IT'S ABOUT TIME: KINGSHIP AND THE CHARACTER IN A CONTEMPORARY BEOWULF

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by

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For Caroline Eckert, 1903-1998

Who never learned to click a computer mouse, but could
recite to me the Chaucer she learned during World War I.

wes God hira ræste - May God rest her

Chapter 1

Introduction

Beowulf occupies a unique position in English literature, not only because so little is known of its provenance, but also because it is a poem with no documented audience until well after the renaissance. Whereas Chaucer's works have been copied and enjoyed since their writing, there is no evidence that Beowulf did more than lie forgotten on a monastery shelf for some five hundred years. From Richard Harvey's opinion on Anglo-Saxon manuscripts in 1597, "Let them lye in dead forgetfulnesse like stones"[1] to Quiller-Couch's statement at Cambridge that Chaucer "inherited nothing from Caedmon and Cynewulf but only from Italy and Provence,"[2] poems such as Beowulf have had great difficulty being accepted as worthwhile pieces of literature. The lack of a verifiable historical audience for Beowulf has given the poem the critical reputation of being irretrievably alien and distant to a modern reader. Earl sees the poem as being forever "a distant stranger."[3] In 1936, some twenty years after Quiller-Couch, Tolkien argued for Beowulf's merit as a work of literature worth studying in itself. His lecture to the British Academy is seen as a turning point in Beowulf criticism. Yet Tolkien also treated the poem as something antiquarian and intentionally distant in spirit, focusing not on the human characters, but on the monsters.

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[1] Quoted in John D. Niles, "Beowulf, Truth, and Meaning," A Beowulf Handbook, eds. Robert E. Bjork and John D. Niles (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 1997) 2.
[2] Clinton Albertson, "Anglo-Saxon Literature and Western Culture," Thought 33 (1958) 94.
[3] James W. Earl, Thinking About Beowulf (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994) 11.

Part of this feeling of strangeness comes from the disappearance of the cultural trappings of the poem: the mead hall, the poetry of the harp, the glory of battle, and the warrior who swears lifelong fealty to his beloved lord. Mitchell and Robinson, in their Old English primer, discuss the role of the loyalty between man and lord in the writings of the period, noting that "the time was not far distant when the interest of writers switched from the 'heroic' love of man for man to the 'romantic' love of man for woman."[4] C.S. Lewis went even further, again in 1936, stating outright that "Every one has heard of courtly love, and every one knows that it appears quite suddenly at the end of the eleventh century in Languedoc."[5] In comparison to this sea-change in literature, the renaissance was "a mere ripple"[6] in Lewis' view.

But such broad shifts in poetic themes seldom happen suddenly and irreversibly. The taste for battle and a glorious death did not disappear from medieval literature; the martial Song of Roland enjoyed wide popularity, and Malory wrote of a knighthood code which was stern and harsh.[7] The husband himself of Chrètien de Troyes' patron, Marie of Champagne, sponsored the Vengeance Alexandre, where "loyalty to one's lord and the smashing of heads are the main concerns."[8] Chaucer has his Knight, but also his Miller, an "antidote to courtly love."[9] By Shakespearean times, chivalry, already destroyed by the crossbow and then gunpowder, is a distant enough memory so that Falstaff can

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[4] Bruce Mitchell and Fred C. Robinson, A Guide to Old English (New York: Basil Blackwell Inc., 1986) 137.
[5] C.S. Lewis, The Allegory of Love (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986) 2.
[6] Lewis, Allegory, 4
[7] Terence McCarthy, "Beowulf's Bairns: Malory's Sterner Knights". In Leo Carruthers, Heroes and Heroines in Medieval English Literature (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1994) 153.
[8] Larry D. Benson, Contradictions: From Beowulf to Chaucer (Brookfield, VT: Ashgate Publishing, 1995) 298.
[9] W.T.H. Jackson, Medieval Literature (New York: Collier Books, 1967) 205.

comically mock its pomposity. As feudalism waned, so did its role in literature; despite the growth of interest in coats of arms, the number of knights in real life had been declining since 1250.[10]

This critical tendency to attempt to find broad changes in literary styles, and to mark them to specific time periods, results in a second obstacle in understanding Beowulf. The characters live in a fictional world critically claimed to be military and heroic rather than romantic, contributing to the sense of strangeness and distance evoked by Tolkien's emphasis on the supernatural elements of the poem. This separation heightens the impression of distance in Beowulf, or what Heaney calls the "once upon a time"[11] feeling of the story.

Yet this heroic-romantic dichotomy is artificial rather than historical; many Anglo-Saxon motifs which are presented as being essentially different from later medieval Romance literature form a literary continuum rather than an abrupt change in values. The origin of courtly love forms a lively debate, with some arguing for origins in the growing veneration of the virgin Mary, Islamic culture, or even classical sources.[12] Vegetius was the accepted early authority on martial chivalry.[13] But Lewis has no truck with pre-French sources, criticizing Odysseus for coldly loving Penelope "as he loves the

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[10] Peter Coss, The Knight in Medieval England 1000-1400 (Dover, NH: Alan Sutton Publishing, 1993) 3.
[11] Seamus Heaney, Beowulf: A New Verse Translation (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2000) ix.
[12] Deborah Webster Rogers and Ivor A. Rogers, J.R.R. Tolkien (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1980) 34.
[13] Little John of Saintré, trans. Irvine Gray (London: George Routledge and Sons, 1931) 63-4. In Joseph R. Ruff, "Malory's Gareth Fifteenth-century Chivalry". Larry D. Benson and John Leyerle, eds. Chivalric Literature (Kalamazoo: The Board of the Medieval Institute, 1980) 102.

rest of his home and possessions."[14] Yet Odysseus refuses the beautiful goddess Calypso in devotion to his wife, and, as with the "Husband's Message", Odysseus and Penelope undergo a sort of lover's game involving Odysseus' bed to prove their identity to each other.

The theme of exile has also been cited as a distinct Anglo-Saxon theme, with critics arguing that exile "has none of the romantic aura that a later age might ascribe to it... the solitary figure is invariably suspect."[15] Exiles in Scandinavian literature are usually outlaws, banished for 'some killings', as is Grettir and Njálssaga's Gunnar, as well as Erik the Red[16]). Yet voluntary exiles, *peregrini pro amore Dei*, pilgrims for the love of God, were well known in early England.[17] One such pilgrim is depicted in "The Seafarer", who, while remembering his lost *duguð*, still has a sort of "perverse voluntary addiction" to his life at sea.[18] The sea itself has been dismissed as an obstacle, merely "something to be navigated"[19] in Beowulf; but Scyld's burial is described with elegance and mystery, ending with the dreamlike closure that "men ne cunnon / secgan tō sōðe... hwā þæm hlæste onfēng"- "men could not say truly how that cargo was received" (50-2). The poet suggests a mood here of awe and mystery in a similar manner to a 12th-century romantic poet.

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[14] Lewis, Allegory, 4.
[15] Michael J. Swanton, Crisis and Development in Germanic Society 700-800 (Göppingen: Kümmerle Verlag, 1982) 94.
[16] The Vinland Sagas, trans. Magnus Magnusson and Hermann Pálsson. (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1965) 17.
[17] Earl, 59.
[18] Earl, 56.
[19] Jill Mann, "Sir Gawain and the Romance Hero". Heroes and Heroines, 107.

It is evident that the distance between Anglo-Saxon and medieval literature has been overestimated, and usually the former is claimed to suffer in comparison. But literary worldviews were not artificial constructs, subject to change by political edicts; the values emphasized slowly changed, just as the societies they mirrored slowly changed. Tolkien depicts the world of Beowulf as one already fossilized and ancient when it was written down, as though it were a "once upon a time" story even in an Anglo-Saxon meadhall. Yet this view fails to take note of the modern and fluid elements of the poem, and ignores the obvious: the opinion that the world of Beowulf is strange to modern ears would not have made it strange to contemporary ears.

A popular fifth-century Latin love story borrowed from Greek[20], Apollonius of Tyre, was extant, at least in fragmentary form, in Old English sometime around the conquest; it may serve as an example of how modern sentiments may cloud contemporary perceptions of distance.

> Đā nam Apollonius þæt gewrit ond ræde. Ond, sōna swā
> hē ongeat þæt hē gelufod wæs fram ðām mædene,
> his andwlita eal ārēodode. Đā se cyng þæt geseah,
> þā nam hē Apollonies hand, ond hine hwōn fram þām cnihtum gewænde,
> ond cwæð: 'Wāst þū þone forlidenan man?' Apollonius cwæð:
> 'Đū gōda cyning, gif þīn willa bið, ic hine wāt.'
> Đā geseah se cyng þæt Apollonius mid rōsan rude
> wæs eal oferbræded. þā ongeat hē þone cwyde, ond þus cwæð tō him:
> 'Blissa, blissa, Apolloni, for ðām þe mīn dohtor gewilnað þæs,
> ðe mīn willa is.'
>
> (Then Apollonius took the letter and read. And, as soon as he understood that he was loved by the maiden, his face reddened. When the king saw this, he took Apollonius' hand, and led him away from the knights and said: 'Were you the shipwrecked man?' Apollonius said, 'Good king, if it is your will, I know him.' Then the king saw that Apollonius was overspread with the

[20] Jackson, 51.

> redness of a rose. Then he understood his words, and said thus to him: 'Rejoice, rejoice, Apollonius, for that which my daughter wills, so my will is.'[21]

Two impressions may be garnered from this story. First, as maudlin as the Apollonius tale is, there are already the accoutrements of later medieval romance; the elegance of medieval courtliness and politeness, and the easily embarrassed hero who cannot openly proclaim his love for his lady, are all present here; clearly, such themes were not alien to the Anglo-Saxons.

Second, the sense of contemporaneity should be recognized. The Apollonius story has been subtly updated in its translation from the Greek legend, and the incest and brothels of the Greek original have been tidily expunged; there are now knights and maidens, and all the gentility such terms imply. Although the ninth-century meaning of *cniht* does not yet imply armor and heraldry, there is an intention of relevance to the time period. It is easy to forget that these character types all existed when the story was being told in England, and that kings, princes, and shipwrecks were evident in real life. Anglo-Saxon narrators, such as the speaker in "The Seafarer", tend to speak longingly of the past; yet it should not be assumed that such works are necessarily set in the past. An Anglo-Saxon audience might have identified with the mystery and sense of loss that the speaker in "The Ruin" feels as he sees the works of giants, probably abandoned Roman walls, long "gebrocen to beorgum" - broken into rubble-heaps; some in the audience would have seen Roman stone with their own eyes.

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[21] Unless otherwise noted, all OE translations are my own. Diacritical marks are as in Klaeber.

As the settings of later medieval romances became increasingly anachronistic to their readership, the stories remained consciously set in the past or looking back to it fondly, to a sentimental lost age of Arthur or Charlemagne.[22] Chrétien de Troyes writes from a time even then gone in Yvain: "Those who in the past obeyed the dictates of love were accounted valiant, generous and worthy, but now love is turned into a trifling thing."[23] In one of Caxton's early printed books in English, he decries the lack of modern men like Richard and Henry V, and gently asks, "O ye knyghtes of Englond, where is the custome and usage of noble chivalry that was used in tho days?"[24] This is a work from 1483 already lamenting chivalry as a moribund institution. In a gunpowder age, the supposed innocence of chivalrous life gained a sentimental antiquation; but this would not have been the case for the audience of a story about jousting which had lived in the age of jousts.

