

2002

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Recommended Citation

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Blending of Strengths:
The Convergence of Christian Themes and Epic Motifs in
Beowulf, The Faerie Queene, and Paradise Lost

A Senior Project

By

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Presented to

The Southern Scholars Honors Committee

April 19, 2002

Supervised by Dr. Rachel Byrd

Outline

Thesis: Christian themes in *Beowulf*, *The Faerie Queene*, and *Paradise Lost* ride on a foundation of pagan writing and thinking and are empowered by this piggybacking.

- I. Superficial pagan and classical elements
 - A. Beginning *in medias res*
 - B. Invoking the muse
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Conclusion: Through their mutual love for Christianity and epic style, the authors of *Beowulf*, *The Faerie Queene*, and *Paradise Lost* produced poetry which ranks among the world's greatest epics and solves mankind's most profound perplexities.

Tertullian, an early church father, once asked, “What does Athens have to do with Jerusalem? What does [Plato’s] Academy have to do with the Church” (qtd. in Peterson 64). Tertullian was not alone in questioning how classical and Christian ideas could blend. Philosophers like Tertullian believed that Christian truths would be corrupted by any association with the style or themes of classical art. Yet a careful analysis of classical artistic forms shows that the many elements of classical artistic style are morally neutral. C. S. Lewis cites the Italian painter Botticelli as an example of Christian artists who accepted traditional images, imbued them with philosophical wisdom, and used them in divine compositions (Lewis *Spenser’s Images* 10,11). Like Botticelli, who painted classical designs, Christian writers found classical rhetoric to be morally neutral, and, therefore, a powerful and already-accessible medium for Christian narrative.

Since Christianity is a religion founded on Biblical narratives, the narrative structure of the epic provided an ideal form for Christian stories. Besides appealing to readers who were familiar with secular epics, the narrative epic form engages the reader’s imagination. In writing Christian epics, Christian writers harnessed these rhetorical strengths, using the epic form to communicate the Christian world view. Christian themes in *Beowulf*, *The Faerie Queene*, and *Paradise Lost* ride on a foundation of pagan writing and thinking and are empowered by this piggybacking. These epics display their dual nature through superficial epic elements, insightful interpretations of pagan motifs, and profound Christian themes.

The most superficial pagan elements in *Beowulf*, *The Faerie Queene*, and *Paradise Lost* are the conventions that epics, by definition, must contain. The earliest preserved epics—Homer’s *Iliad* and *Odyssey* along with other epics written in the

centuries of oral transmission—defined the epic form (Feder 135). According to the *Apollo Handbook of Classical Literature*, epics include legendary material about gods and heroes; repetitions of poetic formulas, lines, passages, and incidents; and lists of ships, warriors, gods and goddesses, and those killed in battle. Since humans crave explanations for life's origin, customs, and destiny, these mythical features helped to answer the reasons for human existence. Christian epics incorporate superficial pagan elements: convention of beginning *in medias res*, the invocation to the muse, catalogues or genealogies of characters, allusions to pagan characters, similes, and stock elements.

The least pervasive element of epic style in these poems is its beginning *in medias res*, or in the middle of action. By starting in the middle of a story, epics immediately fasten the attention of the audience on the narrative. Homer effectively demonstrates this epic tradition. The *Odyssey* begins with a picture of Odysseus leaving Troy, which has already been defeated: "And when long years and seasons/ Wheeling brought around that point of time/ Ordained for him to make his passage homeward" (I.24-26). Here Odysseus is shifting between the fighting and wayfaring episodes in his life. Since one stage of his life has concluded, the *Odyssey* begins in the midst of the warrior's life story.

All three Christian poems—*Beowulf*, *The Faerie Queene*, and *Paradise Lost*—also follow the Homeric model of starting *in medias res*. After a prologue, *Beowulf* begins "Then Hrothgar was given success in warfare, glory in battle, so that his retainers gladly obeyed him" (64-66;24). The conjunction "then" indicates that unspecified events have led up to this point in the story. Spenser follows *Beowulf's* model of starting in the middle of action. Canto I of *The Faerie Queene* begins with the line "A gentle Knight was pricking on the plaine" (I.i.1). Since "was pricking" is a past progressive verb, it implies that the knight had begun his journey before the poem began. And on the first

page of *Paradise Lost*, Milton introduces readers to “an infernal serpent” who has already “deceived/ The mother of mankind” (I.34-36). Clearly the story of iniquity has begun far before Satan’s debasement in hell, and the reader is anxious to know what has caused Satan’s downfall. The poets of *Beowulf*, *The Faerie Queene*, and *Paradise Lost* catch their audience’s attention by beginning their poems in the midst of action.

Repeated more often than its beginning *in medias res* is the epic’s invocation to the muse. Homer’s works illustrate the use of muses in classical literature. Homer calls upon a “goddess” to “sing the rage of Peleus’ son Achilles” as he opens *The Iliad* (I.1). And the ancient bard begins *The Odyssey* with a similar reference to the goddess of poetry: “Sing in me, Muse, and through me tell the story/ of that man skilled in all ways of contending” (I.1,2). By invoking a muse, Homer alludes to a divine authority which gives his poetry a right to be heard.

Both Spenser and Milton follow Homer’s practice of invoking the muse. These Christian poets, however, specify the divine nature of their inspiration. Spenser invokes a “holy” muse when he petitions Clio, the muse of history, at the onset of *The Faerie Queene*: “Helpe then, O holy Virgin cheife of nine . . . / Lay forth out of thine everlasting scryne . . . / Of Faerie knights and fairest Tanaquill” (I.10,12,14). And Milton claims divine inspiration at the opening of *Paradise Lost*, when he pleads, “Sing, Heavenly Muse” (I.6). Milton also mentions the heavenly Spirit before he lists the inhabitants of hell: “Say, Muse, their names then known” (I.376). Philip Gallagher believes that by invoking a “Heav’nly Muse” Milton disclaims classical muses and the theogonic succession myths they inspired about Olympian gods (128,129). In petitioning sacred muses, Spenser and Milton adhere to both the epic tradition and Christian philosophy.

Even more recurrent than the passages invoking the muse are the epic genealogies and catalogues of characters. During the days of oral epic recitation, when *The Iliad*, *The Odyssey*, and *Beowulf* were written, these lists were important for transmitting history. But even after the invention of written records, epics retained these elements because of their powerful poetic effect (Feder 135). Genealogies and catalogues of characters empower poetry by providing mankind with a secure sense of its origin and history.

The Odyssey catalogues dozens of characters who languish in the shades.

Odysseus encounters a list of famous personalities during his visit to the underworld. Among a host of beautiful women, he first sees "that princess of great ladies, Tyro, Salmoneus' daughter," (*Odyssey* XI.252,253). "Next after her [Tyro] I say Antiope, daughter of Asopos" (XI.280). Then comes "Amphitryon's true wife, Alkmene, mother as all men know of lionish Herakles" (XI.288,289). Numerous other shades pass before Odysseus before he embarks toward another island.

Of the three epics, *Paradise Lost* lists the most extensive catalogue of characters. Milton names Satan's officers, "who first, who last/ Roused from the slumber on that fiery couch,/ At their great emperor's call, as next in worth" (*PL* I.376-378). Then he lists them. "First" comes "Moloch, horrid king, besmeared with blood" (I.392); then "Thammuz came next behind,/ Whose annual wound in Lebanon allured/ The Syrian damsels to lament his fate" (I.446-448); next comes "Dagon . . . sea monster, upward man/ And downward fish" (I.462,463); "After these appeared/ A crew . . . under names of old renown) Osiris, Isis, Orus, and their train" (I.476-478).

Almost as complete as Milton's infernal roll call is Spenser's record of hell's inhabitants. "There was that great proud king of Babylon/ . . . And proud Antiochus, the which aduauunst/ His cursed hand gainst God, and on his alters daunst" (*FQ*

I.v.415,422,423). Next comes “great Nimrod . . . / That first the world with sword and fire warrayd;/ And after him old Ninus farre did pas” (I.v.424-426). This list of doomed individuals mirrors the Odyssean catalogue of shades.

Beowulf records the shortest list of characters, which appears as a genealogy. Beowulf's progeny are registered: “Then in the cities was Beow of the Scyldings beloved king of the people, long famous among nations (his father had gone elsewhere, the king from his land), until later great Healfdene was born to him. . . . To him all told were four children born into the world, to the leader of the armies: Heorogar and Hrothgar and the good Halga. I have heard tell that [. . . was On]ela's queen” (53-64;24).

In harmony with the tradition of classical epic poetry, *Paradise Lost*, *The Faerie Queene*, and *Beowulf* contain genealogies and catalogues of characters. These epic conventions empower poetry through their ability to trace the ancestry and history of a culture, and thereby provide the readers with a secure sense of their origin.

More frequently recurring than the catalogues of characters are epic allusions to their Germanic and classical epic predecessors. *The Faerie Queene's* allusions to classical gods, *Beowulf's* reference to a pagan deity, and Milton's use of Homeric diction in *Paradise Lost* provides audiences steeped in secular lore with a familiar context.

Both pagan Germanic and classical Greek works are laced with references to deities. The Icelandic poem *Voluspá* refers to “Ymir” who lived at a time when there “was not sand or sea” (stanza 7) and “the sons of Bur,” who “moulded in magnificence middle-Earth” (stanza 8). Homer also mentions numerous deities, which, according to *The Norton Anthology of World Masterpieces*, were retained as Olympian gods in the poems, prayers, and sculptures of later generations (Lawall 3).

