

Chapter 7

ELENE 582–89: HYPERMETRICS, REVELATION, AND JUDGMENT

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AT A DRAMATIC crux in Cynewulf's Old English poem *Elene*, when the protagonists St. Helena and St. Judas Cyriacus are about to meet for the first time, the poet switches from ordinary verses into hypermetrics for eight consecutive lines (lines 582–89, according to the *ASPR* lineation of the passage).¹ At this point in the narrative, Helena has called an assembly of Jewish wise men to her “palace” or “court” (“salore,” 552a; “hofe,” 557b), as though before her judgment seat, to inform her about the location of the True Cross. They refuse to answer her truthfully, and Helena responds with a vicious death-threat. Her words swell into hypermetrics at the speech's end, and the hypermetrics continue for several lines beyond her speech, narrating the wise men's fearful reaction and concluding as the men give Judas over to Helena and begin to speak (573–97):²

	Elene maþelade	ond him yrrc oncwæð:
	“Ic eow to soðe	secan wille,
575	ond þæs in life	lige ne wyrðeð,
	gif ge þissum lease	leng gefylgað
	mid fæcne gefice,	þe me fore standað,
	þæt eow in beorge	bæl fornimeð,

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I On hypermetric verse, and for a full index of key technical terms used in this chapter and volume, readers should consult the Glossary of Metrical Terms in the Appendices. All citations of Old English poetry are taken from *The Anglo-Saxon Poetic Records*, ed. George Philip Krapp and Elliot Van Kirk Dobbie, 6 vols. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1931–1953), but citations of *Elene* have been compared with *Cynewulfs Elene: mit einem Glossar*, ed. Julius Zupitza, 3rd ed. (Berlin: Weidmann, 1888); *Cynewulfs Elene: mit Einleitung, Glossar, Anmerkungen, und der lateinischen Quelle*, ed. Ferdinand Holthausen, Alt- und Mittelenglische Texte, 4, 2nd ed. (New York: Stechert, 1910); *The Old English Elene, Phœnix, and Physiologus*, ed. Albert S. Cook (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1919); *Cynewulf's Elene*, ed. Pamela O. E. Gradon (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1966); and Robert E. Bjork, *The Old English Poems of Cynewulf*, Dumbarton Oaks Medieval Library, 23 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013). Citations of *Guthlac A* have been compared with Jane Roberts, *The Guthlac Poems of the Exeter Book* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1979) and Bernard J. Muir, *The Exeter Anthology of Old English Poetry: An Edition of Exeter Dean and Chapter MS 3501*, 2 vols. (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 1994). Any differences from the *ASPR* text, aside from punctuation, are discussed *ad hoc*. All translations are my own.

2 Throughout this chapter, hypermetrics are indicated by an expanded left margin in Old English text and by italics in translation.

- hattost heaðo-welma, ond eower hra bryttað,
 580 lacende lig, þæt eow sceal þæt leas
 apundrad weorðan to woruld-gedale.
 Ne magon ge ða word geseðan þe ge hwile nu on unriht
 wrigon under womma sceatum; ne magon ge þa wyrð
 bemiðan
 bedyrnan þa deopan mihte.”
 Ða wurdon hie deaðes on wenan,
 585 ades ond ende-lifes; ond þær þa ænne betæhton
 giddum gearu-snottorne, (þam wæs ludas nama
 cenned for cneo-magum), þone hie þære cwene agefon,
 sægdon hine sundor-wisne: “He þe mæg soð gecyðan,
 onwreon wyrda geryno, swa ðu hine wordum frignest,
 590 æ-riht from orde oð ende forð.
 He is for eorðan æðeles cynnes,
 word-cræftes wis ond witgan sunu,
 bald on meðle; him gebyrde is
 þæt he gen-cwidas gleawe hæbbe,
 595 cræft in breostum. He gecyðeð þe
 for wera mengo wisdomes gife
 þurh þa myclan miht, swa þin mod lufaþ.”

[Elene spoke in the assembly and answered [the Jewish wise men] wrathfully:

“I will tell you truly—and no lie will come of it in life, if you who stand before me pursue this falsehood longer in deceitful fraud—that on a hill a pyre will take you away, the hottest of battle-surgings, and break up your body, the leaping flame; that that falsehood will be reckoned against you as a cause for world-separation [that is, ‘death’]. *You cannot prove true the words that you unjustly concealed for a while now under the folds of impurities; you cannot conceal that fate, hide the deep power.*”

Then they were expectant of death, of the pyre and ending life; and they offered one up there, readily wise in sententious sayings—his name was declared to be Judas among kinsmen—whom they gave to that woman, said he was especially wise: “He can make the truth known to you, uncover the mysteries of fates as you ask him with words, law-justice from the beginning on to the end. He is of noble kind in the earth, wise in word-craft and a prophet’s son, bold in the assembly; it is his nature that he has wise answers, skill in heart. He will make known to you in the multitude of men the gift of wisdom through that great power, as your spirit desires.”]

