

# Speech and Power in Old English Conversion Narratives

***Angela Abdou***

Conversion is perhaps the dominant topic of Old English texts. Not only do many of the poems of Anglo-Saxon England represent large groups of heathens being converted to the Christian way of life, but they also encourage individual listeners and readers to turn back towards God after having fallen briefly away through sin. These two types of conversion, macro and micro, are similar in that they both involve a negating of all that is not Christian. Because that negation is gradual and always in need of being re-accomplished, Karl Morrison describes conversion as always being a work in progress, rather than an instantaneous transformation. Morrison argues that conversion is as much process as it is a moment of stupendous insight or absolute discovery. Rather, conversion—especially as it is represented in conversion narratives—involves constant reappraisal, and remains “part of a strategy for survival.”<sup>1</sup> The macro-conversion, the instantaneous moment in which often an entire group converts, occurs in such Old English poems as *Andreas*, while the micro-conversion, the individual process of constant re-evaluation and re-conversion, occurs in poems such as *Guthlac*. The goal of both types of conversion is unity with God, an “empathetic participation in which the ‘I’ and ‘you’ bec[o]me one” (Morrison 85). This unity has two dimensions: a divine and mystical union with God and the secular and political unity of people into a Christian community. The process of both conversions involved a negotiation between Christian belief and doctrine, as embodied in biblical texts, and the application of that belief in the lives of individuals throughout what would later be called Christendom. The Anglo-Saxon use of vernacular poetry as one site of that negotiation offers an opportunity to investigate the ways in which prophetic traditions are transposed and recreated in one early medieval group of kingdoms.

Surviving Old English records do not suggest that a single word translated the notion of *conversio*; instead, a range of words meaning “to turn” and “to change” (and ranging from “to translate” to “to bend” in their modern English meanings) give the sense. They include *gebigan*, *belwyrfan*, *cyrran*, *gecyrran*, and *awendan*.<sup>2</sup> The basic sense is the physical one of turning or bending, which can suggest turning away as well as turning towards. Conversion is not a one-way street. On the other hand, conversion is also a process, a continuing set of micro-conversions, represented in Anglo-Saxon England by penitential manuals and lists of penances. The micro-conversion of repentance, confession and absolution was also a negotiation between personal and public Christianity, since a single code of conduct developed and used throughout the kingdoms implies a generalisation of ideas and penances, not a particularised approach to individuals and their specific relationships with God.<sup>3</sup>

In this sense, then, the language of a vernacular poetry which supports the Christian way of life can be described as performative. Christian language can change the world with words; non-Christian language, as it is constructed in such poems as *Guthlac* and *Andreas*, cannot. Any language that supports the Christian way of life constitutes a speech act, a performative; any which does not is impotent. Because much of the surviving Old English literature, particularly the poetry, concerns itself with when, where, and whose language can be performative, it can benefit from a speech-act analysis.<sup>4</sup> Stanley Fish suggests that this kind of analysis is about “the conditions for the successful performance of certain conventional acts and the commitments one enters into or avoids by performing or refusing those acts.”<sup>5</sup> Old English texts are heavily involved in making these conventions conventional, in the explicit inscribing or reinforcing of Christian ideology in the consciousness of its readers or hearers. Margaret Deanesley points out that “Christianity...was never an abstract concept, a pure philosophy: acceptance implied a new way of life and the incorporation of Christians into a particular society.”<sup>6</sup> Literary texts participate in this incorporation of individuals into a society, and are, in this way, both sacred and secular acts, both individual and political acts.

*Andreas*, an Old English poem concerning the acts of St Matthew and St Andrew, consists large of set speeches—which is typical of Old English poems. A poem describing macro-conversion, it is a work in which great importance is attached to words, and the characters are distinguished on the basis of the words they use. Matthew is praised as one who first began *wordum writan wundorcrefte*, “to write the gospel in words with wondrous skill” (l. 13); Andreas teaches readers by example

always to praise the Lord with words; and when God first speaks it is with *beorhtan stefne* “bright (clear) voice” (l. 96) in a promise to Matthew that he will enjoy eternal paradise.<sup>7</sup> Conversely, the adversaries—whether the devil, the Jews, or the Mermedonians—are defined as *wærlogan* “promise-breakers.” They inflict Matthew, Andreas, and Christ with *edwitspræcon* “speeches of reproach,” *huscworde* “insulting speech,” *teoncwide* “painful talk,” and *hospword* “insulting words.” While the language of the Mermedonians and the devil is very destructive, it is frequently reported indirectly rather than directly. Further, it is powerless. Only those who use words to support the Christian way of life have power in their words; those who do not have no power. The apparent dialogue in the poem between those who are already converted and those not yet converted is actually a monologic structure reaching for absolute unity through the establishment of a Christian society. The set speeches of the Christian characters bring about conversion, the macro-conversion of the nations they address. Their words, as Christian words, have absolute power.

