, if he who established this world were not to make them fewer” trans. *ibid.*, 65.

⁶⁴⁰ “of poor spirit” trans. *ibid.*, 75.

⁶⁴¹ “a hoard most unlarge”

– and therefore the manipulability – of the world; for the most part, God and all he represents are little more than pieces of mental furniture amassed and arrayed alongside other forms of wisdom designed for arming the wise person against *wyrd*. For instance, although the poem initially introduces God as both Prime Mover and apocalyptic judge (4-6), he is cordoned off from too close interference in the cosmos with the blunt phrase: *Meotud sceal in wuldre. Mon sceal on eorþan*⁶⁴² (I A 7). The focus is thus clearly on the human sphere, with God appearing now and then as the dispenser or creator of things. Indeed, one might even go so far as to suggest that this instrumentality of God is furthered by the parallels suggested between human lords and God as creator and dispenser. In this poem, there is very little of the lord/retainer affection encountered in other poetry, such as *Beowulf*, *The Wanderer*, and *Maldon*, and the human lord in this poem is conveyed not so much as a person of comfort and joy, but rather as the sort of rapacious person one must put up with out of necessity rather than choice; in the courtly arena of this poem, *brym sceal mid wlenco*⁶⁴³ (I A 61), and one is loyal to the lord more out of fear concerning death than out of love.⁶⁴⁴ As the earthly lord is necessary as provider and protector, but also a figure of relative detachment, so the God presented in this poem seems necessary in terms of explaining and determining events in the world – but his relation to humans is relatively impersonal; such is the suggestion of the analogical assertion at the end of *Maxims I A*, which could elliptically refer either to God or an earthly lord: *Lean sceal, gif we leogan nellað, þam þe us þas lisse geteode*⁶⁴⁵ (I A 72). Like Saturn, *Maxims I* shows an interest in theological wisdom, but only as yet another

⁶⁴² “The Ruler's place is in heaven. Man's is on earth.” trans. *ibid.*, 65. Though one could also translate *wuldre* here as glory - which can be had by God in both heaven and earth - I follow Shippey's translation, which accounts for the implied contrast between God's place and the place of humans, which is earth.

⁶⁴³ “power goes with pride” trans. *ibid.*, 67.

⁶⁴⁴ *Dol biþ se þe his dryhten nat, to þæs oft cymeð deað unþinged* (I A 35) “A man who does not know his Lord is a fool; death often comes unexpectedly to him” trans. *ibid.*, 65.

⁶⁴⁵ “If we do not want to speak false, we will have to repay the one who granted us these favours” trans. *ibid.*, 67.

exotic form of wisdom to be added to one's collection, rather than a determinative revelation by which one organizes the rest of one's wisdom.⁶⁴⁶

In fact, it is this distinction between Saturnine power plays and Solomonic humility that is lacking from Michael Drout's recent analysis of *Maxims I*. Filtering a Benedictine interest in discipline through a Foucaultian interpretive lens, Drout ends up with a version of *Maxims I* which harnesses the power of text to impress upon people Benedictine ideals.⁶⁴⁷ That *Maxims I* is a text entangled in power plays and potential coercive violence is hardly a point I dispute. However, where my interpretation differs from that of Drout is in the closed correlation of such power-plays with Benedictine faith. To be sure, monks will behave unmonkishly, as is clear from the vision that the demons press upon Guthlac. But surely what is in this poem is not so much the captivity of the populace by an iron-willed church as much as it is "church language" pressed into the service of a politics that uses power and coercion without qualms. To be sure, the distinction is a fine one, since the content of the maxims can be taken up as well by a monastic as a secular person, for the most part. What is notable, though, is what is absent - the theological qualifications and caveats required to safely situate this power under the aegis of God and His church. Though it is not his immediate intent, Brian O'Camb's dissertation does a remarkable job of showing just how much extra-textual theological gloss must be added to explain *Maxims I* in a monastic context.⁶⁴⁸ Indeed, I have little doubt that O'Camb is correct - presumably, like the voices in Ecclesiastes, the text of *Maxims I* could be made to fit the broader context of a

⁶⁴⁶ For further on the separation of heavenly and earthly spheres in *Maxims I*, see Gruber, "The Agnostic Anglo-Saxon Gnomes." Gruber concludes that, in *Maxims I*, "Divine and mortal beings truly live in different worlds, and the prospect of their continuing the perennial pagan commerce between gods and men seems unlikely." (31) The primary difference between my prior analysis and that of Gruber is that, whereas Gruber investigates the divorce of heaven and earth with regard to pagan ideas, the interest of this dissertation is in its relation to the Christian commerce of heaven and earth embodied in Christ's incarnation.

⁶⁴⁷ Drout, *How Tradition Works*, 80–86.

⁶⁴⁸ O'Camb does this throughout his dissertation; for a brief summary, see O'Camb, "Toward a Monastic Poetics," 239–43.

Benedictine Biblical and Christian tradition. But the unruly content of *Maxims I* should not be taken as the final word on Christian faith, any more than the Ecclesiastean assertion of vanity should be taken as the highest point of Christian doctrine. Beyond Ecclesiastes lies the love of the Song of Solomon; beyond the power plays of Saturn lies the humble wisdom of Solomon; and *Maxims I* is arguably a text in transition that has not yet reached its “beyond”; as O’Camb’s work suggests,⁶⁴⁹ it exists in the supplemental theology implicit in the Exeter book and the monastic culture that produced it. With relation to the wisdom ascent, this “beyond” is found in other wisdom poetry - *Maxims I* simply mimes the frustration of the world, explores imperfect responses to it, and finishes.

Though this is the predominant trend in *Maxims I*, it is necessary to add the caveat that the appropriated theological concepts do introduce some ambiguity, so that if they are being harnessed for the purposes of worldly wisdom, they also potentially pose a threat to such wisdom by gesturing to a different, more heavenly wisdom accessible by a different path. This is particularly clear in the few references that verge on Christology, for it is Christology that sets Christian wisdom apart from a more deist conception of divinity in which God is an uninvolved dispenser and spectator. God is the *sawla nergend*⁶⁵⁰ (I C 65). The reference is scant, but in light of this probable reference to Christ’s salvation of humans, the poem could take on an entirely different hue, with each instance as a local example of the earthly things that an incarnate God involves himself in. In fact, one perhaps encounters two poems in this poem depending on what one takes as one’s ultimate referent; this is further evident a few lines above, where the poem specifies that there must be *husl halgum men*⁶⁵¹ (62). One can read this in two ways. Either this line pulls the Eucharist down into the world of the mundane and makes it little more significant

⁶⁴⁹ O’Camb, “Toward a Monastic Poetics.”

⁶⁵⁰ “the saviour of souls” trans. Shippey, *Poems of Wisdom and Learning in Old English*, 71.

⁶⁵¹ “the Eucharist for the holy man” trans. *ibid.*

than the *scyld* for the *cempan*⁶⁵² (60), or these other matters are in some way lifted up in the presence of the incarnate God in the Eucharist. Depending on which route one takes here, the poem could be read in a particularly non-religious, pragmatic way, or as nothing less than a religious meditation, as O'Camb suggests. What is lacking is a strong didacticism, such as those found at the end of *The Wanderer* or *The Seafarer*, to admonish us to let heaven subsume earth and not the other way around.

9.5.3 *Maxims I* and Social Context

In addition to these theological distinctives, the explicitly specified social context of *Maxims I* differentiates it from *Maxims II*. Whereas *Maxims II* gives few hints about the situations in which its wisdom might be spoken or employed, *Maxims I* is grounded in a wisdom that must be debated publicly and shared; as the very opening of the poem puts it, *gleawe men sceolon gieddum wrixlan*⁶⁵³ (*I A* 4). A little later, the speaker asserts that *þing sceal gehegan/frod wip frodne*⁶⁵⁴ (*I A* 18-9). Moreover, the poem expresses in lines 45-50 a certain amount of confidence regarding one's ability to pass down wisdom to one's children, that is, to maintain the community of tradition.⁶⁵⁵ And while *Maxims I B* like *Maxims II* iterates shared wisdom rather than offering a meta-discussion of its context, this meta-discussion is again taken up in *C*. The recurring mistrust of what is *degol*⁶⁵⁶ is emphasized in the opening introduction of the public and

⁶⁵² “shield” “warrior” trans. *ibid.*

⁶⁵³ “Men of perception ought to exchange their sayings” trans. Shippey, *Poems of Wisdom and Learning in Old English*, 65.

⁶⁵⁴ “Wise men must hold meetings together” trans. *ibid.*

⁶⁵⁵ *Læran sceal mon geongne monnan, trymman ond tyhtan þæt he teala cunne, oþþæt hine mon atemedne hæbbe; sylle him wist ond wædo, oþþæt hine mon on gewitte alæde. Ne sceal hine mon cildgeongne forcweþan, ær he hine acyþan mote; Py sceal on þeode geþeon, þæt he wese þriðhygende* (*I A* 45-50) “A young man is to be taught, to be encouraged and prompted to know things well, until you have made him manageable; give him food and clothes, until he is led to be sensible. He is not to be abused while he is still a boy, before he has had a chance to prove himself; in this way it will be achieved among people that he becomes firm and confident.” trans. *ibid.*, 67.

⁶⁵⁶ See the “thesis statement” of *Maxims I*, which states that the poem's intended purpose is to bring secrets to light: *Frige mec frodum wordum. Ne læt þinne ferð onhælnes, degol þæt þu deopost cunne. Nelle ic þe min dyrne geseccan, gif þu me þinne hygecræft hylest ond þine heortan geþohtas* (*I A* 1-3). “Question me with wise words.

communal world of day, where people speak freely, and even secrets are not hidden but rather organized in writing: *Ræd sceal mon secgan, rune writan,/leop gesingan, lofes gearnian,/dom areccan, dæges onettan*⁶⁵⁷ (*I C* 1-3). Conversely, the world of secrecy and isolation is treacherous, as exemplified in the following passage concerning the *wineleas wonsælig mon*, who *genimeð him wulfas to geferan,/felafæcne deor*⁶⁵⁸ (*I C* 9-10). Similarly, the poem later relates how *earm biþ se þe sceal ana lifgan,/wineleas wunian hafap him wyrd geteod*⁶⁵⁹ (*I C* 36-7); unlike the Guthlac poetry, this poem configures isolation as an impediment to humanity's struggle against *wyrd*, sapiential and otherwise. Hence, the primary site of wisdom in *Maxims I* is the give and take of public debate, discussion, and other forms of sapiential training;⁶⁶⁰ implicit in this depiction is a certain amount of faith in the community over against an individual's private volition, a faith that distinguishes it from the poems that will be dealt with further on in the next chapter, which trust isolation and interiority over more public forms of sapiential agon.

9.6 *The Fortunes of Men and the Representation of Wyrd*

If the *Maxims* are Saturn-like in their collection of wisdom under the ægis of a publicly debated pragmatism – the key words here are *nyttost* (most useful) and *unnytost* (least useful) (*I B* 49-50) – the *Fortunes of Men*⁶⁶¹ is to the *Maxims* what Solomon's exacerbation of mutability is to Saturn's quest for sapiential dominance. If the *Maxims* positively evaluate human capacity to

But do not let your opinion remain hidden, or what you know most profoundly stay obscure. I will not tell you my secret knowledge if you hide the strength of your mind from me and the thoughts of your heart.” trans. *ibid.*, 65.

⁶⁵⁷ “Good advice should be said out loud, a secret written down, a song sung; fame is to be earned, a judgement pronounced; a man should be busy in the daytime.” trans. *ibid.*, 71.

⁶⁵⁸ “unhappy man who has no friends,” “takes wolves as his companions, most treacherous beasts.” trans. *ibid.*

⁶⁵⁹ “The man who has to live by himself is miserable, fate has dictated that he should live without friends.” trans. *ibid.*, 73.

