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Masculinity and Conversion in Old English *Guthlac A*

Abstract

The article turns to Judith Butler's writings on abjection to elucidate the Christian subjectivity that emerges from the Old English poetic life of Guthlac of Crowland, known as *Guthlac A*. The abject is defined as the other within the subject who is in the process of conversion from secular values and the Germanic past. Guthlac's conversion from his secular and ancestral values informs a notion of masculinity nascent in his subjectivity, masculinity that results from the abjection of ancestral secular identity by transposing it onto the demonic other, the destruction of which transforms and sanitizes ancestral landscape.

Old English literature devoted to the cult of St. Guthlac comprises a Latin *Life of St. Guthlac* authored by Felix, a monk, for king Ælfwald of East of Anglia (713-749), two Old English poems, *Guthlac A* and *Guthlac B*, contained in the Exeter Book compiled in the tenth century as well as a prose Old English life found in Vercelli Book collection of homilies also dated to the tenth century. These text preserve the memory of a warrior called Guthlac (c. 674 – c. 714) who, at the age of twenty four, turned his back on secular values and joined the monastery at Repton in Mercia. Guthlac went on to become a recluse at Crowland, where he continued to live in solitude, imitating the Desert Fathers of early Christianity, until his death.¹

The subject of this brief study, *Guthlac A* is dated, alongside *Guthlac B*, to the eighth-century. As many other Old English religious poems, *Guthlac A* is suffused with heroic formulae derived from secular heroic poetry and maintains a heroic sentiment resonant of secular and Germanic values. The language of the poem evokes other heroic verse, however, only to defy the heroic values represented in it. The military language of the poem reinforces the *miles Christi* tradition mediated by *Felix's Life of St. Guthlac*, where Guthlac is reported to assume "spiritual arms against the wiles of the foul foe, he took the shield of faith, the breastplate of hope, the helmet of chastity, the bow of patience, the arrows of psalmody" (*Felix's Life of St. Guthlac* 91).² We also learn from Felix's work that Guthlac's

name means in Old English “belli munus [the reward of war]” (*Felix’s Life of St. Guthlac* 78). In *Guthlac A*, the saint is described as “Cristes cempa” [Christ’s champion/soldier of Christ] (*Guthlac A* l.153; trans. J.O.) and “eadig oretta” [blessed warrior] (*Guthlac A* ll. 176; trans. J.O.) who puts on spiritual armour fighting against the enemy (*Guthlac A* ll.177–178; trans. J.O.).³ The correspondence between the *miles Christi* metaphor in Latin and formulaic language of warfare in Old English tradition was doubtless conducive to promulgating hagiography in Anglo-Saxon England; Rosemary Woolf referred to Guthlac poems, stating in her seminal study of the genre in Old English period that “in Mercia, the verse lives, whether intended for a lay and ecclesiastical audience, were obviously primarily intended as edifying substitutes for heroic poetry” (1966, 39). Taking this into consideration, the language of warfare, and its relation to gender ideology subtending the poem, gains further significance from evaluating the poem in the larger context of Old English poetry. Guthlac’s solitude, which is of his own choice, makes him similar to other solitary figures of English verse, especially Heremod in *Beowulf* and Nebuchadnezzar in *Daniel*, not to mention the solitary speakers of *The Wanderer* and *The Seafarer*, also exiles *pro amore Dei*, whose nascent Christian identity results from their separation from human society. No other character in Old English religious poetry, however, suffers an identity crisis that matches the proportion of Guthlac’s internal conflict. Guthlac, alone and separated from society, comes under attack at the hands of a troop of devils who make up a devilish comitatus, endorsing secular and ancestral values that Guthlac has discarded in the course of his conversion to religious life. The devils in the poem come to embody secular values and attack Guthlac with a view to confusing the holy man with their insinuations that his solitary existence testifies to his disregard for values that are the core of masculinity in the heroic world.

The aim of this article is to elucidate the significance of the evocation and the eventual repudiation of the heroic code in the poem. I would like to argue that what constitutes the core of heroic symbolic system in Old English poetic tradition, from which the *Guthlac-A*-poet worked, is the idea of comitatus as *body politic*, whose constituent elements, masculine bodies, gain their gendered identity as a result of their participation in homosocial acts of gift-giving and economic exchange. The devils, who assault Guthlac, attribute to him queerness resulting from his attempt at an alternative identity construction outside the established homosocial bonds. As Guthlac becomes an abject from such the heroic *body politic*, he loses identity and masculinity. I will explore Guthlac’s conversion from the world as a displacement and, consequently, a metaphoric dismemberment of his gendered social body, turning to Judith Butler disquisitions on abjection as well as Tomhas Laquer’s one-sex model, mediated by Carol J. Clover’s study of masculinity in Norse Saga.