This hypermetric set constitutes a crucial interpretive moment in the poem, and in the ensuing discussion I indicate why the poet has chosen to make this metrical shift.

Before approaching an interpretation of these lines, their problematic structure and grouping must be addressed. Lines 581a, 582a, and 582b present awkward structural alliteration. The first lift of line 581a should alliterate with *woruld*, the line’s “head-stave” (that is, the first lift of the b-verse), yet the manuscript gives us the non-alliterating first lift “apundrad.” The second lift of line 582a is “geseðan,” which alliterates neither with “word” in the a-verse nor “hwile” in the b-verse. This is not strictly a fault, but the second lift of light

hypermetric a-verses alliterates more than half the time in Old English poems.³ Lastly, the head-stave of line 582b is “**hw**ile,” which does not alliterate with “word”: “hw” exclusively alliterates with “h” elsewhere in *Elene*.

In response to these difficulties, editors have taken a variety of approaches to the passage. Ferdinand Holthausen and Pamela O. E. Gradon lineate as follows, leaving line 582b as an isolated half-line:⁴

580 lacende lig, þæt eow sceal þæt leas apundrad
 weorðan to woruld-gedale. Ne magon ge ða word geseðan
 [...] þe ge hwile nu on unriht

Technically, only Holthausen lineates 582b as a b-verse missing a companion a-verse; Gradon lineates it as an isolated half-line without suggesting that anything is missing. Yet the structure of the half-line (a light hypermetric with single, faulty alliteration) seems to suggest Holthausen is correct, and his lineation is evidently accepted by A. J. Bliss.⁵ Although Holthausen’s lineation is still problematic because it lacks an a-verse in 582, it is metrically satisfying and requires no alteration of the manuscript’s words. A missing verse would not be out of character for the text as we have it: incomplete verses can be found at lines 439 and 1044, indicating that the received text is not wholly reliable. And while isolated verses can certainly be authorial, Bliss considers them to be more likely authorial if they have double alliteration or continue alliteration from the preceding line (such as 451, 518, 1276–78).⁶ To be compared with 580b, which in Holthausen’s lineation heavily outweighs its a-verse, there are three other isolated hypermetric b-verses in *Elene* (1102, 1157, and 1159).⁷

ASPR and Robert Bjork follow the lineation of Julius Zupitza and Albert Cook, but without emending the manuscript’s words. According to this scheme, 580b and 581a are the main metrical offenders. Cook emends (emendations underlined):⁸

³ On alliteration in hypermetrics, see A. J. Bliss, *The Metre of Beowulf*, rev. ed. (Oxford: Blackwell, 1958), 92–93.

⁴ Holthausen, *Cynewulfs Elene*, 22, 90; Gradon, *Cynewulf’s Elene*, 48.

⁵ On the structure of Old English hypermetric lines, see, for example, Bliss, *Metre of Beowulf*, 88–97, and “The Origin and Structure of the Old English Hypermetric Line,” in *N&Q* 17 (1972): 242–48; Megan E. Hartman, “The Hypermetric Line in Germanic Alliterative Verse” (unpublished doctoral thesis, Indiana University, 2011), especially 24–60. On Bliss’s lineation of this passage, see *Metre of Beowulf*, 160.

⁶ See further Bliss, “Single Half-Lines in Old English Poetry,” *N&Q* 18 (1971): 442–49 at 449. Kazutomo Karasawa develops upon and diverges from Bliss’s approach to single half-lines in his chapter of this volume.

⁷ Hartman, “Hypermetric Line,” 28–31, suggests that unpaired hypermetric verses which do not occur near a hypermetric set (such as 1102, 1157, and 1159) are “improbable.” Still, this has no bearing on 580b, which initiates a set.

⁸ Zupitza, *Cynewulfs Elene*, 26; Cook, *Elene, Phœnix, and Physiologus*, 22; Bjork, *Poems of Cynewulf*, 182.

similar to *wynn* (*p*) in written form.¹⁰ A scribe may have seen fit to alter the original text accordingly, but such can only be speculation. The most convincing presentations of these lines are Zupitza's and Holthausen's, but Holthausen's lineation is to be preferred. It is metrically satisfying, requires no emendation of the manuscript's words (despite positing a missing a-verse), and rightly considers 582b an off-verse. A missing half-line could ameliorate the slightly awkward sense of 582a–3a (emphases added): "You cannot *prove true* [*geseðan*] the words that you unjustly *concealed* [*wrigon*]." In this reading, does Helena mean the wise men assert words or conceal them? Perhaps we are to understand that a false assertion entails partial concealment. Whatever the case, it at least seems that lineation and emendation do not *greatly* affect the meaning of this passage, and while it is necessary to consider the problematic structure of these lines, the most important thing is not how the lines are printed, but what the hypermetric set is doing here in the first place, the matter to which I now turn.