On several occasions the Old English poet draws attention to the performative power of language. Words are equated with action and are represented as having the potential to bring about change in the world. Characters, aware of this potential, continually attempt to use their words to do things, to perform actions in the world around them. Andreas’ ability to convert the Mermedonian people to Christianity arises from his successful use of words when he is tempted on his journey to that land. When the helmsman of the ship (Jesus in disguise) challenges Christianity, Andreas experiences his own micro-conversion over and over in his development of language to state his allegiance to Christ. That restatement gives the apostle the words with which to endure his three-day torture upon arrival in Mermedonia, with which to aid his fellow apostle Matthew, and with which to convert the people and purge the land of non-Christian temples and practices.

The poem’s principal concern is thus the conversion of a nation, but this conversion is signalled throughout the text by a series of micro-conversions or transformations. The poem opens with a threatened transformation of Matthew; the Mermedonians habitually give their prisoners a poisonous and magical drink such that *hyge wæs oncyrrad* “the mind was converted” (l. 36b). The victims behave like beasts, eating hay and grass—and, presumably, losing the use of words and speeches. Similarly, when the Mermedonians attempt to turn Andreas away from his faith by physical force, *oncyrran* appears again:

Ða þa folctogan feorðan siðe,  
 egle ondsacan, æðeling læddon  
 to þam carcerne, woldon cræfta gehygd  
 magorædendes mod oncyrran  
 on þære deorcan niht (lines 1458-62).

[Then the leaders of the host, the terrible adversaries, for the fourth time led the noble one to the prison; they wished to pervert (change, convert) the mighty thoughts of the counsellor of men in the dark night.]

Neither of these transformations is successful; significantly, the attempt on Andreas is turned away by divine words:

Ða com dryhten god  
 in þæt hlinræced, hæleða wuldor,  
 on þa wine synne wordum grette  
 ond frofre gecwæð (ll. 1462-5).

[Then came the Lord God into that dark hall, the glory of heroes, and greeted his friend with words, and spoke consolation.]

Because God speaks comforting words to Andreas, the Mermedonians cannot pervert his spirit.

A different kind of conversion takes place when Jesus, in his assumed role as helmsman, requests payment in advance of the voyage to Mermedonia. Andreas transforms the unknown seafarer's desire for material gain into a desire for heavenly reward, promising Jesus and his two companions that though he cannot pay them with rings (the standard currency of payment for services rendered in Old English poems), God will pay them with heavenly reward (ll. 271-5). The payment changes from currency to eternal word, and Andreas' refusal to consider the voyage in financial terms in effect renders the secular discourse of payment in cash or kind impotent. Through his words, Andreas attempts to redirect the desire of the seafarers. Andreas' own desire has undergone a similar conversion, and he claims that the force which motivates him on the journey is joy:

Usic lust hweteð on þa leodmearce,  
 mycel modes hiht to þære maran byrig (ll. 286-87).

[Joy urges us into that region, great hope of spirit, to the famous city.]

Since Andreas' earlier reaction to the prospect of visiting Mermedonia had been extremely negative, his speech here serves to convert his own fear to joy as much as to convert the seafarers. The response of the seafarer, Jesus, affirms that joy and indicates the Andreas' own conversion has been accepted as a true one, and given absolution. He does still request payment, but accompanies Andreas on the voyage. His transformative utterances are paralleled by the biblical exemplum Andreas explicates during the journey:

He gehalgode for heremægene  
 win of wætere ond wendan het  
 beornum to blisse, on þa beteran gecynd (ll. 586-8).

[He consecrated for the armed host wine from water, and commanded the change (conversion) for men as a joy, into the better kind.]