The reality is that much of medieval literature was written to be contemporary to its audience, for the writing of literature had political consequences. Lewis viewed adultery as an essential aspect of chivalry, in which "the poet normally addresses another man's wife."[25] Yet this poetic mode was criticized and became muted in later romances as their behavioral code increasingly "became a guide to conduct."[26] Benson goes

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[22] John Leyerle, "The Major Themes of Chivalric Literature". Larry D. Benson and John Leyerle, eds. Chivalric Literature (Kalamazoo: The Board of the Medieval Institute, 1980) 135.
[23] Chrétien de Troyes, Yvain II 1121ff, quoted in Deborah Webster Rogers and Ivor A. Rogers, J.R.R. Tolkien (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1980) 129.
[24] William Caxton, "Exhortation to the Knights of England" (1483). Chivalric Literature, xiii.
[25] Lewis, Allegory, 3.
[26] Loretta Wasserman, "Honor and Shame in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight", in Chivalric Literature, 90.

further, arguing that a tradition of courtly adultery never existed.[27] Both opinions point to a contemporary concern that readers might identify too closely with the stories they read; English romances had always been tamer than those from France in terms of morality (in Malory, adultery ultimately *destroys* Arthurian civilization.[28]) Again, the modern viewpoint is to ascribe a greater distance between the perceived timeframe of medieval literature and its audience than actually existed; the motivations and actions of the characters could be highly current. Beowulf also does not mourn a lost way of life; it glories in its ever-presence and currency, however precarious it may be at the poem's end. Its morality is prescriptive and meant for the present; the narrator says *swā sceal* – "so *should*".

As to possible contemporary criticism of Beowulf's morality, nothing is known. The antipathy to Anglo-Saxon letters is long-standing. To early bishops, the Germanic lays were no more than the "croaking of harsh-voiced birds."[29] Beowulf itself is studied with an intensity its "original poet and scribe might find odd"[30]. The manuscript itself is plain and lacks ornate illumination, and the scribe begins to multiply his use of abbreviations in the last leaves in order to jam in the text without using additional parchment.[31] Other than some nebulous and contentious echoes in Andreas, the poem cannot be proven to have been popular or well-read at any time. Kiernan posits that the worn condition of the last manuscript leaf implies that it served as the book's outside

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[27] Benson, 296.
[28] Jackson, 187.
[29] R.W. Chambers, Widsith (1936; Repr. New York: Russell & Russell, 1965) 2.
[30] John D. Niles, "Beowulf, Truth and Meaning". A Beowulf Handbook, 2
[31] Kevin Kiernan, Beowulf and the Beowulf Manuscript (1981; Repr. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1996) 149.

cover.[32] The blurred ink on the lower edge of the leaf might suggest that the book was handled by many readers; it may also merely indicate that one individual held it with very perspiring hands.

The only real fact which suggests the poem's popularity is that someone bothered to write it down at all, a labor-intensive and costly activity using scarce resources. As Whitelock notes, there are no records of Anglo-Saxon clerics composing secular poems for themselves;[33] in a time before solitary reading was common, poems were intended to be heard by audiences and perhaps accompanied by a harp, as even sermons often were. Some early missionaries sang secular songs to attract crowds. Both Aldhelm and Alcuin, despite his one-time "What has Ingeld to do with Christ?" outburst, knew and respected non-Christian stories,[34] and Bede was himself skilled in native minstrelsy.[35]

Modern attitudes have been no kinder than Alcuin's remark. Niles rightly points out that many academics would be "embarrassed to be as ignorant of the classical antecedents of their civilization as they are of its native English roots."[36] Despite the fact that Anglo-Saxon poetry was highly sophisticated (Brodeur claims it was so inflexible as to be already on its way to decadence [37]), the myth of Roman missionaries encountering a mindless people dies hard, as well as the attitude that "Latin culture is the only culture."[38] The Germanic world was rich with its own images, symbols, and music. Cynewulf, who

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[32] Kiernan, 149.
[33] Dorothy Whitelock, The Audience of Beowulf (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1951) 19.
[34] W.F. Bolton, Alcuin and Beowulf (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1978) 4.
[35] W.L. Renwick and H. Orton, The Beginnings of English Literature (London: Cresset Press, 1939) Pt. I, 2nd ed., 1952, 27.
[36] John D. Niles, Homo Narrans (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999) 5.
[37] Arthur Gilchrist Brodeur, The Art of Beowulf (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969) 1.
[38] Renwick and Orton, 27.

was well-educated, still composed orally.[39] Beowulf itself had to be rescued from being Latinized when Tolkien removed 'The' from its title.[40] Early academics mislabeled the poem as an account of Danish wars, and its very survival may stem from a renaissance theologian's search for political material; previous kings had already used accounts of Arthur to bolster their own genealogical claims; Polydore Vergil's Anglica Historia (1534) was met with "a storm of obloquy"[41] when he questioned Geoffrey of Monmouth's inflated histories of Arthur, which Tudor kings had long used as an official national past for propaganda purposes.

Literary Beowulf criticism had an equally dim start. Victorian academics attempted to reclaim the poem as a lost primal, national epic for their own respective countries. In 1897 Blackburn called Beowulf "essentially a heathen poem"[42]. Strong went little further in 1921 in calling the poem not of "purely literary interest."[43] Problems in interpretation were explained away by simply claiming that the poet or copyists were incompetent, or at best, magnifying a slight Germanic lay or series of lays into epic form, "as if Milton had recounted the story of Jack and the Beanstalk in noble verse."[44] Tennyson and Longfellow both translated a few lines, but the poem has until recently inspired little creative output in comparison to Chaucerian and Shakespearean works, which have a longer history of readers. The last thirty years have somewhat

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[39] Brodeur, 3.
[40] Seth Lerer, "Beowulf and Contemporary Critical Theory". A Beowulf Handbook, 329.
[41] J.D. Mackie, The Earlier Tudors 1485-1558 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1952) 27. Craig R. Davis, Beowulf and the Demise of Germanic Legend (New York: Garland Publishing, 1996) 3.
[42] In C. Tidmarsh Major, "A Christian Wyrd: Syncretism in Beowulf". English Language Notes 32:3, March 1995, 1.
[43] J.R.R. Tolkien, Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics (Norwood Editions, 1976) (1936) 3.
[44] Tolkien, 10.

remedied this neglect, as the poem seems to have inspired a wealth of quasi-adaptations; there has been a Beowulf rock opera, a string of comic books, a 1977 parody entitled Beowabbit,[45] and even a Linux computing protocol named "Beowulf". More serious literary output includes Michael Crichton's Eaters of the Dead, which incorporates echoes of the poem's plot elements, as well as Seamus Heaney's 1999 poetic translation, dryly dubbed 'Heaneywulf' by academics.

Yet twentieth-century critics had difficulty accepting Beowulf as a work of literature with its own set of rules, complaining of Hrothgar's anachronistic Christianity while freely accepting that Shakespeare's characters have Elizabethan manners in ancient Greek settings. Academics have tended either to under-analyze the poem, criticizing it for not being "something that the scholar would have liked better"[46], such as a heroic lay or history of Scandinavia, or to over-analyze the poem. Such is the case with the "blīðheort"- blithe-hearted (1801) raven who awakens Beowulf after his cleansing of Heorot. Critics, unable to see before Poe, have variously found the raven to be a sun-deity and a symbol of "the ever present death in life."[47] This ignores the un-pedantic fact that home ravens still inhabit Icelandic farms, where they are "thought of as carrying the luck of the house."[48] A similar example of this academic tendency is found in criticism of Chaucer's "Miller's Tale", where the rock with which Alison threatens Absalom was turned into a complex biblical allegory. The theory endured until a commentator who

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[45] Marijane Osborn, "Translations, Versions, Illustrations". A Beowulf Handbook, 354.
[46] Tolkien, 4.
[47] Marijane Osborn, "Domesticating the *Dayraven* in Beowulf 1801 (With Some Attention to Alison's *Ston*)", in Helen Damico and John Leyerle, ed. Heroic Poetry in the Anglo-Saxon Period (Kalamzoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 1993) 316.
[48] Marijane Osborn, Heroic Poetry, 324, 321.

happened to be raised in an unheated farmhouse explained that oven-rocks are often used to keep rural beds warm at night.[49] As Lewis dryly noted, "an amazing knowledge of Chaucerian or Shakespearian criticism sometimes co-exists with a very inadequate knowledge of Chaucer or Shakespeare."[50]

It is no safer to ignore all literary images. Grendel's eyes are described as two dots of fire in the blackness; "him of ēagum stōd / ligge gelicost lēoht unfæger"- "from his eyes gleamed flames like an ugly light" (726-7). Since Homeric times, darkness has been symbolic of evil.[51] Nevertheless, in understanding Beowulf, it is essential to remember the real and everyday nature of numerous images and objects which are now, centuries later, only intellectual concepts: "We can still say 'swift as an arrow', but only members of certain clubs know just how swift that is."[52] The Anglo-Saxon knew what arrows and swords looked and felt like from daily life. Bede's story of heathens comparing man's life to a sparrow which flies through the hall and back into the dark has a metaphorical meaning, but would also have been familiar to people who had seen sparrows do exactly this.

The concreteness of the story may have historical grounds. Academics are not convinced that Beowulf derives from lays such as Grettir's Saga, and the argument that the poem derives from a Scandinavian original is now met with "a consensus of mirth."[53] What is more accepted is that there was a real Hygelac (or at least a Chlochilaichus),

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[49] Marijane Osborn, Heroic Poetry, 317. A friend of mine, Kirk Wiseman, commented that this is still done in outport Newfoundland.
[50] C.S. Lewis, An Experiment in Criticism (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1961) 128.
[51] Alain Renoir, "Point of View and Design for Terror in Beowulf" In Donald K. Fry, ed. The Beowulf Poet (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1968) 164.
[52] Renwick and Orton, 23.
[53] Theodore M. Andersson, "Sources and Analogues". A Beowulf Handbook, 129.

recorded by Gregory of Tours in 575 as being killed by Frisians during a coastal raid.[54] Legend takes a good deal of time to grow, and the critical assumption tends to be that the poet, like Virgil, also "cast his time into the long-ago, because already the long-ago had a special poetical attraction."[55] But the poem is about "ðyssum windagum"- "these days of strife" (1062), and not about a lost past. A great deal of energy has been expended on attacking or defending Beowulf for not acting as a king should or would have. Neither position is accurate, for the story was set in a historical English present where the role of a *cyning* was not fixed. If there is ambiguity in the poem, it was intentional; the poet wrote about his own time period and the instability he saw in it.

There was no clear break from the literary values of the Anglo-Saxons and those of the medieval romantics. New poetic styles do not create themselves; as European cultural institutions evolved, literature evolved to mirror them. Beowulf also reflects its time period, and the sense of contemporary 'realness' found in the poem indicates a conclusion: Beowulf was not antiquarian to its own audience, but rather reflected the values and institutions of Anglo-Saxon England. Although modern society has in many ways outgrown the Romance of the Rose and the melancholy prince dying in his lovesickness,[56] the literal earthiness of the Old English language, with the realism of the dragon "sniffing along the stone"[57] - "stonc ðā æfter stāne" (2288), makes it contemporary again. In Heaney's words, "it lives in its own continuous present."[58]

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[54] Whitelock, 40.
[55] Tolkien, 20.
[56] Lewis, Allegory, 1.
[57] Lewis, Experiment, 57.
[58] Heaney, ix.

Disputes over the poem's age have been the Alsace-Lorraine of Beowulf scholarship, with detailed arguments placing its writing anywhere between the seventh century (Girvan) and the eleventh (Kiernan), the date of the manuscript itself. But it is safe to say that the poem in its present form was probably written down at some time during the two centuries between 700 and 900 without clouding the issue of the poem's contemporality; most of the poem's details of setting and character would have been recognizable throughout any of these times in Anglo-Saxon England. Its audience would have known what kings and halls looked like from experience, and may even have heard the poem in the same type of hall, making Beowulf a story that remains rooted in and relevant to its present.