⁶⁶⁰ For further on this dialectic pedagogy in *Maxims I*, see Gilles, “Lyric and Gnome in Old English Poetry,” 31–75.

⁶⁶¹ All citations are from Shippey, *Poems of Wisdom and Learning in Old English*, 58–63.

pass on wisdom, as suggested earlier, *The Fortunes of Men* is pessimistic in this regard, suggesting that even the utmost attention and training will not guarantee a positive outcome:

*Ful oft þæt gegongeð, mid godes meahtum,
þætte wer ond wif in woruld cennað
bearn mid bebyrdum ond mid bleom gyrwað,
tennaþ ond tætaþ, oþþæt seo tid cymeð,
gegæð gearrimum, þæt þa geongan leomu,
liffæsan leoþu, geloden weorþað.
Fergað swa ond feþað fæder ond modor,
Giefað ond gierwað. God ana wat
Hwæt him weaxwendum winter bringað⁶⁶² (1-9).*

In this spectacularly detailed instance of anticlimax, the poem meticulously details parents' care for their children, and then renders the fruits of this care dubious through a *God ana wat* maxim. Resembling in many ways a Boethian wheel of fortune, the poem goes on to render the frustration of earthly existence, punctuated as it is by horrible deaths the poem describes in graphic detail. Like the figuration of Yldo/Wyrd in Solomon and Saturn II, *wyrd* here bears down crushingly on human lives, and the flat way that it is described leaves no room for fighting or changing one's fate: *Sumum þæt gegongeð on geoguðfeore/þæt se endestæf earfeðmæcgum/weallic weorþeð⁶⁶³ (11-12).* Such is this poem's equivalent of that more modern of sententious sayings, "Shit happens."

In some of the most recent criticism, Karen Swenson has suggested that this poem is in fact two poems stitched together such that the more Christian latter portion answers the pagan fatalism of the first portion.⁶⁶⁴ Though I will not here evaluate the question of sources for this poem, I do agree with Swenson's impulse to interpret this poem in terms of question and answer,

⁶⁶² "It happens very often, through God's power, that a man and woman have children, bringing them into the world through birth and clothing them in fleshly form, coaxing and cherishing, until with the passing of many years the time comes that the young limbs, the members they gave life to, have grown to maturity. In this way the father and mother carry their children and lead them, give them things and provide for them. Only God knows what winters will bring them as they grow up." trans. *ibid.*, 59.

⁶⁶³ "For some it happens in the time of youth that the end comes about for the sufferers woefully."

⁶⁶⁴ Karen Swenson, "Death Appropriated in *The Fates of Men*," *Studies in Philology* 88, no. 2 (April 1, 1991): 123–139.

or call and response. Indeed, the following argument takes this theory further and suggests that the poem answers the suffering and death of the first portion in two ways: once with a partially ironic foil, and once with a legitimate theological answer. The foil consists in the long list of royal activities. It is perhaps partially serious because it is conceivable that a medieval reader might have seen some of these matters as suitable blessings that might answer and soothe the experience of living in a death ridden world; such instances include those who are given *gube blæd,/gewealdenne wigplegan*⁶⁶⁵ (69), and those who become *boceras* (71).⁶⁶⁶ However, can one really take seriously the idea that being good at dice is a positive blessing that might be set over against the negative experience of being hung and having one's eyes pecked out? The consolation of this courtly world is lessened through the iteration of trivialities such as *tæfle cræft* (70),⁶⁶⁷ ornamental smithwork (74), hawking (85-92), and a rather lengthy description of minstrelsy (77-84).⁶⁶⁸ Clearly, this is a list of the stopgaps that humans throw up against the brutal capriciousness of death; some of these one can take more seriously than others, but the presence of doubtful consolations renders the whole thing thin, a sparrow-sheltering mead hall built with some valuable things, but too thin and trivial to offer full protection against the dark and unknown matters outside.

Conversely, if this is a foil of an answer to the starkness of death, the concluding lines gesture toward what might be considered a more satisfactory answer. This answer involves confidence in God's benevolence even while facing the apparent meaninglessness of a *wyrd* that would make Him seem far from benevolent; it involves the recognition that the "givenness" of

⁶⁶⁵ "Joy in battle, mastery in war-play"

⁶⁶⁶ "scholars"

⁶⁶⁷ "game craft"

⁶⁶⁸ Shippey notes of the latter part of the poem that "by contrast, the sequence of good fortunes in the second half of the poem (actually it is rather less) is relatively feeble." Shippey, *Poems of Wisdom and Learning in Old English*, 11.

worldly events constitutes a gift rather than a deterministic trap, and the thankfulness that follows upon this recognition. Indeed, it is this sort of thankfulness – described by St. Paul as “learning to be content in all situations” (Philippians 4:12) – that is presumably meant in the depiction of the Godly person who *sceal on geoguþe mid godes meahtum/his earfoðsīþ ealne forspildan*⁶⁶⁹ (58-9), via the means specified at the conclusion of the poem: *Forþon him nu ealles þonc æghwa secge,/þæs þe he fore his miltsum monnum scrifeð*⁶⁷⁰ (97-8). As in *Solomon and Saturn II*, the encounter with *wyrd* and its inexorability drives the sage toward interiorized contemplation focused on cultivating a theologically proper humility toward and thankfulness for the things that happen; the realm of externals and public debate is by and large abandoned as a world of courtly trivialities that, while perhaps innocent enough in themselves, pale against the backdrop of the sinister deaths that preface them. The progression this poem hints at - from loss through imperfect answer toward more perfect transcendent (and more private) answers - is one that is repeated in *The Wanderer*, and *The Seafarer*, and prefaced by the suspicion of this-worldly things in *Precepts* and *Vainglory*.

⁶⁶⁹ “through the power of God, will in his youth obliterate all his harsh experience” trans. *ibid.*, 61.

⁶⁷⁰ “So let everyone thank him now for everything that he has decreed for men through his mercy.” trans. *ibid.*, 63.

Chapter 10: Toward Wisdom *on mode* in *Vainglory*, *Precepts*, *The Wanderer*, and *The Seafarer*

Preface on Sapiential Asceticism: Leaving Behind a This-Worldly Mechanics of Wisdom

The prior chapters have dealt with two broad categories of Old English wisdom: the heroic wisdom with its martial overtones that finds its closest correlative in the heroically oriented book of Job; and the riddling wisdom, which largely corresponds to the vanity and frustration explored in the commentary tradition on Job and Ecclesiastes available to Anglo-Saxon readers. What these categories have in common are groundings in a particular confidence regarding a public and open practice of wisdom and discernment. To be sure, all the poems except perhaps the *Maxims* do work their way toward what I have described as a kind of wisdom more introspective than the public sapiential speech-acts with which they begin; *Beowulf* in particular allows for the unravelling of the public practice of wisdom to such a degree that the conclusion, with great regret and elegiac lament, enters into a state of desperate introspection as the communities in which wisdom is practiced come up against the scathing reality of death.

In contrast to such *Beowulfian* poems, in which introspection is the bitter reward at the end of an ultimately fallible wisdom practice, the poems that will be discussed in this final category - what I describe as asceticism - increasingly take such introspection for granted and automatically presume its superiority over communally oriented wisdom praxis. This is not to say that either community or dialogue are altogether dropped - indeed, these elements often remain palimpsestically present even in those poems in which the ideal of public and dramatic

wisdom exchange has largely dropped away. However, the starting point is certainly different; rather than consisting primarily in public debate, wisdom in these poems is the capacity to stand apart from such communal processes, privately redacting and rejecting whatever they offer of value or deception respectively. Like the Solomon of Ecclesiastes who ambiguously takes up within himself the voices of a crowd and discerns truth and falsehood in its midst, this act of standing apart, considering and compiling, is also reminiscent of the highest order of thought in Gregory's *Moralia*, wherein all the dramatic voices swamping the text of Job are taken up and synthesized in all their paradox by a single compiler, Gregory, who turns distinctly different parts of a polylogue into a more integrated text with fewer clear boundaries between speakers. This is evident in Gregory's musings on the text, which often ignore the dramatic context in favour of more immediate textual associations; put another way, in Gregory's hands, the text increasingly comes to sound like a single voice debating with itself via different inflections, rather than an out-and-out disagreement between various parties.

What is traced then in the following discussion of this "sapiential asceticism" is an increasing mistrust and breakdown of public communal wisdom technique as evidenced in consecutive analyses of *Vainglory*, *Precepts*, *The Wanderer*, and *The Seafarer*; as well, these chapters keep track of the way that various Ecclesiastean and Jobean themes traced in the prior analyses - of poetry more amenable to a public wisdom mechanics - are transposed onto a more privatized mechanics distrustful of the grounds of communal dialogue in which these themes were redacted and developed. In *Vainglory*, the *flyte* of the hall is characterized as a site of evil, to which a more private and spiritual wisdom mechanics is to be preferred. *Precepts* features a father's wisdom imparted to a son in a world where exposure to public fora such as the mead-hall is hardly a source of communal wisdom, but rather a site where one must be careful not to lose a

precious wisdom preserved from the ravages and temptations of society; as in *Vainglory*, there is little place here for the more traditional public exchange of wisdom. For different reasons, the wisdoms of *The Wanderer* and *The Seafarer* are similarly borne away and grappled in the mead-hall of the mind rather than a literal mead-hall; in these poems, the public, martial attitude of Jobean wisdom gives way to the more ambiguous voicing of Ecclesiastes navigated by a compiler or compilers, and not always forthright in its identification of speakers. These poems thus demonstrate a sapiential asceticism that is the converse of the public wisdom encountered in texts explored earlier, such as the first half of *Beowulf*, *Maxims I & II*, and the *Solomon and Saturn* poems.

10.1 *Vainglory*

10.1.1 Active Fight in *Vainglory*

*Vainglory*⁶⁷¹ can be usefully understood through comparison to some of the other figures and poems discussed earlier in this dissertation, particularly with regard to the difference between wisdom forged and shaped in a public milieu and that forged in a more private and psychologically reflective and reflexive way. In *Beowulf* this is evident in the difference between the public discursive wisdom of the first section and the soliloquy-like mourning of the second. In *Maldon*, the clash is evident between the more public battlefield wisdom such as that exchanged between Byrhtnoth and the Viking herald at the beginning, and the more intimate and cognitively sophisticated exchanges between and descriptions of Byrhtnoth and his soldiers as they heroically lose the battle. In the Guthlac poetry, this difference is evident in the heroic spirituality of Guthlac in *A* and the reflective spirituality of *B*, more implicitly critical of a heroic stance. It is likewise evident in the difference between Saturn's more heroic wisdom and

⁶⁷¹ Citations for *Vainglory* refer to *ibid.*, 54–7.

Solomon's more passive wisdom. Bringing these considerations to bear on *Vainglory*, the poem, considered against the backdrop of the *Maxims* and the *Fortunes of Men*, turns from the world of public verbal sparring toward a more privatized mechanics of wisdom.

With regard to the wisdom *flyting* more prevalent in the previously discussed poems, *Vainglory* paints verbal agon in such a way that there is little room for wisdom in it. In this poem, audiences are first introduced to the perils of verbal agon through the behaviour of the *wlonce wigsmipas*⁶⁷² (14), who *wordum wrixlað, witan fundiaþ/hwylc æscstede inne in ræcede/mid werum wunige, þonne win hweteð/beornes breostsefan*⁶⁷³ (16-19). The militant overtones of this manner of speech are further critiqued in the description of the warrior who carries on *on oferhygdo*⁶⁷⁴ (23); instigated by the *feondes fligepilum*⁶⁷⁵ (27), the warrior imitates this devilish behaviour, for he *worn gepenceþ/hinderhoca, hygegar leteð* (34),⁶⁷⁶ and *scurum sceoteþ*⁶⁷⁷ (34). That wisdom has no room in such barbed showers of words is manifest in the ultimate description of the proud man, which focuses on the violent chaos of his words as a manifestation of the broader violent chaos of his character:

*Siteþ symbolwlonc, searwum læteð
wine gewæged word ut faran,
þræfte þringan þrymme gebyrmed,
æfestum onæled, oferhygda ful,
niþum, nearowrencum*⁶⁷⁸ (39-44).