Layers of conversion are implicit here. God transforms water to wine, which in itself is a transformed representation of the blood of Christ. Through the ritual enacted with this transformed substance, men themselves will become transformed and move closer to God. The adjective clause *þa beteran gecynd* can thus be seen to modify both the water and the armed host, for the goal of conversion is to transform individuals and groups into *þa beteran gecynd* "the better kind". The verb *hatan* "to command" emphasises that all of these transformations can be (and are) accomplished through the holy Word.

In all successful conversions and in every stage of Andreas' journey, speech acts play a central role in the gradual progression toward the establishment of a Christian community. God's language is the most overtly performative, and His is the supreme example of performative speech. Consisting almost exclusively of directives and commissives, both of which are ultimately felicitous, God tells Andreas near the beginning of the poem that he *must* make the journey to help Matthew (l. 174). He performs miracles with words (l. 577), and he can raise the sick with a word (*worde abmwete* l. 584). Also, readers are continually reminded of the Last Judgment, which is in effect a kind of ultimate speech act in which God's words have the power to sentence humans to everlasting bliss or everlasting pain. Divine words are in the first place curative, and thus God *abead*, announced health and comfort, to Matthew (l. 96). Andreas models his own language on the poem's first instance of performative language; like God, he uses his words to give comfort:

Ongan þa gleawlice    gingran sine,  
wuldorspedige weras    wordum trymman    (ll. 427-8).

[He then began wisely to strengthen his followers (the younger ones), the men rich in glory, with words.]

Near the end of the poem, after the flood and initial conversion of the Mermedonians, Andreas again follows God's example of curing people with words:

Ða se halga ongann    hæleð blissigean,  
wigendra þreat    wordum retan    (ll. 1607-8).

[Then the holy one began to bless the warriors, to comfort the troop of fighters with words.]

By these words, Andreas expects to accomplish the result of showing the men *wuldres leoht*, "the light of glory," which is available to them if they *teala hycgað* "consider rightly" (ll. 1611-12). He thus signals the implications of the Mermedonians' initial commitment to Christianity, and clarifies that conversion is not only an instantaneous event but also a continuing process. Conversion is not something which can be fully and finally accomplished in one decision. After this announcement, Andreas continues to do work with his words, and he prays to God that he *helpe gefremman* "perform help" (l. 1614). Just as God's words are spoken to offer comfort and help to Matthew, Andreas' words, including his speech to the people and his prayer to God, serve as comfort and help for the Mermedonians. Ideally, performative human speech aligns itself with and models itself upon divine speech acts. Jesus makes this parallelism clearer when he asks Andreas to tell the story of Christ performing miracles before the spirit-blind Jews. He assures Andreas:

Ne frine ic ðe for tæle    ne ðurh teoncwide  
on hranrade,    ac mine hige blissað  
wynnum wridað,    þurh þine wordlæde,  
æðelum ecne.    Ne eom ic ana ðæt  
ac manna gehwam    mod bið on hyhte,  
fyrð afrefred    (ll. 633-38).

[I do not ask you for blame, nor through censorious speech, on the whale-road, but my thought is blessed, and flourishes with joys, through your eloquence, abounding in virtues. I am not alone in that, but to each of men is the spirit hopeful and life comforted.]

Here, then, God himself explicitly directs Andreas to draw upon the comforting power of words. The request also has ideological implications since it forces Andreas to affiliate himself with a certain speech community, rejecting the Jews and their *hearmcwide* “cruel speech” (l. 561) against God, and using his own speech to glorify God.

The Mermedonians, until their conversion, and the devil recognise the power of Andreas’ words. For example, the Mermedonians’ advice to the devil concerning how he should prepare for his meeting with Andreas is *Habbað word gearu / wið þam aǵleacan eall getrahtod!* (ll. 1358-9) “Have completely prepared words ready against the enemy.” They recognise that Andreas’ power is in his words, but they do not recognise that non-Christian language can never approximate this power. The poet draws our attention to this distinction by following the Mermedonians’ speech, and preceding Satan’s response to it, with incoherent noise: *þa hleoðrade hludan stefne* “then resounded loud noise” (l. 1360). In fact, throughout the poem there is a very clear distinction between good and bad—or effective and ineffective—words, between the *hleoporcwide* “clear-sounding speech” of Christ and his followers and the *cirm micel* “great noise” of all who speak against the Christian group.

