

**Lecture 8: Intro to the Environmental Humanities, "The Dream of the Rood"
Chaucer, "The Nun's Priest's Tale" (eco-theology & ecocriticism)**

"The Dream of the Rood"

"The Dream of the Rood" is likely one of the oldest works of English literature. In its oldest form, it is inscribed on an 8th-century stone cross from northeast England known as the Ruthwell Cross.

In terms of chronology, the Ruthwell Cross appears roughly 800 years after Virgil, who came 700 years after Hesiod. These three represent Greek, Roman, and Anglo Saxon cultures.

The inscription on the Ruthwell Cross begins, "Krist wæs on Rodi. Hweþræ' per fusæ fearran kwomu æþpilæ til anum." ("Christ was on the Cross. Yet the brave came there from afar to their lord.")

The expanded version of "The Dream of the Rood" that we read comes from a 10th-century text known as the Vercelli Book.

In old English, a rōd (pronounced with a long "o") is a pole, or a cross. This word continued in use for quite some time. For example, it appears hundreds of years later in Shakespeare's "Hamlet": "No, by the rood, not so" (Act 3, Scene 4).

In "The Dream of the Rood", a religious mystic (a "dreamer") has a vision in which the cross ("rood") that Christ died upon speaks to him, explaining to the dreamer how it is that he, a tree, became the sacred cross. Hence the text has two separate speakers, a man and a tree.

It is immediately surprising that in the text we have an anthropomorphized and sentient tree that speaks. However, this is less surprising when we realize that the ancient Celts inhabiting England worshiped earth, sea, and sky, as well as particular features of the environment, such as streams, lakes, hills, and trees, especially oak trees.

In fact, the "Druids," the Celtic priests, were given their name by Caesar during one of his campaigns, as he noticed that they worshiped trees. While in Latin *druides* simply means "sorcerer," it derives from the Greek *drus*, which means "oak tree." Hence, "Druid" literally means to worship oak trees.

Similarly, early Christians called these and other individuals that worshiped nature "pagan," which derives from the Latin *pagus* and *pangere*, which is to stick

something into the ground, to firmly fix it there. Hence, to certain Christians, who believed that their own souls transcended the earth, “pagans” were people literally rooted in, as well as bound to, the planet.

In "The Dream of the Rood", we have a collision of early Christian and “pagan” worlds. In fact, we have two deities superimposed on each other, a soon-to-be metaphysical deity (Jesus) on his way home to be with his father in heaven, and a “pagan” deity who has been uprooted from the earth to be hewn into a cross. Both man and tree have been forced into the shape of a cross.

"The Dream of the Rood" is an important text to consider as it provides an early example of how Christianity encountered “pagan” religions, something that it repeatedly did throughout its history in Europe, Asia, Africa, the Americas, and elsewhere.

A Transitional Text "The Dream of the Rood"

"The Dream of the Rood" is a transitional text intended to transition “pagans” into Christians. It is able to do so by doubling (a technique that we saw in the Myth of Gilgamesh) the Rood and Jesus. In so doing, the Rood takes on some of Jesus’ qualities, and Jesus some of the Rood’s.

For example, Jesus is described in surprisingly heroic terms, as a “young Hero,” a “Warrior,” a “Mighty King,” “strong” with a “stout heart” (Reader 116). Moreover, he is active, climbing the cross and stripping himself. In being so portrayed, Jesus clearly takes on the characteristics prized by a warrior culture.

Conversely, the tree, a powerful deity of place, allows his own crucifixion like Jesus: “I might have felled all foes, but I stood fast.” Following Jesus’ example, “Nor did I dare harm any of them,” even while being crucified. Like Jesus, the Rood is incredibly powerful, yet allows himself to die for the sake of another (in this case Jesus, just as Jesus died for the faithful).

The doubling continues as the tree describes his own crucifixion like Jesus’: “They pierced me with dark nails, the wounds are seen on me, open gashes of hate...I was all drenched with blood” (from the wound in Jesus’ side).

Furthermore, the antagonists in the work are the common enemy to both of the doubles, the “Strong foes” who both “seized me [the rood] there, hewed me to the shape they wished to see,” as well as crucified Jesus.

By connecting, indeed, superposing a new deity (Jesus) upon an existing one (an earth deity), early Christians were able to assimilate the followers of an obviously “pagan” (firmly rooted in the earth, like a tree) religion.

Because this is a transitional text, once the “pagans” were assimilated into Christianity, “brought into the fold,” the features, especially those related to the worship of nature, of the earlier religions ultimately fell away.

What is especially clever about "The Dream of the Rood" is that it is actually able to incorporate the destruction of the earth deity--indeed, the destruction of the earth religion--into the narrative itself, as the tree's defining bond with the earth is severed when it is cut in order to be fashioned into a rood (cross).