It may not go unnoticed that earlier critical reception of the poem has not been insensitive to the ways in which the Christian warrior discourse of the

poem subtends notions of secular and Christian identities. In *Medieval Identity Machines*, Jeffrey Jerome Cohen claims that Guthlac legends “construct a singular body with both religious and colonialist utility for eighth-century Mercia, an Anglo-Saxon kingdom that likewise struggled to imagine itself in less conflicted, more heterogeneous form” (116). In his ecocritical reading of *Guthlac A*, Alfred K. Siewers is alive to the political and historical background of the poem, arguing that Anglo-Saxon culture of the period was in need of forming “a new ethnic identity that was also ecclesiastical in nature” (212). The complexity of gender overtones in *Guthlac A*, however, seems to have been disregarded by readers of the poem, although they have appreciated the poet’s rich reworking of the heroic tradition in the sacred biography of Guthlac.⁴ The poem, as this reading tries to demonstrate, takes turns to present Guthlac’s masculinity from opposing perspectives, secular and religious. Although the poem is ostensibly a Christian expression of *contemptus mundi*, it also encodes the significance of secular ideologies and their contribution to the developing Anglo-Saxon Christianity.

The poem is organised around a series of debates between the devils and the saint. The argument that the devils maintain during the debate is that Guthlac constitutes a figure of an abject, as he contradicts the normative notions of humanity and masculinity maintained in the secular world. The abject is a liminal territory from which boundaries subjectivity emanates. It is especially important to remember that Guthlac’s nascent subjectivity as a convert to monasticism emerges in the demonic space that he cleanses and transforms into a sacred landscape foreshadowing paradise. According to Judith Butler, “The abject designates here precisely those ‘unlivable’ and ‘uninhabitable’ zones of social life which are nevertheless densely populated by those who do not enjoy the status of the subject, but whose living under the sign of the ‘unlivable’ is required to circumscribe the domain of the subject” (3). For Judith Butler, the abject is a precondition for a definition of norm. She claims that “the construction of gender operates through *exclusionary* means, such that the human is not only produced over and against the inhuman, but through a set of foreclosures, radical erasures, that are strictly speaking, refused the possibility of cultural articulation” (Butler 1993, 8). *Guthlac A* is a poem that exposes contradictory politics of representing the self, a gap between the secular and religious evaluations of the individual. Guthlac is himself an abject from the society which he foregoes. As Alexandra Hennessey Olsen points out, the theme of exile is one of the theme that starts the poem and “is brought up again when Guthlac and the devils discuss the question of who is an exile and who is not” (1981, 24). Abjection is the only means of gender construction in Christian terms, as it makes possible a shift from the secular values that define heroic masculinity as the only normative subjectivity.⁵

In a heroic society, queerness does not necessarily imply effeminacy. From a secular perspective, Guthlac’s separation from the worldly economies of power and status detracts from his masculinity. What can be gleaned from the devil’s

speeches, Guthlac's conversion from the world is corollary to his disempowerment. The treatment of hagiographic material by the poet exposes his sensitivity to a secular notion of masculinity that corresponds to a one-sex model of sexuality, described by Thomas Walter Laqueur in *Making Sex* (1990) and applied to Old Norse and Old English heroic literature by Carol J. Clover. According to Clover, "it seems likely that Norse society operated according to a one-sex model – that there was one sex and it was male. More to that point, there was finally just one 'gender,' one standard by which persons were judged adequate or inadequate, and it was something like masculine" (397). Clover also says that "what finally excites fear and loathing in the Norse mind is not femaleness per se, but condition of powerlessness, the lack or loss of volition, with which femaleness is typically, but neither inevitably nor exclusively, associated" (397). Although there is no such a corresponding notion of effeminacy in *Guthlac*, the demons that assault the saint address his physical powerlessness that displaces him from human society. In his debates with the devils, Guthlac confronts his disempowerment that undermines the notion of masculinity lying at the foundations of his identity, which, in heroic society, is valued only as masculine and inscribed onto an individual's body in the process of symbolic gift exchange. Cut out from a ring-giver and a community with which to participate in the process of exchange that effects the continuance of identity, Guthlac must therefore resist the devils' discourse that discards him from the category of man, if not incorporating him into the category of queer. The poem encodes a dialectic whereby the hero is remasculinised in Christian terms, a dialectic that emanates from the sublation of Guthlac heroic desire for the desire for God.