This hypermetric set of 8–9.5 lines (depending on lineation and whether a half-line is judged to be missing) is by far the longest of Cynewulf's oeuvre. His next largest "sets" come in at a maximum of two lines. *Guthlac B*, which could also be one of Cynewulf's compositions, contains an insubstantially larger three-line set.¹¹ Moreover, in the 2,601 lines of Old English verse which include Cynewulf's runic signatures (namely *Elene*, *Juliana*, *Fates of the Apostles*, and *Christ B*), the poet uses only 40 hypermetric verses, equivalent to 20 lines (a 0.67 percent rate of occurrence).¹² If *Guthlac B* is also Cynewulf's, the number would still only be 0.92 percent (29 of 3162 lines).¹³ The

10 Griffith, "Extra Alliteration," 75, notes that *p* alliterates in only 16 lines of all Old English poems greater than 300 lines for a frequency of 0.1 percent. Compare n9. On *apundrian* and the similar *apyndrian* (which also occurs only once, in a gloss of Aldhelm's prose work *De laude virginitatis*), see *The Dictionary of Old English: A to I online*, ed. Angus Cameron, Ashley Crandell Amos, Antonette diPaolo Healey et al. (Toronto: Dictionary of Old English Project, 2018).

11 On the close relationship between *Guthlac B* and the Cynewulf canon, see Bjork, *Poems of Cynewulf*, xi, and Andy Orchard, "Both Style and Substance: The Case for Cynewulf," in *Anglo-Saxon Styles*, ed. Catherine E. Karkov and George Hardin Brown, SUNY Series in Medieval Studies (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2003), 271–305 at 294–97.

12 A catalogue of hypermetric verses complete with scansion is given by Bliss, *Metre of Beowulf*, 158–64 (see also Hartman, "Hypermetric Line," who makes corrections to Bliss's catalogue). Cynewulf's corpus comes to 2,597.5 full lines if one reckons the 7 incomplete lines found in his works as equivalent to 7 verses, or 3.5 lines: in addition to the two defective lines and four unpaired half-lines in *Elene* (all mentioned above, except line 22), *Juliana* 559 is a defective line of only three syllables. But because both figures (20/2,601 and 20/2,597.5) give a quotient of 0.77 percent (0.769 percent and 0.77 percent respectively, an insignificant difference), I do not factor incomplete lines into my percentage figures (given below) for any poems in the corpus. On Cynewulf's runic signatures, see for example Dolores Warwick Frese, "The Art of Cynewulf's Runic Signatures," in *Anglo-Saxon Poetry: Essays in Appreciation: for John C. McGalliard*, ed. Lewis E. Nicholson and Dolores Warwick Frese (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1975), 312–34; Tom Birkett, "Runes and Revelation: Cynewulf's Signatures Reconsidered," *RES*, n.s. 65, no. 272 (November 2014): 771–89.

13 For this figure I have added *Guthlac B* 1225a (*leofum æfter longre hwile*) to Bliss's catalogue.

percentages of hypermetrics in some other prominent Old English poems are worth noting: 41.56 percent for part one of *The Dream of the Rood* (that is, the first 77 lines, 32 of which are hypermetric), 33.33 percent for *Maxims I* (68 of 204 lines), 19.54 percent for *Judith* (68/348), 5.5 percent for *Daniel* (42/764), 4.22 percent for *Guthlac A* (34.5/818), 3.26 percent for *Christ C* (26/798), 1.36 percent for *Genesis A* (31.5/2,320), 0.52 percent for *Andreas* (9/1722), and 0.36 percent for *Beowulf* (11.5/3,182).¹⁴ The point here is not necessarily that Cynewulf uses hypermetrics infrequently. Some poets do not use hypermetrics at all, and there is evidence to suggest that hypermetrics are a very old, traditional verse form which was decreasingly understood with the passage of time.¹⁵ Rather, the key point to note is that two-thirds of *Elene's* 12 hypermetric lines—and nearly half of Cynewulf's 20 total hypermetric lines—all occur in one place. This passage was clearly exceptional for the poet, crafted with care and purpose; and upon further examination it becomes apparent that this long hypermetric set is central to the poet's purposes in the poem.

The function of the hypermetric set becomes apparent when it is viewed within its narrative context, which I now outline in brief. *Elene* is Cynewulf's longest poem, consisting of 1,321 lines. Found on folios 121r–132r of the Vercelli Book, it is the codex's sixth and last poem, following *Homily XXII* (a soul-and-body meditation on death) and followed by the inappropriately named *Homily XXIII*, the codex's last work (a life of St. Guthlac). The poem itself is a relatively close rendering of a Latin version of the fecund and variable "Finding of the True Cross" tradition, although the precise Latin variant is unknown.¹⁶ The narrative begins with Constantine, who, on the eve of a seemingly hopeless battle, is visited by a resplendent messenger and a vision of the Cross of Christ.¹⁷ Instructed by the vision, Constantine has a cross borne before his army into battle, and his forces overcome their opponents (lines 1–147). Constantine subsequently converts to Christianity and sends his mother, St. Helena, to seek out the True Cross of Christ from Palestine (148–224). There Helena assembles the wisest of the Jews and orders them to reveal the location of the Cross (225–416). The wise men consult privately and Judas, exceptionally learned and son of a prophet, counsels them to withhold the Cross's location (417–546). When the assembly is called back to Helena, they are unwilling to say anything about the Cross, so Helena threatens to burn them to death, upon which

¹⁴ On the composite nature of *The Dream of the Rood*, see especially Leonard Neidorf, "The Composite Authorship of *The Dream of the Rood*," in ASE 45 (2016): 51–70.