The eventual establishment of a Christian society comes about through a series of speech acts. Andreas’ speech initiates conversion, when he commands the stone pillar:

Geher ðu, marmanstan, meotudes rædum ...  
 Læt nu of þinum staþole streamas weallan,  
 ea inflede, nu ðe ælmihtig  
 hateð, heofona cyning, þæt ðu hrædlice  
 on þis fræte folc forð onsende  
 wæter widrynic to wera cwealme,  
 geofon geotende. (ll. 1498-1508)

[Hear you, marble-stone, the commands of the ruler. Now from your pedestal let seethe streams, a flowing river, now the almighty commands, the king of the heavens, that you quickly onto this perverse nation send forth water flowing far, for the death of men, the surging ocean.]

Andreas is the apostolic version of Moses, and like Moses he uses his position as an intercessor for God to a recalcitrant people. He strikes water from a stone, and his

version of this act terrifies because of its excess of power. This conversion, it seems, is accompanied by death. To achieve absolute unity, death must occur both metaphorically within the self and actually within the state—in order to permit the rebirth of a Christian nation. That such death is necessary points toward a contradiction within the didacticism of the text. Readers are constantly directed to use the comforting power of words rather than physical manipulation, but here the language of God is represented as having a more sweeping and more harmful effect than that of the Mermedonians. The violence of the language is necessarily related to the relentless movement toward the establishment of a single ideology and union with Christ.

This single all-powerful act by the prophet to the Mermedonians leads at once to the conversion, beginning, appropriately enough making a different use of water, with a large-scale baptism (lines 1630ff). The masses express their commitment to the new ideology in promises and vows, and thereby absolutely contradict their previous existence as promise-breakers. The ensuing string of performative commands indicates the way in which a community is actually built through speech acts. First, the Mermedonians are commanded to establish a church:

Onfengon fulwihte      ond freoðuwære,  
 wuldres wedde      witum aspedde  
 mundbyrd meotudes.      Ða se modiga het,  
 cyninges cræftiga,      ciricean getimbran  
 gerwan godes tempel.      (ll. 1630-34)

[They received baptism and the promise of peace; with a pledge of glory they were released from torments, in the protection of the lord. Then the brave one, the craftsman of the king, ordered them to build a church, to prepare the temple of God.]

Next, Andreas boldly commands that the people *his lare laston georne, feorhræd fremedon* “follow the bishop’s teachings eagerly, and perform his life-counsel” (ll. 1653-4). First, Andreas’ words and then the bishop’s words are turned into a way of life, and performative language is crucial in establishing the Christian community. Because the speech is Christian, word is deed, and human speech brings the true and faithful community into existence.

After this ritualistic performance, it would seem that conversion is complete. However, as Andreas prepares to leave, God issues one more order:

Ne scealt ðu þæt cowde      anforlætan  
 on swa niowan gefean,      ah him naman minne  
 on ferðlocan      fæste getimbre.      (ll. 1669-71)

[You must not abandon that flock in such new joy, but establish my name with them firmly in their hearts.]

Through God's command, the poet reminds us that conversion is a continuing process. As Karl Morrison suggests:

[A]ll of life, rightly lived, was conversion. Conversion was thought to change the entire direction of human existence itself from a movement toward the grave into a transit toward endless life (p. xii).

Morrison further argues that there are two types of conversion: the formal and the actual. The formal conversion involves institutional affiliation, religious obedience, and discipline, and it can deceive or be misread since its validity depends on the second type. Formal conversion is largely concerned with rules, regulations, and with the external observances of religion. Morrison's category of actual conversion, on the other hand, is supernatural; it does not refer to submission to authority or to a change from one way of life within the Church to another, but it involves "a turning of the heart to Christ and, in fact, *into* Christ by mystical union or incorporation."<sup>8</sup> Clearly, Andreas experiences this type of conversion, and so must the poem's audience. The Mermedonians have to date experienced only the formal conversion, and Andreas must remain in the land to ensure that the micro-conversions which mark the actual conversion take place. Under the apostle's strict guidance and teaching, the Mermedonians *weox / word ond wisdom* "grew in word and in wisdom" (ll. 1677-78). When the transformation is complete, Andreas may leave what was once *mearcland morðre bewunden* "a borderland encompassed about with murder" (l. 19) and is now a *wederburg* "pleasant city" (l. 1697).