This concern is a concept which requires both expansion. There are three key aspects to the idea of time reference in the poem which deserve discrete examination. It is first necessary to examine Beowulf's function as prince and king in terms of the changing concept of kingship in Anglo-Saxon England in order to determine how credible Beowulf was as king and character to the poem's audience. Second, the idea of Beowulf as a real character is important; he must be acceptable as a realistic and ethically justified character in order to function as a believable role model for the poem's hearers. Last, the question of time reference must be formally discussed in terms of how indicators of time position and sequence are handled by the poet. A useful thesis on both time and the hero may be found in Bakhtin's writings, which can provide insight into the question of where Beowulf is set in time for its possible audience.

The word *possible* is important. All of these propositions are predicated on a likely but unproved, and for now unprovable, assumption: that the poem had an audience. It is more important to keep Beowulf itself in mind, and to consider what the intentions of the poem and poet may have been rather than whether they were accomplished. The text of Beowulf, 'a machine made of words' as William Carlos Williams would say,[59] says enough in itself. At times, criticism of Beowulf becomes distorted by modern values or by classical models. For example, as Robert Bjork notes, our ideas of proper plot sequence reflect an Aristotelian bias rather than simple sequential logic;[60] the many digressions, which can make us feel that we are being "channel-surfed into another poem,"[61] may not have distressed an Anglo-Saxon audience. The question of time reference here calls for a formalist methodology, in an attempt to see what the text itself says without the over-analysis which has plagued Anglo-Saxon criticism. As Mitchell and Robinson again politely comment, in reference to "The Wife's Lament", "the only available curb to ever more ingenious speculations" is common sense.[62] Without attempting to see if there are realistic plot reasons for characters to act as they do, one has the level of dialogue employed by Blackburn, who argued that the Beowulf text would mean something else if it was replaced with different words.[63]

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[59] Marc Hudson, Beowulf (Cranbury, NJ: Associated University Press, 1990) 25.
[60] Robert E. Bjork, "Digressions and Episodes". A Beowulf Handbook, 200.
[61] Heaney, xiii.
[62] Mitchell and Robinson, 249.
[63] F.A. Blackburn, "The Christian Coloring in The Beowulf" Lewis E. Nicholson, ed. An Anthology of Beowulf Criticism (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1963) 13.

Chapter 2

Kingship and Beowulf

Fig. 1[1]

Beowulf is, first and foremost, a royalist's poem, depicting a purely aristocratic world.[2] The concerns are those of one class of warriors; the focus of action is the king's mead hall: "we never see peasants engaged in growing their food or brewing their ale."[3] Beowulf enters the story as a prince and dies a king; indeed, there are over thirty different words for 'king' in the text.[4] Despite the persistent violence of Beowulf's world which appealed to early rediscoverers of the poem charmed by "wild and natural" Anglo-Saxon poetry[5], there are elaborate hall rituals and a lengthy royal protocol for actions such as approaching Hrothgar's *gifstol*. The warriors seem to idle their lives away feasting, drinking, and quarreling; yet the evenings end with the company rising in unison (651).

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[1] Dik Browne, "Hagar the Horrible" cartoon, King Features Syndicate, 24 May 1986.
[2] George Clark, Beowulf (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1990) ix.
[3] Edward B. Irving, Jr. Introduction to Beowulf. (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1969), 20.
[4] Howell D. Chickering, Jr. Beowulf (Toronto: Anchor Books, 1977) 5.
[5] John D. Niles, "Beowulf, Truth, and Meaning". Robert E. Bjork and John D. Niles, ed. A Beowulf Handbook (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 1997) 3.

Even the dispensing of mead, undertaken by queen Wealtheow with Heorot's "seleful"-"hall-cup" (619), is a ceremonial act.

Yet, as the cartoon above indicates, these are all roles in chronological flux in Anglo-Saxon times. Titles such as *king*, *prince*, or *Viking* may suggest something more specific and formal to a modern reader than they might have to a contemporary audience. Vikings likely did not think of their activities as denoting a traditional profession or trade. In Scandinavia especially, the title of king was "used freely by many male adults of a royal kin"[6]; the etymology of *cyning* itself is merely 'son of the kin'. The distinctions between Germanic and Roman forms of government were both wide and troublesome for those in positions of power in Anglo-Saxon England. The Germanic king derived his authority from the consent of his *witan* and from the general principle that real power lay in the will of the *folc*, in comparison to the Christian caesar, who ruled in principle by divine ordainment.

For Beowulf, the implications are considerable, for its composition lies in the centuries when English society was moving away from the *folcriht* and towards proto-feudalism.[7] The poem does not depict a static, idealized and earlier form of government, but portrays a society in transition between tribal and monarchical forms of rule.[8] Both Hrothgar and Beowulf are examples of these changing views of kingship, and in this is the poem's relevance to its hearers; the political implications of the two characters'

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[6] Henry Loyn, The Vikings in Britain (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 1994) 6.
[7] Michael J. Swanton, Crisis and Development in Germanic Society 700-800 (Göppingen: Kümmerle Verlag, 1982) 12.
[8] Craig R. Davis, Beowulf and the Demise of Germanic Legend (New York: Garland Publishing, 1996) xi.

actions "could hardly have been lost on its contemporary audience."[9] The poet's success in presenting the change in governmental worldviews to an audience likely made up of both Germanic warriors and a clergy trained by the Roman church might also do much to explain the poem's survival into modern times. As Swanton dryly notes, "Less accommodating poets, like uncompromising kings, may have found their business brought to a rapid conclusion."[10]

As with many traditional cultures, wisdom is implicitly associated with age in early Germanic society. Hrothgar describes Beowulf as wise despite his "geongum feore"- young age (1843), and the youth of the foolhardy (*wlonc*) Hygelac is also emphasized (1969). The poet emphasizes this point of Beowulf's newly-earned maturity upon his return to Geatland in contrast to Hygelac and Hygd's inexperience, when Beowulf seems to have "aged past them."[11] Age did not disqualify one as an effective warrior; indeed, Ongentheow is all the more "eald ond egesfull"- a terrible veteran (2929) - because of his years of experience.[12]

Age also gave one the legitimacy to join the *witan*, the body in which the essential will of the *folc* resided. A parentage of "pre-eminent nobility"[13] did guarantee a certain amount of political influence, but it was not automatic; few continental families before the high middle ages could successfully prosecute their "inalienable right to go on ruling

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[9] Swanton, 152.
[10] Swanton, 83.
[11] Lenore Abraham. "The Decorum of Beowulf", Philological Quarterly 72:3 (1993) 274.
[12] Leo Carruthers, "Kingship and Heroism in Beowulf". Leo Carruthers, ed. Heroes and Heroines in Medieval English Literature (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1994) 26.
[13] Swanton, 17.

because some bogus genealogy linked them with Woden or Julius Caesar."[14] Distinctions of rank continued to crumble in transplanted settlements after the migration periods, and especially so in places with a strong frontier mentality such as Iceland. With the early Germans the sense of royalty as an inherited right is weak. Succession tended to be a competition among princes; even Charlemagne was elected and not simply elevated to regal status.[15] Such elections may often have been a formality; yet even the succession of Charlemagne's son Louis was not automatic. Ability on the battlefield guaranteed more solid prestige among Anglo-Saxons. A comparison can be made with North American Indians, where there was little of a political command structure; chiefs tended merely to be proven warriors chosen on an *ad hoc* basis.[16] The combined expectations of the *guð-cyning* (war-king) are never very separable in reality or in dramatic literature; when Charlemagne's men exclaim "icist reis est vassals!"- this king is a soldier! (3343) in the Song of Roland, it is meant as high praise indeed.[17]

The position of king, when it was itself attained, was limited in scope. Lacking a literate administration and the organs of modern government,[18] early kingship held few material trappings; one Saxon king in Saxo Grammaticus, Frotho, is advised by his retinue to get himself a wife to mend their ragged clothing.[19] In Beowulf, there is no

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[14] J.M. Wallace-Hadrill, The Long-Haired Kings (London: Methuen and Company, 1962), 20.
[15] Einhard and Notker the Stammerer: Two Lives of Charlemagne, trans. Lewis Thorpe (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1969), 58.
[16] Richard A. Preston, Alex Roland, and Sydney F. Wise, Men in Arms (Toronto: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc., 1991), 6.
[17] Quoted in Edward B. Irving, Jr., "Heroic Role-Models: Beowulf and Others", in Helen Damico and John Leyerle, Eds., Heroic Poetry in the Anglo-Saxon Period (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 1993) 350.
[18] Loyn, 6.
[19] Ritchie Girvan, Beowulf and the Seventh Century (London: Methuen and Company, 1935), 47.

indication that Hrothgar's forebears had grand halls of their own. Power itself was unsure and precarious; contemporary Frankish historians were justifiably confused in determining who was in charge when real power lay in the mayors of the palace.

Matters in England were no less opaque. At one point Wessex had five *cynings*, and Mercian kings referred to themselves as *duces* in charters,[20] downplaying the regal implications of kingship in favor of the more tangible military connotations of *dux*. The right to rebel against unjust kings was implicitly assumed and often utilized. Real power emanated from the *witan* as the people's representatives; thus only the position of king and not the individual holding it was sacred. Regicide calls for no more than a higher *wergild*. This was in clear opposition to Roman modes and its pre-Christian extremes of emperor veneration. The late Roman view of order ostensibly saw final authority in the caesar as the voice of the gods. Major portions of early Europe envisaged no such relationship; one Gallic chieftan, Ambiorix, made the understandable complaint to Caesar that the people ruled him as much as he ruled the people.[21]

Although the Anglo-Saxon family unit had little control in determining succession, it was nevertheless powerful enough to undermine what little order the king could provide with the seemingly omnipresent kinship feuds which figure so prominently in medieval histories and literature. Belonging to a kin is the criterion of membership in a community; Beowulf consistently introduces himself by means of explaining his pedigree and is conventionally referred to as *bearn Ecgbeowes*. Grendel, significantly, is

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[20] Swanton, 26.
[21] Caesar, De Bello Gallica V 27. Cited in Swanton, 18.

doubly ominous because "nō hīe fæder cunnon"- "they did not know his father" (1355).[22] In a world with no police force, kinship feuds were so firmly entrenched that the best the church could initially do was to encourage compensation in the form of payments (*wergild*). As crimes were an offence against the common custom and not yet the 'king's peace'[23], there was often little regal intervention possible and kings, if not personally involved in the feud themselves, tended to stay out of such matters.[24] As much as critics read tragedy into Finn's tale as told in Beowulf, there is a positive closure to the story: Hildeburgh returns to her people, and at its ending "gamen eft āstāh"- "revelry rose up again" (1160) among Hrothgar's men in Heorot. The occasion of the story's telling, joy over the end of Grendel's long attacks on Hrothgar's men, does not seem to indicate a condemnation of revenge.[25]

The sense that justice resides in the kin is concomitant with the lack of moral opposition between combatants in Beowulf; the sense of the enemy being *wrong* in their actions, as opposed to merely being on the other side, is a mindset still in development in the text. The prime concern in feuding was loss and restitution and not ethical justification; the concept of personal or collective guilt or innocence came only "with the slow evolution of the idea of sin."[26] At a national level, Ongentheow, though an enemy of the Geats, is still poetically referred to as his "folces hyrde"- the shepherd of his

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[22] Gillian R. Overing, "The Women of Beowulf: A Context for Interpretation". Peter S. Baker, ed. Beowulf: Basic Readings (New York: Garland Publishing, 1995) 223.
[23] Swanton, 36.
[24] Davis, 26.
[25] John M. Hill, "Social Milieu", A Beowulf Handbook 265.
[26] David Williams, Cain and Beowulf: A Study in Secular Allegory (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1982) 8.

people (2981).[27] Much Beowulf scholarship of the1940s and early 1950s was written in a politically charged atmosphere, "when the appreciation of Beethoven or Goethe became guilty secret pleasures,"[28] and was not particularly subtle in sentiment. This period has passed, but there is still often a critical assumption of the presence of states and national ideologies in medieval Europe which did not yet exist.