Spenser sketches bold references to mythology in book I of *The Faerie Queene*. These classical allusions are fitting, since Spenser's Letter to Raleigh states that *The Faerie Queen* is patterned after classical epics and that Homer and Virgil's works are its classical predecessors (Wall 146). During the fight between Red Crosse and the Dragon, the monster falls upon and clenches Red Crosse's "sunne-bright shield" (I.xi.360). The Dragon's grip is so tight that Red Crosse would have found it just as hard "To plucke a bone" "From Cerberus greedy jaw" (I.xi.365, 364) as to free his armor. Here Spenser refers to the dog that guards the gate of hell in *The Aeneid*.

Less clear than Spenser's classical allusions are the allusions to Germanic deities in *Beowulf*. Frank Battaglia cites several passages where *Beowulf* alludes to the Germanic earth goddess, Gefion. Gefion is a word that has been translated as "ocean" in Old English Poetry. Jakob Grimm, however, has related the term to Gefion, the name of the Danish Earth Goddess (Battaglia 30). Battaglia has found five allusions to Gefion in Friedrich Klaeber's edition of *Beowulf*. The first allusion comes at Scyld's funeral: "Then yet they set for him a golden banner/ High overhead, let water bear him,/ Gefion, on the waves; the heart was sad for them" (Battaglia 41). Battaglia notes another allusion to Gefion in the passage in which Wulfgar asks Hrothgar for an audience for the Gears: "Here have arrived, over Gefion's realm/ Come far people of the Geats" (47).

Least clear are Milton's classical allusions. Gregory Machacek observes that most Homeric allusions in *Paradise Lost* serve a completely aesthetic function (42); hence, the Homeric context for these references is difficult to trace. For example, Milton depicts Pandemonium's construction as follows: "Anon out of the earth a Fabric huge/ Rose an Exhalation" (PL I.710-711). This picture echoes a line from book one of the *Iliad* that describes Thetis rising from the sea: "Quickly she rose from the grey sea like a mist"

(I.359). Knowing the original context would not aid the reader in understanding these lines from *Paradise Lost* because the two situations are not similar or meaningfully divergent (42). Machacek maintains that the fragmentary allusions may not have a contextual meaning (44). Yet he notes that their aggregate effect is significant because it gives Milton's written epic the aesthetic quality which characterizes the formulaic diction of oral epics (44). Milton's allusive phraseology, which encompasses his descriptions of God's sublime actions, the angels, and the parents of our race, appears vaguely familiar to the reader. Machacek concludes that Milton's allusions do not remind readers of the context which the phrases are taken from, yet their familiar diction counterbalances the amazing actions and supernatural characters described (Machacek 45).

Allusions to previous Germanic and classical epics embellish *The Faerie Queene*, *Beowulf*, and *Paradise Lost*. These features catch the eyes of readers schooled in non-Christian epics, making the Christian poems attractive to this educated class.

More frequently used than mythic allusions are the similes *Paradise Lost* and *The Faerie Queene* use to depict Christian images. While the similes in these epics are patterned after secular rhetoric, they are pregnant with Christian meaning. John Wall refers to scholars of rhetoric in the early English Renaissance who noted that rhetoric is morally neutral and can assist either side of an argument (158). Christian rhetoric, then, is liberated from the world of classical rhetoric by constant allusions to the living reality of God's Word. In the process, Christian rhetoric uses the authority of classical rhetoric, yet allows the more philosophically complete Christian themes to overshadow classical beliefs (Wall 159). Milton and Spenser harness the rhetorical power of similes to express their Christian views.

Homer uses similes extensively to imbue his epics with concrete imagery. When Hector dies, the Trojans wail “as if all Troy were torched and smoldering/ down from the looming brows of the citadel to her roots” (*Il* XXII.483,484). This comparison shows the depth of the Trojans’ grief by likening it to the lamentation that would arise if their whole city burned. And at the end of the epic, Hector’s mother, Hecuba, compares Hector’s corpse to dew: “fresh as the morning dew you lie in the royal halls” (XXII.890). This simile expresses the delicate care with which the Trojans prepared Hector’s funeral. Thus Homer uses similes to heighten the impact of his characters’ emotions and actions.

Milton subtly weaves similes throughout *Paradise Lost* to link evil characters with their diabolical roots. Jane Melbourne observes that the narrator in *Paradise Lost* employs twenty-seven similes, or phrases that look like epic similes. Among these descriptive constructions is the “as . . . so” comparison of similar actions of one individual at different times (160). Melbourne notes that Milton wrote complex similes on wide ranging subjects. Swarms of evil devils are compared to the “pitchy cloud/ Of locusts,” (I.340,341) that hung “o’er the realm of impious Pharaoh/ Like night and darkened all the land of Nile” (I.342,343). In Exodus, this plague of locusts holds a dreadful connotation that Milton uses to demonstrate the contemptuous nature of demons, demons which include classical deities. Another simile compares fallen angels rushing to the grand congregation to swarming bees leaving their hive:

Thick swarmed, both on the ground and in the air,
Brushed with the hiss of rustling wings. As bees
In springtime, when the sun with Taurus rides,
Pour forth their populous youth about the hive. (I.767-770)

While this comparison may look simple, Melbourne suggests that it becomes profound when one considers the classical and historical connotations of the word “bees.” Melbourne notes that Protestants have historically associated Catholicism with bees. Thus Milton uses this simile to uncover the narrator’s Protestant bent (161). Through the Homeric device of the simile, Milton criticizes classical deities and Catholicism.

Even more explicit than the Protestant Christian tone of Milton’s similes are the Biblical qualities of purity and sincerity expressed in Spenser’s similes. Una, who represents truth (Kirschbaum xiv), is innocent “as that same lamb” which rides beside her (I.i.37). According to Shaheen Naseeb (62), allying Una with the lamb is a Biblical allusion to Christ, whom Peter describes as “a lamb without blemish and without spot” (I Peter 1. 19). Red Crosse and Una meet “an aged Sire,” who “often knockt his brest, as one that did repent” (I.254,261). Naseeb (64) connects this simile to the tax collector who “beat his breast, saying, ‘God be merciful to me a sinner’” (Luke 18.13). When Una is finally unveiled, her radiant countenance is compared to the morning star through a Biblical allusion.

The fairest Una his onely daughter deare,
 Who forth proceeding with sad and sober cheare
 As bright as doth the morning starre appeare
 Out of the East, with flaming lockes bedight,
 To tell that dawning day is drawing neare,
 So Faire and fresh that Lady shewd her selfe in sight. (I.xii.182-187,189)

Naseeb (98,99) links Una to Solomon's bride: “Who is she who looks forth as the morning . . . Clear as the sun” (Song of Solomon 6.19). In using the familiar Homeric allusion, Spenser ties his narrative to Bible characters.

Because rhetoric is morally neutral, Milton and Spenser could incorporate the rhetorical device of the simile, so often used in classical literature, into their Christian epics. These rhetorical constructions empower epics by succinctly linking epic characters to symbols of moral purity like the chaste lamb or to symbols of apostasy such as Egypt's plague of locusts.

Yet more encompassing than the rhetorical device of similes are the stock words, phrases, and lines which epics repeat. *The Norton Anthology of World Masterpieces* notes that poets of oral epics which preceded *Beowulf*, *The Faerie Queene*, and *Paradise Lost* employed a structure of metrical formulas, frameworks such as phrases which could be inserted at various places in a line and a collection of standard scenes. Since oral poems lacked documentation, their poets and the sops who sung the poems depended upon a predictable structure which could be slightly modified (Lawall 98). According to C. S. Lewis, stock material is the most obvious characteristic of the oral technique, and it appears in the famous and little-known passages alike. Lewis notes the density of stock elements in the parting of Hector and Andromache, a passage thought to be one of the pinnacles in European poetry. Stock words, phrases, and lines appear in 28 lines of the 103 lines of dialogue between this ill-fated pair. Thus approximately one fourth of the passage is "stock" (Lewis *A Preface* 20).

Like the ancient classical epics, *Beowulf*, an Old English epic, is infused with stock expressions. According to Robert Stevick, scholars have not decided whether *Beowulf* was composed for oral recitation or was created as a written epic (79). Stevick cites evidence for a pre-textual stage of *Beowulf* (80,81). Since the poem was written soon after the advent of writing, it retains many of the stock elements from years of oral recitation. In the 28 lines of *Beowulf*'s last speech to Wiglaf, stock expressions appear six

times and comprise about a fourth of the passage (Lewis *A Preface* 20). For example, Beowulf calls God “the King of Glory, Eternal Prince” (*Beowulf* 2795;60). The poem refers to God as “the King of Glory” before Beowulf’s fight with Grendel (665;32). And after his fight with Grendel’s Mother, Beowulf calls God “the Eternal Lord,” (1779;46) similar to “Eternal Prince.”

Less common than stock elements in *Beowulf* are *The Faerie Queene*’s stock expressions. Spenser repeatedly describes certain characters with a single adjective. Before he succumbs to Archimago’s deceptions, the Red Crosse knight is called “that good knight” (I.ii.92). As the knight approaches a shaded spot, Red Crosse is similarly described as “this good knight” (I.ii.253). More than once, Spenser uses the term “fair” to describe Una. “Faie Una” brings the Red Crosse knight to Charissa in the house of Holiness (I.x.261), and after visiting this home, “Una faie” begins “To thinke of those her captive Parents deare” (I.xi.1,2).

