The Feminized Cross of
*The Dream of the Rood*

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The canonicity of *The Dream of the Rood* makes the poem seem almost impervious to contemporary incursions of literary theory and modern politics. Seminal articles by Margaret Schlauch (1940) and Rosemary Woolf (1958) are complemented by Michael Swanton’s 1970 edition of the poem; criticism since that time has seemed mostly to be a refining or nuancing of these critics’ tenets rather than an exploration into new ways of reading the text.¹ I contend that an uncritical acceptance of the Christianity of the poem has impeded theoretical examinations of *The Dream of the Rood*; Christianity is the structure upon which the text is built and it needs to be interrogated much as the characters, actions, and speeches of the poem do. When Christian doctrine is viewed as a textual structure rather than as a monolithic and universal Truth, the critic can read the text in a variety of ways. While what follows focuses on gender performance in the poem, it analyzes the Christian structures of the poem as part of a cultural domination by a patriarchal, hegemonic Christianity.

When Christ is read as an interpretable character rather than as a somehow transcendental Son of God, an analysis of the gender paradigms and performances of the poem becomes possible. The performances of Christ in the text of *The Dream of the Rood* construct a masculinity for Christ that is majestic, martial, and specifically heterosexual and that relies on a fragile opposition with a femininity defined as dominated Other. Christ dominates other figures within and without the text. His particularly constructed masculinity, explored rather than merely assumed or
revered, adds a new dimension of gendered heterosexuality to our understanding of this Old English poem.

In the pages that follow, I will argue that Christ’s masculinity is affirmed against the figure of the feminized cross in *The Dream of the Rood*, which acts as a dominated Other. In my discussion of Christ, I rely on Arthur Brittan’s investigation into the construction of masculinity as I examine Christ’s gender performance in this canonical poem.²

In *The Dream of the Rood*, the speaker tells of his *swefna cyst*, best of dreams, in which he sees the cross of the crucifixion, alternately bejeweled and bloody, in the sky. The cross then speaks, giving its own first person account of the Passion of Christ, and encouraging the dreamer to spread the message of the cross to his contemporaries. The poem ends as the dreamer resolves to follow the cross’s instructions, though he longs for the peace and joy of heaven. The poem is probably the most frequently read Old English text, after *Beowulf*, but the gender paradigms within it have gone largely unremarked, despite the mountain of criticism produced about the poem.

An examination of masculinity is a relatively new idea in gender theory, undertaken most recently in medieval studies in the essay collection *Medieval Masculinities*.³ Until the advent of feminist theory and its examination of women, the term “mankind” defined a universalized and assumed, somehow genderless humanity that was actually based on male or masculine paradigms.⁴ Those paradigms then seemed “natural” to the point where they were taken for granted. This naturalization of masculinity as humanity is discussed in Arthur Brittan’s *Masculinity and Power*, wherein he notes that in the social sciences the term “human nature” actually refers to middle class white male nature. For Brittan, “masculinism” is “the ideology that justifies and naturalizes male domination” and it depends on a falsely constructed dichotomy of man/woman or masculine/feminine (147-48, 4). Brittan asserts that “we find it almost impossible to think of gender and sexuality except in terms of a dichotomy” (14). It is just such an opposition, readily accepted and unexamined, that bulwarks a masculinism of domination and aggression. Brittan discusses the necessity of hierarchy, domination, and competitiveness in this definition of masculinity (which, I should note, he does not endorse); all these concepts require a femininity that exists in binary opposition to this masculinity (106).
When this opposition is broken down, masculinism breaks down as well. Without a subordinate, dominated, oppositional femininity, masculinity cannot be defined as “naturally” superior and dominating.

This sort of binary construction is at work in the masculinility of Christ in The Dream of Rood, however, which posits an oppositional masculinity and femininity upon which Christ’s gender construction depends. The concomitant fragility of that construction, which is based on a seemingly natural opposition, underscores the fragility of dominant masculinity and ultimately, I will argue, the fragility of patriarchal Christianity.

