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Religious conflicts in *Beowulf* and Chaucer’s *Troilus and Criseyde*

Bachelor’s Diploma Thesis

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I declare that I have worked on this thesis independently, using only the primary and secondary sources listed in the bibliography.

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Author’s signature
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1 Introduction: The cause of religious conflicts

This thesis analyzes religious conflicts in two poems, *Beowulf* and Chaucer’s *Troilus and Criseyde*, which are both set in pagan environment, but written by poets, who were influenced by a Christian society. Although both written at different times by different authors and taking place in a different period of time, they have similar background and contain comparable religious conflicts and narrative patterns.

*Beowulf* is an Old English heroic epic poem set in Scandinavia and is one of the most important works of Anglo-Saxon literature. It is assigned by some scholars to the first half of the eighth century (Bloom 1), but the exact century is unknown and is a matter of speculation. Donaldson says that from historical circumstances one can assume that the text began before 521 A.D., reached its present form around 850 A.D., and was recorded in 1010 A.D.

The events described in the poem take place in the late fifth century, when the Anglo-Saxons and Jutes overran Roman Britain, and before the beginning of the seventh century. By the end of the seventh century these Germans, and the Celts they ruled, had mostly been converted to Christianity. Before this conversion, the Anglo-Saxons, like much of north-western Europe, were not Christians, but had a polytheistic belief system. The religion of these tribes was related to the tribal religion of the Goths, and that of the Norse and collectively we can refer to the religion of these tribes (once in what is now England) as Anglo-Saxon paganism.
The end of the pagan period came with the rise of Christianity during the early Middle Ages. The Church had to strengthen the faith and discipline the morals of the faithful. In Europe, conversion to Christianity did not naturally happened overnight, but at different times in different parts of Europe (Dowden 4). The arrival of Christianity influenced whole culture, including literature as well. The conversion of Anglo-Saxons is associated with St. Augustine of Canterbury (sent in 596), thanks to separate initiatives on the part of Gregory I., as chronicled in Bede’s *Ecclesiastical History of 731*. But it was only near the end of the 8th century that the Saxons reluctantly accepted Christianity.

The process of conversion was rather peaceful and unforced: According to Pope Gregory’s instructions, the pagan temples of the idols ought not to be destroyed; only the idols in them should, and the sacrifices that the Anglo-Saxons were accustomed to make to their gods were to be made instead of celebration of Christian festivals, so turning an act of “demon-worship” into an act of divine celebration (Church 165). But among many, the attitudes and beliefs of previous domestic religion persisted. It is evident, therefore, that while Anglo-Saxon England in the eighth century was Christian in name, heathenism had not been wiped out; it had been driven underground. Thus pagan activities survived in England with great tenacity until long after the time at which *Beowulf* is believed to have been written.

Due to this cumbersome conversion paganism did not disappear completely, but was suppressed by Christianity. This syncretism might be one of the reasons why the poem of *Beowulf* is imbued with both pagan and Christian
elements. The conflicts between these religions in *Beowulf* are so obvious that even nowadays it is still a matter of speculation, whether *Beowulf* is a Christian poem with pagan overtones or a pagan poem with a Christian overlay.

Similar issue, although not exactly the same, can be assigned to Chaucer’s *Troilus and Criseyde*. The composition date of Chaucer’s *Troilus*, early in the final quarter of the 14th century, places it firmly in an age of uncertainty. The ambiguous nature of the poem and the vagueness that one has in determining what religion the poem praises and what poet actually believes in reflect this. Chaucer is writing at the time of upheaval and change of ideas – which meant mostly a restless rethinking and discontent about the role and the authority of the church. This religious revolt against the established church (heresy) was manifested in the writings of Wycliffe and in the Lollard movement. And it is against this background that Chaucer has written a poem that explores the feasibility of man’s striking to participate in his own moral identity, to determine the extent of his potential for moral-self rule (Cigman 386).

*Troilus and Criseyde* is a tragic story of lovers Troilus and Criseyde set in the period of ancient Troy and Trojan War. Chaucer probably intended to provide the readers with the description of ancient Greek paganism, however, just like in *Beowulf* poem, *Troilus* is imbued with numerous allusions to Christian elements, probably due to Chaucer’s endeavour to clarify the pagan story to a medieval Christian audience.
Thus the aim of this thesis is to prove that in spite of both poets’ efforts to depict a story that was supposed to represent pagan society and its customs, they managed to write a story (although in a pagan setting and with pagan characters) conveying a Christian message.
2 Approaching paganism

In order to properly understand and identify the religious conflicts within these two poems, it is necessary to describe the background of paganism in the periods of time which are portrayed in the poems, and to specify pagan religious beliefs and practices.

Paganism refers to the pre-Christian religious practices of Europe. In comparison with Christianity, it was not considered a religion in the real sense of the word. Paganism did not promote “faith” as it is understood in Christianity; surely ancient pagans believed in certain things without satisfactory evidence, but whether they believed “in” them is another question. Therefore paganism is rather a matter of observing systems of rituals than "proper" creed (Dowden 2).

Generally the word referred to the polytheisms of the Greco-Roman world, as well as certain practices condemned in the Bible (Palmer 403). There is not beginning of paganism. Unlike Christianity, it has no founder, no holy book that defined it. Before Christianity by definiton all societies were pagan, since the only alternative would have been a lack of religion.

Pagan can be defined as "one of a nation or community which does not worship the true God" or "a person of heathenish character or habits." It defines superstition as the “unreasoning awe or fear of something unknown, mysterious or imaginary, especially in connection with religion” (Filotas 12). In short it can be said that pagan and superstitious are any beliefs or practices condemned to pastoral literature which entailed a reliance on powers not
coming from God and not mediated by the Church. Although paganism has no content itself, and does not describe a coherent set of beliefs and practices, similar elements can be attributed to both Greek and Anglo-Saxon paganism.

Let us begin with medieval descriptions of who and what the pagans were, and how their gods originated. Isidore of Seville had claimed that pagans were so named from the country regions (pagi) around Athens, in which places the gentiles set up lights and idols. The gentiles are those who are without the law (i.e. the law of Christ), because they did not yet believe (Minnis 32). They are called gentiles because they are just as they were generated or born (geniti), that is, just as they descended into the flesh in sin, namely serving idols and not yet regenerated in Christ. The term of pagan also describes all those who do not dwell in the city of god, that is, the Chuch.