Vikings saw their early raids more as "joint-stock ventures"[29], than as acts of political significance by a united people. Pillaging parties did not embody any inherent enmity towards Englishmen, and turned their attentions at will to Francia or wherever pickings were easiest. The English and Danes had coexisted in Britain as trading partners for centuries before the raids, and the chronicles betray an emotion of surprise and shock over these violent incursions.[30] It is only as late as the battle of Maldon (991) that the Vikings are firmly and distinctly thought of by chroniclers as a "laþere ðeode"- a loathed people (Maldon, 90); the implicit moral wrongness of the enemy's attack is given as a reason alone for resistance.

Additionally, the sense of belonging to a distinct country as opposed to a people in Beowulf is less than solid. It is only by 1100 that plain delineations between Norway, Sweden and Denmark exist;[31] Norway was itself not unified until after 900 under Harold Fairhair. In opposition to later English literature where it is assumed as a matter of course that royal roots originate in France, Beowulf is of the Geatish people and little

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[27] Carruthers, 21.
[28] Roy Michael Liuzza, "On the Dating of Beowulf", Heroes and Heroines 285.
[29] Loyn, 15.
[30] Loyn, 39.
[31] Loyn, 8.

mention is made of Geatland as a physical place. This ethnic as opposed to territorial identification would likely have been the situation during the migration period from the continent to England, when there was no native territory to identify with.

Migration did not erase this kinship bond. Missionaries such as Boniface were wont to emphasize the shared family ties between England and Germany, writing in 738 that "We are of one blood and one bone."[32] Hrothgar has the Vandal Wulfgar as a guard in his court, and no one finds the presence of the foreigner to be an oddity or threat; the poet emphasizes that Hrothgar is his "winedrihtne"- friend and lord (360). Linguistically, there was little differentiation in the Germanic languages by the seventh century, and men such as Wilfrid report no "serious impediment"[33] in comprehension during their missionary travels among the Frisians or Danish. Beowulf, of course, needs no interpreter in his travels, and even Byrhtnoth and his Viking enemies are depicted as understanding each other's war cries across the cold Pante waters at Maldon (991) near the close of the Anglo-Saxon age. It is only indirectly that Byrhtnoth reminds his warriors of their national duty to "Æþelrēdes eard"- Ethelred's homeland (Maldon, 53); the progression of early England is from the kin-unit to the ethnic polity and only formatively the state, and the literature mirrors this transition.

The poet begins Beowulf by referring to the glory of the "þeodcyninga", the people's kings (2). The term can mean both the king of the people and of the nation. This semantic ambiguity is reflected through the text and through the time period.

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[32] "*De uno sanguine et de uno osse sumus.*" In Larry D. Benson, Contradictions: From Beowulf to Chaucer (Brookfield, VT: Ashgate Publishing, 1995) 23.
[33] Girvan, 8.

Feudalism was a land-based institution, and in the disintegration of Roman order land was "increasingly the one possession worth having."[34] As with so many western institutions, there was a military advantage to feudalism, made all the more pressing with the development of the stirrup around 700 and the growing expense of equipping for war. Charlemagne formally altered the basis of military service from the individual to those holding land. The Vikings initially raided for goods, wives, and slaves, for, as Loyn argues, there was no tradition of primogeniture which would have settled the question of status and succession.[35] Yet the Danes eventually do make land their primary interest, and women and children sometimes accompanied later campaigns.[36]

Primogeniture did eventually come to the Germans and assisted in keeping estates intact; Hygelac seems to need no permission to make Beowulf a land grant of seven thousand hides (2195). The title *cniht*, originally referring to a household retainer or *discthegn* (steward),[37] gradually came to have connotations of land ownership and gentility rather than domestic servility. This was a clear evolution from pre-migration practices, where the title of king had no inherent property basis at all.[38] Yet the transition was not completely unidirectional; even Mercian kings such as Wihtræd are recorded as being king not of Kent but of the Cantware.[39]

Setbacks were indeed the case in the slow synthesis between Roman and Germanic concepts of political order. Alcuin advised Charlemagne to disregard the

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[34] Wallace-Hadrill, 12.
[35] Loyn, 16.
[36] Loyn, 46.
[37] Peter Coss, The Knight in Medieval England 1000-1400 (Dover, NH: Alan Sutton Publishing, 1993) 12.
[38] Swanton, 17.
[39] Swanton, 26.

'tumult' of the crowd because "according to divine law, the people are to be led not followed,"[40] but the continental Saxons apparently did not buy into Roman modes of political thought, resisting Charlemagne not because he was foreign, but because he was an authoritarian ruler; Saxony itself

> ...remains a center of democratic resistance into the eleventh century and beyond, allowing no mediation by princes but demanding that the king be made directly accessible to his people.[41]

Naturally, the paucity of documents leads to questions of interpretation. Tacitus has been accused of wishful thinking for depicting the Germans as noble savages; 19th-century German scholars equally painted a lost golden age of democracy, forgetting that kings were chosen out of a relatively small pool of blue-blooded claimants. Much of the growth of centralized order is attributable merely to its growing possibility fuelled by technology and population and not a sea-change in sentiment; nevertheless, the concept of rule by public consent remained strong in English law.

The spread of Christianity was an additional impetus to the growth of monarchy. Part of Christianity's rapid Nordic acceptance was due to the attitude that gods, as well as rulers, were replaceable if they did not please:

> The hard necessity of reliance on self and companions in the bitter struggle against the climate and natural conditions led to a curious attitude of equality towards the gods. The Scandinavian did not creep to the altar. The gods themselves were subject to testing and open to rejection if a stronger deity than they appeared.[42]

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[40] "*Populus iuxta sanctiones divinas ducendus est non sequendus.*" Quoted in Swanton, 13.
[41] Swanton, 23.
[42] Loyn, 4.

For some, Christianity promised such a stronger deity, such as one convert in Njáls Saga who exclaims, "Grey þykki mér Freyja."- "I think Freya is a bitch."[43] Such an attitude is paralleled in the popular story of Bede about Paulinus' mission to Northumbria in 625, in which Coifi, the head priest of king Edwin, quickly and cynically repudiates the old religion because it "has no virtue or profit" in it.[44] To Bede the unexpectedness of the act is proof of God's providence; but he overlooks the underlying attitude of the priest: the gods are replaceable if they do not produce the goods. But Christianity was equally open to testing; Clovis was a secret follower until sure of popular support, and Eorpwald of East Anglia was assassinated shortly after conversion.[45] Bishops well into Alfred's time preferred to avoid becoming tangled in succession disputes, and kings as late as Cnut still had to prohibit tree-worship.

Yet Christianity and the monarchy consciously supported each other. As Earl claims, native religions supported a polity which no longer existed.[46] Pope Gregory, alternatively, appealed to Æthelberht's desire for kingly prestige by giving him heavenly justification, writing "Almighty God raises up certain good men to be rulers...."[47] Already by 710, writers such as Ceolfrid of Jarrow state that kingly power derives not from the *folc* but from God.[48] State prayers and the anointing of kings with its attendant rituals soon followed. The consecration of Charlemagne as Holy Roman Emperor in 800 was representative of this changing mindset, for the concept of the 'king's peace' was

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[43] Quoted in Lars Lönnroth, Njáls Saga (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976) 216.
[44] Bede, Ecclesiastical History of the English People. In James W. Earl, Thinking About Beowulf (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994) 51.
[45] Swanton, 27.
[46] Earl, 52.
[47] Bede, in Davis, 32.
[48] Swanton, 50.

developing alongside the Christian concern for crime as a personal and moral act.[49] The Roman view of order and justice flowing from God downward was gradually overtaking the *witan*.

Beowulf can be read as a microcosm of these issues. The story does not crystallize a perfect past form of tribal government; nor does any king in Beowulf act as an ancient Louis XIV, proclaiming himself *l'état*. There are subtle semantic and plot shifts throughout the text demonstrating the topical tensions between the role of king as agent of God and as agent of the people. In the beginning of the text the shift has already begun; small groups of *mægþe* (tribes) are "losing their ethnic homogeneity"[50] by submitting to the rule of a neighboring upstart, Scyld Scefing. Scyld arrives Moses-like out of nowhere, "ofer yðe unborwesende"- "over the waves as a child" (46), but his dynasty is set in motion: regal rule passes from him to his son, Beow, and then to Healfdene, in an apparent process of direct succession. Little is known about the political developments of the Swedes, although matters are not so fixed so as to prevent Ongentheow's sons from rebelling and seeking outside help. Critics have more often used a comparison between the kingdoms of Hrothgar and Beowulf to illustrate differences in kingship styles. Leyerle considers Hrothgar the ideal monarch in the poem for having the "discretion and *mensura*"[51] which Beowulf apparently lacks. The text would seem to disagree with Leyerle, as the Geatish people laud Beowulf at his funeral as "mannum mildest ond mon-ðwærust"- "mildest to his men and most gentle" (3181) of

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[49] Williams, 8.
[50] Davis, 70.
[51] John Leyerle, "Beowulf the Hero and the King". Medium Ævum 34:2 (1965) 97.

earthly kings. It is more certain that the two characters do significantly differ politically in their modes of ruling, and in so doing demonstrate the shifting tones of government which were contemporary issues for the audience of the poem.

The beginnings of Hrothgar's kingship are neither clearly tribal nor feudal, and yet there is a sense that the poet sees his rule in more traditional Germanic terms of kingship. Hrothgar inherits the throne directly from his father, Healfdane, though he is not the first-born: the account of Healfdane's children lists "Heorogār ond Hrōðgār ond Hālga til" (61). Hrothgar is not automatically king but must prove himself by attracting followers: "him his winemāgas / georne hyrdon"- his friends and kinsmen willingly obeyed him" (65-6). The Danish kingdom, moreover, is "a divided community"[52] where some follow Christ and others heathenism; the tribal character is asserted in this lack of regal finality. Hrothgar possesses a sort of primitive god-like status as "he truly makes a world"[53] in creating the name of Heorot: "scop him Heort naman" (78). Heorot is not a feudal court but a people's palace[54] (*folcstede*), where everything is shared except "folcscare ond feorum gumena"- the common land and the lives of men (73). The emphasis of this line recalls that for many kings the opposite was then the reality; the assigning of land and people to caretakers was the *sine qua non* of feudalism.[55]

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[52] Theodore M. Andersson, "Heathen Sacrifice in Beowulf and Rimbert's Life of Ansgar". Medievalia et Humanistica 13 (1985): 65-74.
[53] Irving, Introduction to Beowulf, 37.
[54] Swanton, 90.
[55] Davis, 141.