The secular perspective is maintained by the devils, who, representing the secular notion of masculinity, scorn Guthlac as emasculated. The devils point out that Guthlac dissolves his homosocial bonds; from the debate between the devils and Guthlac emerges a secular epistemology, in accordance with which Guthlac qualifies as queer in relation to the masculine society. Guthlac gainsays the representation of his solitariness maintained in the devilish discourse queering him out of heroic society by with the Augustinian perception of the subject. As Jeffrey Jerome Cohen puts it, "the Latin and Old English lives of Saint Guthlac promote an ascesis of sacred individuation" (116), while the devils represent "a discarded image of heroic or secular masculinity" (139). However, Guthlac is also "ana" [one] like God. Guthlac rejects the devilish terms of representation by constructing an Augustinian understanding of the subject. It is through the debate with the devils that Guthlac constructs his masculinity in Christian terms. The communion of saints, which Guthlac eventually joins, is also imagined as cemented by homosocial bonds, not unlike those forging secular communities. Heroic sentiment also colours Guthlac's "longaþ" (longing) for God, an emotional attachment that characterises bonds between lord and warriors in secular poems.

Old English heroic poetry presents an idea of male body whose physical trappings make the body significant only in the social context of rituals that confirm men as part of *comitatus*. As D. Vance Smith observes, “the medieval male body [...] is caught between production and representation. It stands, in many ways, for the larger world; but it is also responsible, in part, for producing and maintaining that world” (5). The demons evoke the idea of *comitatus*. What is understood as *comitatus* is an institution that binds lords and their warriors in a profoundly personal and reciprocal union. In poetry, such bonds are described through emotionally charged language, as affection between lords and retainers is not only supported by loyalty in battle but cultivated in the hall during ceremonies, where men express their emotion profusely with words and gestures. In his article “Love and death in the *Männerbund*,” Joseph Harris claims that two OE terms for lord, *freowine* and *freodryhten*, are derived from IE *prī-* “love” (87). He also emphasises that epithets like *swæs* and *lēof* are ubiquitous in OE descriptions of heroic culture (86). Many examples of affection between men can be adduced from Old English poetry. Such affection is expressed by the speaker of *The Wanderer* when he dreams of kissing and laying his head on his dead lord’s lap as well as “longaþ” [longing] that Hrothgar harbours for Beowulf as he pays farewell to the hero. Hrothgar’s feelings mirror “longaþ” that Guthlac feels towards God.

Masculine bonds are forged and strengthened by rewards in land, money and treasure. Gifts of this kind are not only material rewards but symbols of their relationship. More to that point, since they define an individual’s status within *comitatus*, they also define an individual’s status as man; the demons’ preoccupation with treasure and land cannot be reduced to balancing the monastic *contemptus mundi*, but must be measured against the significance of material culture as a signifier of status and identity that was essential to a Christian community from which noble-born people like Guthlac emanated. Accordingly, both the demons and Guthlac are presented as attempting to express their opposite desires with the emotional language that is normative for male bonds in heroic poetry.

What does the saint’s body represent if it forgoes the joys of the worldly values (*Guthlac A*, ll. 2–3)? The poem is framed by the promise of heavenly reward that will guarantee the supreme fulfilment of a homosocial desire, outside the secular body politic. As Hennessey Olsen observes, “Just as *Guthlac A* begins with a description of joy, so it ends with the word ‘wynne’ (l. 814b) [pleasure or joy] and emphasises the ‘sibbe’ (l. 816a) [peace] that the redeemed experience, ‘wynnym’ (l. 815b) [eagerly], in heaven” (23).

The poem’s opening repudiates worldly values as transient. Heroic poetry tends to present a heroic world in which a community’s flourishing is made manifest as its boundaries are extended while the ongoing accumulation of wealth results in its being showered by the king among his loyal warriors during splendid ceremonies of ring-giving.⁶ However, the human world that is suggested at the poem’s opening is deprived of form and architecture that qualify the human

secular achievement edified at the beginning of *Beowulf*. Wealth is not exchanged with a view to sustaining the flourishing of a community of warriors; instead it decays with the world that is slackening in an entropic process of demise. The poem presents a poignant view of the world, inspired by a commonplace image, so ubiquitous in patristic literature, of the final sixth age of the world, a world in which love for Christ cools (“colaþ Cristes lufu,” *Guthlac A*, l. 38). It is barely possible to reconstruct a notion of heroic code from the poem’s opening, as there is no community from which Guthlac comes; in contrast to the Latin Life of Guthlac of Crowland, there is barely any mention of Guthlac’s heroic pre-existence.

Although the poet works from a Christian tradition and draws a veil of silence over the secular world, secular values are brought to attention throughout the poem by the throng of the devils who torment Guthlac. They repeatedly remind him of a society in which homosocial desire structures bonds and hierarchies. The devils sharpen a secular perspective on Guthlac’s new life, as they represent a cohesive group against which Guthlac’s new loyalties are juxtaposed. The devils speeches cast the deserted mound, which Guthlac inhabits, as an unliveable and uninhabitable space for Guthlac as a man in Butlerian terms. The devils represent Guthlac as queer, as abject from the society of men.