Robert Bjork has studied the way in which direct discourse is "thematically crucial" in Old English poetry, and particularly in the Old English verse saints' lives.<sup>9</sup> The speech of the saints, because of the proximity of the saints to God, is ideal, and the speech of all other characters is to be measured against this standard. In *Andreas*, the argument can be taken further than Bjork suggests, since the moments at which Andreas alludes to biblical language or replicates a biblical incident during his work as an evangelist are the moments during which his speeches achieve their highest power-quotient. In those moments the saint is like Christ, whose word is The Word,

Logos, because of the way in which it transforms all language to divine and biblical language. As with Bede's recreation of Caedmon's divinely-inspired verse, the anonymous Old English poet who rendered a vernacular translation of the acts of Matthew and Andrew focused on the ways in which words are deeds. The Bible, the embodiment of God's words, is the repository from which all Christian words are drawn.

An Old English poem which focuses on one individual and the effects of conversion on the life of an Anglo-Saxon nobleman who is inspired to become a Christian saint is *Guthlac*. Based loosely on Felix's *Vita Sancti Guthlaci*, the two related poems which are known as *Guthlac A* and *Guthlac B* demonstrate the way in which the saint's words coincide perfectly with deeds.<sup>10</sup> Robert Bjork's consideration of the importance of words in the poem agrees with this view to the extent of arguing that the hero's "words become his deeds" (37). However, the poet does not portray words themselves as action, and the idea that any words, other than God's words, can be performative is a demonic one. Rather, the emphasis is continually on *wordum* and *weorcum*, on *spræc* and *dæd*.

The use of heroic diction does suggest action, a war of words, but it is the devils, not Guthlac, who choose this particular battlefield. While they are continually aggressive, Guthlac is defensive, responding to them by closing down options for debate rather than opening them. After Guthlac's responses the devils are often reduced to incoherent noise, or they simply acknowledge defeat and depart (l. 314). Because Guthlac states the truth, *sōð*, he allows no opportunity for debate. Nonetheless, the devils, unable to learn from history, inevitably return to torment Guthlac yet again. It is this continual return which causes what has often been called the narrative's circularity, repetition, or stasis. There are two kinds of stasis in the poem: the devils' stasis of ignorance and Guthlac's stasis of earthly perfection. This earthly perfection is often portrayed in the poem through images of the saint as a *miles Christi*, a soldier for Christ. Guthlac, like the active warriors for the one God of the Old Testament, is an heroic figure; like the fulfilment of the Old Testament prophecies, Christ, he is also a saintly figure, apparently passive, given to stating truths.

Heroic diction is used throughout the poem in describing this hero and his struggle against evil. For example, Guthlac is a *gecostan cempa* "tried warrior" (l. 91a), a *wuldres cempa* "warrior of glory" (l. 324b), an *oretta* "a lone warrior" (l. 401a), an *halig cempa* "holy warrior" (l. 513b), a *godes orettan* "warrior of God" (l. 569b), a *meotudes cempa* "creator's warrior" (l. 576a), and he *gode campode* "fought for good" (l. 643b). The angels protecting Guthlac are also described as warriors:

*Fore him englas stondað / gearwe mid gæsta wæpnum* “before him angels stand, ready with weapons of spirits” (ll. 88b-89a). This diction seems particularly significant since, as Jane Roberts has pointed out, it is used far more extensively in the Anglo-Saxon life than in the Latin:

The Latin *Guthlac*, like so much hagiographical literature, contains the image of the saint as the *miles Christi*, the warrior of God equipped with the spiritual armour described by St. Paul. But in the Latin this occurs in an isolated passage, while in the poem phrases such as *Christes cempa* or *eadig oretta* occur with refrain-like insistence (55).

Michael Cherniss has argued that this heroic diction is “absorbed” into the poem, that the poet has moved beyond the point of finding “it necessary and desirable to directly confront the Germanic heroic view of the world with the Christian view.”<sup>11</sup> Instead, he believes that the poet intends the heroic aspects to function as metaphors for spiritual or psychological conditions and does not mean the terminology to be taken literally (219). Significantly, it is the narrator rather than Guthlac himself who uses the heroic terminology. The poet does seem to recognise that there is an ideological conflict at work, that it would somehow be inappropriate to have a saint referring to himself as a warrior of God. However, for the poet to use that terminology is to create a dual possibility: that Guthlac fulfills both the traditional role of the hero (paralleling the Old Testament warrior figures of David and Joshua) and the new role of Christian saint.