They worshipped their gods in nature, paid cult to trees, placed sacrificial offerings and had a cult of the dead. The principal pagan deities whose cult survived into the Christian Era were Thor and Woden, roughly identified with Jupiter and Mercury. Numerous other beings (giants, dwarves) also figure in myth and folklore. The pagan gods, unlike Christian God, were not supreme – like men, they were subjects to Fate (wyrd) (Filotas 37).

This has been elaborated on an important concept, which appears in both poems - the concept of (pagan) fatalism and (Christian) predestination. Fatalism is in general the view which holds that all events in the history of the world, and, in particular, the actions and incidents which make up the story of each individual life, are determined by fate. The ancient classical fatalism
depicts man as a helpless creature borne along by destiny - future life of each individual is so rigorously predetermined in all its details that his own volitions or desires have no power to alter the course of events. With the rise of Christianity the question of fatalism necessarily adopted a new form. The pagan view of an external, inevitable force coercing and controlling all action, whether human or divine, found itself in conflict with the conception of a free, personal, infinite God (Maher). Consequently several of the early Christian writers were concerned to oppose and refute the theory of fate.

As mentioned before, paganism was applied not only to the Germanic tribes between the fifth and eighth century, but also to the polytheism of classical Greek and Roman religion. What was characteristic for paganism in general was idolatry, the worship of more or less clearly conceptualised divinities, sacrifices to them and rituals in their honour. The principal components of this religious practice therefore were sacrifice, feasting and divination (Filotas 37), which are depicted in both poems.
3 Beowulf

The heroes of the Old English epics were vigorous young men who performed glorious deeds for the sake of their valor; any reward was unimportant for their motivation. The most famous Old English epic is *Beowulf*, a text dated to sometime around the eight or ninth century. *Beowulf* seems to have been composed principally in West Saxon.

*Beowulf* is a blend of Christian and pagan ideas and feelings. Due to the unknown exact date of its composition one can argue, whether the poem is originally pagan but altered to a Christian form, or whether it is originally Christian, depicting ancient pagan life as historical fiction.

In general, there are three perceptions of how and when Beowulf was written: According to Lambdin, Beowulf was probably composed to be chanted or sung. As an oral work, it was probably written as a pagan poem and evolved over a long period of time with many additions and deletions based upon audience, purpose, and artistic merit. This freedom allowed the scops to add totally new episodes or expand or contact old ones as interested a particular group. The examination of the text then exposes that somewhere late in its construction the poem became „Christianized“: elements of Christianity were layered over an originally pagan text. Lambdin says that this was fairly typical because the clerics who transcribed these originally pagan poems worked for the church and would naturally encourage didatic messages where possible. (Lambdin 3).
Secondly, a question may be raised whether the poet’s heart was in all that he was writing, or whether the Church approved of what he was writing, suggesting that the author of Beowulf was a poet coming from a Christian society but whose heart was in the pagan tales and traditions that had been celebrated for generations among his people by singers like himself (Stanley 48). In the changed conditions of his time he had to suppress all reference to the old gods and make over his pagans into good Christians or else show the hollowness of their heathen faith.

Finally, Beowulf was perceived as a poem that was written by a Christian poet in a Christian era who intended to portray the pagan past with the Christian understanding of the narrator and his audience (Major 6).

During the nineteenth century, scholars viewed Beowulf as a relic of the lost pagan days. Apparent clash between Christian and pagan elements was assigned to the fact that materials in Beowulf were drawn from tales composed before the conversion of Anglo-Saxons and any references to a Christian God were considered to be later insertions by monks who recopied the manuscript and touched it up to make it more acceptable (Staver 157). With the more recent acceptance of later dates of composition, the poem’s original Christian composition is more often accepted. It is probably a product of the Anglo-Saxon Christian values and reflects the inconsistencies and blends of the culture that originated during the conversion from paganism to Christianity, not the changes made by a monk.
The story of Beowulf is well known. The huge mead hall Heorot, built by Hrothgar, the king of the Scyldings, is constantly being attacked by the huge monster Grendel. Depicted as a descendant of Cain, Grendel despises the noise produced at the hall and decides to try to put an end to it. He enters the hall and takes thirty men. This continues until the Scyldings fear entering the hall. For the following twelve years Grendel keeps the hall quiet. Words of this comes to the Geats, so Beowulf, their hero, sets out to help Hrothgar. On their arrival, the Geats feast with the Scyldings. They enjoy a wonderful evening filled with revelry and boasting about their great deeds. Beowulf and his men then retire to Heorot and wait for the monster to appear. Their wait is short, as Grendel enters and kills one of Beowulf’s men. Beowulf, who has been sleeping in another house, follows the monster into a deep bog, where an epic battle occurs. Beowulf slays the monster with the sword of a giant, cuts off his head and takes the prize with him back to Heorot. After a while, Grendel’s mother then comes to take the head back. After another great battle, Beowulf slays the mother and displays Grendel’s head in Heorot. He then returns with great honor to his homeland and to the court of Hygelac. When the king and his sons are killed in a battle, Beowulf is made king instead of him. He rules in peace for fifty years until a flagon is stolen and guarded by dragon. Accompanied by his friend Wiglaf, Beowulf kills the monster but in the process is mortally wounded himself. After his death he is sent to eternity in a large funeral pyre, leaving the land alone in a time when war with Franks and Swedes is looming ahead.
3.1 Perception of Anglo-Saxon paganism in *Beowulf*

Anglo-Saxon paganism originated from wider Germanic paganism. What exactly Anglo-Saxon paganism was like is unknown. Reliability of the sources for Germanic religion can be considered questionable, since the texts about it were written respectively by Christian authors and clerics, and Germans themselves left no written account of their own to clarify their beliefs. Only a few general remarks about sacred trees and springs, amulets, charms and love magic were often thought to be sufficient to describe what was a long, difficult and not always successful process (Filotas 3). Therefore modern knowledge of Anglo-Saxon paganism from non-archaeological sources is scanty, for Christians had virtually no reason to record memories and survivals of pagan beliefs and customs. The Christian writers of documents recorded further memories of paganism in the form of place names alluding to Germanic gods or to pagan shrines and sanctuaries, but it is not easy to say how and when the places were associated with the gods, nor when the pagan shrines stopped to be used. Cremation, on the other hand, was probably always non-Christian (Sims-Williams 55).