It is a commonplace in criticism of The Dream of the Rood to note that Christ is presented as an Anglo-Saxon warrior lord, who is served by his thanes, especially the cross, and who rewards them at a feast of glory in heaven. Critics note that Christ is described as frean mancynnes (the lord of mankind, 33), geong hæled (young hero, 39), and riene cyning (the powerful king, 44),² just three examples of many that show Christ as a lord in the heroic sense seen in Beowulf and in historical documents such as the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle: one to whom honor and loyalty to death are due. The cross, the dreamer, and ultimately the dreamer’s readers (the audience) form the comitatus of this lord, the group of followers who trust, obey, and believe in Christ.

Critics have received these elements of heroism in the presentation of Christ with varying degrees of enthusiasm. Indicative of more secular readings is Michael Swanton’s, wherein he describes the crucifixion as “preeminently an act of dominant free will by a prince confident of victory.”⁶ Representative of critics with a more sacred focus, Robert Diamond states that the heroic motif “does a kind of violence to the spirit and doctrines of Christianity” (3) and that the poem “preserves the old cliches and formulas of heroic poetry but applies them to Christian subjects” (7).⁷

Others follow Rosemary Woolf, who argues that the warrior-Christ trope is not specifically Anglo-Saxon but more broadly early Christian.⁸ Critics who follow Woolf thus argue that Christ should not be perceived as an Anglo-Saxon hero like Beowulf or Bryhtnoth. John Fleming claims that there is “no need to turn to pagan Germania” to explain the image of heaven as feast hall at the end of the poem.⁹ Themes of exile and community and militant faith are part of the culture of Benedictine monasticism that, Fleming argues, produced the poem. While no other critic I
have discovered categorically denies elements of Anglo-Saxon heroism in the poem’s diction, many others also subsume these elements in a specifically sacred reading of the poem.\textsuperscript{10} All of these critics, whether their focus is more secular or sacred, assume rather than explore the masculinity inherent in the idea of heroism, whether that heroism is of an Anglo-Saxon warrior or an eremetic monk. Fleming, for example, links Christianity and heroic masculinity when he compares the image of heaven as feast-hall to Alcuin’s “forceful, masculine vision of heaven,” although he does not elaborate on his choice of adjectives.\textsuperscript{11} The \textit{Dream} feast-hall scene does indeed seem like something out of \textit{Beowulf} or the fantasies of the narrator of “The Wanderer.” The dreamer tells us he wishes the cross would take him:

\begin{center}
\begin{tabular}{ll}
\texttt{þær} is blis mycel \\
dream on heofonum, \quad \texttt{þær} is dryhtnes folc \\
geseted to symle, \quad \texttt{þær} is singal blis, \\
ond me þonne asette \quad \texttt{þær} ic syþpan mot \\
wunian on wuldre, \quad \texttt{well mid þain halgum} \\
dreames brucan \\
\end{tabular}
\end{center}

(139b-44a)

(where there is great bliss, joy in the heavens, where the folk of God are seated at a feast, where there is everlasting bliss, and [the cross would] set me then where I afterwards may dwell in glory, may partake well of joys with the holy ones.)

This feast, longed for by an exile, is much like the feast longed for by the narrator of “The Wanderer,” which Helen Bennett describes as the masculine ritual of “the warmth and community of the mead-hall shared with kinsmen and their treasure-giving lord.”\textsuperscript{12} In this sort of economy, according to Bennett, women are excluded because the feast is part of the masculine culture of war. The dreamer in \textit{The Dream of the Rood} longs for a social situation from which women are, by definition, excluded.

Fleming’s reading of this scene as an expression of joy in specifically masculine monastic community accords with Bennett’s analysis of the masculinism of the scene from “The Wanderer” although Fleming wishes to disassociate monasticism from heroic paradigms. The endurance and stamina needed by the warrior for war and by the monk for the ascetic life are defined as masculine and are practiced by males, not only in Fleming’s unexplained choice of adjectives but also in the descriptions and interpretations of Christ’s heroism by countless other critics.\textsuperscript{13}

As such, Christ’s masculinity as warrior or as ascetic has been
largely unexplored. I would like to propose that the masculinity of Christ in the poem is defined primarily in the description of Christ's interaction with the talking cross. Christ is majestic, martial, and dominantly heterosexual, and all of those attributes become apparent in the cross's description of him. An examination of this gender construction reveals both the fragility and the aggression inherent in the patriarchal Christianity that the poem ostensibly celebrates.