Clearly, the flurry of words that issue from this proud caricature cannot accommodate wisdom any more than the Satanic rebellion in heaven, to which it is compared (52-66).

⁶⁷² "proud war-smiths"

⁶⁷³ "Exchange words, strive to know what battlefield might remain indoors in the hall with men, when wine whets the heart of a man"

⁶⁷⁴ "in pride"

⁶⁷⁵ "fiend's flying darts"

⁶⁷⁶ "thinks of many barbed devices, he lets fly with premeditated shafts" trans. *ibid.*, 55.

⁶⁷⁷ "snipes continuously" trans. *ibid.*

⁶⁷⁸ "Sitting proudly at the feast, overcome by wine, he lets his words stream out maliciously, pushing for a quarrel, swollen with violence, inflamed by spite and hostility and tricks to cause trouble, full of pride" trans. *ibid.*, 55-7.

10.1.2 Passive and Non-Violent Wisdom in *Vainglory*

Conversely, the actual site of wisdom is much more like Solomon's: passive, circumspect, and cognitive. Grace empowered passivity like that of Solomon is evident in a number of places in the poem; just as Solomon exhibits a certain "pacifism" insofar as he refrains from riling Saturn, so the humble man not only *wip gesibbra gehwone simle healdeð/freode on folce*⁶⁷⁹ (68-9), but also *feond leofað,/ þeah þe he him abyrgnesse oft gefremede/willum in þisse worulde*⁶⁸⁰ (70-72). Such holy patience depends on heavenly intervention; this is mediated through angels, saints,⁶⁸¹ and ultimately *godes agen bearn* (80),⁶⁸² which can be understood as a double reference to both the incarnation and the sonship granted to Christians by this incarnation. One even encounters the difference between Saturnine and Solomonic wisdom in the initial imagery associated with this poem's wisdom; it depicts sapience in overtones reminiscent of a mining process entailing a patience that contrasts starkly with the verbal frenzies of the proud man; like the literal hoard of the last survivor, this *wordhord*⁶⁸³ that the speaker's teacher *onwreah*⁶⁸⁴ (3) requires one who can root it from the bookish soil in which it is buried, and, just as the hoard in *Beowulf* can only be made accessible by a trained warrior, its wealth is not accessible to everyone, but only to a person *boca gleaw*⁶⁸⁵ (4). The contrast between this mining process and the hall-*flyting* continues in the description of this *wordhoard*, which favours perceptiveness and an inner wisdom that is processed in the mind rather than the mead-hall; it grants the speaker the ability

⁶⁷⁹ "lives humbly here on earth, and always keeps on friendly terms with every member of his family and with people generally" trans. *ibid.*, 57.

⁶⁸⁰ "Loves his enemy, though he has often worked with a will provocation for him in this world"

⁶⁸¹ His final destination is the *haligra hyht* and *engla eard* "hope of the saints" and "land of the angels" (73-4) trans. *ibid.*

⁶⁸² "God's own son"

⁶⁸³ "word-treasure"

⁶⁸⁴ "uncovered"

⁶⁸⁵ "wise in books"

*Ongitan bi þam gealdre godes agen bearn,
Wilgest on wicum, ond þone wacran swa some,
Scyldum bescyredne, on gescead witan (5-8).⁶⁸⁶*

This cognitive wisdom demarcated by the key words *ongitan* and *witan* continues in the instruction that the one who seeks this kind of wisdom *ne læteð on þas lænan tid/amyrran his gemyndum modes gælsan*⁶⁸⁷ (10-11); the emphasis on the mind here indicates that it, rather than an external scene, is the site where wisdom is discovered and processed. Similarly, the behaviours instructed by the key verbs at the conclusion of the poem - *wite* (77), *hycgende* (77), and *gemunan* (77) – all denote functions of a mental wisdom mechanics different from the squabbles in the hall and more like the wisdom of Solomon than that of Saturn.⁶⁸⁸

Such transition from the public heroic hall to a more private wisdom mechanics fits plausibly with other critics' observations on the poem. Though her focus is not on the more private poetics of the poem, C. A. Regan's comment offers an opening into the discussion of this; after tracing the patristic psychologies in the text, she offers an apology for its quality: "The poet was obviously steeped in patristic learning but could not transform that learning into effective poetry."⁶⁸⁹ Whether this poem is or is not effective poetry is a debatable point, as medieval thinkers attached a different meaning to "effective" than modern thinkers. What the statement does notice is the thorny difference of this poem from things that modern interpreters, blinkered by romanticism, have come to consider "good" Old English poetry, that is, poetry in the heroic register. There is a certain emotional constipation about the poem, a stuttering guardedness that romantics do not appreciate either in their own context or in the Anglo-Saxon heroic poems they prefer. It is this quality precisely that this chapter has tried to identify in the poem, a move from a

⁶⁸⁶ "[to] recognise properly [by that] God's own son, a welcome guest wherever men live; and in the same way discern that weaker spirit, who was deprived of authority for his offences." trans. *ibid.*, 55.,

⁶⁸⁷ "does not allow spiritual wantonness, during this brief existence, to pervert his intellect" trans. *ibid.*

⁶⁸⁸ *witan* = "to understand"; *hycgan* = "to think"; *gemunan* = "to remember"

⁶⁸⁹ C. A. Regan, "Patristic Psychology in the Old English 'Vainglory,'" *Traditio* 26 (1970): 335.

free and open heroic register to one that is guarded and introspective, suspicious of the common milieu. Not developed to be a straightforward “open” text plainly spoken, the poem is “noteworthy for its verbal ambiguities,”⁶⁹⁰ and its fortress mentality is embodied in the patristic fortress imagery traced by Doubleday.⁶⁹¹ If *The Fortunes of Men* in the last chapter mark the end of confidence in public *flyte*-like wisdom debate, this poem marks the beginning of an introspection and guardedness that is intensified and clarified in *Precepts*, *The Wanderer*, and *The Seafarer*.

10.2 *Precepts*

10.2.1 Introduction

The first question this section must address is its critically unusual decision to discuss *Precepts* alongside *The Wanderer* and *The Seafarer* rather than, say, Hrothgar's sermon in *Beowulf*. Both, after all, involve sober and sad wisdom, and Hansen convincingly discusses them together as forms of parental instruction.⁶⁹² The difference, though, is in the “publicness” of the wisdom in each work. Hrothgar's wisdom is performative, spoken to Beowulf before the entire court. In contrast, the wisdom in *Precepts* is shared by two people apart from a broader corrupt society - it recalls the phrase in *The Wanderer*, *sundor æt rune*⁶⁹³ (111) - and the dismissal of this corrupt society distances the poem from the heroic world where wisdom is largely a public matter, and introduces us to the mechanics of a more privatized wisdom dialogue. Allen Frantzen, one of the few critics who has observed the similarities between the cognitive

⁶⁹⁰ Hansen, *The Solomon Complex*, 73. On the complexity of the language of the poem, see also Bernard F. Huppe, *The Web of Words: Structural Analyses of the Old English Poems “Vainglory,” “The Wonder of Creation,” “The Dream of the Rood,” and “Judith.”* (Albany: State U. of N.Y. Press, 1970), 16.

⁶⁹¹ James F. Doubleday, “The Allegory of the Soul as Fortress in Old English Poetry,” *Anglia* 80 (1970): 503–8.

⁶⁹² Hansen, *The Solomon Complex*, 41–67.

⁶⁹³ “apart at counsel”

orientation of *Precepts* and the so-called elegies (albeit in only a few sentences), notes that “like *The Wanderer*, this poem cautions against disclosing one's thoughts. Instead, one should be wary of his speech, ponder his fortunes “in his breast” and not aloud.”⁶⁹⁴ It is the privacy here noted by Frantzen that makes this poem a conceptual link between the publicly forged wisdom discussed earlier in this dissertation and the psychological mechanics that allow dialogue to be undertaken in a more private form by single speakers in *The Wanderer* and *The Seafarer*.

10.2.2 A Triumph of Introspective Wisdom

If *Vainglory* features the beginnings of a turn away from a wisdom developed, discussed, and tested publicly, its interior retreat from external sapiential agon is further developed in *Precepts*.⁶⁹⁵ Rather than a site of exchanged wisdom, the community becomes a site where one can be potentially drawn away from wisdom, and even those who instruct others in wisdom cannot be guaranteed that it will successfully take root, much like the parents in the *Fortunes of Men*. That various instances of community become sites of menace for the one seeking wisdom is evident in a variety of passages in the poem. The mead hall, presumably the erstwhile site of wisdom exchange, is alluded to in negative terms; implicitly, it is with regard to the mead-hall milieu that the father advises the young man, *Druncen beorg þe ond dollic word*⁶⁹⁶ (34). The “internationality” valued in *Maxims I* (A 12-18) gives way to a hermeneutics of suspicion, not only denoted by the father's warning about the *fremdre meowlan*⁶⁹⁷ (39), but also with regard to his pessimism concerning the morality of other *folca*⁶⁹⁸ (67-72). Moreover, even more immediate

⁶⁹⁴ Allen J Frantzen, *The Literature of Penance in Anglo-Saxon England* (New Brunswick, N.J: Rutgers University Press, 1983), 194.

⁶⁹⁵ Citations for *Precepts* refer to Shippey, *Poems of Wisdom and Learning in Old English*, 48–56.

⁶⁹⁶ “Avoid drunkenness and foolish words” trans. *ibid.*, 49.

⁶⁹⁷ “strange woman”

⁶⁹⁸ “peoples”

communities cannot be trusted; the father finds his own nation to be corrupt,⁶⁹⁹ and presumably on occasion even the bonds of kith and kin must be severed; the father tells the son to obey them only *gif him sy meotud on lufan*⁷⁰⁰ (10). The erosion of familial community as a site of wisdom is further seen in the father's fears and concerns over the passing on of wisdom, which seems to betray a belief that even this most intimate bond between father and son cannot be trusted as a certain means of passing on wisdom. And while he leaves open the possibility of finding the occasional trustworthy friend (29-31), the father's general mistrust of communal means of wisdom technique (public mead-hall dialogue) gives way to a more privatized means of formation more suitable for groups of twos and threes apart from the main group, or, in some cases, solitaires.

This shift is perhaps most evident in the father's sixth instance of advice:

*Ongiet georne hwæt sy god oþþe yfel,
 Ond toscead timle scearpe mode
 In sefan þinum, ond þe a þæt selle geceos.
 A þe bið gedæled; gif þe deah hyge,
 Wunað wisdom in, ond þu wast geara
 Ondgit yfles, heald þe elne wið,
 Feorma þu symle in þinum ferðe god.*⁷⁰¹ (45-51)

Like the Coastguard of *Beowulf* (286-300), the wise man here must be able to make distinctions (though with regard to good and evil rather than words and works), but the difference is that this wisdom has been largely detached from the communal roots foregrounded in *Beowulf*. In *Beowulf*, the ideal heroic wisdom of the individual never falls far from its roots in broader

⁶⁹⁹ He describes “*forð fyrngewritu ond frean domas, / þa þe her on mægðe gehwære men forlætap/swiþor asigan, þonne him sy sylfum ryht.* (74-5) “ancient scriptures and the Lord's judgements, which people here allow to decline in every province, much more than would be for their own good.” trans. *ibid.*, 51. The word *her* seems to indicate that the father is talking about his own locale rather than the other corrupt nations he laments prior to this.