The writings of this period were gradually Christianized for many reasons. Foremost is the fact that Christianity had become the most popular religion in Britain at this time. Secondly, since the monasteries were the centers of culture, it is only natural that literature that was Christian in tone grew and developed. One school of Christian influence came from the Augustinian influence from
Rome; the second came from Ireland and includes authors like Bede, Cynewulf and Caedmon (Lambdin 12).

Bede (673?-735), also known as the Venerable Bede, is regarded as the first English professional scholar. He spent his entire life preparing for work in the monastery. Perhaps his most significant work is the *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, completed in 731. This work is still considered to be a major source for English history from 597 to 713. Bede gathered his findings from all the written works he could find, from oral traditions, from visitors, and from eyewitnesses and it covers the time from the Roman Caesar’s invasion to 731.

Because the texts dealing with Germanic and Anglo-Saxon paganism were written mainly by Christians, in order to understand paganism properly it is necessary to understand how to grasp the texts which wrote about it. What Bede had when writing *Ecclesiastical History* was a model of paganism, inherited from Gregory the Great, the writings of other Fathers of the Church, the Bible, and even the works of pagan authors of the past, according to which paganism was characterized by the worship of idols that were housed in temples presided over by high priests who had responsibility for leading the folk in the worship of their deities (Church 170).

But the result of his work is biased, since when he writes about paganism it is quite apparent that he favours Christianity and portrays it in a far better light. He says that pagan gods do not answer the prayers of their worshippers and that whosoever offers sacrifice to idols is doomed to the pains of hell (Bede 45). Another important characteristic within Bede’s portrayal of Britain prior to the arrival of St. Augustine in 597 is the way disaster is used to
suggest that a nation without faith is bound to suffer great hardship. According to Bede, when the Angles invaded Britain in 449, they destroyed buildings, murdered bishops and priests and generally created an atmosphere of misery (Bede 57). Eventually Bede concludes with a conviction of pagan Britain as being uncivilised without any spiritual attributes.

It is therefore understandable that Bede, as a confirmed believer in Christianity, portrays paganism in a bad light. His strong commitment meant that he accepted beliefs of the 7th century without question and avoided everything that could damage Christian creed (Southgate). Thus Bede’s presentation of paganism might be the reason why are pagan Danes in Beowulf depicted as conceited and greedy pagans that are not entitled to enjoy Christian salvation.
3.2 Pagan and Christian allusions

Although Beowulf deals with ancient Germanic story and heroes dating back to a time before the Anglo-Saxons were converted to Christianity, throughout the entire work the narrator and characters use phrases that comply with Christian religion. The poem mentions God and the concept of faith, there are references to devils and hell, and also many biblical references, including the Last Judgment, God’s creation of the universe, the Flood, and the story of Cain, which is linked to Grendel’s family line. Therefore it is not surprising that it is generally believed that the poet of the text was a Christian composing for a Christian audience.

Christian references are more numerous in the first half of the poem. The poem is full of casual references to God, and it uses many phrases to name God. He is the “Almighty” (Beowulf, 93), the “Heavenly Shepherd” (929), “Holy God” (1553) or the “Creator” (106).

Throughout the whole poem there are clear references to the biblical tales, for example of Cain and Abel (lines 107-10 and 1261-65) and the story of the Flood (1260-1, 1688-93). The way in which the poet alludes to biblical traditions without apparently having recourse to quotation from the biblical text itself is of some interest when one considers the ways in which other Old Testament tales appear to have echoes in the poem (Orchard 142). There are, for example, a significant number of interesting parallels which seem to connect the story of Beowulf and Grendel with the biblical narrative of David and Goliath. For example, King Hrothgar’s suffering the depredations of the giant Grendel
(115-93) can be assimilated to King Saul suffering the depredations of the giant Goliath. Early in his career, Beowulf, just like David, had seemed of little worth (2183-88). And another parallel can be found when Beowulf defeats Grendel: he returns with the sword and the head of Grendel (1612-17) like David returns with the sword and the head of Goliath.

The Danes are described singing a song of Biblical Creation in their new hall (90-98) and since Hrothgar, the king of the Danes, is portrayed at various points as one who knows God and gives thanks to Him (1397-8, 1778-9), one assumes that the people of Heorot are Christian. However, at Hrothgar’s court prior to Beowulf’s arrival, the Danes are practising idolatry because of their fear of the monster Grendel:

Sometimes at pagan shrines they vowed  
Offerings to idols, swore oaths  
That the killer of souls might come to their aid  
And save the people. That was their way (Beowulf, 175-8)

From this point of view the problems arising from the blend of Christian and pagan elements in a poem is obvious; to the reader who lacks the proper background of author’s religious beliefs and background of the poem itself must the treatment of pagan matters appear indeed peculiar and confusing.

Another pagan value that did not fit into the Christian scheme was revenge. The kin’s duty to vengeance was contrary to Jesus’ teaching to love an enemy and forgive a sin. Overall in the second half, the essential paganism of the poem is more evident than in the first. As the tragedy of Beowulf
approaches, the Christian poet finds little to say concerning the hero’s Christianity and the story becomes rather gloomy.

As Moorman says, the whole of *Beowulf*, despite its Christian elements, is strongly and most un-Christianly pessimistic in its view of life and history. The narrative framework of the poem demonstrates that although even the most heroic of men may for a time overcome the powers of darkness, he in time will be defeated by them. The background of Scandinavian history before which the action of *Beowulf* takes place and to which the poet constantly alludes makes precisely the same point of the fates of nations: societies rise only to perish (Moorman 5). Beowulf is eventually portrayed as seeking worldly fame rather than eternal salvation and though permitted by Fate to win his last battle, in the end he dies knowing that he has accomplished nothing of permanent value. He has never been entitled to salvation: when he dies, it is the Fate taking its final twist. The people who were safe and secure when Beowulf was alive will find themselves in danger after his death. Their fate, like before, is unknown and a sense of doom and misfortune consumes the end of the poem.
3.3 Burial Rites

As mentioned before, poem is interspersed with both Christian and pagan elements, showing the religious transition that occurred in England during the period of its transmission. One of the principal pagan elements in the *Beowulf* poem is his funeral. The tomb burial of Beowulf’s ashes with the treasure hoard is a pagan ritual following upon the pagan rite of cremation, which was frequently condemned by Christian authorities.