The devilish comitatus populates widely Old English poetic imagination. The closest vernacular analogues to *Guthlac A*’s representation of the devilish comitatus are extant in *Genesis A*, *Genesis B* as well as *Christ and Satan* from the Junius Manuscript, a late ten- or early eleven-century codex preserving poetry mostly dated down to the eighth or ninth century. The devils of *Guthlac* are different from the devils that are featured in those three poems. In the biblical matter of the Junius Manuscript, the devilish retinue contradicts bonds of honour that prevail in the comitatus of heaven. *Genesis A* represents the devils’s society as a straightforward inversion of comitatus, whose ideal are the angels’s host in heaven:

[...] sar and sorge, susl þrowedon,
 Bystrum beþeahte, þearl æfterlean
 þæs þe heo ungunnon with gode winnan.
 Ða wæs soth swa ær sibb on heofnum.
 fægre freoþoþeawas, frea eallum leof,
 þeoden his þegnum; þrymmas weoxon
 dugutha mid dryhtne dreamhabbendra. (*Genesis A*, ll. 75–81)⁷

[the devils] suffered sorrow, pain and punishment. Veiled with darkness, they were inflicted with dire retribution, as they had started war against God. Truth with peace, however, prevailed in heaven as of old, fair works of concord. The Lord was gracious to all, the prince to his thegns. The hosts grew in strength, the hosts of the Lord, endowed with joy. (trans. J. O.)

Satan's troops, led by him to wage war against God, are now decimated in hell as exiles, while the true comitatus of heaven enjoys grace and prosperity in heaven. Satan in *Genesis B* is discussed by A. N. Doane in his joint edition of Old English *Genesis B* and Vatican *Genesis* in Old Saxon, composed in Carolingian France in the ninth century, which is the source for the Old English poem. A. N. Doane claims that in *Genesis B* "Satan is represented as wanting to replace the hierarchical system of governance by vassalage, what would have seemed natural and 'modern' to the ninth century Carolingian poet and his audience (1991, 123) and views his hell as an inversion of "Heaven, conceived by the poet as an ideal feudal system of obligation running upward and downward" (117).

In *Christ and Satan*, the poet puts to Lucifer's mouth an evocation of heavenly comitatus where God distributes joys of the hall among angels:

Hwær com engla ðrym,
 þe we on heofnum habban sceoldan?
 þis is ðeostræ ham, ðearle gebunden
 fæstum fyrclommum; flor is on welme
 attre onæled. Nis nu ende feor
 þæt we sceolun ætsomme susel þrowian,
 wean and wergu, nalles wuldres blæd
 habban in heofnum, hehselda wyn.
 Hwæt, we for dryhtene iu dreamas hefdon,
 song on swegle selrum tidum,
 þær nu ymb ðone æcan æðele stondað,
 heleð ymb hehseld, herigað drihten
 wordum and wercum, and ic in wite sceal
 bidan in bendum, and me bættran ham
 for oferhygdum æfre ne wene. (*Christ and Satan*, ll. 36–50)⁸

Where has the glory of angels gone, the glory we should have in heaven? This is a home of darkness, firmly bound with strong fire-fetters; the ground is in surge, kindled with poison. There is no end to the misery and sorrow that we shall suffer together. We shall not partake of the heavenly glamour, the joy of the high-seat. Lo, he used to have joys in the Lord's presence, a better time when there was music in heaven, where noble angels stand around the eternal One, warriors, who praise their Lord with words and works, while I am to dwell in fetters as punishment, without hope for a better home on account of my pride. (trans. J. O.)

The devil, now in hell, suffers the loss of home as a result of having been removed from the emotional economy of heaven and the monologue serves to represent life in hell as life of exile and loneliness. Brought to the awareness that he will never regain the happiness that once nourished his sense of belonging, he now laments his ongoing state of emasculation, since his presence in hell is a corollary to the absence of the lord who ensured the flourishing of the community of

angels [engla ðrym, l. 36). In the Junius poems, hell is a site of uninhabitability that circumscribes heaven as the domain of normative masculinity.⁹

A strikingly different picture of the devilish troop is gleaned from *Guthlac A*. While the devils of the Junius Manuscript represent an ironic inversion of the heroic code, truly maintained only by good angels in heaven, the devils that Guthlac faces seem to live and flourish as a strong cohesive group that takes pains to attract Guthlac into their midst. Although the dominating critical attitude towards the devils in *Guthlac A* involves foregrounding their resemblance to Grendel in *Beowulf*,¹⁰ the demons attack Guthlac as a cohesive comitatus:

We þe beoð holde gif ðu us hyran wilt,
 oþþe þec ungearo eft gesecað
 maran mægne, þæt þe mon ne þearf
 hondum hrinan, ne þin hra feallan
 wæpna wundum. (*Guthlac A*, ll. 280–286)

We will be loyal to you if you will follow and obey us; otherwise we will oppose you with greater forces, when you are unprepared, and no man will need to strike you with hands nor will you body fall with wounds inflicted by weapons. We will destroy this place with our feet. The army will press forward accompanied by formidable hosts. (trans. J. O.)