Stock characters appear to play a less important role in *Paradise Lost* than in the other two epics, yet Milton still employs stock words because of the rhetorical unity that these repetitive phrases confer. For example, the narrator initially describes how the devils opposed God’s monarchy “With vain attempt” (I.44). And at the opening of Book II, the narrator again deplores Satan’s “vain war with heaven” (XI.9). Milton includes stock elements in his epics to repeatedly remind the reader of important points such as the vanity which spawned Satan’s attempt to rule heaven. Thus patterns of ancient epic style provide a rhetorical foundation on which *Beowulf*, *The Faerie Queene*, and *Paradise Lost* build the Christian themes as answers for pagan perplexities.

More thematically significant than *Beowulf*, *The Faerie Queene*, and *Paradise Lost*’s superficial epic elements of beginning *in medias res*, invoking the muse,

cataloguing characters, alluding to pagan figures, using similes, and employing stock elements are the ancient epic motifs, or featured ideas, that appear in these Christian epics. Epic stylistic elements and epic motifs comprise the secular epic tradition upon which the poets of *Beowulf*, *The Faerie Queene*, and *Paradise Lost* build Christian themes. While the morally neutral elements of epic style carry rhetorical strength and make these Christian poems familiar to readers who have studied classical and pagan epics, epic motifs address central issues of life such as how a person should view success, his future, and his origin. By depicting the Christian perspective on pagan and classical epic motifs such as sleep, heroism, hell, and myth, *Beowulf*, *The Faerie Queene*, and *Paradise Lost* build upon the foundation of pagan and classical writing and present Christian answers to these central human issues.

Very similar are the attitudes that pagan, classical, and Christian epics express toward the dangers of sleep. For Homer, sleep brings physical danger, while in Christian poetry sleep is dangerous because it leads to spiritual failure. Homer outlines the notion that sleep leads to folly. The *Odyssey* repeatedly stresses the danger of sleeping. Odysseus is imprisoned by Kyklops until sleep takes "him like any creature" (IX.398,399). As soon as slumber overtakes Kyklops, Odysseus seizes his chance to blind the giant. Odysseus recounts, "I drove my big hand spike/ deep in the embers . . . and rammed it deep in his crater eye" (IX.391,392,401). And it is while Odysseus sleeps that his crew succumbs to the temptation to slaughter and eat Helios' forbidden cattle. Odysseus closes his "eyes under slow drops of sleep," while "on the shore Eurylokhos" makes "his insidious plea" to "cut the noblest . . . cattle" (XII.401,402,406). Then the warrior blames the gods for afflicting him with evil sleep: "O Father Zeus and gods in bliss forever,/ you made me

sleep away this day of mischief! O cruel drowsing, in the evil hour" (XII.438-440). In *The Odyssey*, sleep is clearly dangerous.

The danger of slumber is portrayed most vividly in *The Faerie Queene*. C. S. Lewis mentions a class of temptations that invite the traveler to relax, fall asleep, or to die. When Red Crosse has drunk from the fountain of sloth, "that fraile fountaine, which him feeble made" (I.vii.11), he is incapable of fighting Orgoglio (70). Despayre invites Red Crosse to "enjoy eternall rest/ And happie ease" (I.ix.352,353). Lewis concludes that whenever evil characters speak to humans in the epic, they offer either the "sleep-wish" or the "death-wish" (Lewis *Spenser's Images* 73). In *The Faerie Queene*, evil is usually portrayed as inactive, while good is energetic. Lewis notes only one instance where a good character encourages inactivity, and he believes that this exception proves the rule, for even here good is mistaken in urging inactivity. After hearing Red Crosse's adventure story, Una's father compassionately advises relaxation: "But since now safe ye seised have the shore,/ And well arrived are, (high God be blest)/ Let us devize of ease and everlasting rest" (I.xii.17). Una's father's counsel is reminiscent of the Sirens or Despayre's injunctions. Because his faith compels him toward continued service to the Faerie Queene, Red Crosse wisely disregards this invitation to rest (Lewis *Spenser's Images* 95).

Less obvious than Spenser's caution about slumber is *Beowulf's* warning against sleep. Enemies attack Heorot while its soldiers sleep. During Grendel's first attack, he is said to have "suddenly seized a sleeping man" in Heorot (746-748;33). Grendel's mother follows her son's tradition of attacking at night. "Then they sank to sleep. One paid sorely for his evening rest, just as had often befallen them when Grendel, guarded the gold-hall" (1251-1253;40). Grendel's mother comes after the Danes have celebrated Beowulf's

victory over Grendel, while “the Ring-Danes slept throughout the hall” (1279,1280;40). And finally Hrothgar warns those whom God has blessed against sleeping. This blessed man “lives in plenty . . . the whole world turns to his will . . . until his portion of pride increases and flourishes within him; then the watcher sleeps, the soul’s guardian; that sleep is too sound, bound in its won cares, and the slayer most near whose bow shoots treacherously” (1734-1744;46). This theme agrees with Homer’s theme of the dangers of sleep as well as the Biblical counsel to “be self-controlled and alert” in order to resist the “enemy the devil,” who “prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour” (I Pet. 5.8).

Even subtler than *Beowulf*’s warning against sleep is the danger of slumber implied in the first two books of *Paradise Lost*. At the beginning of book 1, Milton uses the unattractive metaphor of scattered, dead leaves to describe Satan’s horde of sleeping angels: “His legions, angel forms, who lay entranced,/ Thick as autumnal leaves that strow the brooks” (I.331,332). Satan, angry to see his messengers lie useless, condemns their ease: “have ye chosen this place/ . . . to repose/ Your wearied virtue, for the ease you find/ To slumber here, as in the vales of Heaven” (I.318-321). Milton here has Satan scolding the angels for tiring of their “virtuous” strife. Sloth is a detriment for any warrior, regardless of which side he is on. Satan even threatens to abandon the persistently lazy angels. “Awake, arise, or be forever fallen” (I.330). The angels seem as ashamed of their sleep as their commander: “They heard, and were abashed, and up they sprung/ . . . as when men wont to watch/ on duty, sleeping found by whom they dread” (I.331-333). Milton argues even more strongly against sloth when he has one of the devils recommend this futile inactivity as an approach to regain heaven. Belial hopes for “future days,” which “may bring, what chance, what change/ Worth waiting” (II.222,223). Milton

concludes: "Thus Belial, with words clothed in reason's garb,/ Counseled ignoble ease and peaceful sloth" (II.226,227). Belial's advice is especially insidious because it is covered with "reason's garb" yet contains an "ignoble" nature. Finally, Satan suggests that the devils can overcome the "new race called man" (II.348) "by force or subtlety" (II.358). Here Milton suggests that Satan's master strategy for attacking mankind is through subtlety; he assails those who are asleep to his temptations.

Characters in both classical and Christian poetry are cautioned against sleeping. In *The Odyssey*, sleeping predisposes characters to physical dangers, while in the Christian epics, sleeping exposes men to spiritual evils. In *The Faerie Queene* sleep renders Red Crosse incapable of fighting spiritual evils represented by Orgoglio and the giant Despayre. In *Beowulf*, the evil monster Grendel kills Danish soldiers whenever they sleep in Heorot. And *Paradise Lost* shows that sleep gives Satan an easy inroad to man's heart. Thus the Christian epics transform the motif of sleep from the physical danger Homer warns of into a spiritual pitfall.

More diverse than their views on sleep are the pagan and Christian concepts of heroism. Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, considered to be the pinnacle of heroic oral poetry (Feder 135), are pervaded by legends of strong and honorable men. Warriors like Achilles, Hector, and Odysseus, who fight in order to maintain personal honor, served as heroes, or role models, for generations of Greeks. While the Christian poems of *Beowulf*, *The Faerie Queene*, and *Paradise Lost* also display gallant individuals, these Christian heroes conquer in the context of serving God.

Both Homeric and Germanic epics are heroic in that they focus on the valiant actions of their main character. *The Odyssey* praises its hero, Odysseus, as "skilled in all ways of contending,/ the wanderer, harried for years on end,/ after he plundered the

stronghold/ on the proud height of Troy" (I.2-5). Ancient Germanic epics also valorize their chief characters. Friedrich Klaeber describes the Germanic legends of *Eormenric* and *Hama* as being based upon the ancient heroic lore which the Anglo-Saxons carried to England from their continental home (79). Classical and Germanic epics are evidently built around courageous characters.

Beowulf portrays the most literal kind of heroism. *Beowulf's* author follows the poetic tradition of magnifying heroic actions through comparisons to legendary victories (Taylor 120). *Beowulf's* appearance, courage, and battles mark him as a hero. The Scyldings' guard attests to *Beowulf's* mighty appearance, "I have never seen a mightier warrior on earth than is one of you, a man in battle-dress. That is no retainer made to seem good by his weapons-may his appearance, his unequalled form, never belie him" (247-250;27). *Beowulf's* bravery is just as commendable as his exterior. His words to Hrothgar show his willingness to die fighting Grendel: "I resolved, when I set out on the sea, sat down in the sea-boat with my band of men, that I should altogether fulfill the will of your people or else fall in slaughter, fast in the foe's grasp. I shall achieve a deed of manly courage or else have lived to see in this mead-hall my ending day" (632-638;31). Even more powerful than his impressive facade and fortitude are *Beowulf's* military victories in making him a famous warrior. When the first blow fails to kill Grendel's mother, *Beowulf* "seized by the hair Grendel's mother-the man of the War-Geats did not shrink from the fight, . . . he pulled his deadly foe so that she fell to the floor" (1537-1540;43). Stevick notes that *Beowulf's* fight with Grendel's mother is recounted three times. This repetition shows the importance the poem places on bravery and strength (83). By using his valor to defeat "the enemy of mankind," for whom God "had no love," *Beowulf* models Christian heroism, which serves God and man (164-166,169;25).