The reader of *The Dream of the Rood* sees Christ through doubled narrative lenses: the dreamer tells the reader what the cross told the dreamer. Only the cross reports a direct connection with Christ. While the dreamer longs for a union with Christ in heaven, only the cross actually achieves any sort of union with Christ. That union underscores Christ's masculine traits.

The first of those traits, his majesty, is not in critical dispute. Christ's majesty comes from the awe inspired by the mystery in the paradox of Christ's everlasting life through death. Christ is called *ælmhītig / stræng and stīpmod* (almighty, strong and resolute, 39-40), *heofona hlaford* (the lord of heavens, 45), *wealdende* (ruler, 53), and *cynig* (king, 44, 56). Variations of these phrases recur throughout the cross's speech, which shows Christ's majesty, described with both more secular and more sacred terms, to be an integral part of his persona.

Christ's majesty is complemented by his martial heroism. Indeed, the diction describing these two characteristics overlaps. Christ is not only lord and almighty king, but also a *geæng hæleþ* (young hero, 39), a *beorn* (warrior, 42), who leads a *weorode* (troop, 152). He has *elne mycel* (great strength or courage, 34), and he is *mōdīg* (brave, 42) and *mihtig ond spēdig* (mighty and successful, 151). His battle is with the forces of evil; his comrades are angels, saints, the cross, and the aspiring dreamer.

Christ's relationship with the Cross renders his majesty and martial heroism specifically masculine. The Cross is often interpreted as a reluctant (and presumably masculine) follower of Christ, obedient to his lord but distraught as he watches his lord die and dares not try to help him. As a *cōmes*, the cross seems to violate the thane's oath to protect his lord and follow him to death, a duty best exemplified in *The Battle of Maldon*. Instead, the cross tells the dreamer four times that the cross did not dare to stop the crucifixion (35, 42, 45, and 47).
Thus, the speaking cross is the dreamer’s and reader’s main source of information about Christ. Margaret Schlauch was the first to identify this speaking cross with the classical trope of prosopopoeia, the speaking object, at work in poem.\(^{14}\) Michael Cherniss sees the speaking cross as a type of hero’s weapon like the talking weapons of the riddles; like a sword, the cross is rewarded for its thane-like service to its lord with adornment of treasure.\(^{15}\) John Tanke’s post-structuralist reading stresses the speaking cross as the focus of the dreamer’s and reader’s identification: the cross offers “the dreamer the only effective subject position from which to identify with Christ: as one who undergoes the crucifixion not as Christ did but as Christ commanded” (italics Tanke’s).\(^{16}\)

Schlauch and Cherniss do not discuss the gendering of this speaking object or, of course, its power to create a subject position (as Tanke does). The objects that Cherniss compares to the speaking cross—sword, spears—are distinctly phallic and masculine. A reading of the cross as a comes or thane of the Lord-Christ necessitates a masculine gendering of the cross, although such gendering is not discussed in the related literature. Only Tanke analyzes the cross in terms that seem traditionally feminine—that is, as passive, voiceless, and victimized.\(^{17}\) But Tanke does not develop his intriguing comment on the ideology implicit in a perception of the cross as gendered:

The ideological analogy between the divine Christ and the heroic male warrior is supported by an equally ideological association between the human Christ and the passive female victim. Both arguments seek to naturalize the symbolic construction of sexual difference. (132)

Although Tanke’s focus is not gender, his analysis reveals the gendering implicit in a variety of readings of the supposedly masculine or even gender-neutral cross.

