

## ***Thor, with Angels: Christopher Fry's Canterbury Festival Play***

Christopher Fry places the action of the play on the eve of the arrival in Kent of Augustine (to be known as a result as Augustine of Canterbury) in AD 596 as a missionary from Rome by Pope Gregory the Great to reconvert Britain. By doing so, Fry allows himself a way to naturally weave together the aspirations and fears of the Jutes and the young lapsed Briton with the coming of the Christian faith.

### The Purpose of Merlin

Merlin functions as the voice of the pagan past, yet also acts in something approaching Christian knowledge. He sees the British future; he foretells the return of Christianity; he speaks in a way that unites time and nature. Merlin understands that Hoel cannot escape his baptism.

Look at Merlin's final speech (3.207-208). What does he conclude about the slumbering rock and the purposes of the gods in preparation for the one God?

### Cymen's Conversion

Cymen's conversion at the end of the play is prepared for through a number of stages:

1. Cymen's supernatural defense of Hoel on the battlefield creates *Thor, with Angels's* initial dilemma. Cymen's action, however outside his strict control, forces something of a power encounter with the family's gods, as well as with his family in general.
2. His unbidden toast of "Let us love one another" again unsettles his normal practice and assumptions concerning the gods, quickly followed by his attempt to kill Hoel almost killing Quichelm instead.
3. Merlin's oblique answers further frustrate Cymen as to the source of the power that opposes him.
4. Hoel's courage and slaying of the great wolf plunges Cymen into further despair at the silence of the gods. With his effrontery in sacrificing only a lamb, he hopes to force the gods out of their silence. Instead, the Messenger comes with a summons from King Ethelbert.
5. Cymen's final speeches suggest that he has found (or begun to find) answers to his dilemmas. (3.212-214). The sacrifice made by God of Himself opens up a way to live in the world and in God together.

### **Discussion Questions**

- How would you describe the piety and despair of the Norse religion?
- Does it parallel modernity in any way?
- What role does the metaphor of silence serve in the play?
- What role does dreaming serve?
- How does Hoel's lapsed state comment on the contemporary state (ca. 1948) of an increasingly secular Britain?
- What role does Hoel's crucifixion play at the end of the drama? Is it significant?
- How would you describe the dialogue of the various characters?