More strongly symbolic than the hero in *Beowulf* are the victors of *The Faerie Queene*. Red Crosse's courage appears throughout the poem. According to D. Douglas Waters, Aristotle, in his *Ethics*, wrote that the magnanimous person holds virtues of body and soul, knows he is great, anticipates honor equal to his greatness, and achieves great feats "in regard for his greatness." Critics commonly believe that St. Thomas "Christianized" Aristotle's definition of magnanimity and that Renaissance and Reformation writers conveyed St. Thomas' revised model to Spenser (Waters 55). To Spenser, Christian magnanimity, or greatness of soul, could be combined with the Aristotelian concepts of magnificence, such as a desire for fame, glory, honor, great feats, and beautiful goods (Waters 57). Spenser seems to praise Red Crosse's valor when he describes the knight's last encounter with the Dragon.

He thought attonce him to have swallowed quight,
 And rusht upon him with outrageous pride;
 Who him r'encountring fierce, as hauke in fight,
 Perforce rebutted backe. The weapon bright
 Taking advantage of his open jaw,
 Ran through his mouth with so importune might,
 That deep emperst his darksome hollow maw,
 And back retyrd, his life bloud forth with all did draw. (I.xi.470-477)

And upon reaching Una's homeland, Red Crosse's victory is celebrated with "triumphant Trompets" (I.xii.28). Then "A noble crew . . . Of sage and sober Peres" (I.xii.40, 41) come "Unto that daughtie Conquerour . . . And him before themselves prostrating low," and him "Their Lord and Patrone loud . . . proclame" (I.xii.46-48). In this celebration, as in the fighting scene, Spenser magnifies heroic feats. Wall suggests that the epic

combines Christianity with heroism because Red Crosse's heroic deeds in Faeryland are his path toward citizenship in God's eternal city (149).

Even more supernatural than Red Crosse is Satan, an anti-heroic figure in *Paradise Lost*. Milton admitted that the genre of epic, which had previously deemed wars "the only argument heroic" (IX.28-29), does not easily serve Christian themes, "the better fortitude of patience and heroic martyrdom" (IX.31,32). Yet Machacek argues that by redesigning the basic characteristics of the genre, Milton solved the "problem of Christian epic" (Machacek 37). In *Paradise Lost*, Satan is a valiant loser. In the simile, which initially compares Satan's scarred face to the first sunbeams at dawn and later to the lightening-singed trees of a desolate hill, the narrator displays his fascination with the heroic ideal (Melbourne 162). The simile shows Satan as a fallen leader, gallantly carrying the responsibility of failed leadership. In Melbourne's words, Satan is "guilty, but magnificently guilty" (162).

Above them all th' Arch-Angel: but his face
 Deep scars of Thunder had intrencht, and care
 Sat on his faded cheek, but under Brows
 Of dauntless courage, and considerate Pride
 Waiting revenge: cruel his eye, but cast
 Signs of remorse and passion to behold

The fellows of his crime, the followers rather. (I.600-606)

In Book II, when Satan sits, "exalted, . . . by merit raised/ To that bad eminence" his anti-heroic nature is clear. Milton artfully uses heroism to portray Satan's folly.

Heroes play a major role in secular and Christian poetry, yet for the Christians, heroic endeavors are channeled toward advancing God's kingdom. Beowulf fights to

conquer the devilish monster Grendel; in *The Faerie Queene*, Red Crosse knight defeats the diabolical giants of Orgoglio and Despayre; and in *Paradise Lost*, Satan, the great anti-hero, is defeated by God. *The Norton Anthology of World Masterpieces* notes the remarkable difference between Greek and Christian heroes (3). In contrast to the classical heroes who wrestle for the sake of their personal honor, Christian victors fight to advance God's kingdom.

Even more opposed to pagan values than the Christian portrait of heroism is the Christian picture of hell. Like the Germanic and classical poets, Spenser, Milton, and the *Beowulf* poet use the motif of hell. Though the depictions of hell in *The Faerie Queene*, *Paradise Lost*, and *Beowulf* differ, all three Christian epics show that wicked individuals are consigned to a miserable end.

The Icelandic poem *Voluspa* and Virgil's *Aeneid* address the issue of hell. After tracing the creation and subsequent corruption of mankind, *Voluspa* portrays humanity's punishment in a fiery hell. Depicting "the portion of doomed men" (stanza 49), the poem states, "Earth sinks in the sea, the sun turns black,/ Cast down from Heaven are the hot stars/ . . . The sky is scorched with fire" (stanza 50). Since all of earth is destroyed, men have no way to escape its fiery destruction. Hell, or the island of the shades, is also a vivid location in *The Odyssey*. Odysseus describes the fear that gripped the hearts of him and his men as they entered this region of gloom: "From every side they [the shades] came and sought the pit/ with rustling cries; and I grew sick with fear" (XI.44,45). The misery of hell is poignantly expressed by the shade of Akhilleus which says, "Better . . . to break sod as a farm hand/ for some poor country man, on iron rations,/ than lord it over all the exhausted dead" (XI.544-546). Man's innate curiosity about his destiny can be seen in *Voluspa* and *The Odyssey*'s vivid depictions of hell.

Spenser's hell is most similar to the classical version of hell. In the *Aeneid*, the Aeneas and Apollo's prophetess can enter "the region of the Shades" (VI.153) only after they have tossed "Great Cerberus barking with his triple throat . . . a lump of honey and drugged meal/ To make him drowse" (VI.190,194,195). On his journey to hell, the Red Crosse knight also spies "Before the threshold dreadfull Cerberus/ His three deformed heads did lay along" (I.v.298,299), who, after the travelers "Did him appease; then downe his talle he hong/ And suffered them to passen quietly" (I.v.304,305). Both epics also describe mournful gatherings of hell's inhabitants. Many of the residents in Virgil's hell do not deserve to be there: "Now voices crying loud were heard at once—/ The souls of infants wailing . . . Near these/ Were souls falsely accused, condemned to die" (VI.201,202,205,206). And "the trembling ghosts" who stand "with sad amazed mood,/ Chattring their yron teeth, and staring wide/ With stonie eyes," in Spenser's hell appear just as miserable as Virgil's shades (I.v.284,285,286). By including Cerberus and shade-like ghosts, Spenser traces Virgil's pattern of hell.

Spenser's Christian depiction of hell diverges from Virgil's underworld, however, when Red Crosse finds no prophecy in the cavern where Aeneas learns the future of Rome (Bulger 18). Thomas Bulger notes that as Duessa and Night journey farther down into the cave of Aesculapius, the mythological concept of heroic regeneration disintegrates. Where Aeneas learns of Rome's future from Anchises, Spenser's narrative shifts to the tales of Hyppolytus and Aesculapius (Bulger 18). Hyppolytus represents classical characters who are more sinned against than sinful. Hyppolytus, having done nothing to deserve his torment in hell, is sent there as a result of his stepsister's false accusations. Hyppolytus dies because of his "innocence" (I.v.345), impressing the reader with the senselessness of the chain of circumstances which has consigned him to hell

(Bulger 19). The doom of Hyppolytus demonstrates the absurdity of pagan fate, which heaps doom upon the guiltless. While characters in *The Aeneid* find a providential design in the cave of Avernus, *The Faerie Queene* uses this location to describe the arbitrary nature of the mythic world (Bulger 18).

In contrast to Virgil's innocent shades, Red Crosse sees a "hellish brood/ Of feends infernall flockt on every side" (I.v.286,287). These fiendish residents of hell harmonize with the Biblical crowd of "abominable, murderers, sexually immoral, sorcerers, idolaters, and all liars," who "[burn] with fire and brimstone" (Rev. 21.8). Clearly, the Christian God allows only the disobedient to suffer.

Less classical is Milton's picture of hell in *Paradise Lost*. Like Spenser's hell and the hell of the classical poets, Milton's hell is a joyless site. Moloch calls it a "dark opprobrious den of shame,/ The prison of his tyranny who reigns" (II.57,58). While the shades in *The Aeneid* are encircled by "the Styx that winds/ Nine times around" and "exerts imprisoning power" (VI.218,219), Satan of *Paradise Lost* lies vanquished for "Nine times the space that measures night and day/ To mortal men" (I.50,51). Milton's hell is classical in its misery.

Yet unlike Virgil and Spenser's pictures of hell, which are filled with mortals, the hell in books I and II of *Paradise Lost* is inhabited by gods. The famous Mulciber, or Homer's Hephaestus, has been sent "With his industrious crew to build in Hell" (I.751). Greek gods who had ruled on "cold Olympus, . . . or on the Delphian cliff,/ Or in Dodona, and through all the bounds/ Of Doric land" (I.516-519) "came flocking" (I.522). And unlike Virgil's innocent subjects of hell, Milton's gods deserve their doom. Through their "falsities and lies," these gods have corrupted "the greatest part/ Of mankind" (I.367,368).