Of course, Jesus is also physically killed, but Christianity's unique innovation is that he is reborn on a meta-physical register, which is impossible for the tree, a deity of a non-metaphysical religion. Hence, "The Dream of the Rood" symbolically enacts the triumph of one deity (and religion) over another, as well as the triumph of the metaphysical realm over the physical.

This is not, of course, to say that Christianity must be at odds with, let alone eradicate, nature-centered religions. However, historically, as "The Dream of the Rood" attests, this has often happened. The challenge, and it is of course a hermeneutic one, is to interpret Christianity in an earth-friendly way.

Intro to "The Canterbury Tales"

"The Canterbury Tales" were written in the late 14th century in England by Geoffrey Chaucer, before the advent of the printing press.

Although still technically the “Middle Ages” in England (even though the Renaissance was well underway in Italy), Chaucer is writing 600 years after the Ruthwell Cross.

Even though Chaucer is in turn 600 years away from us, his language, Middle English, is close enough to our own that we can still read it today, albeit with some difficulty.

“The Nun's Priest's Tale” is an example of a “beast fable,” which used animals to tell allegorical stories. These often appeared in elaborately illustrated books. From our (environmental) perspective, these works are interesting as they depict animals as not only sentient, but surprisingly human-like.

The depiction of animals (and anything else, for that matter) as human-like is called anthropomorphism, meaning to take on human form or characteristics. "The Dream of the Rood" contains an anthropomorphic treatment of a tree.

"The Canterbury Tales"

"The Canterbury Tales", which is comprised of 24 separate tales, recounts the story of religious pilgrims (pilgrimages were enormously popular at the time) on their way to the shrine of Saint Thomas Becket in Canterbury, England.

After the "General Prologue," most of the pilgrims, such as the "nun's priest" (i.e. a priest traveling with a Prioress and nun), are further introduced in a prologue of their own. We did not read "The Nun's Priest's Prologue."

In "The Nun's Priest's Tale," which we did read, this priest tells a story, involving barnyard animals, that is meant to be read allegorically not literally, as it is for the most part not about animals at all, but instead human beings.

For example, the words associated with Chauntecleer and Pertelote, such as "asure," "paramour," "damoisele," & "debonaire" (119-20), are in fact meant as a critique of England's aristocracy, who largely spoke French in court. All of these words are of French origin. With biting irony, Chaucer is here describing aristocrats like cocky roosters decked in plumage trying to be what they are not.

In recent decades, literary critics have carefully looked at how disenfranchised groups, such as women, appear in the literature that we have inherited. In addition to gender, this issue has been considered on the registers of class, race, religious conviction, nationality, sexual preference, and so forth.

Only recently, however, have critics looked to previously overlooked, yet exceptionally marginalized groups: non-human entities, such as animals.

If we look carefully at Varro's "On Agriculture", for example, we can learn a great deal about how the ancient Romans conceived of their relationship to non-human life, and the rights, or lack thereof, to which they thought such life was entitled. Obviously, Varro literally acts violently toward non-human beings.

The question, however, is what posture toward non-human life (in this case again birds) is contained in "The Nun's Priest's Tale." Certainly, life on the widow's farm is far more pleasant than on Varro's; however, does speaking for animals, and depicting them anthropomorphically, do them any sort of service?

"The Canterbury Tales"

Depicting the lives of animals anthropomorphically does not begin with Chaucer. Aesop's fables, for example, used animals to tell human stories to great success in 6th century Greece. The story of the country mouse and the town mouse is one of Aesop's. Although existing for thousands of years, animal fables became enormously popular in England during the middle ages.

When we use animals to tell human stories, which we have obviously been doing for quite some time, what do we learn about the animals? For example, do we learn anything about country mice from Aesop? The moral of that story, that life in the country is better than the city, is about human life, not animal.

Because anthropomorphized depictions of animals often tell us very little about the lives of animals, they may do little to make us sympathize with non-human life. For example, "The Nun's Priest's Tale" is far less effective at making us sympathetic to chickens than is Varro's book on agriculture.

On the other hand, anthropomorphically depicting animals can to some extent elicit sympathy for them, as it does make non-human life seem more "human."

Anthropomorphic depictions of animals are exceptionally common in our culture.

Note that Steamboat Willie stands like, acts like, dresses like, talks like, and in most ways more like a person than a mouse, which he hardly resembles.

The question is, do anthropomorphic depictions of animals make us more sympathetic to them, for example to chickens by way of Chauntecleer and Pertelote, or does it cause us to cease to see them as animals at all; instead as something resembling human beings?