It is true that Hrothgar is no tribal warrior in permitting his sons and Beowulf to fight for him. From this stance, in Hrothgar's "passive court"[56] he has seemingly abdicated his duty as protector. Yet the dismissive notion that Hrothgar simply hands out advice in a capacity "thought most suitable for senior citizens"[57] is as unkind as it is inaccurate; Charlemagne also lets his strong son, Louis, fight for him in old age without censure from contemporary writers.[58] Hrothgar is described in his youth with no mincing words; he was "herespēd gyfen, / wīges weorðmynd"- "given success in battle, glory in war" (64-5). To Beowulf the man is not a doddering king but a "gomel gūðwiga"- old warrior (2112) who remembers his "hildestrengo"- strength in battle (2113). The two address each other as *wine*: friends, but with the connotation of being fellow comrades in arms and equals.[59] The flavor of the scene is not of Hrothgar as a king set above his warriors but as an experienced soldier with the grey-haired practical wisdom of his *witan* behind him to ground his actions.

Yet Grendel complicates everything. As a challenge to the harmony of Heorot and to Hrothgar's rule, Grendel demonstrates the contemporaneity of Beowulf and the changing opinions of Germanic government, for the old system is shown to be inadequate to stand up to him.[60] The people are not united by a strong king and splinter into desperate heathen worship; the *witan* lies impotent. Locked into a mindset of kinfeud and retribution, the counselors can advise no other action than to offer payments to the

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[56] W.T.H. Jackson, The Hero and the King: An Epic Theme. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982) 132.
[57] Irving, "Heroic Role Models", 356.
[58] Leyerle, 100.
[59] Swanton, 30.
[60] Swanton, 107.

killer (156). Grendel is partially motivated by spite out of being excluded from the kinship of the hall, but also by something more intrinsically evil for which he bears "Godes yrre"- "God's ire" (711). The system of vengeance and retribution is insufficient to explain Grendel's inherent enmity towards man. Grendel's mother kills Aschere in order to avenge her son, but there is no indication that her attacks will not continue in the same pattern as Grendel's.

Perversely, at this point Hrothgar's court begins to adopt the concepts of feudal rule as Wealtheow campaigns for their children as the logical successors to Hrothgar and blocks Beowulf as a regal candidate.[61] But her motivations are maternal and not based on the evolution of Danish political thought. Furthermore, the move not only destabilizes Hrothgar by defying his wishes, but is futile in itself. The poet foreshadows that the tribal practices of succession will persist; Heorot will be racked by "ecghete āþumswēoran"- the violent hatred of son-in-law and father-in-law (84), culminating in the burning of the great hall itself.

Hrothgar's actions after the cleansing of both the mere and Heorot are additionally interesting in that Hrothgar reclaims his authority by becoming a role model for the younger Beowulf, despite the failure of the Danes to face Grendel themselves. The same man who has to be consoled and restored by Beowulf after Aschere's death with the words "Ne sorga, snotor guma!"- "Grieve not, wise man!" (1384) now becomes a mentor, lecturing Beowulf on the evils of pride and by advocating him as the Geats' future king. Hrothgar still defers to the authority of *witans*, stating that the Geats "sēlran

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[61] Earl, 123.

næbben / tō gecēosenne cyning ænigne"- "will not be able to choose a better king" (1850-1). The theme of age consistently informs Hrothgar's final words in the story, for his long reign of "hund missera"- fifty years (1769) is eventually ended as "yldo benam / mægenes wynnum"- "old age removed his proud strength" (1886-7). The sagacity of Hrothgar's experience culminates in his sermonette to Beowulf in Heorot in the celebration of the cleansing of the mere, where, by inverse comparison to Heremod, Hrothgar reminds Beowulf that *fortitudo* will decline in age, but *sapientia* will carry a king through affliction.[62]

To Leyerle, Hrothgar's refusal to face Grendel personally is explained by the wise risk analysis that Heorot is threatened more by internal family divisions than external threats, and that his death would exacerbate such divisions in a fight over succession.[63] It may or may not be so; Hrothgar does not mention such surmises. But there is no question that Hrothgar is skilled in *realpolitik*; he deftly forestalls grumbling in his court over the possible offense implied by Beowulf's belief that Hrothgar "wæs manna þearf"- "was in need of men" (201) by relating the story of his rescue of Beowulf's father from the Wilfings, subtly shifting the ground of Beowulf's act of altruism to the repayment of an old favor.[64] Beowulf will be a different sort of king; but he still learns from the old type of ruler, Hrothgar, who maintains his credibility and authority not from kingly institutions

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[62] R.E. Kaske, "Sapientia et Fortitudo as the Controlling Theme of Beowulf". Lewis E. Nicholson, ed. An Anthology of Beowulf Criticism (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1963) 284.
[63] Leyerle, 92.
[64] Clark, 56.

but from enduring fame in waging war and a *witan*-like wiliness for holding power in an unstable court.

Beowulf would have been a character who instantly appealed to a royal audience, for he is the new type of prince whose ideology is closer to Roman models of kingship. He is not a character from a closed heroic Germanic past but from an evolving present synthesizing both styles. Arriving in the malaise of Heorot where the old system of loyalties is unable to meet the challenge of Grendel, he is the "new 'kind' of hero" which is required to break the impasse.[65] Already in Beowulf's first appearance on the Danish shore, the differing qualifications of kingliness in Heorot and in Geatland can be seen. The coast guard looks up to Beowulf as a *guðcyning*, claiming:

> Næfre ic māran geseah
> eorla ofer eorþan ðonne is ēower sum,
> secg on searwum. Nis þæt seldguma
> wæpnum geweorðad - næfre him his wlite lēoge,
> ænlīc ansyn! (247-51)
>
> (Never have I seen a greater warrior on Earth than a certain one of you, a man in arms. That's no mere hall-retainer made worthy by weapons - unless his face, his matchless appearance, belies him!)

But Beowulf's answer downplays his military aspect, introducing himself not as a fierce slayer of water-monsters but by his regal connection as Ecgtheow's son. His reply combines both the mindsets of the war-chieftain and the feudal monarch, for his father is described as an *æþele ordfruma* (263) - both a war-leader and noble, implying an aristocratic heritage to which Beowulf has a right by birth. Beowulf, as both *æþeling* and outsider, being Hrethel's grandson only by his unnamed mother's marriage, combines

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[65] Michael Swanton, Beowulf (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997), 22.

ideals "of both tribal and intertribal kingship."[66] The many hints of Beowulf's aristocratic character gradually turn into foreshadowing as Hrothgar pregnantly suggests that someday "þū healdan wylt māga rīce"- "you will hold the kingdom of your kinsmen" (1852-3). To Beowulf, who consistently emphasizes his emotional bond with his uncle Hygelac and his childhood in Hrethel's home, no answer is needed as his inheritance of the throne is an understood eventuality.

Beowulf's court demeanor is a continuation of this theme, for the gentility of his behavior is emphasized by the poet; his fierceness as a warrior is directed only against non-human agents at Heorot. After the coast guard insults Beowulf as a spy and demands a hasty (*ofoste*) answer (256), he responds with kindness.[67] Despite his father's connections and Hrothgar's hospitality, not all of Heorot is prepared to be a polite host. Even before Beowulf faces the monsters, he must pass the credibility test of the guard, of Wulfgar, of Unferth, and of Wealtheow, and this is all achieved by winning them over with tact and verbal strength;[68] his defense to the coast guard is so polite that the latter offers to act as Beowulf's guide to Heorot, even offering to guard their boat and to ask God's blessings on the venture.[69] Wulfgar's directive, "lætað hildebord hēr onbīdan, / wudu wælsceaftas word geþinges"- "leave here your battle-shields and deadly shafts to await the outcome of your talk" (397-8), is made both out of royal protocol and out of security concerns for the king. Yet Beowulf complies without complaint, only bringing weapons into the home of Grendel's mother; the men do not rush Heorot but "sigon

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[66] Davis, 144.
[67] Chickering, 294.
[68] Irving, 40.
[69] Irving, 42.

ætsomne"- advance together (307) in aristocratic procession. Beowulf's behavior conforms with regal etiquette even down to his three-day stay at Heorot, which Girvan claims was the standard length of visit among the Germans.[70]

While a prince, Beowulf is already being groomed in kingly ways, first by Hrothgar who warns him in advance of succumbing to selfish pride, and then by Hygelac, who gives him a hall and a 'princely throne'- "bold ond bregostōl" (2196). In a sort of ceremonial knighting, Beowulf is even awarded Hrethel's heirloom; his gold-adorned sword is "on Biowulfes bearm ālegde"- "laid on Beowulf's lap" (2194). The principle of royal succession has taken root in Geatland, so much so that Beowulf upholds the principle of primogeniture in supporting Hygelac's son as child-king.[71] Despite the people's entreaties and the widowed Hygd's proffering of the throne to him, as she "ne truwode"- did not trust her young son's abilities (2370), Beowulf ignores the 'tumult of the crowd'; he resists violating royal protocol in the cause of military expediency and supports the youth with "freondlarum"- friendly counsel (2377). As Beowulf's reward for taking the right action, the poet gives the audience a short wait before the kingdom "on hand gehwearf"- passes into his hand (2208).

The effects of disorder are long-lasting. Beowulf predicts to Hygelac that Hrothgar's proposed marriage alliance between Freawaru and Ingeld will fail as "æfter lēodhryre lytle hwīle / bongār būgeð, þēah sēo bryd duge"-"after the fall of a man the deadly spear rests only a little while, though the bride may be good" (2030-1). The implicit point, expressed quite bluntly by the poet, is that order must be maintained by a

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[70] Girvan, 44.
[71] Swanton, 135.

strong monarch and not by contrived kinship alliances and "nuptual diplomacy"[72] - the old way of the chieftain, which, as the poet foreshadows, has failed with Hildeburh and will fail again with Freawaru.

Geatland under Beowulf's rule contains subtle differences from Hrothgar's kingdom, but there are semantics which indicate the sort of feudal rule with which Beowulf's audience would have been increasingly familiar. The currency of feudalism is land, and slight shifts can be seen in the second section of the story which indicate a growing interest in land use and appropriation. Apart from Heorot and Grendel's underwater cavern, there is little mention of land in Hrothgar's kingdom other than the beds among the mysterious and generic 'outbuildings' - "bed æfter būrum" (140) for which his men abandon Heorot after Grendel's attacks. Danish land elsewhere in the text is ostensibly common land, such as the beach and the paths for horse-riding. There is evidently enough public land for the "ceaster-būendum"- the city dwellers (768) to be within earshot of Heorot as Beowulf and Grendel battle each other.

However, land is of particular interest in Geatland; although there is a reference to the "eðelriht"- the ancestral domain (2198), the broad kingdom *belonged* to Hygelac: "ōðrum swīðor / sīde rīce þām ðær sēlra wæs"- "the other, rather, who was of higher rank, [held] the broad kingdom" (2198-9). Territorial apportionment and usage is periodically indicated by the "beorht hofu"- bright dwellings (2313) - of the peasantry which are burned down by the dragon, and by architectural details such as the stone arch near the wall of the dragon's barrow (2542), and by Beowulf's memorial; even the

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[72] Davis, 101.

dragon has a 'home'. The last group of fitts has an atmosphere of spaciousness, from the windy headland upon which Beowulf prepares for battle, to his recollection of Hrethel, which closes with Hrethel looking sadly across the fields which seemed all too wide and empty for him - "þūhte him eall tō rūm" (2461). Yet Beowulf dignifies him in finality, reporting that Hrethel left his children land "swā dēð ēadig mon"- "as an honest man does" (2470), the implication being that honest men have property to give.[73]

The royal hierarchy also seems to have a more solidified feel in Geatland than it has in Hrothgar's kingdom. Titles such as *wine*, referring to 'comrade' or 'friend', represent "the essentially horizontal structure of heroic society based on personal loyalties,"[74] and are used freely in Heorot in the poem. The term may be used between warriors of any rank or kin; Hrothgar speaks of Beowulf as "wine mīn Bēowulf" (457). However, as Swanton notes, while a Danish king is usually affectionately called *wine Scyldinga* – friend of the Scyldings - this epithet is not used in Geatland.[75] *Wine* appears sparsely, and tends to be used not of Beowulf but of his inferiors: "winia bealdor" - "the dear people's lord" (2567).[76] Significantly, the term does not survive into middle English. The term *þegn* seems to go through a similar alteration; in Heorot all of Hrothgar's retainers seem to be thanes (Grendel eats thirty of them - "þritig þegna" (123) - in one night), but in Geatland only those with a special relationship of service to the king receive the title, such as Wiglaf, who by defending Beowulf from the dragon is a

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[73] T.A. Shippey, Beowulf (London: Edward Arnold Publishers, 1978) 56.
[74] Swanton, 30.
[75] Swanton, 31.
[76] Swanton, 31.