This depiction of hell clearly shows the Christian doctrine that sin, not misfortunes, leads an individual to hell.

Least vivid is the nature of hell portrayed in *Beowulf*. Yet one thing is certain: only the wicked suffer there. Describing the “hope of heathens,” the narrator writes, “in their spirits they thought of Hell” (179,180;26). As the narrative continues, it describes Grendel as an example of the evil beings who are destined for hell. After his fatal fight with Beowulf, Grendel, “bereft of joys, had laid down his life in his fen-refuge, his heathen soul: there hell took him” (820-823;34). In contrast to the heathens who live in fear of hell, the epic says, “Well is the man who after his death-day may seek the Lord and find peace in the embrace of the Father” (186-189;26). This peaceful man seems to have followed the Biblical advice to “Be faithful until death” and can expect God to give him “the crown of life” (Rev. 2.10).

The Faerie Queene, *Paradise Lost*, and *Beowulf* demonstrate the sharp contrast between classical and Christian concepts of hell. While classical epics like *The Aeneid* place evil as well as virtuous characters in the underworld, Christian epics show that only those who have chosen lives of sin descend to hell. The implications of each doctrine are profound, for the classical picture shows humans no path by which to avoid hell, while the Christian epics demonstrate man’s responsibility for his actions and destiny.

The strongest tension between pagan and Christian motifs lies in the opposition between myth and truth. By reflecting aspects of secular folklore, *Paradise Lost*, *The Faerie Queene*, and *Beowulf* contrast pagan myth with Biblical truth.

The non-Christian epics of *Voluspa* and *The Aeneid* use myths to explain the history and future of humanity. *Voluspa*’s sybil professes to tell of man’s beginnings: “I tell of giants from times forgotten./ Those who fed me in former days” (stanza 6). Then

the sybil relates the myth of creation, saying, “the sons of Bur then built up the lands./ Moulded in magnificence middle-Earth” (stanza 8). The classical epic *The Aeneid* also uses myths to explain human existence. During his visit to hell, Aeneas meets his father, Anchises, who unfolds a cosmogonic myth. Anchises does not want “to leave . . . [Aeneas] mystified” (VI.576), so he explains the origin of life:

First, then, the sky and lands and sheets of water,

The bright moon’s globe, the Titan sun and stars,

Are fed within by Spirit, and a Mind

Infused through all the members of the world. (VI.578-582)

Voluspa and *The Aeneid* show how Germanic and classical epics depend on myths to explain reality and predict the future.

Because *Paradise Lost* contrasts myth with God’s wisdom, it provides the most overt rebuttal to pagan legends. Philip Gallagher believes that Milton calls the details of Greek lore into question by alluding to the mythic roll call (126). He includes nine oriental gods from Palestine and Egypt and a list of the main gods of Greece and Rome:

The rest were long to tell, though far renown’d,

Th’ Ionian Gods, of Javan’s Issue held

God’s, yet confest later than Heav’n and Earth

Thir boasted Parents; Titan Heav’n’s first born

With his enormous brood, and birthright seiz’d

By younger Saturn, he from mightier Jove

His own and Rhea’s Son like measure found;

So Jove usurping reign’d: these first in Crete

And Ida known, thence on the Snowy top

Of cold Olympus rul'd the middle Air
 Thir highest Heav'n; or on the Delphian Cliff,
 Or in Dodona, and through all the bounds
 Of Doric Land; or who with Saturn old
 Fled over Adria to th' Hesperian Fields,
 And o'er the Celtic roam'd the utmost Isles. (II.507-521)

This roll call is an allusion to the genealogy of gods stated in the *Theogony* (Gallagher 125). Milton implies that Hesiod's myth cannot depict a theogony because all its characters are devils rather than deities. Milton also uses geography to suggest that these gods cannot be true gods, for real gods would not rule only in "the middle Air." Milton also debunks the gods by stating their moral corruption. Saturn grasps Titan's "birthright," and Jove also gains the throne by usurpation (Gallagher 126). As was noted earlier, Milton's allusions to Greek gods also formed familiar reference points for readers who had been schooled in Greek classics.

Less direct than Milton's disavowal of mythic characters is Spenser's refusal to venerate pagan gods. While Spenser may not attach mythic names to demons, he traces the dubious nature of myth by placing Red Crosse's temptation scenes in a mythic framework. According to Bulger, Spenser's mythic scenes serve two functions: they are metaphors for the fallen state of mankind, and they indicate inherent limitations of mythical thought. Red Crosse begins to experience problems when he accepts the "ydle dreame" (I.i.406) proposed by Archimago from Morpheus, the god of false dreams. The Morphean underworld does not immediately appear harmful. The restful state of Morphean sleep is initially agreeable and attractive (Bulger 10):

A trickling streame from high rocke tumbling downe
 And ever-drizling raine upon the loft,
 Mixt with a murmuring winde, much like the sowne
 Of swarming Bees, did cast him in a swowne:
 No other noyse, nor peoples troublous cryes,
 As still are wont t'annoy the walled towne,
 Might there be heard: but careless Quiete lyes,
 Wrapt in eternall silence farre from enemyes. (I.i.361-369)

Bulger concludes that because this passage depicts Morpheus as a comic deity, Spenser shows the folly of turning the mindless biological instinct of sleep into a god (Bulger 11).

Unlike the unprofitable rest of Morphean sleep, Red Crosse finds true rejuvenation through God's Word. Thomas Dughi suggests that Red Crosse's fall in canto 11 represents the result of the transforming work of God's Word. Red Crosse falls nearly literally into God's Word: "It fortun'd (as faire it then befell)/ Behind his backe unweeting, where he stood) Of ancient time there was a springing well," called "The Well of Life" (I.xi.253-255,261). This well imparted true strength: "Those that with sicknesse were infected sore,/ It could recure, and aged long decay/ Renew, as one were borne that very day" (I.xi.264-266) This scene symbolizes the regenerative working of the Word to build faith in the soul of the Christian (Dughi 2). Spenser suggests that pagan mythology merely pretends to offer the vitality that humans can find only in Christianity.

Less direct than *The Faerie Queene's* denial of classical myths is *Beowulf's* rebuttal of pagan myths, such as the myth of *Voluspa*. Paul Taylor traces the structural parallels between *Beowulf* and *Voluspa*, an Old Icelandic cosmogonic poem. Both *Voluspa* and *Beowulf* involve evil invasions until an exceptional hero of sufficient

strength appears to defend the hall. In *Voluspa*, a natural son of Odin, Thor, protects and purges Asgard. Similarly, Beowulf, who purges Heorot, is later adopted as a spiritual son of Hrothgar. When the author of *Beowulf* calls Beowulf *eotenweard* (668b), meaning “guard against giants,” he may have been thinking of Thor, who protects the gods from Loki, the author of all of the world’s evils (Taylor 126).

The poet of *Beowulf* carefully subjected his pagan allusions to Christian themes. At the start of the epic, the author praises “the Lord of Life, the Ruler of heaven” for giving Beowulf “honor in the world” (16-17;23). This deity is linked to the Hebrew God by Biblical allusions. “The Eternal Lord” has “avenged the murder” of Abel (107,108;25). Genesis supports *Beowulf*’s account. After Abel’s murder, “the Lord said to Cain . . . now you are cursed from the earth, which has opened its mouth to receive your brother’s blood from your hand” (Gen. 5.9,11). And it is this “Holy God,” that Hrothgar believes “has sent him [Beowulf] to us West Danes . . . against the terror of Grendel” (381-389;28).

Like pagan epics, *Paradise Lost*, *The Faerie Queene*, and *Beowulf* contain the motif of pagan mythology, yet these myths merely serve as a familiar context for classical scholars and as examples of falsehood to be compared with Bible truths. Milton uses classical allusions to debunk Hesiod’s *Theogony*; Spenser employs the myth of Morpheus to demonstrate the folly of worshipping this mindless instinct as a god; and the *Beowulf* poet replaces Germanic mythical characters with Christian figures, showing that the Bible is superior to Germanic legends. Hence, Christian epics let the mythic motif argue against itself

More profound than the epic style and motifs in *Beowulf*, *The Faerie Queene*, and *Paradise Lost* are the answers these epics provide for timeless pagan perplexities.

Humans of all religions have asked questions like: How should I respond to failure and success? What determines my destiny? And who controls the universe? To show how Christianity satisfies the most profound questions of life, the epics outline humility as opposed to pride, human free will as opposed to fate, and the nature of God.

One of the timeless pagan questions answered by the Christian epics is that of how humans should behave. Pagan and classical epics teach man to fulfill his longing for acceptance by evoking praise from his comrades. Yet Christianity teaches that a person discovers the greatest satisfaction by serving others. Christians find joy by submerging their selfish desires for the good of humanity. While pagan works like *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* highlight the honor and pride of the individual, *Beowulf*, *The Faerie Queene*, and *Paradise Lost* show the folly of pride.

The heroes of *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* are characterized by pride and a love for honor. Achilles' honor is dear to his mother, Thetis: "I gave birth to a flawless, mighty son . . . / the splendor of heroes, . . . / like a fine tree I reared him—the orchard's crowning glory" (*Il* XVIII.63-65). And Achilles speaks of his position as the strongest man in his army, saying, "no man my equal among the bronze-armed Achaeans, / not in battle" (XVIII. 124,125). The *Odyssey* also emphasizes human glory in its descriptions of immortals praising Odysseus. Apparently the Greek gods have no qualms about praising mortals, for Athena addresses Odysseus as, "Son of Laertes and the gods of old, / Odysseus, master of land ways and sea ways" (XXIV.562,563).