⁷⁰⁰ “if they love God” trans. *ibid.*, 49.

⁷⁰¹ “Be quick to recognise what is good or evil; and always distinguish between them in your mind with sharp intelligence; and always choose the better for yourself. The distinction will always be there for you; if your mind is good enough, and there is wisdom in it, and you have a ready knowledge and perception of evil, then keep yourself resolutely away from it, and always foster what is good in your heart.” trans. *ibid.*, 51.

community, and the latter part of the poem presents such dissociation as an inexplicable tragedy to be fought off as long as possible; however, the wisdom presented here is less immediately dependent on public contexts and is tailored to survive in more individuated and private contexts through its dependance on the mind rather than community – a Wanderer, or a Seafarer with a mind could develop this wisdom in the wilderness much more readily than he could the publically dependent heroic wisdom of *Beowulf*, *Maldon*, or *Solomon and Saturn*, embedded as this latter is in the flashy agon of the mead hall or the battlefield.

While this quote is probably the poem's most representative of this less public and communal wisdom, its marks can be found throughout the poem. Lines 40-41 equate wisdom with a guarded attitude toward one's interaction with the external world, whether these be words or desires: *Wes þu a giedda wis,/wær wið willan, worda hyrde*⁷⁰² (40-41). This guarded attitude is further augmented in the father's seventh set of instructions by what seems allusion to the behaviour of the wise man and the fool amidst what is presumably the conviviality of the mead hall:

*Seldan snotter guma sorgleas blissað,
swylce dol seldon drymeð sorgful
ymb his forðgesceaft, nefne he fæhþe wite.
Wærwyrde sceal wisfæst hæle
Breostum hycgan, nales breahme hlud*⁷⁰³ (54-8).

A comparison between this passage and the wisdom of the younger Beowulf is helpful in demonstrating the immensity of this shift from heroic to more privatized wisdom. Beowulf, where he most clearly represents the heroic wisdom of the mead-hall, is certainly good with words, but incidents such as the *flyting* match with Breca suggest that Beowulf is not exactly

⁷⁰² “Always be wise in what you say, watchful against your desires; guard your words” trans. *ibid.*, 49.

⁷⁰³ “A wise man seldom enjoys himself without worrying; just as a fool rarely mixes enjoyment with concern about his future, unless he knows he has an enemy. A sensible man must be careful with his words, and think things over in his heart, not be loud and noisy” trans. *ibid.*, 51.

wærwyrde “word-wary.” Moreover, the young warrior Beowulf is seemingly far more *sorgleas*⁷⁰⁴ than *Precepts* recommends here for the *snotter guma*;⁷⁰⁵ indeed, he fights his first two battles with a bravado that approaches jocularly at some points. Whereas in *Beowulf* the lines between the mechanics of wisdom and public performance are blurred, *Precepts* offers a world where wisdom is neither loud nor noisy; the wise person ought *breostum hycgan, nales breahhtme hlud*. Moreover, in the tenth set of instructions, the entire passage describes how the wise person *warnað him wommas worda ond dæda/on sefan symle*⁷⁰⁶ (79-80). What was once recognized and tested through public performance in the community is now sifted and sorted in the private confines of the mind. Aside from the primary textual evidence, the probable monastic context of the poem reinforces such displacement of open and public speech-acts with a more private and introspective wisdom.⁷⁰⁷ Elaborating upon the suggestion of Sandra McEntire,⁷⁰⁸ Michael Drout⁷⁰⁹ has argued that this poem is something of a bridge text, evoking a context outside the monastery, but nonetheless conveying Benedictine ideals. Such Benedictine impulses accord well with the argument that *Precepts* is an ascetic wisdom text, shrinking from the wisdom mechanics of the hall and favouring an alternate contemplative mechanics more like that cultivated in a monastery. This mechanics, with its quiet introspection and mistrust of worldly influence, paves the way for the type of wisdom necessary to make poetry such as *The Wanderer* and *The Seafarer* intelligible, for exilic wisdom cannot be developed without a conception of wisdom that can stand independent of the public square.

⁷⁰⁴ “sorrowless” Translation mine.

⁷⁰⁵ “wise man”

⁷⁰⁶ “always guards himself mentally against sins of word and deed” trans. *ibid*.

⁷⁰⁷ To be clear, I do not here mean to suggest that community disappears in the development of monastic discourse, for there is certainly still community in a monastery. Rather, what I am referring to is the displacement of the performative bravado of heroic dialogue with the more subdued and regulated contemplative stance of a monastic community.

⁷⁰⁸ Sandra McEntire, “The Monastic Context of Old English *Precepts*,” *Neuphilologische Mitteilungen* 91 (1990): 243–51.

⁷⁰⁹ Drout, *How Tradition Works*, 54–68.

10.3 *The Wanderer* and *The Seafarer*

What makes *The Wanderer* and *The Seafarer*⁷¹⁰ intriguing is that in spite of the isolated context of the speakers, various communities are retained palimpsestically in the speaker's mind, and the agon of their wisdom, that might once have occurred in the mead hall, now take place in the interior halls of the speaker's mental reflections and memory. Moreover, at stake are the same issues seen in so many other wisdom poems prior, the respective roles of human wisdom, destructive *wyrd*, and heavenly wisdom. Bunched together in a series of non-demarcated “voices” reminiscent of Gregory's Ecclesiastes, these issues and wisdom techniques comprise some of the most sophisticated treatment of the wisdom ascent in Old English poetry.

10.3.1 *The Wanderer*

As numerous critics have noted, the “voices” in *The Wanderer* – and “voices” is the right critical word even if the poem does not contain multiple characters⁷¹¹ – draw wisdom from a

⁷¹⁰ Citations for *The Wanderer* and *The Seafarer* are from Anne Lingard Klinck, *The Old English Elegies: A Critical Edition and Genre Study* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1992), 75–8, and *ibid.*, 79–83. Translations are my own.

⁷¹¹ The question of “voices” in *The Wanderer* is a long and vexed one. Earlier critics tended to read these voices in terms of older vestiges of an original pagan voice curtailed by a more recent Christian voice (cf. Lumiansky, who offers a brief survey of the debate over pagan/Christian voices), while later critics, following Lumiansky, tended to read such voices as a dramatic dialogue. Another contingent of critics, frustrated by the tendency of such early “voice” critics to impose modern categories on medieval texts, suggested textual unity by reading the poem in terms of premodern genera that would have been familiar to an Old English audience - the assertions that this poem would be recognizably unified to those familiar with genres such as *planctus* (Woolf), *compunctio* (Palmer), wisdom (Shippey) etc. - are versions of such historicizing unification. Most recently, critics of a more post-structuralist critical milieu have worried that such unification runs the risk of flattening the polyphony of the text, so they have reintroduced the idea of “voices,” though the voices discussed are now charged with the full complexity and nuance of the postmodern self rather than divisible into simple dramatic personae or binaries such as pagan and Christian (see Pasternack on polyphony and Low on the alienated self). My own reading straddles the gap between the two later critical positions, suggesting that the poem does indeed find some kind of unity as a specimen of the wisdom genre, but also suggesting that this genre has itself always been something of a restless-voiced polyphonic genre, a fact that lends historicist credence to the more postmodern interpretations. R. M. Lumiansky, “The Dramatic Structure of the Old English *Wanderer*,” *Neophilologus* 34, no. 1 (1950): 104–112. Rosemary Woolf, “*The Wanderer*, the *Seafarer*, and the Genre of *Planctus*” (London: University of Notre Dame Press, 1975), 192–207; James M. Palmer, “*Compunctio* and the Heart in the Old English Poem *The Wanderer*,” *Neophilologus* 88, no. 3 (2004): 447–460; Shippey, “*The Wanderer* and *The Seafarer* as Wisdom Poetry.” Carol Braun Pasternack, “Anonymous Polyphony and *The Wanderer*'s Textuality,” *Anglo-Saxon England* 20 (1991): 99–122. Anthony Low,

variety of categories that exist in tension with each other. James Cross astutely reads the poem as a set of concentric wisdom circles in which more secular wisdom is not so much negated as subsumed and qualified within a broader framework of Christian wisdom, and these wisdoms are represented by various voices emerging from various communal contexts.⁷¹² Moreover, there is remarkable continuity between Cross's argument and more modern, theoretical perspectives arguing that the poem is a conglomerate of voices in uncomfortable tension, eventually attempting to find apotheosis in the final Christian lines of the text. Carol Braun Pasternack, for instance, offers a fairly representative reading of the poem, discovering in it a Bakhtinian polyphony reaching toward the assurance at the end of the poem through a variety of voices.⁷¹³

10.3.1.1 Warrior culture

The wrangling of these voices contributes to the martial tenor of the poem. For those used to discussing the poem as an elegy or even as wisdom poetry, the description of *The Wanderer* as a martial poem may come as a surprise; however, the following will show why this term is apt, and therefore why *The Wanderer* is in many ways the apotheosis of wisdom's war, rooted in the warlike world of *Beowulf* and branching into the worlds of religion, mysticism, and arcana represented in poetry such as *Precepts* and the *Solomon and Saturn* poems.

Though it is not popularly read as a poem with a particularly military tone, critics such as Scott Gwara suggest as much. Gwara, seeking to redress critical oversight of the poem's warrior themes, goes so far as to argue that the speaker is actuated by a “philosophy of warrior

“Exile, *The Wanderer*, and the Long Wave of Alienation and Subjectivity,” in *Satura: Studies in Medieval Literature in Honour of Robert R. Raymo*, ed. by Nancy M. Reale and Ruth E. Sternglantz (Donington: Shaun Tyas, 2001), 1–19.

⁷¹² J. E Cross, “On the Genre of *The Wanderer*,” *Neophilologus* 45, no. 1 (December 1, 1961): 63–75.

⁷¹³ Pasternack, “Anonymous Polyphony and *The Wanderer*’s Textuality.”

wisdom,”⁷¹⁴ and to analyze the poem at length from this perspective. Given the overlap between warrior culture and wisdom not only in poems such as *Beowulf* but also in the Biblical context of Job, Gwara's discovery of warrior motifs in what is also a wisdom poem is a useful critical springboard for exploring the place of *The Wanderer* amidst the wisdom dealt with in this dissertation.

One of the most fruitful ways to trace the martial tenor of the poem is to identify the enemies against which the speaker fights. The most immediate enemy is the harshness of nature;⁷¹⁵ nature-as-enemy appears as early in the poem as the elliptical reference to the way the wanderer must stir the sea with *mid hondum*⁷¹⁶ (4). The image is only partial - presumably the hand has an oar - yet it nonetheless emphasizes the proximity of the speaker to the cold and potentially treacherous sea - he is so close to it that he is nearly paddling by hand. Later in the poem, the natural environment is described in misanthropic terms:

*Ond þas stanhleoðu stormas cnyssað;
Hrið hreosende hrusan bindað,
Wintres woma, þonne won cymeð,
Nipeð nihtscua, norþan onsendeð
Hreo hæglfare hæleþum on andan*⁷¹⁷ (101-5).

⁷¹⁴ Scott Gwara, “*Forht and Fægen in The Wanderer and Related Literary Contexts of Anglo-Saxon Warrior Wisdom*,” *Medieval Studies* 69 (2007): 279.

⁷¹⁵ The Anglo-Saxon propensity to construe nature as an enemy and threat has been chronicled by a variety of critics. See Neville's discussing, as well as Higley's book-length study of what she calls the “natural analogy” in Old English and Welsh poetry, which she defines as “the link between the physical world and a state of mind, present in many different literary traditions and in many permutations, involving a loner - an exile, a pilgrim, or a poet/seer - pitted against the wide open spaces of the world.” Neville, *Representations of the Natural World in Old English Poetry*, 71–7; Sarah Lynn Higley, *Between Languages: The Uncooperative Text in Early Welsh and Old English Nature Poetry* (University Park: Pennsylvania State UP, 1993), 15.