¹⁵ Hartman, "Hypermetric Line," 406–7.

¹⁶ See, for example, Gradon, *Cynewulf's Elene*, 15–22. *The Old English Finding of the True Cross*, ed. and trans. Mary-Catherine Bodden (Cambridge: Brewer, 1987), 36–47, gives a convenient comparison of Latin and Old English versions of the *Inventio*-narrative. See also Cook, *Elene, Phœnix, and Physiologus*, xiv–xxiv, and Alfred Holder, *Inventio Sanctae Crucis: Actorum Cyriaci pars i. latine et graece; Ymnus antiquus de Sancta Cruce; Testimonia Inventae Sanctae Crucis* (Leipzig: Teubner, 1889), 44–56, on the earliest accounts of the *Inventio*.

¹⁷ On the dream, see further Antonina Harbus, "Text as Revelation: Constantine's Dream in *Elene*," *Neophilologus* 78 (1994): 645–53.

the wise men give Judas over to Helena (547–603). As we have seen, the hypermetric set overlaps with the end of Helena's threat and the beginning of the wise men's response to her.

Judas then claims not to know the location of the Cross, so Helena has him thrown into a pit for seven days, after which he agrees to comply with her wishes (604–715). He prays to God that, if God has indeed anointed Jesus, he would reveal the location of the Cross with smoke, which God does (716–827). Unsure of which of three discovered crosses is Christ's, Judas places each on a dead boy, and the last cross resurrects him, proving it is Christ's (828–94). A demon then laments and threatens the Jews, but Judas rebukes him (895–967). Subsequently, Helena has a church built on Calvary and sets the Cross in a rich casing, and Judas receives baptism (968–1043). Judas is consecrated bishop of Jerusalem and renamed Cyriacus. Then Helena asks Judas to pray that the nails which pierced Christ might be found. After his prayer, the nails begin to shine and are found (1044–1147). In the end, Helena sends the nails to Constantine, Judas performs many miracles, and Helena leaves for Rome, charging all to remember the day the Cross was found. The narrative proper ends with a blessing on all who observe this holy day (1148–1236). An epilogue follows the narrative, which includes Cynewulf's account of having been divinely inspired, his runic signature, and a description of the purgative fires of Judgment Day (1237–1321).

It can be observed from this summary that the eight-line hypermetric set sits right around the middle of the narrative's 1,236 lines, just before Helena and Judas meet for the first time. The set is enveloped by repeated diction, which gives us a clue as to its significance: Helena's words "word" (582a), "wrigon" (583a), and "wyrd" (583b) in the set's first lines are recast in the set's last line, spoken collectively by the wise men as "onwreon wyrda geryno" (589a) and "wordum" (589b). What stands out in this repeated diction, then, is (1) words ("word"), (2) (dis)covering ("[on]wreon"), and (3) fate ("wyrd"). The above summary shows that *Elene* is especially preoccupied with spiritual revelations, including miracles (Constantine's vision, the smoke revealing the Cross's resting place, the shining of the nails), rediscovered artifacts (the Cross, the nails), and the salvific story of Christ. Thus the diction enveloping this hypermetric set bespeaks the poem's central themes, and the hypermetric set itself embodies, even *performs* the poem's thematic movement from concealment to revelation.¹⁸ Even Judas, though he does not yet believe, is himself revealed here like a spiritual mystery as we catch a glimpse of his destiny as a revealer of truth.

It is important, then, to note how this shift from concealment to revelation occurs in the hypermetric set. At the end of her threat, Helena declares that the "apocalypse" (that is, *uncovering*) of truth is inevitable. Moved by their fear of her "judgment," the men betray Judas to her as the one who can reveal the truth. Now, hypermetrics are a

¹⁸ On the thematic centrality of revelation in *Elene*, see Daniel G. Calder, "Strife, Revelation, and Conversion: The Thematic Structure of *Elene*," in *ES* 53 (1972): 201–10; Jackson J. Campbell, "Cynewulf's Multiple Revelations," in *Cynewulf: Basic Readings*, ed. Robert E. Bjork, Basic Readings in Anglo-Saxon England, 4 (New York: Garland, 1996), 229–50; and Bjork, *Poems of Cynewulf*, xvii.