This fragment supports Jeffrey Jerome’s Cohen observation that “the antagonism between the singular and the multiple is slender pivot upon which the rhetorical architecture of *Guthlac A* balances” (2003, 125). Such a discourse casts Guthlac as an outsider and an exile who discards homosocial bonds that define the warrior class.

Guthlac’s desire for God emerges as queer when put against the devils’ performance of heroic identity. His choice to forgo human values is implicitly a choice to forgo masculine values:¹¹

Magun we nu nemnan þæt us neah gewearð
 þurh haligne had gecyþed,
 hu Guðlac his in godes willan
 mod gerehte, man eall forseah,
 eorðlic æþelu, upp gemunde
 ham in heofonum. (*Guthlac A*, ll. 93–98)

We may now declare what was revealed in holy manner; how Guthlac directed his mind in accordance with God’s will, forsaking all evil and noble excellencies and contemplating the home in heaven. (trans. J. O.)

In verse “man eall forseah, eorðlic æþelu” (*Guthlac A*, ll. 96–97) ‘evil’ varies ‘earthly excellencies.’ Guthlac’s unwordliness defies expectations regarding gender

he represents and destabilises hierarchy these values establish in the warrior-class. He was committed to secular values in his youth (*Guthlac A*, l. 105). The poet's digression on *Psychomachia* waged by angels competing for the holy man's soul is introduced by a remark that Guthlac was exposed to many risks in early youth ["se halga wer / in tha arestan aeldu gelufade farecnessa fela" (*Guthlac A*, ll. 110–111)]. Enlightenment brought about by the holy angels induces Guthlac's awareness that his heroic commitment constituted "synna lust" 'sinful longings' (*Guthlac A*, l. 113).

In heroic poetry, warriors are valued as persons, and as men, on account of their connection to their lord, to whom they have sworn lifelong obligation, as well as of their ancestry. The devils try to attract Guthlac to their comitatus. They address him as "yrming" [wretch] (*Guthlac A*, l. 272). They evoke Guthlac's solitariness and destituteness that characterises a number of religious characters in Old English poetry. From secular and human perspective, Guthlac, as a hermit, finds himself in a uninhabitable space that precludes the secular and masculine terms of representation:

Oft we ofersegon bi sǣm tweonum
 þeoda þeawas, þræce modigra,
 þara þe in gelimpe life weoldon.
 No we oferhygdu anes monnes
 geond middangeard maran fundon.
 ðu þæt gehatest þæt ðu ham on us
 gegan wille, ðe eart godes yrming.
 Bi hwon scealt þu lifgan, þeah þu lond age?
 Ne þec mon hider mose feded;
 beoð þe hungor ond þurst hearde gewinnan,
 gif þu gewitest swa wilde deor
 ana from eþele. Nis þæt onginn wiht!
 Geswic þisses setles! Ne mæg þec sellan ræd
 mon gelæran þonne þeos mengu eall. (*Guthlac A*, ll. 267–279)

We have often seen between the two seas people's customs, proud one's violence, who in prosperity lived their lives. Never have we encountered man's greater pride over the world. You have been threatening that you will [take over] our home. You are a God's wretch. How will you live, even though you own the land? No man will nourish you with food.¹² You will be hungry and thirsty in the course of the formidable battle if you depart alone from your native land¹³ alone like a wild animal. Such undertaking is of no use. Give up this place. No man can give you a better council than this multitude. (trans. J. O.)

The devils attack Guthlac as one who perverts the normative notions of masculinity, first by casting the religious man's solitariness and the secluded place of habitation as an indicator of his monstrosity, secondly by accusing him of the

sin of pride, thirdly, by dismissing his land tenure as defying the norms of gift-exchange that organise the bonds and relationship in the hall.

The first two points seem to render Guthlac akin to Heremod, whose exemplum is used by Hrothgar in his sermon on pride in *Beowulf*, as well as to Nabucodonozor in *Daniel* of the Junius Manuscript. Like *Guthlac*, both men are “ana” [lonely, trans. J.O.] and both are associated with “oferhygd” [pride, trans. J.O.]:

[Heremod] ana hwearf,
 mære þeoden, mondreamum from.
 Deah þe hine mihtig god mægenes wynnum
 eafeþum stepte, ofer ealle men
 forð gefremede, hwæþere him on ferhþe greow
 breosthord blodreow. Nallas beagas geaf
 Denum æfter dome. (*Beowulf*, ll. 1714–1720)

Alone [Heremod], the great lord, turned away from joys of men. Although mighty God exalted before all men with strength and power, his mind grew bloodthirsty. Not at all did he distribute rings among the Danes as was fit. (trans. J. O.)