⁷¹⁶ “by hand”

⁷¹⁷ “And storms knock these stone cliffs;
The snowstorm descending binds earth,
Winter's tumult; when dark comes,
The Night shadow darkens, sends from North,
The fierce hail-storm in hostility against men.”

Such lines suggest that nature, at least to the degree it is represented in *The Wanderer*, is the enemy of humankind, and, given the wanderer's situation as an exile, the harshness of nature is something he must reckon with daily.

While such natural imagery offers particular and local examples of the wanderer's enemy, there is a presumed metaphysics lying behind this imagery, and this metaphysics has to do with the general mutability of worldly things and the inevitability of being subject to this mutability. Such mutability is conveyed in the famous Ubi Sunt passages in the poem (92-6), the reflection on the crumbling “work of giants” (87), and the dissolution of The Wanderer's own *comitatus*. It is impossible for mortals to fight such mutability successfully. *Wyrð bið ful aræd* (5), and *ne mæg werig mod wyrde wiðstandan*⁷¹⁸ (15) - and though M. S. Griffith shows how the former term presumably means something more potentially hopeful than fatalistic inexorability, it remains questionable whether the idea of one's fate being ordered from on high is exactly a comforting thing⁷¹⁹ - it is, after all, the Creator who lays waste the world in the middle of the poem: *Ypde swa þisne eardgeard ælda scyppend,/oppæt burgwara breahtma lease/eald enta geweorc idlu stodon*⁷²⁰ (85-7). Thus, the speaker is trying to fight his way through a world where the deck seems unfairly stacked against him, with nature, God, and fate all on the same side.

If nature and general mutability are the first two enemies the wanderer faces, the third “enemy” the wanderer fights is the threat these more external forces pose to his own identity.

⁷¹⁸ “the weary mind cannot withstand fate”

⁷¹⁹ Griffith, in his exhaustive study of the phrase “*Wyrð bið ful aræd*,” concludes that this phrase should be translated as “one's lot is highly ordered.” He takes this as a probably comforting thing, but consider the phrase in Job “hedged behind and before,” which in one place implies God's protection and care of Job, and in Job's mouth implies God's panoptic persecution of him. I suggest that similarly, the meaning of this is left ambivalent, such that the initial grace that it references at the beginning is complicated by the God who lays waste the world; this complication is, in fact, not entirely resolved within the poem, but the Biblical precedent suggests that we should not be surprised that God here is configured both as the initiator of earthly cataclysm and the fortress where we find refuge from such cataclysm. Griffith, M. S., “Does *Wyrð Bið Ful Aræd* Mean “Fate Is Wholly Inexorable?” in *Studies in English Language & Literature: “Doubt Wisely”: Papers in Honour of E.G. Stanley*, ed. M. J. Toswell, and Elizabeth M. Tyler (London; New York: Routledge, 1996), 148.

⁷²⁰ “So wasted this earth-yard the shaper of men,/ till giant work stood, old and idle,/ bereft of babbling burghers”

This is most clearly expressed in his question, if not directly about suicide, at least about his interior motives for continuing to struggle through the world in the way that he has been thus far: *forhwam modsefa min ne gesweorce*⁷²¹ (59)? However, the shaking of the wanderer's interior identity is not only expressed in these lines; if critics have been uncertain about the nature of the speaking "I" in Old English poetry,⁷²² the wanderer certainly seems to match their uncertainty. He has lost homeland and kinsmen, two important markers of Anglo-Saxon identity. He tries to reconstruct this identity through memory of the past - a very Augustinian move⁷²³ - but this fix is only partial at best; he cannot marshall these memories into a coherent, meaning-giving narrative, and his thoughts are scattered. Indeed, his thoughts are so scattered that he can at times barely distinguish between his own realm and that of animals; his remembered friends are elided with the seabirds in front of him (lines 49-54), and, in an ingenious play on the "beasts of battle" motif, he becomes the third "animal" in the list of battlefield spectators (lines 80-84). Though it is occasioned by the external assaults of God, *wyrd*, and nature, this dissolution of the interior self is the primary enemy the wanderer faces; indeed, it is this assault on identity that has made seamless the poem's transition from romantic to post-structuralist critical contexts, which both appreciate such alienation, albeit in different ways.⁷²⁴

⁷²¹ "why should my mind not grow dark"

⁷²² The major critical question here is the degree to which the Old English first-person voice is similar to that which is the subject of most romantic poetry. See Bloomfield, "Understanding Old English Poetry."

⁷²³ For a thorough discussion of *The Wanderer's* Augustinian approach to memory, see Selzer, "*The Wanderer* and the Meditative Tradition."

⁷²⁴ To clarify this, one of the aspects of *The Wanderer* that has given it staying power in academics throughout the twentieth and twenty-first century is the capacity of its meditation on self dissolution to speak to both a romantic glorification of self-dissolution (E. G. Keats and Hamlet) and a more postmodern sense of fragmented identity. On the romantic interest in *The Wanderer* and other of the elegies, see Mora, "The Invention of the Old English Elegy." On the way that *The Wanderer* resonates with the modern sense of alienation, see Anthony Low, "Exile, *The Wanderer*, and the Long Wave of Alienation and Subjectivity." See also the two articles on the wanderer and existentialism, Dennis Chase, "Existential Attitudes in the Old English *Wanderer*," *The Language Quarterly* 26, no. 1-2 (Fall-Winter 1987): 17-19; and Ronald J. Ganze, "From *Anhaga* to *Snottor*: The Wanderer's Kierkegaardian Epiphany," *Neophilologus* 89, no. 4 (2005): 629-640.

10.3.1.2 Wisdom

If these are the enemies that the wanderer faces, the weaponry he uses in his fight with them consists in wisdom. His wisdom helps him abstract himself from his particular situation, and “try on” a perspective not necessarily his own, what Cross refers to as “the lessening of grief by generalization.”⁷²⁵ “ *Ic to soþe wat/þæt biþ in eorle indryhten þeaw...*”⁷²⁶ (11-12), he begins at one point; at another, he interjects with an opening assertion that “*Ongietan sceal gleaw hæle...*”⁷²⁷ (73). Such third person statements open a space where the wanderer can flee for refuge from the enemies he faces. If he can understand his own situation in relation to these instances of a pre-fixed wisdom frame,⁷²⁸ he can reclaim the meaning he so desperately seeks. If there is a space of meaning “out there” for those who fit the ubiquitous designation of “wise man” or “man,” then there is hope for the wanderer in being such a man, crushed as he is under the hand of *wyrd*, weather, inner doubt, and possibly even God. There is hope because, if there can be a wisdom “out there,” independent of the wanderer's condition, then there is a place for him to escape to - the wisdoms in the poem are rungs on a ladder leading gradually out of his personal and mutable experience toward something else. To be sure, these “rungs” have different sources and varying levels of stability - the maxim about staying silent (11-14) seems less than helpful, and even the otherwise wise statement of moderation cannot (65-9), I think, get him all the way to the heavenly end he eventually reaches - but each is a stopgap against the darkness, and holds just long enough for him to reach the next.⁷²⁹ I have been using metaphors relative to

⁷²⁵ Cross, “On the Genre of *The Wanderer*,” 68.

⁷²⁶ I know as a truth that it is a noble custom in an earl...

⁷²⁷ “A wise man must perceive...”

⁷²⁸ Of course, the fixity of this wisdom should not be understood in terms of the freestanding objectivity favoured by Enlightenment rationalism, but rather in terms of the communities from which it borrows its credence.

⁷²⁹ For various accounts of the way this wisdom works not so much as a final solution to the wanderer's problems as a stepping stone leading him through a process toward hope, see Shippey, Gilles, and Sheppard. Shippey describes this process as a kind of wisdom-play involving what he calls “proverbiousness;” Sheppard

climbing because they are the most convenient way to describe what is going on in the poem, but it should be clear how this deployment of wisdom accords well with the agon explored in earlier chapters; for every blow against the wanderer offered by his adversaries, the wanderer always comes back with a well crafted wisdom retort to fight off the darkness⁷³⁰ - or almost always.

I say “almost always,” because, at the end, the wanderer's wisdom must give way to a recognition of human limitation and of the need for a wisdom beyond earthly wisdom. His offhand comment in this surrender is a little like the modern proverb “look before you leap,” or the Biblical concept of “counting the cost”:⁷³¹ *ne sceal næfre his torn to rycene/beorn of his breostum acyþan, nemþe he ær þa bote cunne*⁷³² (12-13). This is a call for a recognition of human limitations - one should not presume to unleash a grief if one does not have sufficient resources to re-contain it afterward.⁷³³ And the resources one has if one is a Christian are precisely the resources of security referenced in the last line.⁷³⁴ These resources are not of earthly origin or held by an individualistic hero; they are God's, and they belong to *us* (115), the

emphasizes the importance of the rhetorical deployment of the maxims over specific content; and Gilles reads the text as an arena wherein lyric and gnomic impulses battle against each other. Shippey, “*The Wanderer and The Seafarer as Wisdom Poetry*.”; Sealy Ann Gilles, “Text as Arena: Lament and Gnome in *The Wanderer*,” in *The Rhetorical Poetics of the Middle Ages: Reconstructive Polyphony: Essays in Honor of Robert O. Payne*, ed. by John M. Hill and Deborah M. Sinnreich-Levi (Madison, NJ; London: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press; Associated University Presses, 2000), 206–220; and Sheppard, “A Word to the Wise: Thinking, Knowledge, and Wisdom in *The Wanderer*.”

⁷³⁰ Here, the generic terminology used by Gilles is quite helpful. The gnomic verbal weaponry is deployed as a way of controlling the lyric impulse to emotively focus on this darkness. Sealy Ann Gilles, “Lyric and Gnome in Old English Poetry” (Ph.D., City University of New York, 1985).

⁷³¹ See Luke 14:28-33.

⁷³² “nor shall a man too easily speak his anger from his breast, unless he knows the cure beforehand”

⁷³³ See Wolfe, who argues that “the statement concerning restraint in speech summarises the actions of the wise man. This idea of knowing the remedy is anticipated early in the poem. Lines 15– 16, which follow his first statement that it is virtuous to lock one's passionate thoughts inside, give the reason why: *Ne mæg werig mod wyrde wiðstondan/ne se hreo hyge helpe gefremman*. The weary and troubled mind cannot make the situation better; essentially, complaining about the inevitable is not going to help. However, through his meditations and through patiently waiting to express himself, the *snottera* has calmed himself sufficiently to actually discover the *bot* to this problem of worldly transience. All this also gives one final ounce of anticipation to the audience: now, at the last moment, he is going to reveal the remedy he has discovered.” Melissa J. Wolfe, “*Swa Cwæð Snottor on Mode*: Four Issues in *The Wanderer*,” *Neophilologus* 92, no. 3 (2008): 564.