sonically exceptional poetic form frequently found in wisdom poetry and supernatural discourse.¹⁹ Cynewulf seems to be using this exceptional form to express this scene's importance as an exemplum within the poem. The sonic difference of hypermetrics stands out to the audience, almost as though in direct address, to impart the poem's moral message: the truth cannot and will not be forever hidden, and if we wish to avoid a wrathful judgment for neglecting and concealing it, we must do our part to seek it out and reveal it. Just as Helena's threat and gnomic declaration have the force to move their intradiegetic audience (the wise men), so they ought to move the extradiegetic audience of Cynewulf's poem—and this force is performed in hypermetrics. The poem's epilogue reiterates the moral: in his runic signatures' signature penitential tone, Cynewulf describes (1) his misery before God revealed the truth about the Cross to him (1236a–56a); (2) the transitory nature of the world and its goods (1256b–76a); (3) the final judgment of humans, when each "reord-berend" (speech-bearer) must hear God's verdict and give an account for his deeds (1277a–86a); and (4) the subsequent fiery ordeals for those deemed righteous, sinful, and cursed, respectively (1286b–1321b).²⁰

It is not likely that this admonitory theme is unrelated to the poem as a whole. Dolores Warwick Frese has demonstrated that Cynewulfian codas are integrally linked with their foregoing narratives: in the case of *Elene*, Frese notes that the poet's inspiration by divine revelation is directly tied to the revelations and subsequent conversions of Constantine and Judas.²¹ Various other scholars have noted Cynewulf's self-identification with Judas.²² The latter, who had knowledge of the Cross, is confined to a grave-like pit before he seeks the revelation of the Cross and is saved. The former, who also had knowledge of the Cross, labours heavily in the dark confinement of "narrow night" ("nihtes nearwe", 1239a) before God "revealed a roomier plan" ("rumran gepeaht ... onwreah," 1240b, 1242a) in him through the meaning of the Cross (1242b–50a, 1251b–56a). In light of these mutual identifications, Helena's Neronian threat to burn the wisest Jews is likely to be understood as having figural significance. The fiery death she promises to those who conceal the truth stands parallel to the fiery death awaiting wicked "speech-bearers," which Cynewulf describes in the epilogue. For Cynewulf, *Elene* is not simply a narrative, but a potent reminder that God is revealing himself to people

¹⁹ On some common uses of Old English hypermetrics, see Matthew D. Coker, "The Dream of the Rood and the Function of Hypermetric Lines," *N&Q* 66 (2019): 8–19.

²⁰ On the mood of Cynewulf's epilogues, see Robert C. Rice, "The Penitential Motif in Cynewulf's *Fates of the Apostles* and in his Epilogues," *ASE* 6 (1977): 105–19.

²¹ Warwick Frese, "Runic Signatures," 323–27. Compare Campbell, "Cynewulf's Multiple Revelations," 247–48.

²² See, for example, Peter Clemoes, "King Alfred's Debt to Vernacular Poetry: The Evidence of *Ellen and Cræft*," in *Words, Texts and Manuscripts: Studies in Anglo-Saxon Culture Presented to Helmut Gneuss on the Occasion of his Sixty-Fifth Birthday*, ed. Michael Korhammer (Cambridge: Brewer, 1992), 213–38 at 236–37; Varda Fish, "Theme and Pattern in Cynewulf's *Elene*," *NM* 76.1 (1975):

in wondrous ways, and that he will hold those with knowledge of him accountable for what they do with that knowledge.

Of course, in *Elene* Cynewulf is versifying an existing legend and cannot receive credit for all the interpretive possibilities of this diversely developed narrative tradition. Yet in the poem it is everywhere apparent that he is, in fact, especially concerned with revelation. Words such as “deop” (deep, in the sense of “spiritual”), “run” (private speech), “geryne” (mystery), “onwreon” (reveal), and “cuðan” (make known) recur frequently and consistently throughout the text.²³ Moreover, Cynewulf’s epilogue, which is clearly not based on his source, can be expected to intimate some of his primary concerns. Most notably, it can be demonstrated that the words of Helena’s threat are one of the poet’s inventions; therefore, they are clearly something he wished to emphasize. The closest approximation to Cynewulf’s Latin source for *Elene* 573–97 reads:²⁴

Tunc beata Aelena iussit omnes in igne mitti Qui cum timuissent tradiderunt ei ludam dicentes. Hic uir iusti et prophetae filius est et legem melius nouit cum acriuilia [var. acribia, actibus] Hic domina omnia quae desiderat cor tuum ostendet tibi diligenter.

Then blessed Helena commanded all of them to be sent into fire. They, because they had feared, gave Judas over to her, saying, “This man is the son of a righteous prophet, and he knows the law better with [?]. This man, lady, will diligently show you all that your heart desires.”

Helena’s very brief command in the Latin text is in *Elene* a long threat in direct speech, and her declaration that the truth cannot be concealed has no source in the Latin. After Helena’s speech, Cynewulf’s verses correspond relatively closely to the Latin text, in accordance with his usual practice. The poet’s independence from his source here in Helena’s speech and in the poem’s epilogue clearly indicate his aims and demonstrate that this hypermetric set was of considerable thematic value to him.

1–25; and Robert DiNapoli, “Poesis and Authority: Traces of an Anglo-Saxon *Agon* in Cynewulf’s *Elene*,” *Neophilologus* 82 (1998): 619–30.