Traditional readings of the thane-lord relationship between the cross and Christ emphasize Christ’s masculinity in the context of what we would now see as a homosocial bond, a bond between men that uses an exchange of objects, often women, to hold together the status quo of any society dominated by men. Whether Christ is interpreted as a majestic, heroic Anglo-Saxon lord served by his thane or as a majestic, heroic heavenly king served by an appropriately Christian servant, the bond is still one that defines Christ as the dominant male in a relationship between males. This homosocial bond is made most apparent in Kenneth Florey’s analysis of the poem, wherein he continually
refers to the cross as “he” rather than “it,” emphasizing the cross as a masculine-gendered “character” in the drama of the poem.18

But the masculinity in this homosocial bond is undermined in a close reading of the union at the crucifixion between Christ and the cross, however. If that meeting is construed as one between a lord and a retainer, the gender of the cross is masculine. But the vocabulary and imagery suggest a heterosexual rather than a homosocial relationship between two characters of a masculine Christ and feminine cross. Although several critics have referred to the feminine gendering of the cross, none but Tanke has considered how the gendering of the cross as feminine during the crucifixion scene serves to highlight a heterosexual masculinity of Christ.

Faith Patten was the first critic to note the feminization of the cross in *The Dream of the Rood*. Her argument examines the “sexual imagery” of lines 39-42, in which Christ strips before mounting and embracing the cross, and emphasizes three words: *ongyrede, bifode,* and *ymbclypte.*19 But Patten does not elaborate on why or how these words convey “sexual imagery.” Patten identifies the feminized cross with the feminized figure of the church: “the cross is imaged as the bride of Christ, or the Church, which, allegorically, is born from the union of Christ and the cross” (397). She argues further that the parallels between Mary and the Cross (90-94) and between Christ and Adam (98-102) are similar in meaning and opposite in gender: just as Mary’s bearing of Christ prefigured the cross’s bearing of Christ, so Adam’s death and downfall prefigured Christ’s death and resurrection. As Adam and Christ are masculine, Mary and the cross are feminine; within Patten’s analysis of the structure of the poem, the cross “seems to be female” (396).

Eamon O’Carragain similarly points out that the annunciation and the crucifixion were both thought to have occurred on March 25th, making a stronger case for the parallel between Mary and the cross both bearing Christ, though O’Carragain does not discuss the gender implicit in that parallel.20 Like Patten, John Canuteson also sees the cross as a bride of Christ: “A kind of marriage consummation takes place on the cross.” Canuteson refers to the cross as “she” throughout his article, and notes that the diction describing Christ as he approaches the cross for the consumption encompasses “all the things a woman would see and appreciate.”21
The identification of the speaking cross in the lines that refer to the Virgin Mary reinforces the feminine position of the cross in the crucifixion scene. I quote the lines in full:

Hwæt, me þa geweorðode wuldres ealdor
ofr holtwudu, heofonrices weard.
Swylce swa he his modor eac, Marian sylfe,
aelmihtig god for ealle menn
geweorðode ofer eall wiþa cynn.

(90-94)

(Lo, then the prince of the world honored me over forest-wood, the guardian of heaven’s kingdom, just as he, almighty God, also honored over all the kind of women his mother, Mary herself, for all men.)

The cross makes the comparison between itself and the Virgin, providing not only a simile of honor but one of gender role as well. Although the cross undergoes the crucifixion with Christ, it is with the mother of Christ rather than with Christ himself that it identifies itself. Patten and O’Carragain examine the parallel between the cross and Mary only in so far as it relates to Christ (both bore him); they do not remark that the parallel places the cross in a feminine position, one of honor but also of suffering, passivity, and endurance in opposition to Christ’s heroic masculinity. The diction of the cross as it describes its union with Christ during the crucifixion shows the feminization of the cross that is finally made explicit when it compares itself to the Virgin rather to Christ.

That diction forms the crux of my argument about the heterosexual nature of the masculinity of Christ and the feminized cross, for I agree with Canuteson and Patten that the cross is specifically feminized in the key lines where the physical contact is initiated between the cross and Christ (39-43). Woolf notes that the approach of Christ to Calvary, where the cross is waiting for him, is “the poet’s own variation” of the traditional biblical story, wherein Christ carries the cross up the hill. This “variation” makes Christ appear heroic rather than haggard; it also calls to mind later medieval archetypes of a romance lover coming to his beloved.