⁷³⁴ The gnomic form of this line should not be taken as a final foreclosure of emotion and meaning, but rather in the same way I interpret those in *The Seafarer*, discussed below. If the former maxims in the poem are defensive weapons that fail, the weaponic function of this proverb is as a gift from the wanderer's heavenly lord.

church.⁷³⁵ With these resources, a Christian audience – precisely that referred to via *us* - realizes that God (and his subservient *wyrd*) is their security rather than merely the waster of the earth,⁷³⁶ and each finds security amidst exile in his/her own identity in Christian community.⁷³⁷

This is by now a more than familiar theme in this dissertation; the failure of earthly wisdom's warfare gives way to heavenly wisdom. But what is really remarkable about this process is that whereas the poetry dealt with earlier in this dissertation focuses primarily on the development of wisdom via community, the wisdom process of this poem is loosed from its communal moorings and imagined as the function of an exilic psychology that maintains only the vestiges of such community; the public verbal sparring assessed in prior chapters continues in the form of a sapiential psychomachia occurring in the imagination of a single person.⁷³⁸ In the world of *Beowulf*, there is little room for private grief or a sapiential answer to this grief. Grieving is generally public, as is the solution, and where there is no community - as in the case of the last survivor - there is no comfort, though the often introverted tones of the latter portion of the poem seem to ache for such comfort. In contrast to this need for an immediate comforting community, *The Wanderer* is something of a soliloquy that can jostle about in the mind of a

⁷³⁵ See Sharma, who argues that the confidence with which these final gnomic passages are spoken, as well as the communal implications of the phrase *Us eal...*, imply that these lines are spoken from the confident perspective of renewed community rather than *sundor* in the sense of utter isolation; Sharma, "Heroic Subject and Cultural Substance in *The Wanderer*," 14–15. Sharma interprets the phrase *sundor æt rune* as a paradox, with what he argues are the communal implications of *æt rune* juxtaposed against the isolation of *sundor*; this fits his interpretation, wherein exile, separation, and loss paradoxically form a new community, within which communal "consultation" can occur. *Ibid.*, 15.

⁷³⁶ While this may seem like an odd rhetorical move, it exactly parallels the movement of Boethius's *Consolation*, as well as that of Ecclesiastes.

⁷³⁷ I say "Christian community" rather than heaven because, though many critics see this as a purely otherworldly solution, the focus on heaven also ties one to a Christian community that, at this time, had a variety of ways of existing within the world. For all its otherworldliness, Christianity is still a socially embodied presence.

⁷³⁸ I here follow Melissa J. Wolfe, who argues that the speaker in the *The Wanderer* shows the restraint he values by speaking through a variety of personae. However, I do not think the translation of verbal agon into internal psychomachia is necessarily dependent on this interpretation; regardless of whether there are one or two speakers, the poem shows a marked tonal interiority and introspection that sets it apart from a more public discussion such as that envisioned in *Maxims I*. Wolfe, "Swa Cwæð Snottor on Mode."

single person, an *anhaga*⁷³⁹ (1) who is *sundor æt rune*⁷⁴⁰ (111). And though I am generally reluctant to make assumptions about the “progression” of poetic traditions in Old English, I do think that it is viable to suggest that the differences between wisdom in *Beowulf* and *The Wanderer* is probably broadly emblematic of the differences between a more public heroic culture and a Christianity that offered the possibility of an inward and upward turn such as that discovered by St. Augustine and outlined at the end of this dissertation's first chapter.

Indeed, I would go further and contend that such a poetic flow strongly suggests the influence of Gregory's interpretation of Ecclesiastes on this poem. Paul De Lacy has already demonstrated the basic structural similarities between *The Wanderer* and Ecclesiastes,⁷⁴¹ similarities all the more striking because the seemingly unexpected “turn to God” at the end of both has caused critical problems common to scholars of these works. When considered in light of Gregory's interpretation of Ecclesiastes, the similarity becomes even more striking; both works feature a play of personae speaking in “voices” that are eventually stilled by a single speaker at the conclusion. Moreover, the Old English word used to translate the Ecclesiastean *vanitas* in Werferth's translation of the dialogues is *idelnesse* (4.3.23),⁷⁴² a word that also figures prominently in the lament of *The Wanderer* (see lines 87 and 110). Not only does this suggest Ecclesiastes as a powerful cultural backdrop against which *The Wanderer* was written, but it corroborates De Lacy's discovery of affinities between the two works, and suggests even more strongly the direct influence of Ecclesiastes on *The Wanderer*.

⁷³⁹ “lone walker”

⁷⁴⁰ “apart at counsel”

⁷⁴¹ Paul De Lacy, “Thematic and Structural Affinities: *The Wanderer* and Ecclesiastes,” *Neophilologus* 82, no. 1 (1998): 125–137.

⁷⁴² Gregorius Magnus, *Bischofs Waerferths von Worcester Übersetzung der Dialoge Gregors des Grossen über das Leben und die Wunderthaten italienischer Väter und über die Unsterblichkeit der Seelen*, 264.

10.3.2 *The Seafarer*

If *The Wanderer*'s position within the wisdom paradigm is fairly straightforward, it is because there is great critical consensus concerning the flow of the poem; if they accept the poem in its entirety, few critics would argue that it works its way up toward a higher wisdom. *The Seafarer*, however, has not fared as well in the critical milieu, and this is in large part due to the greater complexity of the poem. Whether the shock of it was intended in its original context or not (and the matter is debatable), modern readers are not used to encountering an assertive rather than self-pitying speaker using first elegiac and then theological language halfway through the work; the speaker has the confidence of *Beowulf*, the suffering of *The Wanderer*, and the theological capacity of *Guthlac*. This seemingly anomalous tone has spawned three waves of critical approaches. The first dealt with this strange multiplicity by positing different “voices” in the poem, whether these voices consist in two different characters speaking to each other,⁷⁴³ or a Christian monk glossing the text of a more pagan original.⁷⁴⁴ The second wave, troubled by the way that the “multiple voice” theory presupposed modern rather than medieval categories (i.e., the juxtaposition of these categories is only confusing because modern readers no longer think like this), sought a unifying theme that could tie together the threads in the poem; often though not always, this practice involved finding cultural analogues in which the ideas juxtaposed would hardly be contradictory, but would be nearly commonsense - as, for instance, in Whitelock's

⁷⁴³ For a brief critical history of this position, see Michael Matto, “True Confessions: ‘*The Seafarer*’ and Technologies of the ‘*Sylf*,’” *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 103, no. 2 (April 1, 2004): 156–7.

⁷⁴⁴ *The Seafarer* has been one of the central texts in the much vexed discussion of Romantically inclined critical attempts to purge the original “pure” poetry of inferior monkish meddling. Ezra Pound's famous translation follows this trend in exorcising the concluding lines of the poem, and it is continued in the widespread classroom circulation of Kevin Crossley-Holland's translation, which likewise omits some of the concluding lines. For further accounts of this, see Eric Gerald Stanley, *Imagining the Anglo-Saxon Past: The Search for Anglo-Saxon Paganism and Anglo-Saxon Trial by Jury* (Cambridge; Rochester, NY: D.S. Brewer, 2000). For particular attention to the elegies in this regard, see Mora, “The Invention of the Old English Elegy.”

theorization that the speaker is undertaking a *perigrinatio pro amore dei*,⁷⁴⁵ which would explain how a single person can be a hero, an exile, and a theologian all at once. A third wave, though - and this wave is more accordant with postmodernism and post-structuralist theory - has questioned the too easy discovery of unity throughout the poem and wondered whether this approach does not run the risk of steamrolling or neglecting the more difficult portions of the text in favor of an easy unity; Peter Orton, for instance, has done this in his paper, drawing our attention away from context and toward text,⁷⁴⁶ and others have shown that it may be too simplistic to presume that the strange combination of things in the poem could only be attributed to a wandering monk.⁷⁴⁷ Michael Matto has taken the seafarer's crisis in identity even further, analyzing the poem in terms of Foucaultian technologies of the self.⁷⁴⁸ Intriguingly, the critical interpretation has swung roughly from a focus on complexity, to unity, and then to complexity again, and my purpose in this dissertation is to show that, whatever one makes of these movements, an aspect that is worth considering is the alignment of the flow of wisdom in the poem with that of the Biblical wisdom tradition and the Old English wisdom tradition as explored prior; indeed, such a reading might help mediate the tensions in this critical history, given the ambiguous space of many of the Biblical wisdoms themselves between dramatic dialogue and reflective monologue.

Given the similarity of *The Seafarer's* initial verses to *The Wanderer*, it is helpful to think about this portion of the poems in the same terms - what enemies are here being fought. The initial answer to this is that it is the harshness of nature and the sea. What is interesting, however,

⁷⁴⁵ Dorothy Whitelock, "The Interpretation of *The Seafarer*," in *Essential Articles for the Study of Old English Poetry*, ed. Jess B. Bessinger (Hamden, CT: Archon Books, 1968).

⁷⁴⁶ Peter Orton, "The Form and Structure of *The Seafarer*," in *Old English Literature: Critical Essays*, ed. R. M. Liuzza (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), 353–80.

⁷⁴⁷ See, for instance, Sebastian Sobecki, who argues that the seafarer may in fact be a fisherman. Sebastian Sobecki, "The Interpretation of *The Seafarer*; a Re-examination of the Pilgrimage Theory," *Neophilologus* 92, no. 1 (2008): 127–139.

⁷⁴⁸ Matto, "True Confessions."

is that, whereas the collision with nature and mutability destabilizes the identity of the wanderer, the seafarer's sense of identity and self is the implied initial bulwark against such harshness - the seafarer never asks why his thoughts do not grow dark because the question never crosses his mind. Evidence for this healthy sense of self confidence is peppered throughout the opening passages of this poem. Where the wanderer's sense of self falls apart so that he clings to seabirds and only partially effectual maxims, the seafarer is more confident in the face of suffering, at least confident enough to actively embrace his interaction with the birds: *Hwilum ylfete/song dyde ic me to gomene, ganotes hleopor,/ond huilpan sweg fore hleahtor wera,/mæw singende fore medodrince*⁷⁴⁹ (19-22). Where the wanderer longs for community that might help him recover his identity, the seafarer rejects the town community in favour of his sea-earned identity. And where the first person expressions in the wanderer are muted, expressed later in the poem and often in terms of what the "I" cannot do, the "I" here is expressed often, with near credic assertions such as *ic gelyfe*⁷⁵⁰ (66). Whereas the wanderer initially turns to communal wisdom in his distress, the seafarer asserts against it what is at least a somewhat defiant "I." I say "somewhat defiant" because this "speaking I" persona - more pronounced than that in *The Wanderer* and standing in place of the more secular wisdom *The Wanderer* turns to - is, as Matto shows, deconstructed. Matto has subtly drawn on past debates about the poem to show the shifting subject/object positionality of the speaker,⁷⁵¹ and this deconstruction of the "speaking I" accords well with the patterns traced in other chapters, wherein a self-sustaining wisdom encounters *wyrd*, death and grace, and finds out the necessity of seeking something beyond itself.

⁷⁴⁹ "Sometimes I made the swan's song an entertainment for myself,/the gannet's laughter and curlew's call instead of men's laughter,/the singing seagull instead of mead-drinking."

⁷⁵⁰ "I believe"

⁷⁵¹ Ibid.

This encounter of the self with *wyrd* can be traced throughout the poem. The first part of the poem, interested in seafaring and harsh climates, features a challenge to the self grounded in the seafarer's particular experience. Specifically, the seafarer finds that, for all his experience, he is still troubled to travel by sea, a sentiment that he universalizes in his statement about his lord's will; no one is self confident enough *þæt he a his sæfore sorge næbbe,/to hwon hine dryhten gedon wille*⁷⁵² (42-3). Here, I suggest that *wyrd* and God are seen to be on the same side, much as they are in *The Wanderer*; nature batters his heart even as God batters his heart, and he knows that in himself he will never be *modwlanc*⁷⁵³ (39) enough to face the ocean or God, for that matter, without fear.

Tucked in amidst this encounter with *wyrd* is a latent sense of grace; this is evident not only in the way that his *longunge*⁷⁵⁴ (47) and desire implicitly critique the sufficiency of the self to satisfy human wants and needs, but also in the passage about the beauty of spring describing how *bearwas blostmum nimað, byrig fægriað*⁷⁵⁵ (48). The glimpse of this heartbreaking natural beauty that he is about to leave behind paradoxically inspires him, not to stay and enjoy it, but to seek the source in *dryhtnes dreamas*⁷⁵⁶ (65). Indeed, this is arguably a piece of natural theology not unlike that in the riddles, driving the reader toward God in paradoxical ways.