²³ Compare Martin Irvine, *The Making of Textual Culture: Grammatica and Literary Theory, 350–1100*, Cambridge Studies in Medieval Literature, 19 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 440–446.

²⁴ Latin text cited in Holder, *Inuentio Sanctae Crucis*, 1–29 (6.185–7.191). This edition uses, among others, one of the variants closest to Cynewulf’s narrative (the St. Gall manuscript) and is very close to the *Acta Sanctorum* variant. See further Gradon, *Cynewulf’s Elene*, 18–20, for a discussion of the variants, and compare, for example, Holthausen’s composite text (cited in *Cynewulfs Elene*, 22):

Tunc beata Helena [irata]: [“soðlice ic secge, þæt ic eow ealle on fyre hate forbærnan”]. Qui cum timuissent [ignem], tradiderunt ei [unum nomine] ludam, dicentes: “Hic viri iusti et prophetae filius est et legem novit cum actibus suis: hic, domina, omnia, quae desiderat cor tuum, ostendet tibi diligenter.”

[Then blessed Helena [wrathful] said: [“Truly I say that I command you all to burn up in fire”]. Those, because they had feared [the flame], gave over to her [a man named] Judas, saying: “This man is the son of a righteous prophet, and he knows the law with its statutes. This man, lady, will diligently show you everything your heart desires.”]

While Cynewulf does not appear to model Helena's speech on his Latin source, he does have an Old English poetic precedent in mind. The poet appears to draw a significant portion of his diction from the various rhetorical battles of *Guthlac A*.²⁵

1. *Elene* 574 **Ic eow to soðe secgan wille**
Guthlac A 493b–4b **Ne** beoð þa **dyrne** (cp. *Elene* 584a) swa þeah.
 Ic eow soð siþþon **secgan wille** (Speaker: Guthlac)
2. *Elene* 575–76 ond þæs in life lige ne wyrðeð,
 gif ge þissum lease leng gefylgað
 Guthlac A [no approximations]
3. *Elene* 577 mid fæcne gefice, þe me fore standað
Guthlac A 246 Ne eam ic swa fea-log, swa ic eow fore stonde (Guthlac)
4. *Elene* 578–81 **þæt eow in beorge** hæl fornimeð,
 hattost heaðo-**welma**, ond eower hra bryttað,
 lacende **lig**, þæt eow sceal þæt leas
 apundrad weorðan to woruld-gedale
 Guthlac A 190b–93b þonne hy him **yrre** (cp. *Elene* 573b) hweopan
 frecne **fyres wylme**. Stodan him on feðe-hwearfum,
 cwædon **þæt he on þam beorge** byrnan sceolde (Narrator)
 ond his lic-homan **lig** forswelgan
 Guthlac A 283 hondum hrinan, ne þin hra feallan (Demons)
 Guthlac A 374–75 Deah ge minne flæsc-homan **fyres wylme**
 forgripen grom-hydge gifran **lege** (Guthlac)
5. *Elene* 582–84 **Ne magon ge ða word geseðan** **þe ge hwile** nu on unriht
 wrigon under womma sceatum; **ne magon ge þa** wyrd bemiðan
 bedyrnan þa deopan mihte."
 Guthlac A 702 He sceal þy wonge wealdan, **ne magon ge** him **þa wic** forstondan.
 (St. Bartholomew)
- Guthlac A* 376a–78a næfre ge mec of þissum **wordum** onwendað bendan mec min gewit
 agelæsteð.
 Peah þe ge hine sarum forsæcen, **ne motan ge** mine sawle
 gretan,
 ac ge on betran gebringað. (Guthlac)
- Guthlac A* 465–66 Fela **ge** fore monnum **miþað** þæs **þe ge** in mode gehycgað;
 ne beoð eowre dæda **dyrne**, þeah **þe ge** hy in dygle gefremme.
 (Demons)

Andy Orchard has demonstrated the same type of compositional dependence in *Judith*, where the *Judith*-poet departs from the poem's biblical source to create a dramatic battle

²⁵ Overlapping diction is indicated in bold; similar diction is underlined.

Admittedly, these are impressionistic and thematic resemblances rather than close borrowings, but the remaining hypermetrics in *Elene's* eight-line set, which follow the Latin source more closely, display far more independence from the words of *Guthlac A* (I can find no close parallels from the latter poem):²⁸

- The reminiscences of *Guthlac A* in Helena's speech seem to be the product of remembrance rather than direct borrowing by consulting a text. This possibility is even more likely given Cynewulf's remembrance of two other passages from *Guthlac A*:

28 Parallels with other Cynewulfian and non-Cynewulfian poems are given in Orchard, "Both Style and Substance," 274–87.

1. *Guthlac A* 24–25: lærað **ond** læstað, **ond his lof** rærað,
 oferwinnað þa awyrgðan gæstas, bigytað him wuldres ræste.
 Juliana 48: lufast **ond** gelyfest, **ond his lof** rærast
2. *Guthlac A* 79–80: lufiað **mid lacum** þa þe læs agun,
 dæghwam dryhtne þeowiap. He hyra dæde sceawað.
 Juliana 111 lufige **mid lacum** þone þe leoht gesceop