In sharp contrast to the pagan concern for human glory, *Beowulf* denounces pride. The epic points to pride as a cause of feuds. Regarding Hygelac of the Geats, it states, "fate took him when for pride he sought trouble, feud with the Frisians" (1205-1207;39). The poem directly warns against the corrupting effect of pride: "the whole world turns to

his will . . . until his portion of pride increases and flourishes within him; then the watcher sleeps, the soul's guardian; . . . and the slayer most near whose bow shots treacherously" (1739-1744;46). This warning is reminiscent of Solomon's injunction: "Pride goes before destruction and a haughty spirit before a fall" (Prov. 16.18).

Spenser is even clearer than the *Beowulf* poet in denouncing pride. Spenser history of Lucifera links pride with hellish creatures:

Of greisly Pluto she the daughter was,
 And sad Proserpina the Queene of Hell;
 Yet did she thinke her pearlesse worth to pass
 That parentage, with pride so did she swell,
 And Thundering Jove, that high in heaven doth dwell,
 And wield the world, she claymed for her syre,
 Of that any else did Jove excel:
 For to the highest she did still aspire,
 Or if ought higher were then that, did it desire. (I.iv.91-99)

Not only does this passage reveal Lucifera's ancestry is diabolical, but it also suggests the absurd nature of her pride. She swells with pride because of her hellish ancestors. Waters illustrates his interpretation of Arthur's humble magnanimity with a quotation from Sister Anne, a well-known writer from Spenser's era. Sister Anne notes that Spenser chose Arthur to symbolize the valor that carries great endeavors to a successful end. Waters concludes that Arthur's magnanimity implies "greatness of soul." This is the kind of magnanimity that can defeat hellish pride, personified in Orgoglio (Waters 57).

Of the three epics, *Paradise Lost* depicts the evil nature of pride most forcefully. From the outset of the poem, Milton declares that pride is Satan's nemesis. Milton traces

the history of evil from its inception, when Satan's "pride/ Had cast him out from Heaven, with all his host/ Of rebel angels, by whose aid aspiring/ To set himself in glory above his peers" (I.36-39). Lewis notes that pride caused Satan to rebel against equality, which justly prevailed in heaven among equals. In rejecting this natural equality, he rebelled against the "lay of nature" (Lewis *A Preface* 78). After the fall, pride closes the heart toward spiritual development. Gerald Schiffhorst comments that the evil angels and Satan exhibit a stubborn heroism, similar to stoical pride and rigidity. The rebel angels survive their fall by "their own recover'd strength/ not by the sufferance of supernal power" (I.240-241). Satan's struggle is a self-centered test of strength and will, rather than an opportunity for spiritual development (Schiffhorst 16). Pride brings Satan no joy or peace. Satan may be "Vaunting aloud, but" he is inwardly "racked with deep despair" (I.126). In *Paradise Lost*, pride causes Satan's fall, his stubbornness, and his despair.

In addition to attacking the pagan and classical veneration for personal honor, the Christian epics present the humility as the Christian substitute for pride. The classical emphasis on individual honor contradicts the Bible's numerous recommendations to be humble. Solomon sates: "When pride comes, then comes disgrace, but with humility comes wisdom" (Prov. 11.2). In the New Testament, the apostle Peter counsels young men, saying, "Clothe yourselves with humility toward one another. . . . Humble yourselves, therefore, under God's mighty hand, that he may lift you up in due time" (I Pet. 5.5,6). The Bible plainly states that honorable characters are humble before they are ever exalted.

Beowulf subtly reflects the Biblical doctrine that the greatest heroes are humble. Beowulf readily credits his comrades for Grendel's defeat: "'With much good will we have achieved this work of courage, that fight, have ventured boldly against the strength

of the unknown one” (958-960;35). And when Beowulf prepares to fight Grendel’s mother, he is “mindful of the great strength, the large gift God had given him, and relied on the Almighty for favor, comfort and help” (1270-1273;40). Beowulf looks outside himself for strength to fight the monster. After the fight, Beowulf again directs honor away from himself, saying, “The fight would have been ended straightway if God had not guarded me” (1657,1658;45). The poem summarizes its concept of heroism by portraying Beowulf’s ability to be “brave, a man of battles,” and “of good deeds,” who bares “himself according to discretion,” yet holds “the great gift that God had given him, the most strength of all mankind, like one brave in battle” (2177-2183;51). On his death bed, Beowulf seems to be more concerned with God’s glory than his own honor: “I speak with my words thanks to the Lord of All for these treasures, to the King of Glory, Eternal Prince, for what I gaze on here, that I might get such for my people before my death-day” (2794-2798;60). Beowulf demonstrates the Christian hero’s ability to recognize his talents as God-given for bringing honor to God.

More direct than *Beowulf*’s theme of humility is Spenser’s stress on Christian humility as opposed to the fiendish pride of classical heroes. Bulger notes that *The Faerie Queene* raises Una’s humble faith above Odysseus’ military prowess:

What man is he that boasts of fleshly might,
And vaine assurance of mortality,
Which all so soon, as it doth come to fight,
Against spirituall foes, yields by and by,
. . . Ne let the man ascribe it to his skill,
That thorough grace hath gained victory. (I.x.1-7)

In contrast to the man “that boasts of fleshly might” (I.x.1), Una’s deportment displays modest humility. She is first described as riding “Upon a lowly Asse more white then snow,/ Yet she much whiter, but the same did hid under a vele, that wimpled was full low” (I.i.29-31). While she searches for St. George, one day she undresses “In secret shadow, farre from all men’s sight” (I.iii.31). Thomas Dughi notes that in the first nine cantos of *The Faerie Queene*, Red Crosse is brought ever nearer a conviction of his sinfulness. This trend culminates during his encounter with Despaire, when he sees his guilt before the law: “If any strength we haue, it is to ill” (I.x.9). The poem shows that true humility springs from a person’s knowledge of his sinfulness. Dughi believes that Red Crosse’s anguish over his sin springs from an understanding of human sinfulness (Dughi 5):

The knight was much enmoued with his speech,
That as a swards point through his hart did perse,
And in his conscience made a secret breach,
Well knowing true all, that he did reherse,
And to his fresh remembrance did reverse
The ugly vew of his deformed crimes. (I.ix.424-429)

Spenser stresses Christian humility by contrasting Una’s exemplary humility with Odysseus’ pride and by portraying Red Crosse’s deepening knowledge of personal sin.

Even more bold than Spenser’s theme of humility is the stress *Paradise Lost* places on humble heroes. In contrast to Satan’s stubborn self-dependence, the epic’s true hero, Christ, exemplifies humility. Schiffhorst notes that Satan expresses blind fury in the intemperate anger of those who doubt God’s goodness. Satan “on himself/ Treble confusion, wrath, and vengeance poured” (I.219-220). When he acknowledges that

“suffering for Truth’s sake is fortitude to highest victory” (XII.569-570), Christ wins where Satan lost, subduing wrath, despair, and grief, accepting the yoke of obedience humbly (Schiffhorst 18). Schiffhorst concludes that Satan’s destructive and selfish “fortitude” makes his “heroism” blind, self-deceptive, and foolish. While his counterpart, the Son, models the ideal heroism of humility and patient endurance, Milton’s emphasis on both the human frailty and limitations of heroism highlights the contrast between proud rebellion and patient, selfless obedience (Schiffhorst 19).

More crucial than the theme of humble heroes in these Christian epics is their illustration of free will versus fate. The epic hero must be free to choose his actions before he can display pride or humility. Characters in both pagan Germanic and classical Greek writers are victimized by a fatalistic universe. *Beowulf*, *Paradise Lost*, and *The Faerie Queene* answer this pagan distress of victimization by demonstrating mankind’s dependence on personal choice rather than fate.

The Germanic poem *Voluspa* presents a cosmos ruled by fate. After the gods have created men, the Fate Maidens weave the fate of mankind: “The lays that determine the lives of men/ They fixed forever and their fate sealed” (stanza 20). The poem continues to predict history, describing the corruption of mankind and retribution for that corruption: “The waters are troubled, the waves surge up:/ Announcing now the knell of Fate” (stanza 40). In *Voluspa*, man’s individual and corporate history is foreordained.

Fate spawns the profound despair that C. S. Lewis sees in Homer’s works. Much has been said about the melancholy of Virgil, notes Lewis, yet “an inch beneath the bright surface of Homer we find not melancholy but despair.” Goethe called it “hell,” Lewis writes (Lewis A *Preface* 30). Fate had ordained the tragedies of *The Iliad*. Unlike Virgil’s works, where suffering has meaning and is bought by high resolve, in *The Iliad*, there is

merely suffering. Achilles tells Priam, "What good's to be won from tears that chill the spirit? So the immortals spun our lives that we, we wretched men live on to bear such torments" (XXII.612-614). Lewis believes this suffering is endurable only because of Homer's style-his tireless, changeless, angelic speech. Otherwise the *Iliad* would make the darkest modern realism appear as child's play (Lewis A *Preface* 31).