Heremod is an evil king, associated with “oferhygd” [pride] by Hrothgar, because by disregarding his obligations of loyalty and generosity towards his comitatus he became an exile, whose solitariness parallels the solitude of Grendel, his Mother, and the Dragon in *Beowulf*. Guthlac, like Heremod, also detached himself from the joys of men (þæt milde mod wiþ moncynnes dreamum gedælde, *Beowulf*, ll. 39–40); in *Beowulf*, such detachment is perceived as monstrous.¹⁴ The devils therefore struggle to repress the positive monastic evaluation of solitude by estimating Guthlac’s self-imposed religious exile as inhuman and monstrous. What is more, their derisive comparison of Guthlac to a wild beast defines the topography of the fens as an inhuman space, welcome only to those who suffer the fate of an abject. This comparison evokes Nebuchadnezzar who likewise turned away from humanity and, as a result of his madness, came to resemble a wild animal:

Ða for ðam gylpe gumena dryhten
 forlangen wearð and on fleam gewat,
 ana on oferhyd ofer ealle men.
 [...]
 Seofon winter samod susl þrowode,
 wildeora westen, winburge cyning. (*Daniel*, ll. 612–621)¹⁵

The lord of people [Nebuchadnezzar] was inflicted with madness for his boasting and departed, alone in pride before all men. [...] For seven years he suffered punishment in the wilderness. (trans. J. O.)

Guthlac, Heremod and Nabuccodonozor are diagnosed with suffering from “ofer-hygd” on account of their disregard for human bonds, by definition homosocial in the case of Heremod and Guthlac.¹⁶ Additionally, Guthlac inhabits the wilderness of wild beasts, like the king of Babylon.

Thirdly, the conflict over land tenure¹⁷ between Guthlac and the devil is a linguistic struggle over the power to represent the enemy as inhuman and an exile. In D. Vance Smith’s terms, the exile’s body fails to represent the secular world as well as maintain it. Both the devils and the saint call the mound “ham” [home, trans. J.O.] or “setl” [settlement, trans. J.O.], which, as Stephanie Clark suggests, indicate the setting as a permanent site of habitation (2011, 87). Another term used to describe Guthlac’s mound, *wræcsetl* (*Guthlac A*, l. 296), conveys “a precarious sense of exile, with the attempt to claim authority that goes with inhabiting a setl” (Clark 2011, 87). The devils claim that Guthlac is an exile who has cut off his kinship ties, thereby dissolving bonds with ones who are responsible for his well-being and defence.

The devils’ representation of the holy man as abject is directed against Guthlac’s self-representation. Guthlac is engaged in a struggle against the language¹⁸ and the established secular forms of representations of identities. Guthlac puts forward the Cassianic doctrine of “pure heart”¹⁹ and Augustinian understanding of the self, which views the soul as a mirror image of God. Guthlac does not view his solitariness as the cause of emasculating abjection; rather, his solitariness mirrors oneness of God:

An is ælmihtig god, se mec mæg eaðe gescyldan;
 he min feorg freoþað. Ic eow fela wille
 soþa gesecgan. Mæg ic þis setl on eow
 butan earfeðum ana geðringan.
 Ne eam ic swa fealog, swa ic eow fore stonde,
 monna weorudes, ac me mara dæl
 in godcundum gæstgerynum
 wunað ond weaxeð, se me wraþe healdeð. (*Guthlac A*, ll. 241–254)

One is the almighty God who may easily shield me; he is the guardian of my life. I will tell you many truths. I can deprive you of the possession of this place without effort. I am not so destitute of a host of men, standing before you, as a multitude lives and grows in my soul, providing me with help. (trans. J.O.)

Deictic terms in this passage mirror the Augustinian idea of the soul, which depends on the analogy drawn between the human soul and the Trinity:

And so there is a certain image of the Trinity: the mind itself, its knowledge, which is its offspring, and love as a third; these three are one and one substance. The offspring is not less, while the mind knows itself as much as it is; nor is the love less,

while the mind loves itself as much as it knows and as much as it is. (Matthews 2002, 9.12.18)

Solitude is here valued in Augustinian terms, as Guthlac's solitude is the mirror image of the oneness of God. In the creed that opens his counterattack on the devil Guthlac declares he will live a solitary life of a recluse as *imitatio Dei*, the performance of which defies the secular parameters of masculinity that bind an individual to a comitatus. The horizontal homosocial bond that ties the devil is juxtaposed with a vertical and personal relationship between Guthlac and God.