In the traditional Christian belief, what happens to the body after death is a matter of science – ashes to ashes, dust to dust. God created man from dirt and so the body will return to the earth as the Bible states. What is important is what happens to the soul after death and not the fate of the body. Unlike the Christian people, people in pagan society, at the time of death took measures to assure that both the body and the spirit were dealt with. One of the most common steps used to assure the spirits safe passage to the after world is cremation. In the Anglo-Saxon period, almost all burials involved some form of cremation, whenever it was a feasible option (McLucas). Christian burial procedures would ordinarily reflect Christian concern for an intact physical body, based on belief in the future resurrection of that body (Hodges). *Beowulf*, however, begins and ends with burials that reflect nothing Christian, but rather pagan customs of cremation and inhumation with grave goods are described.

In the traditional Christian belief, it is understood that earthly treasures serve no purpose in the afterlife. However, Beowulf’s dying instructions are that he be buried with the treasure to the ground. If Beowulf possessed
Christian ideals, he would not find it necessary to be cremated, nor have his tomb adorned with riches. Eventually, he is burned to the bones along with “helmets, heavy war-shields and shining armour” (Beowulf, 3139-40).

Another evidence for the pagan necessity of cremation can be found in lines 1114-1117, where Hnaef and his nephews, who died in the fight were cremated:

Then Hildeburth ordered her own Son’s body be burnt with Hnaef’s, The flesh on his bones to sputter and blaze Beside his uncle’s. (Beowulf, 1114-1117)

This clearly shows that they obviously did not want to entrust the spirit of the deceased to God for safe passage into the afterlife, but rather relied on the flames to ensure that the spirit does not hang around afterward.
3.4 A Christian *Wyrd*

Perhaps the greatest conflict between the Christian and the pagan elements in the poem is the role of *wyrd* (or fate). The protagonists and supporting characters display undying faith in *wyrd*, which is simultaneously integrated with the Christian belief that man should have faith only in God and his grace. Unlike fate or fortune from the Christian point of view, *wyrd* lies not under the control of God, who is ultimately carrying out his divine plan in a way that human intellect is merely incapable of perceiving, but rises above all deities (Lambdin 29).

The pagan word *wyrd* and God’s decree seem to be used in Beowulf interchangeably. When Hrothgar and Beowulf make speeches about his plans and prospects, the outcome of the flight with Grendel is said to be either in the hands of the Lord, or *wyrd*. Beowulf uses both words in one speech:

Whichever one death fells
must deem it a just judgement by God.
If Grendel wins, it will be a gruesome day;
he will glut himself on the Geats in the war-hall,
swoop without fear on that flower of manhood
as on others before. Then my face won't be there
to be covered in death: he will carry me away
as he goes to ground, gorged and bloodied;
he will run gloating with my raw corpse
and feed on it alone, in a cruel frenzy,
 fouling his moor-nest. No need then
to lament for long or lay out my body:
 if the battle takes me, send back
this breast-webbing that Weland fashioned
 and Hrethel gave me, to Lord Hygelac.
 Fate goes ever as fate must. (*Beowulf*, 440-455)
The characters that are depicted as pagan in the poem seem to invoke the Christian God: "Like a man outlawed for wickedness, he must await the mighty judgment of God in majesty" (Beowulf, 977-79). And conversely, the Christian poet appears to invoke the pagan *wyrd*: "That final day was the first time, when Beowulf fought and fate denied him glory in the battle" (2573-75).

According to Staver, perhaps the word *wyrd* had come to mean a sense of inevitability, but the decree of God put a face on it. While the pagan warriors had known that *wyrd* was either for or against them, the Christian warrior could comfort himself that a personal God looked down on him and controlled *wyrd* itself (Staver 159). Hamilton also tries to reconcile these two different concepts, saying that the *Beowulf* poet may have regarded fate as subordinate to the Divine will, which would explain the poet’s frequent reference to God’s protecting care of the Geats and Danes and his control of their fortunes (Hamilton 326), as it is described when God grants Beowulf the victory over Grendel’s mother: "Holy God decided the victory" (Beowulf, 1553-4) or when God in special concern for the safety of the Danes provides them with Beowulf to guard their hall against the giant:

The King of Glory
(as people learned) had posted a lookout
who was a match for Grendel, a guard against monsters,
special protection to the Danish prince. (Beowulf, 665-669)
3.5 Warrior ethics and Christian morality

Another pagan elements that are striking in the poem lie also in the realm of ethics and morality. The fundamental ethical code of the poem is pagan: it is the warrior code of the aristocracy, celebrating loyalty, bravery and great deeds managed in this world (Irving 124) and other pagan warrior values such as taste for boasting, pride in loyalty, and a desire for fame. To a pagan Germanic society of this era, boasting was not merely considered an important part of one's character, but it validated one's character and abilities. To a Christian, it would have been deemed as prideful but more importantly, sinful.

From this point of view, Beowulf is depicted as pagan: he takes pride for his actions or uses boasting in order to secure his reputation. At the feast, when a Dane named Unferth claims that Beowulf once lost a swimming match against Breca and that he will sure meet with defeat for a second time as well when he faces Grendel, Beowulf defends himself and makes excuses, saying what the reason for his loss was:

Time and again, foul things attacked me, lurking and stalking, but I lashed out, gave as good as I got with my sword. My flesh was not for feasting on. (Beowulf 559-62)

In addition to pride, the narrator stresses out Beowulf’s obsession with treasure and providing treasure to his people and condemns the Geats’ inability to understand the transitory nature of worldly possessions and status (Moura). According to Geat culture, the king’s sole purpose was to “shower [the people]
with gifts and armor” (*Beowulf*, 2866). This system of a king offering tribute to his people would, by Christian standards, be an absorption with transient earthly possessions.