Guthlac is stolidly defensive in response to the repeated attacks of the fiends. The two main temptations in the poem exactly recapitulate two of the temptations of Christ: they are Guthlac’s being lifted in the air, a temptation to exalt himself in pride, and his being taken down to the gates of hell, a temptation to despair. Upon his resistance to and victory over the demons, Guthlac is each time returned to the *beorg* “hill.” By retreating to the *beorg* and creating his heaven on earth, Guthlac has advanced as far as he may until he ascends to heaven. His work, then, is simply in maintaining this state as long as necessary. He has achieved a stasis of earthly perfection. The devils, however, are in frenetic and circular activity, caused by their despair and inability to repent or to learn from the past. The plot circles from temptation to the *beorg* or to the fallen existence of the devils, and then repeats the circle because of the circular reasoning of the demons. Olsen, in commenting on the devils’ continual attacks, claims that the poem’s “emphasis is on the fact that good and evil might balance each other were it not for the miraculous intervention of God in human affairs”

(28). However, good and evil do not balance each other in the poem; they cannot. Rather, good repeatedly defeats evil but evil, refusing to admit defeat, continues its attacks. God's intervention at the end does not end a balance; it ends a cycle of temptation and defeat. Thus, where Guthlac stands firm, the devils scatter; where he states a truth once, they try many different kinds of temptations and speeches; where his views are his own as developed from God and not dependent on theirs, they can only react, and react again, to his certitude. The devils, according to Guthlac, are *for-scadene* "scattered" (l. 478a), while the introduction to this speech states that Guthlac *wið mongum stod / ealdfeonda, elne begylded* "stood against many ancient enemies, confirmed in bravery" (ll. 474b-5). Similarly, Guthlac states:

Nis me wiht at eow  
leofes gelong,        ne ge me laþes wiht  
gedon motum.        (ll. 312b-14a)

[There is not a thing dear to me which depends on you, nor are you able to do any thing of evil to me.]

The devils' success, on the other hand, is dependent on Guthlac's giving in to their temptations and physical abuse. Where they are aggressively engaged in a hopeless task, he is defensive and simply concerned with maintaining his state.

Another feature of repetition in the narrative is the poet's penchant for giving several versions of the same story. The events themselves are less important than is their interpretation, and the multivocality of presenting several different versions represents different approaches to the interpretation of those events. Guthlac's version is definitive, and usually he refers to a biblical commonplace. Thus, when he is lifted in the air by the devils, they claim it is so he will see the corruption of the Church; the narrator tells much the same story, though slightly qualified by the awareness that *sua bið geogude þeaw* "such is the custom of youth" (l. 419b). Guthlac, however, perceives something quite different during this trip in the air:

mec yrringa        up gelædon  
þæt ic of lyfte        londa getimbru  
geseon meahte.        Was me swegles leoht  
torht ontyned,        þeah ic torn druge.        (ll. 484a-87b)

[You angrily took me up so that I could from the air see the buildings of the lands. A bright light of heaven was revealed to me so that I might endure suffering.]

Guthlac sees not the corruption of the church, but a light from heaven—always a biblical symbol for God. Similarly, when he is taken to see the horrors of hell, the devils expect to bring him to despair. Instead, Guthlac says:

Eom ic soðlice  
 leohte geleafan      ond mid lufan dryhtnes  
 fægre gefylled      in minum feorhlocan,  
 breostum inbryrðed      to þam betran ham.      (ll. 651b-54)

[I am truly and beautifully filled with the light of belief and with love of the lord in my heart (locking of life), in my breast inspired to that better home.]

Guthlac's rereadings enable him to endure otherwise unbearable situations.

A speech in *Guthlac* can change the interpretation of events. Speech as a phenomenon is crucial to the poem. The devils are repeatedly defined in terms of the hostile nature of their speech and the evil which they attempt to create through words. They are, for example, called *edwitspræcon* "reproach-speakers" (l. 447), and use *ligesearwum* "lying tricks" (l. 228b) in their attempts to influence Guthlac. The devils use *sarstafum* "painful words" (l. 234a), *teoncwidum* "abusive words" (l. 448a), and *torncwidum* "offensive speech" (l. 574) against Guthlac. However, Guthlac is given relief from the devils' hostile speech and lives out his earthly existence surrounded by *fæger fugla reord* "the fair voice of birds" (l. 743a). Evil voices trouble the saint, and fair ones reward him: the balance of good and evil in the poem is worked out through speech.

