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Year in School: Senior
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Funding Source: MU Undergraduate Research Scholars Program

Examining cultural hybrids in Anglo-Saxon England

The tribes that settled England 1500 years ago are our cultural and linguistic ancestors, and the more we understand about them the more we can learn about ourselves. However, their language is dead and resembles German more than English, and only 30,000 anonymous, untitled lines of their poetry survive. Thus, scholars do not have much to work with and what they do have is problematic. It is no surprise that we have filled gaps in our understanding with our own cultural defaults, forcing the Anglo-Saxon poetry into distinctions such as Christian versus pagan. But comparative research worldwide has shown that when two diverse cultures integrate—as happened when the once-pagan Anglo-Saxons integrated Christianity into their society—they do not simply adopt the new system. Instead, what emerges is a unique synthesis of both belief systems, a “child” having characteristics of each “parent,” but that has a life of its own. Therefore we need to re-examine the poetry on its own terms and discover what information it conveys, not what scholars living a millennium later supply on accident. To this end, I analyzed a poem which scholars call *The Wife’s Lament* using methods from Oral Traditions studies. I went through the poem half-line by half-line using a database of the Anglo-Saxon language to locate phrases and other elements that recur in different poems. Comparing the contexts of each recurrence can reveal cultural implications and idiomatic meaning behind the phrases, the same way that the phrase “Once upon a time” bears unique, traditional meanings for us. The resulting understandings from this and future research can serve as an excellent model of how cultures do and do not adapt when they come into contact with one another, a very important lesson for our own ever-diversifying society.