"þegn ungemete till"- "an exceedingly good thane" (2710).[77] The poem's audience would thus have been exposed to a term which would increasingly gain a connotation of an official royal relationship.

If order is preserved by a strong king, there is, of course, little functional place for the *witan*. In Beowulf's youth he is advised by the "snotore ceorlas"- wise men (416) - of Geatland to seek out Hrothgar, despite Hygelac's misgivings.[78] Here the *witan* opposes the Geatish king with impunity; his own retainers defy him in assembling an exhibition for Heorot. The situation is reversed later on when the aged king Beowulf ignores the *ræd* (3080) of his people and advisors; his warriors faithfully follow their king in meeting the dragon, all with the approval of the poet. But the ambitions of Beowulf's followers are less clear, for they are not the same *comitatus* that is found earlier in Heorot. Beowulf's retinue is not motivated by hall-feasting and treasure-giving, but by land. Wiglaf reports that the eleven were chosen from the *here*, referring to "the whole body of fighting men who were in the service of Beowulf rather than to an inner ring of close companions."[79]

Furthermore, Wiglaf's speech to the deserters after their cowardice focuses both on the fact that they will lose their treasure-giving lord as well as their homes and lands (*londriht*).[80] Their punishment is exile as well as "edwitlif"- a life of disgrace (2891). The poet uses their weakness to heighten Beowulf's and Wiglaf's glory; but their flight

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[77] Swanton, 66.
[78] Kemp Malone, "Beowulf the Headstrong", Anglo-Saxon England 1 (Cambridge, 1972) 139.
[79] Rosemary Woolf, "The Ideal of Men Dying with Their Lord in the *Germania* and in *The Battle of Maldon*", Anglo-Saxon England 5 (Cambridge, 1976) 68.
[80] Woolf, 69.

may have far more severe consequences than the abandonment of the king's hall if the raven, as the messenger predicts, will soon be telling the eagle "hū him æt æte spēow"- "how he fared in eating" (3026).

Beowulf's death contains a last implicit advocacy of familial succession. His final act, after lamenting that he has no direct heir, is to hand over to Wiglaf his armor pieces, enjoining him to "use them well"- "hēt hyne brūcan well" (2812). Carruthers (1994) does not agree that Beowulf is passing on the kingship, or that "such an action would be acceptable to the community."[81] It can hardly be believable that Beowulf's intentions are otherwise. An Anglo-Saxon prince's weapons are no mere sentimental trinkets; Beowulf asks Hrothgar at the mere to return his armor to his lord "gif mec hild nime"- "if battle takes me" (1481), in formal recognition of their relationship. Hygelac returns the favor with Hrethel's sword in a sort of kingly anointing.

Wiglaf's actions after this point show decisive leadership if not yet regality; the returning deserters submit without anger to his harshly severe taunt that Beowulf's gifts were "forwurpe"- utterly wasted (2872). Later on, the poet reports that Wiglaf "ācīgde of corðre cyninges / þegnas syfone ætsomne"- "summoned seven together out of the band of the king's thanes" (3121-2). Wiglaf now has the authority to give orders to the Geats, and the poet waits until now to back up this regality with Wiglaf's lineage as the son of Wihstan, a bold warrior whose aristocratic claims are ensured by another land-based reference: he is among the "boldagendra"- the owners of halls (3112).

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[81] Carruthers, Heroes and Heroines, 28.

In some ways the narrator's concern with *þeodcyningas* is transformed into a broader pan-Germanic sensibility with Beowulf; England in the Anglo-Saxon period still saw itself as belonging to a sort of larger Germania with its continental forefathers, of which *Angle-land* was an extension.[82] The significant division in early Europe tended not to be between countries, but between the Christian and heathen. In the text, Beowulf's kindred "is as big as all Scandinavia"[83]; he moves freely as guest or warrior among many peoples of whom he speaks respectfully, whether Scylding or Frisian. Nevertheless, this ethic operates alongside a clear sense that Beowulf is not the old type of king who is merely the elected *guð-cyning* of his kin, but rather represents the beginnings of the new type of feudal monarchy based on succession through primogeniture.

Moreover, the ethical sentiment of the new system is not far behind. Despite the indefinite moral response of the characters to kinship feuds such as the Finnsburg story, there can be no mistaking the poignancy of the waste and the despairing loss felt by widows such as Hildeburh, "unsynnum wearð / beloren lēofum æt þām lindplegan / bearnum ond brōðrum"- "who was guiltlessly deprived of her beloved son and brother in the shield-play" (1072-4). Beowulf casts doubt on the efficacy of Hrothgar's planned marriage of Freawaru, recognizing the self-perpetuating nature of the Danish feud. His view of morality goes beyond loss and restitution; Earl sees this progression as no less than a move from ego to superego.[84]

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[82] Kemp Malone, "Beowulf", Anthology of Beowulf Criticism 147.
[83] Earl, 38.
[84] In Thomas A. Shippey, "Structure and Unity" A Beowulf Handbook, 173.

The development of the feudal system was not without its practical drawbacks. While it continued the emphasis placed on loyalty between man and lord in new clothes, it made the terms of this loyalty land-based. Realistically, as the warrior no longer relied directly on his lord on an everyday basis for his sustenance, spiritless participation could be the result; despite the poet's gushing encomium, many of the men at Maldon would have owned bookland and hardly "had their lives materially and emotionally focused upon Byrhtnoth."[85] The problem of feudal fidelity may have been problematic enough for poets to wish to lionize it.[86] How, then, to gloss over this failing of feudalism in the text? The poet deftly handles this matter in Geatland by giving it a moral dimension. Beowulf abandons Hygelac's body after his fall in Frisia; but to stay after the "gūðe ræsum"- onslaught of battle (2356) is a suicidal act of pride when he is needed back home to assume the throne, whereas Beowulf's men desert him in cowardice as he rightly defends their nation against the dragon's attacks.

The problems of kingship in Beowulf were contemporary ones for its audience; the questions of how a king should rule and the consent of the ruled would be issues for centuries, before and after feudalism had been firmly and legally established. In many ways, the final voice of authority went upward from the *folc* to the king, and then to God; when Richard Coeur de Lion was killed by a stray arrow while suppressing a vassal's rebellion during Lent, it was popularly believed to be divine judgment.[87] Beowulf is a moral example to his people, but for those historical kings who were less than altruistic in

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[85] Woolf, 68.
[86] Wallace-Hadrill, 15.
[87] Roland Bainton, The Medieval Church (New York: D. Van Nostrand Company, 1962) 38.

conduct, the philosophy which served to establish the Christian model of kingship could also act to hem it in. The principle of the king's responsibility to his people never totally disappears in England in sentiment or in law; the nation of the Beowulf poet is, centuries later, the same nation which enacts the *Magna Carta*.

Chapter 3

Character Realism in Beowulf

Chickering calls the language of Beowulf "marvelous when it is focused on the concrete,"[1] but less successful at dealing with the abstractions of emotion or philosophy. Other critics center on the stark commonplace realism of the hardy Nordic hero. Unlike the Greek hero, the enemies of the Germanic protagonists are tangible; the hero is not "haunted by irresponsible fate or plagued by the frivolities of the gods."[2] Beowulf briefly worries that the dragon's attack is his punishment for having "ēcean Dryhtne / bitre gebulge"- bitterly offended the eternal Lord (2330-1), but there is little flavor of the impersonal petulance which Poseidon harbors for Odysseus for blinding the Cyclops. *Wyrd* in Anglo-Saxon England is not Hardy's gloomy terrestrial malevolence, but rather simply 'what happens'.[3]

Nevertheless, scholars seem determined to symbolize Grendel and company as the North Sea, or nature, or the inherent enmity of man towards civilization, in order to defend against the view of Beowulf as a silly monster story. But Grendel is frustratingly real; he occupies a physical home in the mere where he lives with his mother, he cannot fly to Heorot, and he does not simply vanish when grappled with.[4] The poet likes to mystify Grendel as a "sceadugenga"- walker in shadows (703), but this, as with the

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[1] Howell D. Chickering, Jr. Beowulf (Toronto: Anchor Books, 1977) 10.
[2] Kenneth Rexroth, "Classics Revisited- IV: Beowulf". The Beowulf Poet, Donald K. Fry, ed. (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1968) 167.
[3] Chickering, 269.
[4] J.R.R. Tolkien, Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics (1936) (Norwood Editions, 1976) 36.

ominous repetition of *com* (702, 710, 720) in Grendel's approach, is intended to build the terror of the audience and not to suggest unreality.[5] Grendel may be God's adversary (*andsaca*), but he is not yet a real medieval devil. He does not tempt men or desire their souls; he eats them.[6]

If the ogres of the story were entirely supernatural instead of occupying flesh and blood, only a supernatural hero could oppose them, and the story would become fable.[7] But Beowulf, even if he is "mægene strengest / on þæm dæge þysses lifes"- "the strongest man in the days of this life" (789-90), is "*only* a strong man, and the poem thus reveals how the best of human beings might comport themselves in their struggle against the hopeless odds of the enemy."[8] Beowulf changes and ages as a real person does, from his *sleac* childhood to the youthful rush of his first speech to Hrothgar,[9] into the statesmanlike qualities of his old age. His humanity is important, for the realization that Beowulf is mortal and fallible adds suspense to his battles with the monsters if it is sometimes in doubt that he will prevail; it also makes Beowulf a more sympathetic and identifiable character.

The view that poems such as Beowulf are didactic is controversial; but in many pre-literate societies, oral poetry was a "profoundly social medium"[10] which both entertained and transmitted cultural norms and values. For many Anglo-Saxon laymen,

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[5] Arthur Gilchrist Brodeur, The Art of Beowulf (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969) 91.
[6] Edward B. Irving, Introduction to Beowulf (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1969) 48.
[7] Fred C. Robinson, "Elements of the Marvelous in the Characterization of Beowulf: A Reconsideration of the Textual Evidence". Peter S. Baker, ed. Beowulf: Basic Readings (New York: Garland Publishing, 1995) 79.
[8] Robinson, "Elements", 79.
[9] Lenore Abraham, "The Decorum of Beowulf". Philological Quarterly 72:3 (1993) 268.
[10] John D. Niles, Homo Narrans (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999) 8.

for whom literacy was either unattainable or spurned as effeminate,[11] such performances were a primary form of education. It is probable that Germanic courts consciously saw the portrayal of such heroes as models for "admiration and emulation,"[12] and a non-human cardboard Beowulf is hardly a stirring role model. Germanic heroes tend to accumulate increasingly fabulous qualities as they fade back in time; but Beowulf is not about a lost past. The poet was writing about a hero accessible to his audience, and had to balance Beowulf's powers and his limitations if he indeed had the intention of making him a realistic character.