Guthlac responds to the devils' attacks with the statement that he will eagerly obey God with *gæstgemyndum* "spirit-thoughts" (l. 602a). This compound is *hapax legomenon*, but a similar compound, *gæsthygd*, appears in *Juliana* (l. 147), when that saint also answers her devilish tormentor with "spirit-thought." This emphasis suggests that Anglo-Saxon hero-saints are always given a degree of knowledge or insight which distinguishes them from the biblical Job, or the speakers of the psalms, to whom they are compared. Job and the speakers of the psalms are rarely granted insight into God's plan or the divine truth, but must simply endure, certain in their faith. Guthlac and Juliana, saints because they follow Christ, speak *soð* and use language solely as a tool by which to unveil truth. They have faith, like the Old Testament believers, and they also have truth. The devils claim that Guthlac veils truth,

but they are merely projecting their own use of language onto their opponent. The conflict of Christ and the devils, Christian saint and devilish tormentors, develops as a battle for control of language. The devils, for example, refer to their previous threats to Guthlac as if they were the teachings of friends: *No we þe þus swiðe swencan þorftan, / þær þu fromlice, freonda larum / byran wolde, þa þu hean ond earm / on þis orlege ærest cwome* “we should not have needed to afflict you this harshly if you had desired to hear the teachings of friends when first you came into this battle” (ll. 452a-55b). Their manipulation of language exposes itself in that they present themselves both as Guthlac’s friends with advice and as his adversaries in battle. Similarly, at one point they threaten Guthlac, saying he will face hunger and thirst with nobody to help him if he attempts to claim their land. They threaten that he should therefore *[G]eswic þisses setles* “[G]ive up this seat” (l. 277a). They add immediately, *Ne mæg þec sellan ræd / mon geleran þonne þeos mengu eall* “Nor may anyone give to you better advice than all of this troop” (ll. 278b-79b). Again, they attempt to veil their threats as advice. It is, then, not surprising that these devils accuse Guthlac of veiling what is in his heart: *Fela ge fore monnum miþað þas þe ge in mode geþycgað* “From men you conceal much which you in your heart think” (l. 265). Because they use language only to aid them in their deception, they are unable to understand that Guthlac uses it only to reveal the truth.

The closer a figure in the poem is to God, the more capable of speaking *sod*: Guthlac is much closer to the holy word than the devils but St Bartholomew, God’s messenger, is closer than Guthlac. Because absolute truth is located with God, belief in it is therefore necessary. On earth, God’s presence is continually deferred, but Guthlac and the Christian audience of the poem must retain an abiding faith in their ability to gaze upon His face after death. For the devils, truth is only another weapon: the only time they use the word *sod* is in their explanation of why they took Guthlac in the air: *We þec in lyft geladdum, oftugon þe londes wynna, / woldum þu þe sylfa gesawe þæt we þec sod onsteldum* “We led you in the air, deprived you of the pleasures of land, we wished you then to see for yourself that we charged you with the truth” (ll. 467a-68b). Guthlac does not accept their representations as truth, their presentation of the corruption of youth as the corruption of the entire church, and he does indeed avert it.

The devils’ promises, or threats of violence, are continually broken. Guthlac recognises the impotence of their threats: *Deað ge me deað gehaten, / mec wile wið þam niþum genergan* “Though you promise me death, He will protect me against your



commitment: “commissives,” which commit the speaker to doing something; “expressives,” which express the speaker’s own feelings, or “declarations,” which bring about a change in the world through an utterance. Guthlac himself uses three of the five categories; he does not use either directives or declarations for he knows that only God and St Bartholomew (the messenger of God) can employ these categories effectively. The devils are incapable of making their speech “do” anything.