Beowulf includes and builds upon the Germanic notion of fate. Some critics believe the poem carries a fatalistic tone because Beowulf leaves his people, the Gears, without a blood successor to the throne when he departs for war (Cain 233). C. S. Lewis, for one, believes *Beowulf* hits a chord of despair, reminiscent of the *Odyssey*. Once the king has died, the moment of happiness, like those before and after it, is swallowed by the incoming tide of the Heroic Age. Once "the joy-giver of the people of the Weathers . . . is fast on his death-bed," (2900-2901;61) Wiglaf speaks "hateful news" of coming doom: "Many a spear, cold in the morning, shall be grasped with fingers, raised by hands; no sound of harp shall waken the warriors, but the dark raven, low over the doomed, shall tell many tales to the eagle how he fared at the feast when with the wolf he spoiled the slain bodies" (3022-3027;62). Yet despite this tone of despair, the *Beowulf* poet superimposes fate with the Christian concept of God's will. C. Tidmarsh Major argues that although pagan terms for fate appear in *Beowulf*, a newer Christian meaning for these terms was always operative in the mind of poet and his audience (6). The poet of *Beowulf* refers to the *wyrd*, which some translate as fate. Cain notes that in translating Boethius' *De Consolatione Philosophiae*, Alfred the Great, translates *wyrd* as both fate and Fortuna. And like Boethius, who considered Fortuna and fate to represent divine providence, Alfred notes that *wyrd* is subject to God's control (231). Cain also supports this view by quoting J. D. A. Ogilvy: "*wyrd* is merely a name for the working of Divine Providence in

temporary and transitory affairs" (Cain 231). The narrative clearly shows that fate operates under the will of God. Before he fights Grendel, Beowulf believes that the "wise God, Holy Lord" is able to "assign glory on whichever hand seems good to Him" (686,687;32). The narrator later writes of Grendel: "It was not his fate that when that night was over he should feast on more of mankind" (735,736;33). Grendel's "fated" death has been clearly ordained by God. In contrast to the arbitrary fates assigned by pagan gods, characters in *Beowulf* could depend on a wise God to decide their destiny.

Less explicitly stated, yet almost as pervasive, is Milton's reaction to fate in *Paradise Lost*. The fallen gods in *Paradise Lost* like to think that they are not responsible for their destiny but that they are mere victims of fate. According to a footnote in *The Norton Anthology of English Literature* the Syrian god Thammuz, supposedly killed by a boar in Lebanon, gains sympathy by making his distress appear fated (675). His "annual wound in Lebanon allured/ The Syrian damsels to lament his fate" (I.447,448). Yet the devils cannot honestly divorce their fate from God's will. Belial says "fate inevitable/ Subdues us," yet acknowledges that "omnipotent decree,/ The Victor's will" has also decided the devils' doom (II.197-199). Milton shows that fate benefits the Devils because it hides their responsibility for misery. Their condition actually stems from their evil choices, which the next section of this paper will discuss. *Paradise Lost*, then, acknowledges the pagan concept of fate and exposes its deceptive roots.

Perhaps less thorough than Milton's treatment of fate is Spenser's response to fate in *The Faerie Queene*. Spenser alludes to the fateful lives of Greek characters. Spenser shows this denial of the human choice in the process of salvation, while Red Crosse visits hell and hears Night tell Aesculapius that he has nothing left to lose:

. . . sith that heavens king
 From hope of heaven hath thee excluded quight,
 Why fearest thou, that canst not hope for thing,
 And fearest not, that more thee hurten might,
 Now in the power of everlasting Night? (I.v.379-383)

The stoic's acceptance of the "chayne of strong necessitee" (I.v.221) ends in limitless despair (Bulger 21). Spenser shows his disapproval of fate in his depiction of the character who utters these dreadful philosophies. "Griesly Night," rides "cole blacke steeds yborne of hellish brood," "with visage deadly sad" (I.v.172,179,171). The miserable countenance of Night portrays the noxious effects of fatalism.

At the same time these epics seek to negate the notion of fate, they introduce a positive alternative in the Christian concept of free choice. By highlighting the importance of personal choice, the poems answer the distress pagan literature voices in reference to man's destiny. Personal decisions, rather than blind fate, mold the lives of characters in *The Faerie Queene*, *Paradise Lost*, and *Beowulf*.

In contrast to fatalistic pagan and classical literature, the Bible presents the doctrine of free will. In the Old Testament, the Israelite leader Joshua reminded the Israelites of their ability to choose their religion. "If serving the Lord seems undesirable to you," Joshua said, "then choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your forefathers served beyond the River, or the gods of the Amorites. . . . But as for me and my household, we will serve the Lord" (Joshua 24.15). This passage demonstrates the Biblical principle that God allows individuals to freely determine their actions.

In *The Faerie Queene*, Red Crosse's freedom to choose righteousness is crucial for his victories. Lewis notes that Spenser portrays sin as ruling an entire life. Leaving

that unrighteous path is the only way to escape sin and its consequences. No compromise or middle course exists (Lewis *Spenser's Images* 30). (While Spenser believed that the switch from false to true religion occurs only in harmony with heavenly grace (Waters 62), a person must freely choose to accept this grace.) The episode of Red Crosse's battle with Errour illustrates how personal resolve participates in justification by faith: "Add faith unto your force, and be not faint:/ Strangle her, else she sure will strangle thee" (I.i.165,166). Choosing to fight in faith, Red Crosse, "knitting all his force got one hand free,/ Wherewith he grypt her gorge [neck] with so great paine,/ That soone to loose her wicked bands did her constraine" (I.i.169-171). Spenser demonstrates the crucial role choice plays in spiritual victories.

More striking than the function of choice in *The Faerie Queene* is its position in *Paradise Lost*. At the beginning of book II, Satan states that "the fixed laws of Heaven/ Did . . . create . . . free choice" (II.18,19). And fallen angels appeal to their prerogative of free choice whenever they propose a battle plan. Moloch does not think his companions should accept their "dark opprobrious den of shame,/ The prison of his tyranny who reigns" (II.58,59). Instead he pleads, "let us rather choose,/ . . . all at once/ O'er Heaven's high towers to force resistless way,/ Turning our tortures into horrid anus" (II.60-63). The first two books of *Paradise Lost* show that, as independent created beings, even devils have the power to choose their destiny. At the very beginning of the epic, Milton also suggests man's freedom to choose right and wrong. He writes how Satan moved mankind "to fall off/ From their Creator, and transgress His will" (I.30,31). Milton implies that "Eternal Providence" (I.24) had not ordained this fall and thus leaves humans free to choose Satan's plans. C. S. Lewis observes that the central paradox of Milton's vision is that discipline, in the unfallen sense, is vital for what seems its opposite—freedom, nearly

extravagance. For, “without sin, the universe is a Solemn Game; and there is no good game without rules” (Lewis A *Preface* 81). Thus freedom of choice is at the heart of this epic.

Though free will plays the least obvious role in *Beowulf*, it undergirds the narrative. The didactic tone of the poem implies that humans have the freedom to control the course of their lives. The poet upholds Beowulf as a model of virtuous behavior, saying, “in this way a young man ought by his good deeds, by giving splendid gifts while still in his father’s house, to make sure that later in life beloved companions will stand by him, that people will serve him when war comes” (20-24;23). The epic also alludes to free choice when it describes Heorot’s construction. Referring to Hrothgar, the poem states: “It came to his mind that he would command men to construct a hall, a great mead-building that the children of men should hear of forever” (67-70;24). The poet gives no hint that Hrothgar had been fated to build Heorot or that God had ordained the hall’s construction; the plan simply comes to Hrothgar’s mind, and he chooses to execute it. After he has defeated Grendel, Beowulf’s victory speech in Heorot stresses personal decision: “I resolved, when I set out on the sea, sat down in the sea-boat with my band of men, that I should altogether fulfill the wish of your people” (632-635;31). Determination leads to Beowulf’s military victory. Like Beowulf’s military triumph, the ancient Hebrew Daniel won a victory over appetite because of a choice. The Bible reports that “Daniel resolved not to defile himself with the royal food and wine,” of the Babylonian court (Dan. 1.8). Beowulf, like the Biblical Daniel, portrays choice as a key ingredient to personal success.

More central than their themes of humility and human free will is the Christian picture of the Deity that *Beowulf*, *The Faerie Queene*, and *Paradise Lost* portray. By painting a loving picture of God, these epics answer the distress voiced by pagan

literature. C. S. Lewis writes that *Beowulf* does not portray any more suffering than *The Iliad* presents, but it has a sense of good and evil which Homer's works lack (Lewis *A Preface* 26). While the gods of *Voluspa* and classical Greek literature are arbitrary and afflicted with human sins, the Christian God of *Beowulf*, *Paradise Lost*, and *The Faerie Queene* embodies omnipotence and ultimate righteousness.

Both the pagan Icelandic cosmogonic poem *Voluspa* and Homer's epics portray divisive, weak gods. The gods in *Voluspa* are slow to understand how war breaks on earth. The sybil says, "The first war in the world I well remember" and proceeds to describe how it "burned the hall of the high god" (stanza 21). But the gods do not know who instigated the war: "The gods hastened to their hall of judgement/ Sat in council to discover who/ Had tainted all the air with corruption" (stanza 22). Unaware of the origin of war, the gods are powerless to protect their hall from fire.