Beowulf's human character has also culminated in the scholarly search for an actual historical Beowulf. The activity has been dryly likened to searching the Bath registers "for a woman named Alison five times married."[13] Others point to Schliemann's pursuit of Troy, as well as more modern analogues: there was indeed a living Macbeth and a Colonel David Crockett.[14] The ninth-century Durham *Liber Vitae* lists as monks a Biuuulf and Wiglaf, and the lay names Eadgils, Herebald, and Hygelac. The name *Beowa* appears elsewhere, and a Wiltshire charter of 931 lists *grendlesmere* as a place-name. Even early critics of the poem were skeptical of any connection; Klaeber argued that Beowulf was a fictional insertion into the Geatish line of royalty as his name did not alliterate with the Wægmundings.[15] But neither does Freawaru's name alliterate

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[11] Niles, Homo Narrans 73.
[12] Edward B. Irving, "Heroic Role-Models: Beowulf and Others". Helen Damico and John Leyerle, ed. Heroic Poetry in the Anglo-Saxon Period (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 1993) 347.
[13] Nevill Coghill, The Poet Chaucer (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1949) 121.
[14] Irving, Introduction, 13.
[15] Fr. Klaeber, Beowulf and the Fight at Finnsburg (New York: D.C. Heath & Company, 1950) xxvii.

with Hrothgar's sons. The question is problematic when the background cultural capital of the poem is now lost: do names such as Hrothgar and Hrothulf refer to specific historical people, or are they names as common as the Roger and Ralph they later become?[16] Yet the lack of a well-known historical Beowulf does not prevent his acceptability as a realistic fictional character. Indeed, it permits the poet to invent him freshly without the limitations of having to depict someone the audience knew from elsewhere; presenting an Offa or Ingeld as refusing the throne would not have been palatable to people who knew that he did not.

The conception that Beowulf and others are merely conventional character types is also problematic. Names had ritual and magical associations for the Anglo-Saxons (we still *spell* words). Even Alcuin saw symbolism in personal names such as *Hehstan* (High Stone) and *Arno* (Eagle).[17] Some of the Beowulf cast's names have appropriate meanings: *Hygelac* means 'lacking reflection or thought', qualities which *Hygd* (forethought) does have. These "quasi-allegorical"[18] titles continue with Hygd's stated opposite, Modþryðo (arrogance), who murdered her kinsmen after suffering "ligetorne"-imagined insults (1943). Even objects may have symbolic names, such as the sword Hrunting, which, as a 'runt' of a sword, fails when needed in the mere cave. But Beowulf's *Nægling* also snaps, a sword ostensibly as strong as a nail.

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[16] Kevin S. Kiernan, "The Legacy of Wiglaf: Saving a Wounded Beowulf". Basic Readings, 203.
[17] W.F. Bolton, Alcuin and Beowulf (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1978) 81. Such humor goes back at least as far as Christ's symbolic pun on Peter's name (Petros being Greek for *rock*): "upon this *rock* I will build my church" (Mt: 16:18).
[18] Fred C. Robinson, Beowulf and the Appositive Style (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1985) 22.

To assume that all Anglo-Saxon names are emblematic is hazardous. Unferth can be translated as 'unpeace', 'nonsense', or even 'giant heart',[19] and the meaning of the name might have been equally ambiguous to Anglo-Saxon ears; various Germanic forms of Unfrid are recorded.[20] Several folkloric interpretations have been offered of Beowulf as 'Bee-wolf', or 'Bear' (having a wolfish desire for the bee's product, honey) as Klaeber contended,[21] but none seem to have enough textual support to make Beowulf a symbolic character; both the poet and Beowulf stress his familial title as *bearn Ecgþeowes* - Ecgtheow's son - rather than his name. Klaeber also argued that Scyld Scefing was a mythological figure as he represents both protection against enemies as a shield and agriculture as a sheaf.[22] Even this least subtle of symbolic names is questionable in light of the fact that Scyld's death represents neither protection nor agriculture; he is "gēafon on gārsecg"- "given to the ocean" in a ship burial (49).

However realistic Beowulf might be, the existence of monsters in the story remains a stumbling block; but not so if the time period is strenuously kept in mind. Contemporary medical texts contained salves to keep elves away; as sober a document as the Anglo-Saxon chronicle records that in Northumbria in 793 "wæron geseowene fyrene dracan on þam lyfte fleogende"- "fiery dragons were seen flying through the air." Exaggeration was common in actual biographical writings. Harold Hardrada killed "two

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[19] Assuming the textual restoration of *Unferth* to *Hunferth* is made. Robert E. Bjork, "Digressions and Episodes". Robert E. Bjork and John D. Niles, ed. A Beowulf Handbook (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 1997) 206.
[20] Morton W. Bloomfield, "Beowulf and Christian Allegory: An Interpretation of Unferth". Repr. in Lewis E. Nicholson, ed. An Anthology of Beowulf Criticism (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1963) 157.
[21] Klaeber, xxvi.
[22] Klaeber, xxiv.

[dragons] at least."[23] Byrhtnoth is reputed to have been 6'9" in height. Einhard records 'portents' of Charlemagne's death such as a black-colored spot on the sun and "frequent earth-tremors in the palace at Aachen."[24] A thirteenth century romance of Richard the Lionhearted has him earning his name by thrusting his hand down the throat of an attacking lion and ripping out the heart, which he consumes raw; the rightful conclusion after this and other improbabilities should be "that there was no Richard, that he is a figure foisted into the Plantaganet dynasty."[25] The question of whether Anglo-Saxon authors actually believed in elves and dragons cannot be answered; but they did populate both fictional and non-fictional literature - however thin the line between them might have been - and would not prevent characters such as Beowulf from being considered a believable character.

Nevertheless, Beowulf's credibility as a mortal man is seemingly tested by his own description, independent of the fiends he faces. Some scholars see Beowulf as a sort of monster himself; Dragland (1977) pointed out that both Beowulf and Grendel are giants with the strength of thirty men.[26] But this sort of hyperbole is surely part of an older rhetorical style, just as John [21:25] writes that if all of Christ's works were recorded, "the world itself could not contain the books that should be written." Nineteenth-century critics such as Conybeare carped about the unrealistic fifty-year gap between the two narratives of the poem, but the frequency of these formations suggest

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[23] W.P. Ker, Epic and Romance (1908) (New York: Dover Publications, 1957) 168.
[24] Einhard and Notker the Stammerer: Two Lives of Charlemagne, trans. Lewis Thorpe (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1969), 85.
[25] Ritchie Girvan, Beowulf and the Seventh Century (London: Methuen and Company, 1935), 76.
[26] S.L. Dragland, "Monster-Man in Beowulf" Neophilologus 61 (1977): 608. In Fidel Fajardo-Acosta, The Condemnation of Heroism in the Tragedy of Beowulf (Queenston, ON: Edwin Mellen Press, 1989) 13.

that they are poetic phrases and not literal measurements; Hrothgar rules fifty years (1769), Grendel's mother holds the mere for fifty years (1498), and, in a world without tape measures, the dragon is also exactly "fiftiges fōtgemearces"- fifty feet in length (3042).[27] Girvan calculates that if all of the dates given are taken literally, Beowulf must be about forty-five when he visits Heorot, and Hrothgar ninety - an especially vigorous ninety if he has three young children.[28] Christ explained that we should forgive our neighbor "seventy times seven" [Mt 18:22], in a language which had no suitable word to express infinity. Similarly, such conventional phrases in Beowulf indicate not a lack of character realism or continuity, but rather the poetic license of a less exacting world. A warrior who literally has the strength of thirty men should not need weapons to fight a fifty-foot dragon; he ought to be able to *lift* him.

The Breca incident and the episode at the mere seem to provide additional difficulties, but these can also be explained as problems of textual interpretation. Beowulf relates that he and Breca "ætsomne on sæ wæron / fīf nihta fyrst"- "were together on the sea for five nights' space of time" (544-5). Their swimming match has been assumed to indicate Beowulf's superhuman endurance; but, as Earl argues, *sund* can mean 'sea' as well as 'swim'. A possible reading of "on sund reon" (512) is "they rowed on the sea."[29] Robinson agrees, adding that it is only during their last night that Beowulf states he is *in* the water (553).[30] The name *Breca* suggests a deeper semantic symbolism, as OE *brecan* can mean to plough the sea; but in Elene "brecan ofer bæþweg" (244)

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[27] Bolton, 76.
[28] Girvan, 64-5.
[29] James W. Earl, "Beowulf's Rowing-Match" Neophil 63 (1979) 285-90.
[30] Robinson, "Elements", 86.

refers to the action of a boat.[31] Similarly, Beowulf's return from Frisia with a large cache of armor is usually translated as a swimming *geste*. However, "sundnytte drēah" (2360) only means "made use of the sea", which does not indicate whether the action is done with arms or a boat.[32]

Also problematic is Beowulf's plunge into the mere; his time spent underwater, a "hwīl dæges" (1495), is usually rendered as "a good part of the day". But when the dragon returns to his hoard "ær dæges hwīle" (2320), the time before daylight is intended. Robinson interprets *hwil dæges* here to mean that Beowulf merely reaches the mere's bottom before daytime, adding that when Beowulf cuts off the head of Grendel's mother, Hrothgar's men almost immediately (*sona*) see the *blode* rise to the water's edge (1594).[33] The poet is also not clear on whether or not Beowulf has performed Herculean feats of swimming and breath-holding, and is perhaps intentionally ambiguous. If so, this uncertainty gives to the audience both a hint of extraordinary action along with a reminder of Beowulf's physical limitations as a human being.

The moral component of Beowulf's actions also deserve examination in regard to his realism as a character. McNamee (1960) went so far as to suggest that Beowulf represents an allegory of Christ in that he comes as a savior to free the Danes from the Grendels in a "purification of the waters."[34] Symbolists have interpreted Beowulf's meeting of the dragon as a Garden of Gethsemane allusion where Beowulf is abandoned

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[31] R.W. Chambers, Widsith (1912) (New York: Russell & Russell, Inc., 1965) 111.
[32] George Clark, Beowulf (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1990) 165.
[33] Robinson, "Elements", 82.
[34] M.B. McNamee, "Beowulf- An Allegory of Salvation?" Nicholson, Anthology of Beowulf Criticism, 341.

by his twelve disciples. Again, it is easy to strain the meaning of number expressions such as twelve. Beowulf's shield has a physical purpose; it is not yet the "breastplate of righteousness."[35]

Nor does Beowulf have the consistent life demanded of a saint or a Christ figure. One of the major background themes of his life is his change from an "æðeling unfrom"- feeble prince (2188) to a mighty hero. Both Offa of Mercia and Grettir are depicted in literature as being *sleac* as boys[36], and the poetic convention finds its English pinnacle in Henry V, whose "reformation, glitt'ring o'er my fault" [1H4 1.2:207], makes for a dramatic contrast to his idle youth. Beowulf's past is not in keeping with an allegory of Christ. As a youth, those around him "gōdne ne tealdon"- "considered him no good" (2184). He remains a sympathetic character who compensates for his lackluster reputation by being sensitive about his honor; his youth is a sore spot, as Unferth discovers when he questions Beowulf's courage with Breca and a furious *flyting* begins. The difficulty of living up to his famous father is a burden with which many men in the poem's audience would have been able to identify.[37]

Nor does Beowulf display the sort of emotional sureness throughout life which a Christ allegory or an idealized saint such as Eadmund might exhibit. His first reaction to the dragon's ravages is to blame himself, as human a response as Charlemagne's soul-searching at the end of his reign.[38] Hrothgar, significantly, does not condemn himself as

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[35] Tolkien, 22.
[36] C.L. Wrenn, Beowulf (London: George G. Harrap & Co., 1973) 50.
[37] George Clark, "The Hero and the Theme", A Beowulf Handbook, 282.
[38] Michael J. Swanton, Crisis and Development in Germanic Society 700-800 (Göppingen: Kümmerle Verlag, 1982) 139.

the reason for Grendel's depredations, simply explaining it in his sermon as one of the trials which a good king must expect.[39] Beowulf's death is filled with the surety that "mē wītan ne ðearf Waldend"- "the Ruler has no cause to accuse me" (2741), but also with the wistful regret that he has no son to pass on his legacy. This sort of world-weariness is echoed in his portrayal of his forlorn grandfather, Hrethel, whose son's pointless death was "hreðre hygemēðe"- "blinding to the heart" (2442). Other subtle touches indicate normal human fear; like Grettir, who is frightened of the dark after being cursed by Glam,[40] Beowulf releases his "pent-up terror" in the cave of the mere by cutting off the head of the already dead Grendel - "hēafde becearf" (1590).[41] His weaknesses do not make him a tragic hero; rather, they make him a more convincing role model by confirming his humanity.