Guthlac’s speech simply states facts. Only St Bartholomew, the messenger of God, can “do” through speech. He proclaims heavenly awe and fear to the demons: *Ɔa cwom dryhtnes ar / halig of heofonum ahead / unfancundne ege earmum gestum* “then came the messenger of the lord, the holy one from the heavens, who through speech announced the fear (of heaven) to the miserable spirits” (ll. 684b-86b). Bartholomew then orders the demons to set Guthlac down unharmed (l. 689), and places them under the authority of Guthlac (l. 706). The holy word is by its nature performative; as God created the earth in Genesis, and as He created the Word, which is Christ, in John, so Bartholomew’s commands are performative because they must be obeyed.

In *Guthlac*, then, speech in itself is not action, unless it is the speech of God. Both the narrator and Guthlac realise this and continually emphasise the need to unite speech and action. The devils, like the Mermedonians of *Andreas*, futilely attempt to effect changes in the world through their threatening speech. The devils tormenting Guthlac, because they cannot repent and change their ways, are doomed to an eternity of repeating the same mistake, which is reflected in the repetition and circularity of the narrative. The Mermedonians, on the other hand, are capable of recognising the truth available to them, and in embracing it they convert. In time, they can reach Guthlac’s state of absolute truth, of a micro-conversion in each true speech, a stasis which permits him the opportunity to aspire to heaven. The speech acts in both poems function as a controlling mechanism to reveal truth, the word of God.

## **University of Western Ontario**

### **Notes**

1 Karl Morrison, *Understanding Conversion* (Charlottesville, 1992), p. xii.

2 See J. Bosworth and T.N. Toller, *An Anglo-Saxon Dictionary* (Oxford, 1898; *Supplement* 1921; revised with addenda by Alistair Campbell 1972); and see also the

relevant fascicles of the *Dictionary of Old English* ed. A. diPaolo Healey *et al* (Toronto, 1986-).

3 On the Old English penitentials see especially Allen J. Frantzen, *The Literature of Penance in Anglo-Saxon England* (New Jersey, 1983).

4 The classic text of speech act theory is J.L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words*. William James Lectures delivered at Harvard University in 1955. (Oxford, 1962). The terminology is given there, and the philosophy is also presented in John R. Searle, *Expression and Meaning: Studies in the Theory of Speech Acts* (Cambridge, 1979). For more recent elaborations of the theory, especially with respect to literature, see Angela Esterhammer, *Creating States: Studies in the Performative Language of John Milton and William Blake* (Toronto, 1994), Sandy Petrey, *Speech Acts and Literary Theory* (New York, 1990), and Mary Louise Pratt, *Towards a Speech Act Theory of Literary Discourse* (Bloomington, 1977). Speech act theory has occasionally been alluded to with respect to Old English texts, though never fully elaborated: see Alexandra Hennessey Olsen, *Speech, Song, and Poetic Craft: Artistry of the Cynewulf Canon* (New York, 1984); Barrie Ruth Strauss, "Women's Words as Weapons: Speech as Action in 'The Wife's Lament,'" *Texas Studies in Language and Literature* 23 (1981), pp. 268-85; Eric Jager, "Speech and the Chest in Old English Poetry: Orality or Pectorality?" *Speculum* 65 (1990), pp. 845-59; and Marie Nelson, "The Battle of Maldon and Juliana: the Language of Confrontation," in *Modes of Interpretation in Old English Literature* eds Phyllis Rugg Brown, G. Ronan Crampton, and Fred C. Robinson (Toronto, 1986), pp. 137-50.

5 Stanley Fish, *Is There a Text in this Class? The Authority of Interpretative Communities* (Cambridge, Mass., 1980), p. 221.

6 Margaret Deanesly, *An Ecclesiastical History of England: The Pre-Conquest Church in England* (London, 1961), p. 1.

7 Quotations from *Andreas* are taken from Kenneth R. Brooks, ed. *Andreas and the Fates of the Apostles* (Oxford, 1961).

8 Karl F. Morrison, *Conversion and Text: The Cases of Augustine of Hippo, Herman-Judah, and Constantine Tsatsos* (Charlottesville, Virginia, 1992), p. xii.

9 See Robert E. Bjork, *The Old English Verse Saints' Lives: A Study of Direct Discourse and the Iconography of Style* (Toronto, 1985).

10 I quote from the standard edition, which is Jane Roberts, ed. *The Guthlac Poems of the Exeter Book* (Oxford, 1979).

11 Michael D. Cherniss, *Ingeld and Christ: Heroic Concepts and Values in Old English Christian Poetry* (The Hague, 1972), p. 218.