The vocabulary provides the specifically textual evidence that this crucifixion is also a form of heterosexual consummation. Swanton states that Patten’s conclusions about the sexuality implicit in this scene are “unwarranted.” However, an analysis of key verbs in the passage shows that although most of the diction was found in traditional, orthodox, religious uses, it also
had sexual connotations. The sexual associations of these words—ongyrede, gestigan (which occurs in two forms in the passage), ymbclypht, and bifode (which also occurs in two forms)—are much less frequent in the extant literature than orthodox religious usages. However, the mere evidence of the existence of such sexual connotation shows that these words confirm both the orthodox faith of the poem and the heterosexual relationship of the feminized cross with Christ, its overtly masculine bridegroom. I quote the passage in full:

Geseah ic þa freme mancynnes
efstan elne myele þæt he me wolde on gestigan.
þære ic þa ne dorste ofer dryhntnes word
bugan oððe berstan, þæt ic bifde geseah
eorðan sceatas. Ealle ic midte
feondas gefyllan, hwæðre ic feste stod.
ONGYRED hine þa geong hælde, þæt wes god ælmihtig,
strang ond stiðmod. Gestah he on gealgan heanne.
modig on manigra gesyhðe, þæ he wolde mancyn lysan.
BIFODE ic þa me se beorn ymbclypht.

(33a-42a)

(I saw then the lord of mankind hasten with great strength so that he would climb on me. There then I did not dare to bend or break against the lord's word, when I saw the corners of the earth shake. I could strike down all the fiends; however, I stood fast. The young hero then stripped himself, that was god almighty, strong and resolute. He climbed onto the high gallows, brave in many visions, then he would redeem mankind. I trembled when the warrior embraced me.)

The first of the words I have chosen, gestigan, appears in two forms in the passage: gestigan (34) and gestah (40). It means "to move, go, reach: go up, spring up, ascend, rise, mount, scale . . . go down, descend."²⁴ It is typical of the words I have chosen in that its most frequent usage is traditionally religious while it also has sexual connotations.²⁵ While it most often refers to an ascent to heaven, its three explicitly sexual usages all come from the story of Abraham in Genesis.

Gestigan is used in Genesis when sexuality, legitimacy, and patrimony are at issue. Twice it refers to Hagar, who will produce Abraham's first born son when his wife Sara cannot; Sara tells Abraham to Hat þe þa recene reste gestigan²⁶ (order her then instantly to ascend to the bed, 2230) and the narrator relates that Agar de idese laste / beddreste gestah (Hagar the noblewoman by duty to the bed ascended, 2249-50a). Finally, Sara is brought from the bed of the heathen Abimelech and given back to Abraham: þæt me Sarra bryde laste beddreste gestah (So that for me
Sara by bridal duty to the bed ascended, 2715b-16b). These three examples all show that *gestigan* was used not only in conventional religious phrases but also in situations charged with issues of sex, sexuality, and sexual rights.

These ascended beds in *Genesis* also bring to mind the beds in the beginning of *The Dream of the Rood*, where men sleep (*syðfan reordberend reste wunedon*, 4) and the dreamer dreams. According to Fleming, the ascetic monks with whom he associates *The Dream of the Rood* prayed prostrate on the floor, arms outstretched in the shape of the cross, so that the “bed” of the monk may be construed as an imagined cross, just as Christ’s “bed” in *The Dream of the Rood* could be viewed as a bed within the other contexts of *gestigan*. “Ascent to the bed”—or ascent to the cross, in the case of *Dream*—involved issues of fertility, of legitimacy, and of sexual control over the body.

These three examples may seem insignificant when compared with the sheer numbers of uses of the verb that are much more conventionally religious. However, I am not arguing that a more specifically sexual meaning should replace our understanding of the religious significance of the word. I only wish to point out that the word had sexual as well as religious connotations; we can re-read *The Dream of the Rood* with the understanding that these words had sexual as well as orthodox religious connotations.

The Old English *Genesis* evidences a sexual connotation for another of the key verbs from the *Dream* passage, *bifian* (to tremble). Like *gestigan*, this word occurs in two forms in the passage (36 and 42), first in a traditional religious sense and then in a more sexual sense. The cross tells the dreamer that *ic bifian geseah / eorfan sceatas* (I saw the corners of the earth tremble) and then says *Bifode ic pa me se beorn ymbclypte* (I trembled when the warrior embraced me). The first usage is highly conventional; there are 25 uses of forms of *bifian* that refer to the earth trembling at the crucifixion, ascension, or on Judgment day. A typical use of this word is from Ælfric’s Catholic Homilies, *eal bifode on cristes æriste* (All trembled at the resurrection of Christ, I.15 228.12); the first usage in *Dream* falls into this category.