Greek literature also portrayed the arbitrary and weak nature of gods in the writings of Homer. The gods cannot rule wisely because their motives conflict. At the beginning of the *Odyssey*, Athena complains to Zeus about the suffering that Zeus' brother Poseidon has caused Odysseus. Zeus responds: "Poseidon must relent/ for being quarrelsome will get him nowhere,/ one god, flouting the will of all the gods" (I.99-101). Clearly, the Greek gods are not unified in their dealings with mankind. Zeus's actions are hardly moral. The gods are also weak. Hephaestus does not want to see his father, Zeus, beat Hera because he would not be powerful enough to rescue her from his Zeus: "I would be shattered-what could I do to save you?" (II I.709). Then Hephaestus recounts the story of the event which caused him to become crippled:

You remember the last time I rushed to your defense?

He grabbed my foot, he hurled me off the tremendous threshold

and all day long I dropped, I was dead weight and then,
 when the sun went down, down I plunged on Lemnos,
 little breath left in me. But the mortals there s
 soon nursed a fallen immortal back to life. (*Il* I.711-716)

This episode illustrates Zeus' rage and Hephaestus' weakness. Greek gods are neither unified enough nor strong enough to maintain their individual wishes.

Out of the three Christian epics, the most direct depiction of an all-powerful, righteous God appears in *Beowulf*. This epic stresses God's omnipotence by frequently referring to His limitless power. At the beginning of the epic, the narrator establishes God's ultimate authority, by calling Him "the Lord of Life, the Ruler of Heaven" and identifying Him as the source of Beowulf's worldly honor (16,17;23). Hrothgar also seems to understand God's power to stop evil. As Hrothgar tells Beowulf about Grendel's devastation, he mentions that "God may easily put an end to the wild ravager's deeds" (478,479;29). Before his fight with Grendel, Beowulf remarks, "may wise God, Holy Lord, assign glory on whichever hand seems good to him" (685-687;32). This plea suggests that all military success comes from God, for whether Grendel or Beowulf would win the fight, God would empower the victor. The narrator summarizes God's omnipotence, saying, "He Who has power over seasons and times: He is the true Ruler" (1610,1611;44). In addition to stressing God's might, the poem emphasizes God's righteousness. The fiendish evil Grendel is evidently God's determined enemy, associated with Cain and his offspring, who are also antagonistic toward God (Stevick 85, 86). Grendel's enmity against God is seen in his exclusion from God's throne: "He might not approach the throne, [receive] treasure, because of the Lord: He had not love for him" (168,169;25). God is not only displeased by evil, he also seeks to punish it. "The Eternal

Lord avenged the murder in which he slew Able. Cain had no pleasure in that feud, but He banished him far from mankind, the Ruler, for that misdeed" (107-110;25). Thus, *Beowulf* portrays a God of ultimate power and righteousness.

More symbolic is Milton's portrait of God's authority and righteousness. It is, after all, Milton's appreciation for God's goodness that impels Milton to write the epic to "justify the ways of God to men" (I.26). Through the narrator, Milton provides a non-diabolical view of the war:

Such place Eternal Justice had prepared

For those rebellious; here their prison ordained

In utter darkness and their portion set

As far removed from God and light of Heaven

As from the center thrice to th' utmost pole. (I.70-74)

Here Milton describes the stark contrast between God, who inhabits light and acts from eternal justice, with Satan, who dwells in a dark prison and is motivated by rebellion. The geographical distance between the two immortals mirrors the distance between the Divine character and that of the "infernal serpent" (I.34). Milton powerfully presents God's omnipotence by having even Satan call God "our Conqueror (whom I now/ Of force believe almighty, since no less/ Than such could have o'er powered such force as ours)" (I.143-145). Later Beelzebub expresses his certainty of God's perpetual rule:

In height or depth, still first and last will reign

Sole King, and of his kingdom lose no part

By our revolt, but over hell extend

His empire, and with iron scepter rule

Us here, as with his golden those in Heaven. (II.324-328)

Paradise Lost argues that if God's enemies acknowledge Him as almighty, He must be undefeatable. The epic also uplifts Divine righteousness as it simultaneously demeans Satan's lies.

More allegorical than the picture of an omnipotent and righteous God in *Beowulf* and *Paradise Lost* is *The Faerie Queene's* portrait of a gracious God. Heavenly grace is portrayed in Red Crosse's victory over Orgoglio, Prince Arthur's rescue, and Red Crosse's rejuvenation at the "well of life." Waters notes how Spenser highlights man's need for divine grace by showing that "heavenly grace . . . did . . . bless" Red Crosse at his encounter with Orgoglio, so he "lightly leapt from underneath the blow," otherwise, "he had beene pouldred all, as thin as flower" (I.vii.102,103,105) (Waters 57,58). In the next canto, divine truth and grace lead Prince Arthur to rescue Red Crosse. Spenser specifies that Una "brings Arthur to . . . fight" the Gyant and "redeeme her deare" (I.viii.Arg.). Thus, Prince Arthur, the "noble knight," (I.viii.16) is a minister of Divine grace (Waters 58). Waters believes that Prince Arthur's coming to Red Crosse's rescue is an allegorical portrait of both the ability of God's grace to restore a Christian's magnanimity and the necessity of that restoration in enabling man to rise from sin and become saved through grace (58). God imbues Red Crosse with life-giving grace when Red Crosse literally falls into the "well of life" (I.xi.261) and "a trickling streame of Balme" (I.xi.425) in canto 11. His battle with the old Dragon exhausts Red Crosse, and "the knight backe overthrowen" (I.xi.270) falls into a well which "unto life the dead" can restore (I.xi.262). Dughi believes Red Crosse's two falls result from the transforming work of God's Word. According to Dughi, these scenes of the knight's falls symbolize the regenerative working of the Word to build faith in the soul of the righteous (Dughi 2).

All along Red Crosse's journey God displays His power, righteousness, and grace to Red Crosse by rescuing the knight from evil creatures.

Beowulf, *The Faerie Queene*, and *Paradise Lost* skillfully stencil Christian themes onto the pattern of classical and pagan epics. This overlap appears in superficial epic elements of style, such as beginning *in medias res*, invoking the muse, cataloguing characters, alluding to pagan and classical deities, writing in similes, and using stock elements; in the epics' insightful interpretations of the pagan epic motifs, such as sleep, heroism, hell, and myth; and in the profound Christian themes of humility, human free will, the omnipotent and righteous nature of God. By depicting how a person should respond to success, what determines his destiny, and the character of the God who controls the universe, these Christian epics answer mankind's most profound questions. C. S. Lewis said every poem could be viewed in two ways—as a message the poet conveys and as a structure that he creates. This duality can be compared to a person's two parents, its mother being the mass of experience and thought inside the poem and its father being the pre-existing form (epic, tragedy, novel, etc.) which it finds in the public world. The man who writes a good sonnet, therefore, must not only be enamored with a woman, but must be enamored with the sonnet as well (Lewis *A Preface* 2,3). Through their mutual love for Christianity and epic style, the authors of *Beowulf*, *The Faerie Queene*, and *Paradise Lost* produced poems which rank among the world's greatest epics and answer mankind's deepest perplexities with Christian doctrines.

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SOUTHERN SCHOLARS SENIOR PROJECT

Name: Ayshe Inankur Date: 1/17/02 Major: English

SENIOR PROJECT

A significant scholarly project, involving research, writing, or special performance, appropriate to the major in question, is ordinarily completed the senior year. The project is expected to be of sufficiently high quality to warrant a grade of A and to justify public presentation.

Under the guidance of a faculty advisor, the Senior Project should be an original work, should use primary sources when applicable, should have a table of contents and works cited page, should give convincing evidence to support a strong thesis, and should use the methods and writing style appropriate to the discipline.

The completed project, to be turned in in duplicate, must be approved by the Honors Committee in consultation with the student's supervising professor three weeks prior to graduation. Please include the advisor's name on the title page.
The 2-3 hours of credit for this project is done as directed study or in a research class.

Keeping in mind the above senior project description, please describe in as much detail as you can the project you will undertake. You may attach a separate sheet if you wish:

Thesis: The combination of pagan and Christian elements in Beowulf, The Faerie Queene, and Paradise Lost has helped to make works the greatest epics in the English language.

- I. In Beowulf, Christian themes are woven into a more dominant secular Germanic framework.
- II. The Faerie Queene, like Beowulf, is built upon pagan literary traditions, yet this epic's Christian themes are more evident than in Beowulf.
- III. Milton's Paradise Lost is even more successful than The Faerie Queene in building a narrative on pagan, Greek, and Christian traditions.

Signature of faculty advisor Rachel Byrd Expected date of completion 4/19/02

Approval to be signed by faculty advisor when completed:

This project has been completed as planned: yes

This is an "A" project: yes

This project is worth 2(3) hours of credit: 3 hours

Advisor's Final Signature Rachel Byrd

Chair, Honors Committee _____ Date Approved: _____

Dear Advisor, please write your final evaluation on the project on the reverse side of this page. Comment on the characteristics that make this "A" quality work.

April 19, 2002

In preparation for writing the essay Ayesha carefully read and analyzed three long works of English literature by major authors. She also researched extensively the secondary sources in preparation for writing her honors project. The theories of the paper are Ayesha's original work, and they deal with issues important not only to her but also to other Christian scholars. Much of the work of this essay lies in marshalling the supporting evidence, which Ayesha does thoroughly. She has carefully organized, revised, and edited her work for a non-specialized literary audience. In my opinion her essay is A quality work.

Rachel Byrd, Ph.D.