In the lines from *Guthlac A*, two rhyming standard verses precede two rhyming hypermetric verses, resulting in a particularly striking and memorable sonic effect. This sequence of a single rhyming couplet followed by a single rhyming hypermetric couplet is not found in any surviving Old English poem besides *Guthlac A*.²⁹ Cynewulf's lines here do not rhyme, but the similarity in structure between the lines in *Guthlac A* and *Juliana* is too strong for the passages not to be related. It is likely that Cynewulf was impressed by the poetic effect of these lines and that he remembered them, incorporating parts of their form into his own composition.

Returning to Helena's threat, the closest correspondences between her speech and *Guthlac A* seem to occur especially within *Guthlac A*'s hypermetric sets (190–193, 376–79, 465–69, 701–2), especially those hypermetric sets which are part of the rhetorical battles between Guthlac and the demons he has supplanted. While space forbids further exposition of *Guthlac A* here, a few remarks are necessary. In *Guthlac A*, demons repeatedly threaten Guthlac with empty death-threats, and Guthlac responds by declaring either his confidence that he will be saved or the demons' destined doom. These word-battles often have a highly juridical flavour, especially because Guthlac and the demons are locked in a territorial dispute, and the poem's hypermetrics are primarily used for important spiritual revelations, counsels, and assertions of authority.³⁰ Helena's hypermetric speech in *Elene* approaches a similar usage, both in its threat towards the Jews (just as demons threaten Guthlac) and in her declaration of fate (a rhetorical weapon which is used by both Guthlac and the demons). In the declaration of fate (that is, that the truth cannot be concealed), she uses a bipartite hypermetrical structure ("Ne magon ge ...," 582a–83a; "Ne magon ge ...," 583b–84a) which is paralleled in *Guthlac A*, *Genesis A*, *Christ C*, and *The Dream of the Rood*.³¹

²⁹ For a fuller discussion of this effect in *Guthlac A*, see Matthew D. Coker, "Voicing the Supernatural in Anglo-Saxon England" (unpublished doctoral thesis, Oxford University, 2019), chap. 4.

³⁰ For further discussion, see Coker, "Voicing the Supernatural," chaps. 4 (on *Guthlac A*) and 5 (on *Genesis A*, where hypermetrics are also used in "legal" contexts).

³¹ See Coker, "Function of Hypermetric Lines," 14–18, and n26, where I discuss *The Dream of the Rood*, *Genesis A*, and *Christ C*. In *Guthlac A*, some evidence of this dual structure can be observed above in 376a–78a ("næfre ge mec; ne motan ge") and 465–66 ("Fela ge; ne beoð eowre") and below in 287–91 ("gif þu ure; gif ðu þines").

The only other two hypermetric sets in *Elene* also seem to indicate borrowing from *Guthlac A*:

1. *Elene* 609–10 **Iudas hire ongen þingode** (**ne** meahte **he** þa gehðu bebugan,
oncyrran rex geniðlan; he wæs on þære cwene gewældum)
- Elene* 667–68 **Iudas hire ongen þingode,** **cwæð þæt he** þæt on gehðu gespræce
ond on tweon swiðost, wende him trage hnagre
- Guthlac A* 239 **Guðlac him ongean þingode,** **cwæð þæt hy** gielpa **ne** þorfstan

These are the only verses in Old English poetry which collocate *ongean* and *þingian*. The only other similar locutions are “gean þingade” in *Genesis A* 1009b (where God is the speaker); “wið þingode” in Cynewulf’s *Elene* 77b (where an angel is the speaker) and *Juliana* 261b and 429b (where a demon is the speaker); and “wiðþingode” in *Andreas* 263b, 306b, and 632b (where Jesus is the speaker). The verses from *Elene* are clearly related to *Guthlac A* 239. Given the foregoing evidence, it must be that the sonic effect of *Guthlac A*’s hypermetrics, paired with their rhetorical effect, had a lasting influence on Cynewulf’s verse. It is also important to note that here in both 609–10 and 667–68, Judas is compelled to speak to Helena and his anxiety (*gehðu*) is highlighted, generally fitting the fearsome judgment-context of the eight-line hypermetric set.