Guthlac experiences an emotional longing for God qualified with the word "langaþ," found elsewhere in Old English poetic corpus. In *Beowulf*, Hrothgar is overwhelmed by an intense surge of emotion on the day of Beowulf's departure; the old king feels "dyrne langaþ" (*Beowulf*, l. 1879) towards Beowulf. The word qualifies the formal vertical bond established between the king and the hero. Hrothgar's longing for Beowulf generated two contradictory critical evaluations of his kingship. While Mary Dockray-Miller attempts to expose Hrothgar's characterisation as teeming with ironic comments exposing his effeminacy and failure as king, David Clark claims that the passage is committed to celebrating homosocial bonds between heroes (2006, 134). Additional evidence adduced from *Guthlac A* supports the latter view that descriptions of affections between males in Old English poetry did not detract from heroes' masculinity; on the contrary, the farewell scene in *Beowulf* focuses on the formal context surrounding expression of emotion between Hrothgar and Beowulf. Guthlac's recurrent longing for God may thus have been composed in imitation of heroic poetry; his love for God replaces his love for male companions that constructs the unity of the devilish host. The theme of the devils as representing human heroic bonds makes it possible to fleetingly look at Guthlac as an exile from secular perspective, while from the Christian and Augustinian perspective the homosocial bond between Guthlac and God and warrior discourse in the poem is utilised to represent the Augustinian idea of the soul.

Guthlac A textualises a war of discourses. The spiritual weapons that Guthlac fights with and the devil's assaults on the saint allegorise conversion of Anglo-Saxons a process of rewriting culture that can also be explained with the reference to early medieval translation theory:

Medieval arts commentary does not simply "serve" its "master" text: it also rewrites and supplants them [...]. It [translation practice] takes over the function of commentary on the *auctores*, and in so doing replicates the characteristic move of academic exegesis, that of displacing the very text that it proposes to serve. (Copeland 1991, 3–4)

Rita Copeland argues that early medieval translation practice holds up antique translation models, where Roman translation "offered a perfect platform for

contesting the pre-eminence of Greek culture” and that “translation in Roman theory is figured as a pattern of transference, substitution, and ultimately displacement of the source” (1991, 44). In *Guthlac A*, the source of poem’s expression, secular heroic lore and poetic tradition, are foregrounded only to be contested and replaced by Christian terms of representation. The outcome of such contestation involves the reconceptualization of norms regarding identity and restructuring the culturally established notions regarding loyalties and kinship obligation. Writing lives of saints in Old English meant more than writing “edifying substitutes for heroic poetry” (Woolf 1996, 39); Old English religious verse problematises and textualises the mastering of Germanic native culture by Christian codes of reading and remembering past. Guthlac, who discards his military accoutrements and assumes spiritual weapons instead, is thus a personification of the allegoresis performed by the poem’s intended audience. The poem’s traditional language serves to displace their native culture, the very cultural formation that it had served the Anglo-Saxons and their ancestors over centuries.

Notes

- 1 Guthlac is a hermit of the Antonine tradition, “a solitary monk, wrestling with temptation and practicing a life of austerity and prayer” (Clayton 1996, 148). Hugh Magennis also emphasises the *Guthlac-A*-poet’s familiarity with the tradition of eremitical hagiography, as the text “shows a reversion to Antonine and indeed Pauline model and an imaginative expansion of the theme of the saint setting up a dwelling in the wilderness” (Magennis 1996, 180–181).
- 2 All quotations and their modern English translations from Felix’s *Life of St. Guthlac* are taken from Bertram Colgrave, 1956.
- 3 All quotations from *Guthlac A* are taken from Jane Roberts, 1979.
- 4 Santha Bhattacharji observes that “the words *cempa* and *oretta* for ‘warrior’ occur repeatedly, and much Grendel-like vocabulary is used for Guthlac’s spiritual foes” and focuses on gender overtones in *Guthlac B*, rather than in *Guthlac A* (2005, 47). In *Guthlac B*, she argues, “the male saint is playing the female role in a drama resembling the sexual act” (2005, 48). In *Guthlac A*, the saint is not feminized by the devils. I argue that the devil expose Guthlac as withdrawal from masculine values as potentially disempowering him as a man. Earlier important critical readings of the poems which, however, foreground the Christian tradition as the source of the poem. Paul F. Reichardt focuses on the influence of the Cassianic doctrine of pure heart on the religious theme of *Guthlac A* (1974, 333), but he also emphasises the theme of renunciation from secular values that supports the poet’s holding up Guthlac as an example for the British people to follow” (1974, 337). Kathleen E. Dubs, in “*Guthlac A* and the acquisition of wisdom,” explores the sapiential theme of theme which she