While Beowulf may well be brave and gentle king, who dies for his people, he is, nevertheless, of all men the most eager for praise and keenest to win fame (*Beowulf*, 3182), and his actions in the poem are always those of the pagan Germanic chieftain rather than of the “Christian Saviour” (Moorman 6). This is proved by his final wish is to see the treasure hoard he has won:

Go now quickly,        
Dearest Wiglaf, under the grey stone   
Where the dragon is laid out, lost to his treasure;   
Hurry to feast your eyes on the hoard.   
Away you go: I want to examine   
That ancient gold, gaze my fill   
On those garnered jewels; my going will be easier   
For having seen the treasure (*Beowulf*, 2743-51)

One of the poem’s most important passages is the so-called sermon of Hrothgar, in which Hrothgar, king of the Danes, responds to Beowulf’s announcement that he has managed to get rid the world of two monsters, Grendel and Grendel’s mother, thus doing God’s work with God’s aid. Hrothgar in his speech defines the characteristics of the ideal warrior-king in Anglo-Saxon society and warns Beowulf against the transience of fame and life.

At this point in the poem, Beowulf returns to the hall of Hrothgar to declare his deeds and to present to Hrothgar the hilt of a sword which he used to kill Grendel’s mother. Upon this hilt is engraved a scene from the Hebrew Bible showing God’s destruction of the race of giants:
Hrothgar spoke; he examined the hilt, that relic of old times. It was engraved all over and showed how war first came into the world and the flood destroyed the tribe of giants. They suffered a terrible severance from the Lord. (*Beowulf* 1687-91)

Beowulf proudly declares that his victory would have been impossible, save for the grace of God. But as Bodek points out, it is important to remember that Beowulf has only expressed pride in the deed arose from doing God’s work, with God’s aid. His act of violence was meant to rid the world of God’s enemies (Bodek 130). Yet Hrothgar, rather than praising the deity or thanking Beowulf, decides to warn him about the dangers of power:

Heremod was different, the way he behaved to Ecgwala's sons. His rise in the world brought little joy to the Danish people, only death and destruction. He vented his rage on men he caroused with, killed his own comrades, a pariah king who cut himself off from his own kind, even though Almighty God had made him eminent and powerful and marked him from the start for a happy life. But a change happened, he grew bloodthirsty, gave no more rings to honour the Danes. He suffered in the end for having plagued his people for so long: his life lost happiness. (*Beowulf* 1709-22)

Hrothgar’s response praising traditional Christian values in contrast with Beowulf’s pagan pride. These include the strongly held belief that ring-giving and companionship without violence make for a happy life (Bodek 131).

Hrothgar specifically warns Beowulf not to “give way to pride,” and also emphasizes to Beowulf that life is fleeting and that he should orient himself
toward “eternal rewards”—a supremely Christian idea—rather than worldly success. Beowulf is asked to be careful about the fragility of life. We should all remember that we are vulnerable to fate and death or we will suffer dire consequences:

O flower of warriors, beware of that trap. Choose, dear Beowulf, the better part, eternal rewards. Do not give way to pride. For a brief while your strength is in bloom but it fades quickly; and soon there will follow illness or the sword to lay you low, or a sudden fire or surge of water or jabbing blade or javelin from the air or repellent age. Your piercing eye will dim and darken; and death will arrive, dear warrior, to sweep you away. (*Beowulf* 1758–1768)

Hrothgar also warns of placing importance on tribute as well while describing a king whose “possessions seem paltry to him now. / He covets and resents” (lines 1749-1750).

Finally, Hrothgar's sermon is important to the structure of the poem as a whole, because it sets the standards by which the audience will further judge an older and more mature Beowulf (Bramante).
4 Chaucer’s *Troilus and Criseyde*

*Troilus and Criseyde* is a poem by Geoffrey Chaucer set inside Troy during the Trojan War. Chaucer took the story over from Boccaccio’s *Il Filostrato*, making some changes to characters, lengthening the story, and vastly improving it.

It begins with the news that the prophet Calkas (Criseyde’s father), foreseeing the end of Troy, has left the city to join the Greek camp. Hector reassures Criseyde that she will be respected, despite her father’s act. In April the people of Troy celebrate the Palladium festival and go to the temples. In a temple, Criseyde catches the eye of Troilus, a man who had been previously shown mocking love, and Troilus soon falls in love. With the help of Criseyde’s uncle Pandarus he wins her love but soon they are parted, when Calkas, Criseyde’s father, persuades the Greeks to exchange their prisoner for Criseyde and thus saves her from Troy.

Although Criseyde promises Troilus that she’ll return to him, on the tenth day after leaving Troy she meets Diomede, accepts him as her lover and decides to stay. While Troilus and Pandarus still wait for Criseyde’s return, Troilus slowly realizes that she will not come back. Finally, when he finds on the captured coat of Diomede his own brooch that he had given her, he gets angry for he knows she is no longer to be trusted, yet he is disappointed at the same time, because he is still in love with her.
Heartbroken, he tries to find Diomedes and take his revenge during battle but he is killed by Achilles. As his spirit goes to heaven he condemns the pagan rites and prays that to be worthy of Christ's mercy.
4.1 Perception of Greek paganism in Troilus

Just like Beowulf poet, who was probably a Christian, Chaucer was a poet whose mind and attitudes were shaped by Christian culture and learning as well. His poems generally display fourteenth-century attitudes, prejudices and ideals. This fact has an influence on the poem’s structure and its ending. In the comments of narrator of Troilus we can find Christian allusions and phraseology, but the setting and the characters are pagan. Chaucer was aware of the essential differences between the pagan past and the Christian present, and to some extent he tried to avoid imposing “modern” criteria and classifications on “ancient” experience, striving to present it with historical plausibility. According to Minnis, in keeping with the standard contrast between the pagan world under natural law and the Christian world under grace, he writes with a large measure of consistency (Minnis 21).

Paganism as it is depicted in Troilus was similar to Anglo-Saxon paganism. Pagan refers in the same way to heathen conceptions of the gods, a type of knowledge vastly inferior to Christian theology which had as its subject the one true God. The pagan Greeks cherished life and believed in living it to the fullest degree, since death was an inevitable fact (Weigel 41). Idolatry and polytheism were supposed to have been propagated by the forces of evil and therefore it was a major target for medieval attacks on false notion of deity.