Helena’s threat shares certain structural affinities with one of the demons’ threats in *Guthlac A* 280–291:³²

- | | |
|-----|---|
| 280 | We þe beoð holde gif ðu us hyran wilt,
oþþe þec ungearo eft gesecað
maran mægne, þæt þe mon ne þearf
hondum hrianan, ne þin hra feallan
wæpna wundum. We þas wic magun |
| 285 | fotum afyllan; folc in ðriceað
meara þreatum ond mon-farum.
Beoð þa gebolgne, þa þec breodwiað,
tredað þec ond tergað, ond hyra torn wrecað,
toberað þec blodgum lastum; gif þu ure bidan þencest, |
| 290 | we þec niþa genægað. Ongin þe generes wilnian,
far þær ðu freonda wene, gif ðu þines feores recce. |

[We will be gracious to you if you will heed us, or a greater strength will seek you out again when you are unready, so that none will need to touch you with hands, nor fell your body with the wounds of weapons. We can raze this settlement with our feet; a people will force their way in with bands of horses and human-entourages. They will be

32 Repeated third-person plural verb endings are indicated in bold. “Rhyming” endings are in italics. For fuller discussion of this passage in its rhetorical context, see again Coker, “Voicing the Supernatural,” chap. 4.

swollen with anger, those who strike you down, tread you and tear you and avenge their grief, *bear you away, leaving bloody tracks; if you think to endure us, we will assault you with hostilities. Start asking for refuge for yourself, and go where you expect to find friends, if you care for your life.*]

By comparison, both threats begin with lines of very similar structure. The a-verse has a structure of first-person pronoun + second-person pronoun + *o*-internal feminine rhyme; the b-verse has an infinitive (of hearing, speaking) + finite form of *willan* (“We þe beoð holde | gif ðu us hyran wilt,” *Guthlac A* 280; “Ic eow to soðe | secgan wille,” *Elene* 574). Helena’s speech, like the demons’, also repeatedly uses finite third-person verbs before leading up to the hypermetric set (“wyrðeð,” 575b; “gefylgað,” 576b; “standaþ,” 577b; “fornimeð,” 578b; “bryttað,” 578b), setting them in an especially noticeable verse-final position for five consecutive lines. While the demons do not threaten Guthlac with fire in this passage, they do in at least two others (189b–99b, 579–89; Guthlac’s comment at 374–75 seems to suggest that the demons also threatened him with fire in a portion of the poem which is now lost). If these passages are related, it is noteworthy that the demons’ threat at *Guthlac A* 280–291 also has an instance of *tricolon abundans* (a form of clausal parallelism in which the third clause is longest) preceding hypermetrics (“tredað þec ond tergað, ond hyra torn wrecað,” 287a–89a), just like *Guthlac A* 24–25, which Cynewulf also seems to have remembered. While lines 287a–89a are perhaps not as impressive sonically as 24–25, line 288 does have three third-person plural verbs with internal rhyme (*tredað*, *tergað*, *torn wrecað*) and an alternating alliterative pattern (*tr-*, *t-r*; *t-r*, *wr-*), lending it a certain mnemonic quality.

Cynewulf, who may have composed *Guthlac B*, likely read or heard *Guthlac A* and remembered its most salient poetic effects (rhyming verses, *tricolon abundans*, and hypermetrics), especially where these are used in tandem. Even if the reader will not agree on the date of *Guthlac A* based on linguistic and metrical grounds, they will perhaps remember both that Cynewulf is known to be a highly formulaic poet (more than 40 percent of his verses are “formulaic”) and that the stylistic features he mimics here are characteristic of *Guthlac A*.³³ It is likely that Cynewulf, who generally uses *tricolon abundans* and hypermetrics only occasionally, was influenced by *Guthlac A*. If Cynewulf remembered *Guthlac A*’s salient sonic effects, it stands to reason that he also remembered their agonistic context. Such remembrance is reflected in *Elene*’s eight-line hypermetric set: it shares with *Guthlac A*’s hypermetrics rhetorical conflict whose resolution hinges on a coming judgment and revelation of truth.

Francis Leneghan has persuasively argued that the Vercelli Book was assembled to “teach the teachers”—that is, to train educators in their dual roles as interpreters and communicators of spiritual signs.³⁴ A similar rationale seems to lie at the heart of

³³ Orchard, “Both Style and Substance,” especially 278.

³⁴ Francis Leneghan, “Teaching the Teachers: The Vercelli Book and the Mixed Life,” in *ES* 94 (2013): 627–58.

Elene, and this text about revelation and proclamation makes a perfect final poem for the codex. In *Elene*, the eight-line hypermetric set stands apart from ordinary lines through its lengthened verses and heightened patterning, and both Helena's message and the wise men's response to it (distinguished as these are by hypermetrics) stand out from the rest of the narrative to communicate the gravity of the coming Judgment and the proper response to it: seeking out and revealing truth. The thematic correlation between the hypermetric set and epilogue confirms this impression. Moreover, the connection between hypermetrics in *Guthlac A* and *Elene* illuminates the connotations Cynewulf probably had in mind when constructing *Elene's* expanded verses. These are further indications of the fundamental importance that the study of metre and compositional style hold for our interpretation of Old English poems. A. J. Bliss was a forerunner in demonstrating this importance, and the ongoing work of the ground-breaking Consolidated Library of Anglo-Saxon Poetry will doubtless continue to demonstrate this value in exciting new ways and change the way we read (and remember) these poems.³⁵

35 I am grateful to Professor Francis Leneghan for reading a draft of this chapter and for his insightful suggestions.