The only overtly sexual usage of *bifian* in the extant corpus is in *Genesis*. As Lot is overcome by the northern kings (Abraham will avenge his defeat and recover his women and treasure), the poet tells us that
Gender issues abound in these lines; the women are equated with treasure, with property, and the men are defined merely as defenders of that property. Within the terms of my argument, these lines illustrate a sexual connotation for *bifan*, for the women of Sodom tremble with fear as they enter into forced sexual relationships with their conquerers. The parallel with the situation of the cross in *Dream* shows a common context for both usages and suggests an unwillingness on the part of the cross as well of the Sodomite women. The feminized cross of *Dream* finds itself in a situation strikingly similar to that of the Sodomite women as they face rape.

The next important verb, *ymbclypte*, might seem to a modern sensibility to need no explanation of a sexual usage; after all, the foremost connotations of “to embrace” in modern English are romantic and sexual. Again the extant corpus provides many more examples of religious rather than sexual usage, however; there are nine extant copies of the psalm text *rapas synfulra ymbclypynde weron me* (ropes of sins were embracing me); other common uses include the embrace of Zion, peace, and death.\(^{30}\)

Only two usages of *ymbclyppan* are concrete rather than metaphorical, showing an embrace between two people or people and concrete objects: Christ embracing the Cross in *The Dream of the Rood* and Arcestrate embracing Apollonius in *Apollonius of Tyre*. This sort of actual embrace is very rare in the Old English corpus, although to modern sensibilities such concrete contact is the primary meaning of “embrace.” In the late tenth century prose work, at the moment of recognition between the separated wife and husband, *Arcestrate*, *sódlice his wif, up aras and hine ymbclypte* (Arcestrate, truly his wife, rose up and embraced him, 49.1). At this emotional and sexually charged moment the Old English narrator has chosen a word rarely used for persons, showing its unusual and perhaps provocative sexual connotation—and it is the same word that describes Christ’s embrace of the cross in “The Dream of the Rood.”
The final word at issue is ongyrede, which occurs only once in the poetic corpus, in The Dream of the Rood. WhileDickins and Ross translate ongywan as the ungainly “take one’s clothes off,” most other dictionaries and glossaries prefer “strip.” It is used in prose, in various forms, only seven times. Christ’s naked body is the focus of three of the other seven uses of the verb ongyrdan in the Old English corpus which also refer to the disrobing of Christ, but these follow the conventional story line of the Roman soldiers stripping Christ (and then playing dice for his clothes). There are two usages in Bede that do not refer to bodily disrobing. The two remaining usages of the word refer, like ongyrede in “The Dream of the Rood,” to naked holy bodies, and the sexual tensions surrounding those bodies. I will examine this evidence in detail.

The first of these occurs in the Life of Mary of Egypt, when the abbot Zosimus gives the saint his cloak to cover her nakedness. In this instance, the naked body becomes covered, and the “stripping” is actually the removal of Zosimus’ outer cloak so that Mary can cover herself:

He þæ festlice swa dyde swa heo behead hine þam scyccelse ongyrede þe he mid bewæfed wæs on bæclingen gewend hire to wearp(Then he confidentially did as she had prayed him, ungirded the mantle with which he was clothed, and, turning his back, threw it to her.)

The female is naked here, and while Zosimus has already seen Mary’s naked body (it is earlier described as sweartes . . . for þære sunnam haeto, or darkened by the sun’s heat), it must be covered up before they can have a proper face-to-face conversation. The writer of the Life (not Ælfric) is emphatic that this covering must happen: gegyrede hire be þam daele þe heo mæst mihte and mæst neod wæs to behelignenne (she girded herself about the part that she most required to do, and [which there] was most need to conceal). The sexual temptation of the naked body, even an old holy body cooked by the sun, must be hidden.