In Troilus and Criseyde Chaucer created his historical setting and characterized his pagans with the latest information available to him in the most influential encyclopedias, history books, mythographies and theological treatises.
of the day. When no information was available, he improvised by converting Christian beliefs and modern mores into their pagan equivalents (Minnis 21).

Therefore it can be said that *Troilus and Criseyde* present a comprehensive and consistent picture of the heathen past which matches the notions about pagans current in fourteenth-century England, rather than an accurate description of Greek paganism. This fourteenth-century picture of a heathen past is in *Troilus* represented by pagan philosophies concerning with fate, fortune, predestination and the freedom of the will.
4.2 Pagan and Christian allusions

At first sight it may seem that Troilus is simply about the pagans in a pagan world, planet-determined destiny and an afterlife among pagan planetary-deities spheres. The characters are pre-Christian pagans, living in a historical Trojan world which worshipped the classical pantheon and were subject only to natural law, not the Christian law.

There are many pagan references present – including the gods, myths, and legends of Greco-Roman pagan lore. When predicting fall of Troy, Calkas is portrayed as a pagan astrologer and fatalist. When Troilus first sees Criseyde, it is in a pagan temple of Pallas Athena during the service of an idol. Furthermore, the pagans are depicted observing the rites of their heathen religion:

The men of Troy gave up no ancient rite
Due to their gods; they were indeed devout,
And their most sacred relic, beyond doubt,
Highest in honour, was named, as I recall,
Palladion, which they trusted above all. (Troilus, I, 150-4)

The poem is also imbued with astrological material, which was associated with pagan gods. Mercury, Venus, Mars, Jupiter/Jove and Saturn were classical deities appearing in Troilus and are involved in specifically astrological passages:

And if it chanced the hour of my birth
Was governed by unfavourable stars,
If thou wert quenched, O Venus full of mirth,
By Saturn, or obstructed by fell Mars,
O pray thy Father to avert such jars
And give me joy, by him that in the grove,
Boar-slain Adonis, tasted of thy love. (Troilus, III, 915-21)
It is important to remember that Chaucer wrote his texts to be oriented on a medieval audience, therefore the story of ancient Trojans must be seen in a medieval light. This is also the reason why Christian and pagan elements are blended; Christian allusions and colloquial language was supposed to close the distance between the audience and the historic content of the poem.

Thus in spite of the historical, ancient and pagan setting of *Troilus and Criseyde*, the poem has enormous amounts of Christian allusion and material as well. This can be divided into 3 categories.

One Christian manifestation in the poem is its colloquial language, religious phraseology, references to Christian practice and beliefs. These includes hundreds of colloquial religious exclamations: in phrases such as Criseyde’s “Lord, how you stare! Answer me, yes or no!” (*Troilus*, II, 276), Pandarus’s “By God, I’ll tell you this, for what its worth / There’d be no prouder woman on the earth“ (II, 137-8). “O mercy God” is another expression used by protagonists in the poem, for example Troilus’s “Merciful God! O where’ he said, confounded, / ‘ Have you been hiding, lovely to my eyes?” when he first sees Criseyde (I, 276).

The second category of Christian allusions suggests such concepts as God’s love, grace, bliss, creatorship. These colloquial uses of „God“ involve expressions that imply at the Christian God’s attributes and suggest God’s power and authority, such as Troilus’s oath to Pandarus „Nevertheless I swear, and by that Lord / Who as He pleases governs all whatever“ (III, 372-3). These expressions not only name God (Lord), but also ascribe power to Him, referring to His might and ability, and thus suggesting a real and powerful Deity
to some greater extent than the expressions of the first category. God’s creatorship is also mentioned when Troilus swears his fidelity to Criseyde with “As God, from whom no secret can be hidden, / May give me joy, since first you caught my eye” (IV, 1653-4) or when Pandarus swears “For, by the Lord that made the east and west” (II, 1053) in hopes to bring Troilus an answer to his letter from Criseyde.

Last kind of expression that allude to God are expressions that actually invoke Him. These can be found when Troilus says „If there is no love, O God! What am I feeling?” (I, 400).
4.3 Fatalism and predestination

The poem concerns with such theological issues as free will versus fatalism or changeability. Furthermore, the possibility of resisting temptation, which is related to the idea of Troilus and Criseyde being „tempted“ to love each other, involves another concern of Christian readings of free will. Despite poem’s many fatalistic elements, its characters are carefully depicted making choices. This is compared with an important pagan practice of making predictions, in particular predictions concerning the destinies of individuals from the configuration of the stars at their births (Minnis 46). These predictions have considerable bearing of fatalistic philosophy in *Troilus and Criseyde*.

According to the doctrine of Predestination, the freedom and responsibility of man are fully preserved (Alone). Christians share the conviction that there is no such thing as mere chance, that fortune in the sense of an arbitrary force simply does not exist. However, this is put in contrast right at the beginning of the fourth book in a proem on Fortune, addressed to Mars and the three Furies:

How short a time, lament it as we may,  
Such joy continues under Fortune’s rule,  
She that seems truest when about to slay,  
And tunes her song, beguiling to a fool,  
To bind and bind and make of him her tool,  
The common traitress! From her wheel she throws  
Him down, and laughs at him with mops and mows. (*Troilus*, IV, 1-7)
Chaucer’s characters clearly believe that their fate is determined by the stars or predictions and that they cannot decide anything themselves. When Pandarust persuades Troilus to reveal what lady he loves and offers him his help in book I, Troilus replies that he cannot be helped because he believes fortune is his foe:

For-well I know it – Fortune is my foe;
Not one of all the men that come and go
On earth can set at naught her cruel wheel;
She plays with us and there is no appeal (Troilus, I, 837-840)

When Criseyde has been forced to leave Troy, Troilus starts believing that his death has been revealed to him by dreams and augury of birds. He becomes convinced of the inevitability of his death, not only because of the lovesickness caused by the absence of Criseyde, but mainly on account of these dreams of death:

„I know it from my malady, and by
My present dreams and some from long ago,
That I am certainly about to die.
Besides, the own they call Escaphilo
These two nights past has shrieked for me, and so
I pray for Mercury, if he please, to fetch
This soul of mine and guide a sorrowful wretch!” (Troilus, V, 316-27)

Later, he dreams of Criseyde kissing a boar:

And then, one evening, he lay down to sleep;
It happened so that in his sleep he thought
He had gone out into the woods to weep
For her and for the grief that she had brought,
And up and down the forest as he sought
His way, he came upon a tusky boar
Asleep upon the sunny forest floor.
And close behind it, with her arms enfolding,
And ever kissing it, he saw Criseyde. (Troilus, V, 1233-1241)
Cassandra, his sister, interprets the dream of the boar correctly, saying in context of the old tales concerning fortune that his passion for Criseyde will result in a destruction of Troy (Troilus, V, 1506-10). Troilus accepts the idea of fatalism that is embedded in the pagan society: if he is slow to act, this is because he cannot believe in the effectiveness of human action. At first, he is enraged by his sister’s prophecy and does not believe her; eventually he becomes convinced that his hope is lost and Criseyde can no longer be trusted.