Following these dislocations of the self through trial and beauty, the poem generalizes further the effects of *wyrd*. Lines 58 through 71 describe three types of deaths, one of which every human must face: death, old age, and violence. In lines 80-89, the mighty rulers of the past are brought low. The eponymous elderly man is left behind to mourn his friends and then to undergo the shutting down of all the bodily senses (90-96). Further underlining the apparent

⁷⁵² "that he never has anxiety concerning what the lord will bring him"

⁷⁵³ "brave-spirited"

⁷⁵⁴ "longing"

⁷⁵⁵ "groves take to blossom, cities become fair"

⁷⁵⁶ "the Lord's joys"

hopelessness of all this, gold is ineffectual against such a fate (97-102). If the wanderer's sense of desolation is cognitive, *The Seafarer's* is visceral, like that in *Fortunes of Men*, and in this *wyrd*-crushed world there is nothing the initial "speaking I" of the poem can do to save itself. Like the soul that seemingly flies out of the earthly body to satisfy its yearning (58-66), the "speaking I" must seek its answer elsewhere.

Here again is the familiar wisdom pattern traced throughout this dissertation, wherein self-sufficiency gives way to things it cannot fight, and defeat is answered in a similarly familiar way: the seafarer ends with a number of maxims concerning grace. What is particularly interesting about this from a sapiential perspective is that, whereas most of the maxims in the other poems explored in this thesis function like weapons in an actively martial way, these maxims function much more like the weaponry used as gifts in *Beowulf* - they are tokens and guarantors of a king and his community, and of the recipient's place within that community. That a turn to gnomic and generally sententious speech ties the speaker to a broader community is pointed out by Matto; the "speaking I" has given way to broader communal wisdom, expressed in the form of sentences spoken in the third person.⁷⁵⁷ And the content of these sentences mark their deployer as one who finds his identity in God and the church, much as weaponry in Old English poetry is not simply functional, but is often burdened with the weight of its history and the effects of this history.⁷⁵⁸ They are comparable to the sword that destroys Grendel's mother; even as its lineage trumps the death-threat of Grendel's mother where Beowulf's own individual strength and weaponry fail, so the spiritual lineage inscribed in these proverbs are the proper answer to the mutability discovered in the poem and unsuccessfully taken on by the "speaking I." Indeed, such a reading is further reinforced by the earlier passage in the poem that speaks of the

⁷⁵⁷ Ibid., 174-5.

⁷⁵⁸ See George Clark, "Beowulf's Armor," *ELH* 32, no. 4 (December 1965): 409-441.

self as a warrior who must gain *lof* (fame) among an audience of angels (72-80); the wise warrior fights for the glory of his lord, and so it is understandable that his final maxims constitute what the wanderer refers to as his lord's *larcwidum*⁷⁵⁹ (*Wanderer* 38), sentences that connect him to his community.

Yet for all this talk of community, the mechanics of this wisdom in relation to community is radically different from the heroic mechanics introduced at the beginning of this dissertation. The communal dialogic form resembling *flyting* gives way to a stand-alone meditation that could occur as well in a private mind as it could in a monastery or mead hall; in this, it parallels *The Wanderer*. To be sure, the palimpsests of community are certainly there, as discussed above, but the tenor of the poem's world is one that reflects the mind and speech of a single individual; this individualized context is staked out early in the poem by the speaker's initial and incessant uses of the first person and references to his self, as well as the initial images of the speaker's loneliness; he is outside the town, and his spirit is an *anfloga*⁷⁶⁰ (62). With the passing of the heroic world comes the passing of the public speech-acts of wisdom from the world of *Beowulf*'s first half; taking their place are internalized, psychologized and spiritualized versions of such *flyting* matches. Indeed, one might argue of this poem that, if the passage on *lof*⁷⁶¹ among the angels (72-80) is an alternative to the heroic, worldly search for *lof*, the soliloquy-like debate of the poem is part of the Christian alternative to the verbal agon of public *flyting*.

Vainglory, *Precepts*, *The Wanderer*, and *The Seafarer* thus represent a change in the mechanics of wisdom. In *Precepts*, wisdom that at one point may have been passed on through communal interaction is now carefully guarded, kept away from the corrupt community and passed on in a more individuated and private way, by a single trustworthy person. *The Wanderer*

⁷⁵⁹ "precepts"

⁷⁶⁰ "lone flyer"

⁷⁶¹ "fame"

puts into play all the forces seen in other wisdom poems - earthly wisdom, fate, and heavenly wisdom - but the “voices” representative of these forces are compiled inside a single speaker's mind rather than explored publicly and dramatically. In *The Seafarer*, the challenge of *wyrd* is answered by a use of maxims that, like the weaponry they parallel, are markers of identity, but again, what might have occurred publicly in *Beowulf* is here figured in the mind of a single speaker and only features the communal source of the maxims implicitly and palimpsestically. The spirit of these poems is a long way from the public world of the first portion of *Beowulf*, in which there is much greater elision between the public and private self such that the internal thoughts of characters are expressed by public speakers. In this way, they echo a similar tendency toward privatization in the Biblical texts, the Ecclesiastean deferral to a single compiling redactor or Job's sarcastically expressed yearning for a wisdom beyond the public community of his comforters who behave as if they have a monopoly on it: *ergo vos estis soli homines et vobiscum morietur sapientia*.⁷⁶²

⁷⁶² Job 2:12 “Are you then men alone, and shall wisdom die with you?” (Douay-Rheims)

Chapter 11: Conclusion

In the prior chapters, this dissertation has traced parallels between the treatment, organization, and rhetoric of wisdom in Old English literature and the Biblical books of Job and Ecclesiastes, with the latter understood through exegetical traditions available to Anglo-Saxon readers. *Beowulf* in this argument serves as an excellent introduction to the most basic of these parallels: a wisdom tradition that blurs the lines between wisdom and weaponry; an unflinching confrontation with the suffering, pain and *wyrd* that wisdom seeks to overcome; and the ultimate recognition that wisdom comes up short in the face of these forces. Like the active Jobean warfare conceived of by Gregory, the wisdom exchanges in the earlier part of the poem are public and assertive; more like the less dramatically defined introspection of Ecclesiastes is the introverted and guarded perspective of the latter half of the poem.

The Battle of Maldon follows a similar pattern, with wisdom becoming less public and more introspective just to the degree that it encounters failure in the visceral world of physical battle. As with *Beowulf* and Job, the association of wisdom and weaponry in this poem is strong; the primary difference between this and *Beowulf* is that where *Beowulf* leads readers to the failure of heroic wisdom and then leaves them aching for something more, *The Battle of Maldon* follows the exegetical tradition of Job and Ecclesiastes in pointing upward toward a heavenly answer to this failure.

Guthlac A & B features a transposition of this treatment of wisdom into a context thoroughly saturated with the wisdom of revelation rather than (as in much of *Beowulf*) merely a natural, that is, experiential, wisdom. Far from disrupting the pattern of wisdom discovered prior, this pattern largely continues, simply adding heavenly wisdom to the arsenal of earthly wisdom as the saint battles demons and comes to terms with death. Like the Solomonic redactor of

Ecclesiastes, part of Guthlac's trials involves discerning the merit of various demonic "voices" that appear on the surface to have a ring of truth about them; like Job's, Guthlac's wisdom is an act of warfare. And as in both Biblical texts, there is the point where wisdom wielded on earth - be it heavenly or otherwise - must give way to a still higher wisdom. This is evident in a preliminary way in Bartholomew's intervention against the demons on behalf of Guthlac; it is further evident in *Guthlac B*'s dismantling of wisdom technique via the encounter with death, and this portion's implied gesture toward a higher wisdom that Guthlac in death obtains, and that his servant in grief must aspire toward.

Prefacing a larger discussion of riddling wisdom in wisdom literature proper (*Solomon and Saturn II*, *Maxims I & II*, and *The Fates of Men*), the Exeter riddles and *Solomon and Saturn I* furnish details and nuances necessary for understanding this kind of wisdom; not developed with regard to the entire schema found in Ecclesiastes and Job, these poems speak to and help define particular niches in this schema that become important in the poems discussed later. Both texts entertain the question of power relations with knowledge and wisdom, that is, whether one approaches these matters with an attitude of humility toward mystery or a lust for mastery; this speaks particularly to the Biblical interest in these matters, with Ecclesiastes discerning the intents and thoughts behind the voices of the *flyting* crowd, and characters in Job such as Elihu demonstrating that, even if one may be correct in something, that correctness can be wielded in a sinful, non-humble way. The riddles, too, particularly highlight the frustration dealt with in both books, whether this be the frustration of sin and suffering, or alternately the frustration of simply being unable to understand everything.

Following this necessary prefatory discussion, the wisdom rubric of *Solomon and Saturn II* is in many ways a showcase and exemplar of Ecclesiastean and Jobean themes. It features the

play of voices found in both books, and its *flyting* context inflects its verbal contests with a Jobean construal of wisdom as warfare. Like the Biblical books, it discovers the world - and its interlocutors' reflections on the world - as riddles that often evoke more questions than answers, and interweaves this intellectual frustration with more visceral worldly frustrations of pain and suffering - all things that have to do with the Ecclesiastean idea of *vanitas*. Like both books, but particularly like Job with its distinction between truth and its deployment in the context of Elihu, the poem focuses not on a clear distinction between an inherent and immediately perceivable value that belongs to the subject of the characters' wisdoms, but rather on the attitude with which this wisdom is wielded, whether it be with a humble sense of mystery or a prideful desire for mastery. Finally, *Solomon and Saturn II* points, if obliquely, toward a heavenly wisdom implicit in the figure and speech of Solomon, and toward which both readers and Saturn are expected to proceed; this resembles the way that Job and Ecclesiastes point in the exegetical traditions toward a gospel that answers many of the loose ends that seem to remain unresolved at the most primary level of these Biblical texts.

Where *Solomon and Saturn II* is comprehensive in its parallels with Jobean and Ecclesiastean wisdom, poetry such as *Maxims I & II* and *Fortunes of Men* are particular in their focus on the play of voices integral to this wisdom. Like the voices navigated by Solomon in Ecclesiastes or the voices of the interlocutors in Job made triply polyphonic by Gregory, the voices of various wisdoms in these poems are placed alongside each other, bound by the uneasy unity of sapiential compilation. Though these works gesture in a heavenly direction as they encounter the crises of various wisdoms, their primary purpose is the practical, this-worldly navigation of these crises; in comparison to the Biblical texts, they resemble a Job that is largely lacking the divine revelation at the end, or an Ecclesiastes that lacks a Solomonic compiler to

sort truth from falsehood.

In the matter of the final chapter - *Vainglory*, *Precepts*, *The Wanderer*, and *The Seafarer* - the Jobean/Ecclesiastean ascent to wisdom is transposed such that its mechanics occurs in more private contexts than those seen in the earlier parts of *Beowulf* or the give and take of *Solomon and Saturn II*. As in Ecclesiastes and Job, crises of wisdom in these poems point readers or characters upward toward heaven. But in *Vainglory* and *Precepts* these crises are entertained and presented in a context removed from and suspicious of the public milieu; in *The Wanderer* and *The Seafarer*, the polylogue of voices has become such that it is conceivably entertained in a single mind taking personae up in itself. Thus, these poems characterize a transition from the dramatically demarcated letter of Job to the more fluid and ambiguous play of voices entertained by Solomon in Ecclesiastes. The mechanics of wisdom here is the same in technique as that explored in earlier chapters; what is different is the distinct assertion of privacy in the practice of this wisdom.