A more obviously sexual use of the word comes in the Old English martyrology story of St. Eufemia, whose brief life, recorded on September 16, is that of a typical virgin martyr. She is pressed to renounce Christianity by an evil government official and (unsuccessfully) tortured, then killed when she refuses. The second of Eufemia’s torturers (who have been ordered to throw her into an oven) strips her: þa ongyrede ðæter þegn þa þæmann (then the other thane stripped the maiden). As in the use of the
word in the narrative of Mary of Egypt, there is an implicit sexual tension between the two figures, the naked woman and the clothed man. The virgin martyr is a sexualized figure, naked and seemingly defenseless before men who have a thwarted and explicit sexual interest in her.

Christ's naked body is different from these two bodies: his is male, Mary's and Eufemia's are female, and he strips voluntarily. These examples show that ongyrede was used in linguistic situations that were full of sexual tensions of gender, power, and naked bodies. As Christ strips himself in his ascent to the cross, he too is entering a linguistic situation charged with sexuality: the heterosexuality of a masculine lover coming to his feminized beloved.

Editors and critics shun the sexual implications of Christ's nudity, reading it metaphorically to avoid having to look at the naked male body of Christ. That naked body serves to sexualize this otherwise religious scene. The sexual connotations of these words, gestigan, bjian, ymbclypte, and ongyrede raise the issue of Christ's masculinism, which I see as a naturalized male dominance of an artificially opposed feminine in the cross. Christ mounts the feminized cross when he is naked, enacting literally the motif of the bride of Christ that is a commonplace in medieval Christology.

All of the verbs I have discussed in this section point to diction chosen for its competing connotations of orthodox belief and of sexuality. The cross trembles as Christ strips, mounts, and embraces. All of these words point to a construction of a gendered relationship between Christ and the cross that emphasizes explicit, rather than assumed and unremarked, heterosexuality as a key component of Christ's masculinity along with his majesty and his heroism. The cross is the feminized figure, trembling and waiting, not daring to move, as the masculine Christ performs his heroic—and seemingly sexual—act.

That masculine performance necessitates an oppositional feminine Other against which Christ's masculinity is defined. That feminine is passive and subordinate, identifying with the Virgin rather than with Christ the hero. As Tanke describes, the cross is the victim in the Dream crucifixion narrative. Tanke exposes the violence needed for this construction of the cross: the cross is "either the subject of a passive voice sentence or the object of a
verb.” Tanke catalogues those verbs in a list which is also a catalogue of violence enacted upon the cross:

[The cross is] hewn down, steered away, seized, worked, commanded, borne, set up, fastened, mounted, embraced, driven through with nails, mocked, spattered with blood, disturbed, abandoned, wounded, felled, buried, discovered, and adorned. (120)

Tanke emphasizes the difference between the “traumatized and ignorant victim” that the cross claims to have been during the previous action of the crucifixion and the “authoritative and knowing subject” of the poem’s speaker of that narrative in the poem, which becomes a sermon (135-36). While the word “rape” appears only in a footnote in Tanke’s analysis (121 n.9), he fully demonstrates, in my view, the violence implicit in the binary gender paradigm that the poem both sets up and depends upon. As the feminine Other to Christ as masculine subject, the cross is violated and is acquiescent in that violation. A reading of the cross as expressly feminized (rather than quasi-neuter) and of Christ as expressly masculine (rather than quasi-universal and somehow genderless) reveals the violence necessitated by the existence of that binary paradigm. That binarism is not natural but rather is naturalized, its character constructed and violent.

Acknowledgement of such a violent binarism provides a way of reading the rest of the poem in which the dreamer becomes a voyeur who engages in a homosocial relationship with Christ that is mediated by the feminized cross. The dreamer has had the swefna cyst, the best of dreams, in that he scopophilically watches the cross, both bejeweled and blood-stained, and derives pleasure (spiritual and otherwise) from looking and listening to its erotically charged narrative. The dreamer becomes a privileged masculine figure in this triangle of Christ-cross-dreamer, and the vision of the homosocial feast in heaven at the end of the poem (discussed above), where there is masculine community and exchange, provides the incentive for the dreamer to stay on earth for a time and relate the message of the Cross. To read this relationship in the terms of a homosocial nexus reveals the benefit that accrues to the masculine figures: Christ’s position as dominant masculine figure is affirmed and the dreamer accrues status in the masculine afterlife as a follower of Christ while receiving the pleasure of an onlooker during the narrative of Christ’s sexualized action.

