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Medieval Latin 105

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*Spondeo in the Waltharius*

*Spondere* means to “promise solemnly” or “to pledge one's self.” In early Classical times, a contract was legally binding only if *spondeo* was used to contract it, rather than other words of promise. This was recorded in Gaius's *Institutiones Juris Civilis* around 180 C.E., but it is presumed to originate much earlier.<sup>1</sup> Another meaning of the word is to “engage in marriage, to betroth.” That meaning is also an old one, occurring in Plautus's *Trinummus* no later than 184 B.C.E. In that play, it is used to contract a marriage agreement, probably in part because of its legal importance.<sup>2</sup> By the later medieval period, the substantive noun *sponsa*, which is derived from *spondeo*, was often used to refer to the bride of Christ.<sup>3</sup>

The *Waltharius* poet uses the first two meanings of *spondeo* throughout the poem. Examining the use of *spondeo* can shed light on the possibly Christian nature of the poem, and the debate about whether it is ironic. A form of *spondeo* first appears when Ospirin tells Attila to give a wife to Walter, and speaks of “*qui dat sponsam*”<sup>4</sup> in line 139. Forms of *spondeo* are also used to refer to marriage and betrothal in lines 229, 235, 571, 980, 1149, 1174, 1195, 1409, 1418, and 1448. Of these eleven instances, two refer to the betrothal between Hildegund and Walter, three refer to Walter himself, and four refer to Hildegund. Interestingly, the word is used both in the beginning of the story, when their betrothal is secret, and at the very end, when Walter returns

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1 Charlton T. Lewis, *A Latin Dictionary founded on Andrews' edition of Freund's Latin Dictionary*. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), 1745.

2 Lewis, 1746.

3 Domino du Cange, *Glossarium mediae et infimae latinitatis*. (Paris, 1887), 562.

4 Dennis M. Kratz, ed. and trans., *Waltharius and Ruodlieb*. (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1984), line 139.

home and marries Hildegund.

The forms used in lines 799, 914, 1089, and 1099 take the “solemn promise” meaning. The promises they refer to are, respectively, Gunther's promise of treasure to Hadaward, Gerwit's promise to avenge Batavid, Hagen's promise of faith to Walter, and a figurative promise – confidence's promise of the impossible. In using *spondeo* for these oaths, the *Waltharius* poet may intend to call upon the legal meaning, lending the promises greater gravity. Ironically, none of these solemn promises is fulfilled, just as the figurative statement using *spondeo* is about the unachievable. Hagen speaks the figurative words, “*Quae nequeunt fieri, spondet fiducia cordi,*” arguing to Gunther that even though confidence promises the things which cannot be done, it would be foolish to fight Walter after he has slaughtered their comrades.<sup>5</sup> What is more, Hagen gives in a few lines later, becoming the foolhardy Confidence he has just mocked, finding nearly as bad an end as did his comrades.

In contrast, in the instances where *spondeo* and its forms refer to marriage, and specifically to Walter and Hildegund and their marriage, the promises are true. The promise made by their parents is honored by young Walter when he refuses to take a wife offered by Attila, and honored by Hildegund's service to him while they flee. At the end of the poem, the promise is fulfilled by their marriage. Although he is injured alongside Gunther and Hagen, Walter ends the poem happily, ruling Aquitaine for 30 years after his father's death.<sup>6</sup> He is the only character in the poem to be overtly Christian, and the promise that his father made, and that he honors and fulfills, is a sacrament.

When examined in this way, the uses of the word *spondeo* in the *Waltharius* support claims that the work is meant ironically, and that the poet forwards a Christian agenda at the

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5 Kratz, line 1099.

6 Kratz, line 1450.

expense of the pagan characters. Promises made between comrades and between the lord and his liege come to nothing, breaking on the same day, or, in the case of the bond Hagen feels toward Walter, a few months. These promises end in humorous disgrace. However, the promise made by Alphere and Hereric<sup>7</sup> lasts for the whole of the story, and if the audience is Christian, they may even imagine that the promise lasts forever. The Christian character, Walter, and his faithful *sponsa* Hildegund end the story happily, demonstrating the poet's positive use of *spondeo*.

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7 Kratz, line 80.