At this point it is necessary to say that in time when Chaucer wrote Troilus, fatalism was in a society understood in a negative way, since the doctrine of it was anathema to Christian theologues because it excluded the possibility of free will and, to some extent, moral accountability. As Cook says, the conviction that things happen at random and that there is not necessarily any reward for good or punishment for bad behaviour is a doctrine that stresses a terrifying lack of control over the forces that shape one’s fates. Equally disturbing is the prospect of living at the mercy of the classical gods, for these pagan deities are profoundly fickle (Cook 35). This is probably why Chaucer decided to adapt fatalism to more Christian point of view.

The notion of fate can be accepted by a Christian if it is reduced to the decrees of the one true God. Whereas Chaucer’s pagans believe they are fated, he himself believes in their free will. As Shanley claims, the story does not depend on destined events alone, nor is the final unhappiness of either owing only to fate (Shanley 275). The pagans regard their supposed destinies as necessary facts; the Christians regard them as conditional facts. By being so utterly convinced that their actions are fated, the pagans determine their
actions themselves (Minnis 71). This is more obvious in Criseyde’s free decision
to love Troilus. After she watches his return from battle, we are told that:

And also blissful Venus, Well arrayed,
Sat in her seventh house in heaven, and so
Was well disposed, with other stars in aid,
To cure the foolish Troilus of his woe;
And, to tell truth, she was not wholly foe
To Troilus in his naivity,
But somewhat favoured him, the luckier he. (Troilus, II, 680-6)

The pagans in Troilus may believe that they are determined by the stars,
but the narrator clearly believes that men can freely accept or reject astral
influences and temptations. This can be also seen in the moment when Troilus
won the love of Criseyde:

Her love, I do not say she suddenly
Gave it to him; but she began to incline
To like him first, and I have told you why.
His manhood and the thought that he would pine
On her account invited love to mine
Within her; but long service and devotion
Got him her love; it was no sudden motion. (Troilus, II, 673-9)

Here it is obvious that Criseyde took her time with falling in life with Troilus and
used her free-will; the stars nor any prediction did not force her to do anything.
Although it is not expressed explicitly, Chaucer managed to portray his
characters as free to choose what they wish, and as they choose they
determine their lot. When Criseyde is untrue to Troilus, although sorrowful, she
acts deliberately as well.
In the parallel to Beowulf, where the pagan *wyrd* was regarded as subordinate to the God’s free will, the same thing is emphasized in *Troilus*. The fortune and the stars are mere secondary causes subject to the controlling first cause, God:

O heavenly influences in the sky!  
Truth is you are our hersmen and our grooms,  
And we your cattle, though we question why,  
And think your reasoning has gone awry;  
So with Criseyde, I mean: against her will,  
The gods had their own purpose to fulfill. (*Troilus*, III, 618-23)
4.4 Human love versus God’s love

The most serious narratorial statement occurs towards the end of Book V: “Thus goes the world; God shield us from mischance, / And all that mean true dealing, God advance!” (*Troilus*, V, 1434-5), and “Such is the world for those who can behold / The way it goes; there’s little of heart’s rest; / God grant we learn to take it for the best.” (V, 1748-50), which both lead to epilogue.

The ending of *Troilus* raises the question, whether the poem’s loyalties lie finally with the earthly pagan life to which the most of the poem is dedicated, or with the Christian values represented in the closing stanzas. Until the last moments of the poem, *Troilus* represents a story about natural human love of romance and earthly pleasures and this human love affair is praised throughout the whole poem; the allusions to God have almost no significance. However, in the end the affair fails. All joy has eventually failed, only heartbreak is left, and nothing further can be done to remedy the situation. And finally, in the last moments this human love is placed in context of a higher love, the love of God.

It is already obvious in a book IV that Troilus slowly becomes aware of the fact of predestination:

> Since all that comes, comes by necessity,  
> Thus to be lost is but my destiny. (*Troilus*, IV, 958)

According to Bloomfield, this indication that Troilus believes in predestination represents a stage in Troilus approach to Chaucer (Bloomfield 25) and and it is at this point when the distance between the narrator and Troilus starts to disappear.
At the end of Book V Chaucer identifies himself completely with Troilus expressing explicitly his Christian beliefs. After Troilus death, when Troilus approaches the stars, looks back on the earth and laughs, his tragedy becomes comedy. In this tale, tragedy is human and comedy is divine: whereas the earthly pagan perspective is fixed upon the linear vicissitudes of fortune, the divine perspective can comprehend in a single view both the present state and the final outcome (Martin 176).

The epilog hence endorses Christianity over human love, contrasting the enduring love of Christ with the fickle passion of the pagan Criseyde and continues with praising God:

And give your love to Him who, for pure love,  
Upon a cross first died that He might pay  
Our debt, and rose, and sits in Heaven above;  
He will be false to no one that will lay  
His heart wholly on Him, I dare say.  
Since He is best to love, and the most meek,  
What need is there a feigning love to seek? (Troilus, V, 1842-8)

The narrator of the Troilus in fact concludes his tale by even condemning paganism:

Behold these old accused pagan rites!  
Behold how much their gords are worth to you!  
Behold these wretched worldly appetites! (Troilus, V, 1849-51)

This connection between pagan rites and earthly appetites expresses the long-standing medieval belief about pagans and their interest in worldly pleasures. Chaucer therefore manages to describe a generally critical view of classical
antiquity that was common in the fourteenth century. As Cook adds, he apparently feels it important to warn readers of the anti-Christian values that taint the old pagan stories. This judgement implies that in *Troilus*, Chaucer’s lovers should serve as an object lesson for what happens to those who choose to indulge in, rather than eschew, both the pleasures of the flesh and the pleasures of the traffic with certain pagan attitudes and ideas (Cook 26).