- traces to patristic literature and claims and which she locates in Old English secular poetry, like *Beowulf* (1981, 608).
- 5 Jeffrey Jerome Cohen argues the Latin Life of Guthlac and *Guthlac A* encode “an irresolvable conflict between social forces that aim to render the flesh obedient, intelligible, *useful*, and a radically acontextual openness that never ceases to pull the body outside of itself, outside any organisation, no matter how minutely disciplined that body has become” (2003, 117). He proposes that Guthlac’s body in the Old English poem is “a fantasy of corporate integrity with vast colonialist utility for contemporary Mercia” (2003, 117).
 - 6 Jeffrey Jerome Cohen claims that the poem utilises “the vernacular of heroic narrative to inspire to imitation an audience with inadequate exposure to Latin conventions of hagiography” and, accordingly, “the first twenty-nine lines suggest that Guthlac’s battle against fantastic foes will nonetheless set him *against* the Ingelds and Beowulfs of heroic tradition, against those exemplary bodies whose hold over the contemporary performance of masculinity the Guthlac story challenges” (2003, 123).
 - 7 All quotations from *Genesis A* are taken from George Phillip Krapp, 1931.
 - 8 All quotations from *Christ and Satan* are taken George Phillip Krapp, 1931.
 - 9 According to Hugh Magennis, “perversion of community is an especial concern in Christian narrative poems, both biblical and hagiographical” and “the theme of threat to community and perversion of community readily suggest the possibility of non-literal interpretation of Christian narrative poetry, particularly in terms of the idea of the city of God” (1996, 189–190).
 - 10 Sam Newton registers a number of analogues in *Beowulf* and *Guthlac A*, as “in both works, the heroes exorcise specific places haunted by fen-dwelling demons” (2004, 142). Alfred K. Siewers has offered an ecocritical reading of both poems in he argues that “Guthlac’s exorcism of the Fens parallels readings of Beowulf’s foray into the Grendelcyn’s mere as the exorcism of an earlier indigenous culture” (2006, 211).
 - 11 As Paul F. Reichardt emphasises, “in monastic hierarchy of holiness, no state is more exalted than that of the hermit who lives alone in a remote place” (1974, 332).
 - 12 Although “mos” means ‘food, sustenance,’ Laurence K. Shook suggests an alternative translation of “mos” as bog or marsh. “If mose is taken as an inflected form of *mos*, ‘bog’ or ‘marsh,’ the statement becomes: ‘No man will feed you here in the marsh.’ There is in this case an obvious difficulty of syntax in that *on mose* or *in mose* would be the more likely form. But the simplex might be possible, especially in view of the construction: *he ana sæt dygle stowe*: ‘he withdrew alone into a secret place’ (*Guthlac A*, ll. 158–159)” (1960, 5).
 - 13 The devils refer to the secular world as Guthlac’s “eþel” [homeland, trans. J.O.] (*Guthlac A*, l. 277), which is “a dignified expression,” as Laurence K. Shook notices (1960, 8). Laurence makes this point in a different context, where

Guthlac calls homeland his barrow attacked by the devils and notes “the poet’s awareness of his [Guthlac’s] relationship between Guthlac’s earthly and heavenly home” (Shook 1960, 8). Mary Clayton translates “eþel” as “your home” (2013, 109). In her article, “A more permanent homeland” (2011), Stephanie Clark consistently translates “eþel” as homeland. Furthermore, she claims in a footnote that the use of the word “eþel” indicates that Guthlac “is far from the rights and protections of and duties to his kin” (2011, 90).

- 14 Andy Orchard claims that “Heremod’s fate, to turn away in lonely exile from the joys of men, recalls that of Grendel himself, the more so since his exile takes place among giants, as Heremod, just like Grendel, passes ‘into the power of enemies’ (*on feonda gewæld*, lines 808 and 903)” (1995, 48).
- 15 All quotations from *Daniel* are taken from George Phillip Krapp, 1931.
- 16 In Cynewulf’s *Juliana*, the saint is also accused of the sin of pride by the devil.
- 17 This point I make here is indebted to Stephanie Clark’s argument that “The *Guthlac A* poet represents the spiritual conflict between the devils and saint as a land dispute between spiritually unworthy tenants who have held the land through temporary loan and a warrior of God who is granted permanent tenure as his reward for faithful service (2011, 76).
- 18 Such a point has been made by A. N. Doane in his edition of *Genesis B*, where he shows that “to fall, Satan must struggle against things as they naturally are, not least against language. Satan’s striving to be something else, to say something “not praise,” strives against the conditions of his existence. All of his anticreation amounts only to this, that he strives to turn *lof* to *hetespræce*” (1991, 119).
- 19 Cassianic doctrine of pure heart is discussed by Paul F. Reichardt’s reading of *Guthlac A* (1974, 333).

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