This masculine heaven that Christ already occupies and toward which the dreamer longs is paradigmatic of the exclusionary,
binary, and violent system upon which this construction of patriarchal Christianity depends. For Christ to be dominant, there must be a figure for him to dominate. For heaven to be attractively exclusive, figures (of women, in this case) must be excluded. Christ’s glory in the crucifixion narrative and throughout the poem is dependent on the violence inflicted, in this poem, on the cross rather than on the body of Christ and the binary construction set up by that violence. The sexuality of this figure of Christ aggressively takes control of the narratival situation, and the feminized Other, the cross, must submit for that narrative to be effective for the dreamer.

In this analysis I have attempted to argue for rather than to assume the masculinity of Christ, and to interrogate what it means for Christ to be presented as aggressively heterosexual, rather than in some quasi-neutral, universalized masculinity. The resulting evaluation of Christ in *The Dream of the Rood* as specifically dominating, relying on a dominated feminine Other for definition, reveals the oppositional nature of that definition. An examination of this rubric exposes the violence necessitated by this construction, the complicity of the feminine figures like the cross within the construction, and the voyeuristic nature of the dreamer and other masculine figures participating in a homosocial relationship with Christ. The Christianity celebrated in this poem is actually a Christianity that serves patriarchy, a spiritual justification for the violence and oppression inherent in masculine/feminine opposition needed for naturalized domination of society by males.

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**NOTES**

dissertation, “Riddles of Subjectivity in Old English Poetry” (Diss. Cornell University, 1993), which examines the construction of subjectivity in the poem.


3 Clare Lees, ed., Medieval Masculinities (U. of Minnesota Press, 1994). Thelma Fenster’s preface and Clare Lees’ introduction to this volume both address the issue of studying men as a part of the goal of gender theory.

4 For a recent discussion of this much-noted phenomenon, see Luce Irigaray, Sexes and Genealogies, trans. Gillian Gill (Columbia U. Press, 1993); Irigaray asks if it is possible to “speak in a universal and neuter way? Does neutrality exist? Where? How?” (170, italics hers) and notes that “this neuter does not solve the problem of the hierarchy observed by the male and female genders” (174).


13 Such masculinization of asceticism and holiness has recently been analyzed by gender theorists in relation to saints’ lives, wherein female saints are seen to perfect themselves by acting and/or dressing like men; the more “masculine” the female saint’s thoughts and actions, the “holier” she becomes. See Allen Frantzen’s reading of the Lives of Agatha and Eugenia, wherein “for a
man to be holy is to act like a man; for a woman to be holy is also to act like a man" in "When Women Aren't Enough," Speculum 68 (1993): 445-71.

14 Schlauch, “Prosopopoeia,” 23-34.


17 Ibid, 120-21. Tanke sees the cross as voiceless in the “time” of the crucifixion, when the cross dared not speak. It is only in the “time” of the dream that the cross acquires a voice.


22 Woolf, “Doctrinal Influences,” 146.

23 Swanton, Dream, 113.


25 There are 29 uses that refer to ascent to heaven; 6 uses describe boarding a ship; 7 references to Christ’s ascension of the cross (including the two Dream references); and 9 uses refer to ascending a hill or reaching a geographic place. Word study information from Antonette di Paolo Healey and Richard Venezky, eds., A Microfiche Concordance to Old English (U. of Delaware Microforms, 1980), fiches G031 and G032.


28 Healey and Venezky, Concordance, fiche B012.

29 There are 21 other general references to humans trembling in the face of God or moral truth, mostly from psalms and homilies that exist in multiple manuscript copies.
30 Healey and Venezky, *Concordance*, fiche Y002.


32 Healey and Venezky, *Concordance*, fiche O007.

33 They are the reference to Oswin’s removal of his sword in his humility before the bishop (3.12.196.26) and to the monk Owen who strips himself of the things of this world (4.3.264.3).


37 Tanke, “Riddles,” 120.