Chaucer’s blending of Christian and human love depicts that human passion is irreconcilable with love of God and the epilog finally ends with a prayer to the Trinity:

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Thou One and Two and Three and Never-ending,
That reignest ever in Three and Two and One,
Incomprehensible, all-comprehending,
From visible foes, and the invisible one,
Defend us all! And Jesu, Mary’s Son,
Make us in mercy worthy to be thine,
For love of her, mother and maid benign!
Amen. (*Troilus*, V, 1863-1869)
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5 Conclusion

Although both of these poems were created at different times, by different authors and in terms of storyline have nothing in common, a comparison can be made. In each of them, the writer has used an outworn legend for a topical purpose.

Furthermore, they both manifest character development of main protagonists. In Beowulf this fact in particular is visible in maturing of main character, Beowulf, who was at the beginning in a swimming contest with Breca depicted as a prideful and boastful young man, to his death as a wise old king. We are informed that he had been even despised as a coward and a weakling:

He had been poorly regarded
for a long time, was taken by the Geats
for less than he was worth: and their lord too
had never much esteemed him in the mead-hall.
They firmly believed that he lacked force,
that the prince was a weakling; but presently
every affront to his deserving was reversed. (Beowulf, 2183-89)

But as a mature man (and as a result of Hrothgar’s speech) things have altered for him. We learn that he had heeded Hrothgar’s warning and has managed to rule with wisdom, generosity, and justice.

Before his religious transformation, Troilus is cynical and indifferent to love, despising and disrespecting the Christian ideals. But after Criseyde betrays him, he goes through intense sufferings: throwing himself into the fight, he is killed by Achilles. During his lifetime, there was nothing that would change him,
but after his death, he condemns sinful life that he has led before and turns to God. When he is in the eight sphere he laughs out loud, by contrast with those who are mourning him below (Manzalaoui 149). Christ is contrasted in fairly explicit terms to worldly objects of love such as Criseyde. With that Chaucer seems to be saying that one will find that the only person worthy of such love is God:

And give your love to Him who, for pure love,
Upon a cross first died that He might pay
Our debt, and rose, and sits in Heaven above;
He will be false to no one that will lay
His heart wholly on Him, I dare to say.
Since He is best to love, and the most meek,
What need is there a feigning love to seek? (Troilus, V, 1842-8)

Both poems are influenced by poets’ attitude to religion. In Beowulf it is obvious that the poet was familiar with Christianity and possibly was a cleric. Due to the fact that at that time Christianity seized control over the society and condemned paganism at the same time, it is just possible that he simply intended to create for his audience a picture of life as he imagined it to have been in pre-Christian times and convey a Christian message at the same time. Centuries later, in a retelling of the story of Troilus and Criseyde, Chaucer introduced pagan gods and rites but made almost no effort to depict the behaviour of his two protagonists other than as members of a society of that time recognizable as medieval. As Wentersdorf explains, it would therefore be safer to proceed on the assumption that the Beowulf poet, writing in or close to the eighth century, approached his task similarly and developed his version of the ancient Germanic legends in the social idiom of his own day, creating an
atmosphere and a way of life that would have been familiar to his audience (Wentersdorf 91).

Finally, a very similar narrative method is used in both poems. In *Troilus* the reader, lacking the proper background, is not certain about the essence of the poem until he reaches the epilogue, which with the praise of God clarifies how to make sense of everything that has been said in the poem before. And in the same way (like the epilogue in *Troilus*) functions Hrothgar’s sermon in *Beowulf* – not only to emphasize Christian values in the middle of the pagan poem, but also to assure us that *Beowulf* is a fabulious tale belonging to a world past and gone and to keep reality in focus with legendary events of the story (Goldsmith 81). The only difference between these two is that sermon in *Beowulf* is not placed at the end of the work.

Although the poems do not depict a real pagan society or true pagan characters, it does not mean that they are uninformative or valueless. They both perfectly depict the atmosphere and conceptions of a medieval society and last but not least they are both exquisite literary works.
Works Cited

Primary Sources


Secondary Sources


Czech Resume

Tato práce analyzuje náboženské konflikty v básních *Beowulf* a *Troilus a Kriseida* od Geoffreyho Chaucera. Obě tyto básně se odehrávají v pohanském prostředí, ale byly napsány autory, kteří pocházeli nebo byli silně ovlivněni křesťanskou společností. Přestože nemají společného autora a odehrávají se v rozdílných časových obdobích, mají obdobné pozadí vzniku a obsahují podobné náboženské konflikty.

*Beowulf* je hrdinský epos, který vznikl kolem 8. století, kdy společnost přestoupila z pohanství na křesťanskou víru, a proto v něm můžeme nalézt prvky obou těchto náboženství.

Chaucerova báseň *Troilus a Kriseida* byla napsána na konci 14. století a popisuje milostný příběh dvou lidí v období Trójské války. I přes pohanský příběh v antickém prostředí se Chaucerovi podařilo vytvořit spíše vyprávění s křesťanským podtextem, než znázornění tehdejší opravdové pohanské společnosti.
English Resume

This thesis analyzes religious conflicts in two poems, *Beowulf* and Chaucer’s *Troilus and Criseyde*, which are both set in pagan environment, but written by poets, who were influenced by a Christian society. Although both composed at different time by different authors and taking place in a different period of time, they have similar background and contain comparable religious conflicts and narrative patterns.

*Beowulf* was written sometime in the 8th century, which was the time when the society was in the process of conversion from paganism to Christianity. Therefore, the story contains elements of both of these religions, and these elements also affect setting of the story and its characters.

Chaucer’s *Troilus and Criseyde*, written early in the final quarter of the 14th century, depicts a tragic story of lovers Troilus and Criseyde set in the period of ancient Troy and Trojan War. In spite of the ancient setting and pagan characters, Chaucer ended up writing a story that had a Christian overtone, rather than depicting a real image of pagan society of that time.