This dissertation's discovery of a similar wisdom mechanics repeated with variation in Job, Ecclesiastes, and Old English poetry strongly suggests that these Biblical texts were important in shaping the Old English wisdom tradition. Though such influence is impossible to prove, the resonances demonstrated between the bodies of Old English literature and Biblical commentary establish Job and Ecclesiastes as contexts comparable in importance to those discovered by critics such as Susan Deskis⁷⁶³ and Carolyne Larrington.⁷⁶⁴ Establishing the importance of these texts as contexts for understanding the underpinnings of the Old English wisdom tradition is the burden of this dissertation, and I believe it has supplied enough evidence to do this.

⁷⁶³ Deskis, *Beowulf and the Medieval Proverb Tradition*.

⁷⁶⁴ Larrington, *A Store of Common Sense*.

However, since the best answers to questions are ones that invite further and deeper questions about the texts and contexts involved, I conclude with a brief description of some of the further questions this dissertation invites concerning Old English wisdom. Foremost are questions concerning the relation of this dissertation's discovery to other aspects of historical and textual context, both with regard to the Old English texts and the Biblical commentary. For instance, though it has often been a temptation, I have refrained from making any strong argument regarding the historical development of Old English poetry. Though limited by the necessarily speculative nature of studies of hypothesized oral tradition, a scholarly exploration of historical development considering this dissertation's material with regard to oral-formulaic theory and the Germanic roots of Old English wisdom would be a useful supplement.

Similar to this question of historical development is the also undealt-with question of immediate manuscript context, of particular interest for those poems found in the Exeter book. The question here is whether the wisdom themes in the Old English poems work together to reflect a larger purpose behind their organization in manuscripts. This is a distinct possibility, particularly in the Exeter Book with its heavy emphasis on wisdom, but discovering it would entail a discussion of wisdom instances in Exeter poems not covered by the scope of this dissertation. However, a study of these other instances as well as their relation to the matter of this dissertation with regard to their positions in the Exeter manuscript would, I think, produce fascinating results.

With regard to Biblical contexts, this dissertation invites further research in at least two other areas. The first is simply the treatment of other Biblical wisdom texts and commentary traditions, for, though I have limited the scope of this dissertation to two of the Biblical texts closest in tenor to Old English wisdom, there are certainly others. A study of Proverbs and

Bede's commentary on this book is a particularly attractive option. As well, the deuterocanonical books that serve as a bridge between Old and New Testament conceptions of wisdom certainly comprise part of the Biblical wisdom context in which Old English wisdom developed. Studies of these Biblical texts among an Anglo-Saxon readership would supplement the necessarily narrow focus of this dissertation.

In addition to this, the resonance between Biblical wisdom and Old English wisdom suggests that a discussion of Old English wisdom might benefit from thorough engagement with critical and theoretical perspectives on wisdom developed by Biblical scholars. As mentioned at the beginning of this dissertation, the scholarly study of Old English wisdom is rooted at least in part in the older field of Biblical wisdom studies, which has had more time to develop definitions of wisdom as well as nuances and caveats in these definitions. To be sure, there is enough difference between Biblical and Old English wisdom that one must be careful not to apply uncritically the language of Biblical studies to Old English poetry. However, a critically careful assessment of the ideas, concepts, and theories that might be applicable in discussions of Old English wisdom would be a welcome contribution to the field of Old English wisdom studies, which still by and large hearkens back to the now at least somewhat dated Biblical studies that Morton Bloomfield and Elaine Tuttle Hansen turned to as they forged their own definitions of wisdom. By way of example, Walter Brueggemann has produced a fascinating study of wisdom as a response to, result of, and way of navigating political crises in Israel, particularly the transition of Israel from a small tribal group to a more internationally recognizable nation.⁷⁶⁵ There is, I think, a fascinating comparative study to be done on the way that Old English wisdom helped the Anglo-Saxons navigate similar cultural tensions and transitions.

⁷⁶⁵ Walter Brueggemann, *Solomon: Israel's Ironic Icon of Human Achievement* (Columbia, S.C: University of South Carolina Press, 2005).

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Appendix A: The Jobean Beatific Vision

Sancti uiri quo apud Deum altius uirtutum dignitate proficiunt, eo subtilius indignos se esse deprehendunt, quia dum proximi luci fiunt, quicquid eos in seipsis latebat inueniunt; et tanto magis foris sibi deformes apparent, quanto nimis pulchrum est quod intus uident. Unusquisque enim sibi, dum tactu ueri luminis illustratur, ostenditur; et unde agnoscit quid est iustitia, inde eruditur, ut uideat quid est culpa. Hinc est quod saepe mens nostra quamuis frigida in conversationis humanae actione torpescat, quamuis in quibusdam delinquat et nesciat, quamuis peccata quaedam quasi nulla perpendat; cum tamen ad appetenda sublimia orationis compunctione se erigit, ipso suae oculo compunctionis excitata ad circumspiciendam se post fletum uigilantior redit. Nam cum neglectam se deserit, et noxio tepore torpescit, uel otiosa uerba, uel inutiles cogitationes minoris esse omnimodo reatus credit. At si, igne compunctionis incallescens, a torpore suo, tacta subito afflatu contemplationis, euigilet, illa quae leuia paulo ante credidit mox ut grauia ac mortifera perhorrescit. Cuncta enim uel in minimis noxia, quasi atrocissima refugit, quia uidelicet per conceptionem spiritus grauida, introire ad se iam inania nulla permittit. Ex eo enim quod intus conspicit, quam sint horrenda haec quae exterius perstrepunt sentit; et quanto amplius subleuata profecerit, tanto magis refugit infima, in quibus prostrata defecit. Nihil quippe eam nisi id quod interius uiderat pascit; atque eo grauius tolerat quicquid se ei extrinsecus ingerit, quo illud non est quod intrinsecus uidit, sed ex his interioribus quae raptim uidere potuit, ad exteriora quae tolerat iudicandi regulam sumit. Super se enim rapitur dum sublimia contemplatur; et semetipsam iam liberius excedendo conspiciens, quicquid ei ex seipsa sub seipsa remanet, subtilius comprehendit. Ex qua re miro modo agitur, ut, sicut superius dictum est, unde dignior efficitur, inde sibimet indigna uideatur; et tunc rectitudini se longe esse sentiat, cum appropinquat. Unde Salomon ait: Cuncta tentauit in sapientia; et dixi:

Sapiens efficiar et ipsa longius recessit a me. Quaesita enim sapientia longe recedere dicitur, quia appropinquanti altior uidetur. Qui uero hanc nequaquam quaerunt, tanto se ei propinquos aestimant, quanto et eius rectitudinis regulam ignorant, quia siti in tenebris mirari lucis claritatem nesciunt, quam numquam uiderunt; cumque in forma eius pulchritudinis non tenduntur, in semetipsis libenter cotidie deformiores fiunt. Nam quisquis eius radiis tangitur, sua illi manifestius tortitudo monstratur; et eo uerius inuenit quantum flectatur in uitio, quo, sagacius summa considerans, conspicit quantum distat a recto. Unde beatus Iob humanum genus uirtutibus transiens, amicos loquendo superauit; sed loquente Deo, sublimius eruditus, semetipsum cognoscendo reticuit. Illos namque iniuste loquentes subdidit, sed ad uerba locutionis intimae reum se iuste cognouit. Et quidem cur flagellatus sit nescit, sed tamen cur flagella ueneratus non sit, silendo redarguit. Diuina enim iudicia cum nesciuntur, non audaci sermone discutienda sunt, sed formidoloso silentio ueneranda, quia et cum causas rerum conditor in flagello non aperit, eo iustas indicat, quo se eas facere qui summe iustus est demonstrat. Uir ergo sanctus, et prius de locutione, et post de silentio reprehensus, quid de semetipso sentiat innotescat. Ait enim: Qui leviter locutus sum, respondere quid possum? De verbo otioso ne sancti quidem excusari possunt. Sed linguae culpas vitae meritis tegere curant.--
-Ac si dicat: Sermonem meum defenderem, si hunc cum rationis pondere protulissem. At postquam lingua leuitate usa conuincitur, quid restat nisi ut conticendo refrenetur? 32.1.1-32.2.5⁷⁶⁶

The higher holy men advance with God, in the dignity of virtues, the more accurately do they discover that they are unworthy; because while they become close to the light, they find out whatever escaped their notice in themselves, and they appear to themselves the more deformed

⁷⁶⁶ Gregorius Magnus, *Moralia in Job*, 1625–6.

without, in proportion as that is very beautiful, which they see within. For every one is made known to himself, when he is illumined with the touch of the true light, and by the same means as he learns what is righteousness, he is also instructed to see what is sin. Hence is it that though our mind is often benumbed with cold in converse with men's doings, though it sins and is ignorant in some points, though it regards some sins as though they were none; yet when it raises itself by the compunction of prayer to aim at things above, having been roused by the eye of its compunction, it returns to observe itself with greater vigilance after its tears. For when it deserts itself in neglect, and is torpid with fatal lukewarmness, it fully believes that idle words or unprofitable thoughts are of lesser guilt. But if warmed by the fire of compunction, and touched by the sudden breath of contemplation, it starts from its lukewarmness, it soon begins to dread, as grave and deadly offences, those things which but a little before it believed to be trifling. For it avoids, as most atrocious, all things which are in the very least degree hurtful; because, namely, being pregnant with the conception of the Spirit, it no longer allows any vanities to enter in unto it. For from that which it beholds within, it feels how dreadful are those sins which clamour without; and the more it has advanced when raised up, the more does it shrink from the grovelling pursuits, in which it sank prostrate. For nothing in truth supports it, but that which it has beheld within, and it endures the more heavily whatever thrusts itself on it from without, the more it is not that which it beheld within; but from those inward objects which it has been able to catch a glance of, it forms a standard for judging of those outward things which it has to bear with. For it is rapt above itself, when it contemplates sublime objects, and now beholding itself, by going out of itself more freely, it comprehends more minutely whatever remains to it, of itself, under itself. By which means it is wonderfully brought to pass, as was before said, that it appears the more unworthy to itself, by the very means by which it is rendered more worthy; and

that it then feels itself far removed from uprightness, when it is approaching near it. Whence Solomon says, *I have tried all things by wisdom, and said, I will become wise, and it departed the farther from me.* [Ecc. 7:23] For wisdom which is sought after is said to depart far off, because it seems higher to a person approaching it. But those who do not seek it, think themselves the nearer it, the more they know not also its standard of uprightness; because, living in darkness, they know not how to admire the brightness of the light, which they have never seen, and since they do not tend towards the comeliness of its beauty, they willingly become more deformed every day in themselves. For whoever is touched by its rays, his deformity is more manifestly pointed out to him, and he finds the more truly how much he is distorted in sin, the more keenly, from considering the highest objects, he beholds how far distant he is from uprightness. Whence blessed Job, surpassing in virtues the race of men, overcame his friends in speaking; but when instructed more highly, by God speaking to him, on knowing himself, he remained silent. For he overcame those who spoke unjustly, but at the words of the voice within he knew that he was justly condemned. And he knows not indeed why he was scourged, but yet he proved by silence why he revered not the scourges. For when the Divine judgments are not known, they are not to be discussed with bold words, but to be venerated with awful silence; because even when the Creator of all things discloses not His reasons in inflicting the scourge, He shews them to be just, by pointing out that He inflicts them Who is perfectly just. Let the holy man, then, who has been reprov'd both first for his words, and afterwards for his silence, make known what he thinks of himself. For he says; *I who have spoken lightly, what can I answer?* [Job 39:4] As if he said, I would defend my speech, if I had uttered it with weight of reason. But after a tongue is convicted of having used levity, what remains for it but to be restrained with silence? (32.i-32.ii:3.506-8)