The question of how Beowulf's self-sufficiency as a hero meshes with his human limitations is complicated by his relationship with God. As in the Greek epic, the great Nordic man "sails his own ship."[42] But Beowulf is always mindful of human interdependencies; this is his primary concern as he prepares to enter the mere. He is always careful to credit Hygelac with his successes, explaining that "gēn is eall æt ðē / lissa gelong"- "All favors are still dependent on you" (2149-50). In the same way, Beowulf thanks God for his victories:

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[39] Leo Carruthers, "Kingship and Heroism in Beowulf". Leo Carruthers, ed. Heroes and Heroines in Medieval English Literature (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1994) 27.
[40] Grettir's Saga, tr. Denton Fox and Hermann Pálsson (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1974) 80.
[41] J.D.A. Ogilvy and Donald Baker, Reading Beowulf (Oklahoma: The University of Oklahoma, 1983) 64.
[42] Ker, 7.

> 'Ic ðāra frætwa Frēan ealles ðanc,
> Wuldurcyninge wordum secge,
> ēcum Dryhtne, þē ic hēr on starie'
> (2794-96)
>
> ("To the Lord of all, the King of Glory, eternal Lord, I say words of thanks for the precious things which I gaze upon here.")

Beowulf's belief in a guiding providence is consistently demonstrated through the text; his first words to Hrothgar after returning from the mere explain that "ætrihte wæs gūð getwæfed / nymðe mec God scylde"- "the battle would have been ended immediately had God not shielded me" (1657-58). But this is not the passivity of a saint, as there is always the indication that Beowulf's victories are earned. This sort of partnership is implicit in the mere, where it is "geūðe ylda Waldend"- "granted by the ruler of men" (1661) that Beowulf should see a mighty sword; but, unlike Odysseus, it is up to him to wield it without the help of an Athena. Beowulf then explains that God "oftost wīsode winigea lēasum"- "most often guides the friendless" (1663-4). The scene has a twofold significance: divine help is not automatically to be assumed (*oftost*), and, for Beowulf, God helps those who help themselves - "þonne his ellen dēah" - when their courage is good (573). As a real man, the best course is to act bravely and have faith.

Beowulf's religious belief in itself has been nearly as controversial for scholars as the dating of the poem. Early critics such as Blackburn (1897) were vociferous in referring to the "Christian coloring"[43] of Beowulf, claiming that the poet had rather superficially attempted to Christianize heathen references in the poem. Modern critics more charitably note that there are equally no clear allusions to pagan deities in the poem.

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[43] F.A. Blackburn, "The Christian Coloring in The Beowulf, repr. in Lewis E. Nicholson, ed. An Anthology of Beowulf Criticism (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1963) 2.

The author may have been cautious about bluntly stating Beowulf's Christian piety, for it might have offended both clergy as well as testing the credulity of warriors such as the Frisian Radbord, who preferred glorious Valhalla to Heaven, which contained only "a lot of poor people."[44] In the end, Heaven swallows the smoke of Beowulf's pyre - "Heofon rēce swealg" (3155-6); the poet can hardly be more equivocal. Yet the theology of Beowulf's remarks are not in debate here, but rather the importance they hold in establishing Beowulf's reliance on agents other than himself where his own strength is not sufficient. Clearly, Beowulf does not see himself as superhuman; he confesses to Hrothgar that "þā Metod nolde, / ganges getwæman"- he could not prevent Grendel's escape as the Creator did not will it (967-68). Whatever Beowulf sees as his deity, as a realistic character he accepts being subject to it.

A conscious didacticism may not have been the author's intention. However, official court poetry can hardly have failed in some way to confirm the values of the court. Beowulf is not a distant Nordic demigod, but a man who shared the human limitations of the poem's hearers. As a character intended to speak to the audience's age and not a vanished one, he would have been a sympathetic role model for both young and old warriors. Scholars have frequently grappled with Beowulf's justifications, varying from condemning his "fool-hardy deeds"[45] to calling him a perfect combination of the *sapientia* which Hygelac needs and the *fortitudo* which Hrothgar lacks.[46] The poet's

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[44] Vita Vulframni 668. In Craig R. Davis, Beowulf and the Demise of Germanic Legend (New York: Garland Publishing, 1996) 31.
[45] John Leyerle, "Beowulf the Hero and the King". Medium Ævum 34:2 (1965) 95.
[46] R.E. Kaske, "Sapientia et Fortitudo as the Controlling Theme of Beowulf", Nicholson, Anthology of Beowulf Criticism, 269.

attitudes are more important in determining how Beowulf was intended to be perceived, and in this is he is less ambiguous; as a prince, Beowulf is lauded for acting as a kinsman should -"Swā sceal mæg don" (2166), and as king he "gehēold tela"- ruled well (2208). He shares the same compliment that both Scyld and Hrothgar share: "þæt was gōd cyning!" How Beowulf's motivations would have been judged by his contemporaries is more significant in determining his character's realism than modern polemics. The poem must come first, and the necessities of plot must be taken into consideration. There is no use in debating whether Hygelac should have been killed in a distant landing party by Frisians; many in the audience may have known the history, giving the poet little latitude in relating Hygelac's death.

Beowulf's opposition to Grendel would have been entirely plausible to his audience, and the poet is plain in calling him one of the "untydras"- evil progeny (111) who, like all biblical monsters such as Nimrod, was descended from Cain and shared his bloodthirstiness.[47] The moral comparison to Satan is easy to make, for in their depictions both envy man, are miserable, and inhabit an *ænga styde* - desolate place.[48] The audience would have had little difficulty accepting that Beowulf is justified in attacking this threat to men's lives and to civilization itself as represented by Heorot. Indeed, commentators have at times argued that Beowulf should have done *more* in questioning why he permits Grendel to consume Handscio. Here again the necessities of plot development come into play. The terror "must find its climax in death; it demands a victim, lest we lose

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[47] David Williams, Cain and Beowulf: A Study in Secular Allegory (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1982) 32.
[48] Betty S. Cox, Cruces of Beowulf (The Hague: Mouton & Company, 1971) 87.

conviction of its reality."[49] This has been a dramatic device from the time of Odysseus to that of Star Trek's Captain Kirk; there must be an "expendable counter"[50] to demonstrate that the villain is a real and threatening force. Here, as with Odysseus in the Cyclops' cave, the audience may even empathize with the hero's pain; it takes additional valor to refrain from rash action while the situation is assessed, lest all be lost.[51]

Beowulf's opposition to Grendel's dam has been less favorably received. Klaeber gallantly felt that she deserves "a certain amount of sympathy"[52] for having acted in maternal revenge after Grendel's death. Leyerle (1965) went further in warning that the power of the monsters progressively increases as their "reasons for fighting become better justified."[53] By this criterion, she acts out the appropriate blood-vengeance code of Anglo-Saxon society. But outlaws, especially quasi-human outlaws, are not covered by this sentiment. Furthermore, her actions are an indication that the depredations will continue; Aschere's severed head, left on the shore of the mere, is both a provocation and reminder of this intent. Hrothgar echoes this belief in wondering despondently "hwæþer him Alwalda æfre / wille æfter wēaspelle wyrpe gefremman"- "whether the Almighty would ever bring about change for him after the tidings of woe" (1314-15). Beowulf does cite the need to avenge his friend - "his frēond wrece" (1385), but he also suggests an altruistic motive in facing the new plague of Grendel's dam, thereby winning "dōmes ær dēaþe"- glory before death (1388). Beowulf's purposes here have been called those of

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[49] Brodeur, 93.
[50] Davis, 138.
[51] Chickering, 308.
[52] Klaeber, lii.
[53] Leyerle, 89.

a "bloody mercenary and professional murderer"[54]; yet he behaves as a gentleman, never asking "just how much 'wound gold' Hrothgar has in mind"[55] when the king is vulnerable and shaken. Nor does he take treasure from the cave after his victory; to a warrior of honor, they have no more value than a bought Victoria Cross.[56]

Beowulf has been censured for taking the battle to Grendel's mother's own home in the mere. Yet this, in addition to providing plot variety to the staging of another scuffle in Heorot, makes Grendel's dam more fearful by moving the battle to a place where Beowulf is at a decisive disadvantage. Battles such as Ravenswood are fought with everyday weapons; but the mere is a magical place.[57] Its description emphasizes its unearthly and eerie nature, down to the horrifying image of a hart who instinctively surrenders to baying hounds before entering the bloody and surging waters (1368-72). The picture must have been calculated to be particularly alien and foreboding to an Anglo-Saxon audience, which was unfamiliar with large waterfalls.[58] The poet is clear on the rightness of Beowulf's actions, for after the black mere has been "gefælsod"- cleansed (1620), a heavenly light shines approval on Beowulf inside the cave - "lēoht inne stōd" (1570). To the warrior audience, his resolve is to be approved and emulated. The hero has acted from realistic motivations even in a magical environment.

The picture shifts again with the dragon. Critics have in the last century been in a rush to defend the dragon. Clark saw no evil, but rather innocence in his "lyftwynne"-

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[54] Fajardo-Acosta, 2
[55] Clark, 107.
[56] T.A. Shippey, Beowulf (London: Edward Arnold Publishers, 1978) 20.
[57] Williams, 54.
[58] Brodeur, 94-5.

joy of flight (3043).[59] Leyerle held that the dragon was blameless, having slept peacefully until being disturbed, and then acting only in retribution as an "agent of fate" rather than God's enemy.[60] The moral culpability shifts away from the dragon to the thief, and then indirectly to Beowulf, who demonstrates Byrhtnoth's *overmod* in attacking the dragon out of "misplaced chivalry."[61] Such a view might be popular with deconstructionists, but would be rejected by an Anglo-Saxon audience. The poet refers to the dragon only as an "uhtsceaða"- night-ravager (2271), but the rest may have been obvious enough to avoid insulting the audience. Chickering tends to allegorize the dragon, but still admits that "no serpent in Western literature means well."[62] Tolkien sees the dragon more as a conception - being more *dragon-ness* than *dragon*[63] - but this is no more accurate than his reduction of the dragon to a worm, playing on the word *wyrm* as though he can be pierced by a fisherman's hook.[64] The dragon is the living and dangerous successor to Grendel and is introduced in the same words: "oððæt ān ongan"- "until *another* began" (2210) as is Grendel (100).[65] As with Grendel, there is no reason to believe that the dragon will stop his attacks or that he is no longer "gebolgen"- enraged (2220). The dragon is not the devil as he is depicted in Rev 20:2, but his serpentine characteristics and fiery breath must have had unmistakably evil connotations to the poem's listeners.

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[59] Clark, 130.
[60] Leyerle, 90.
[61] J.R.R. Tolkien, "The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth Beorhthelm's Son". Essays & Studies 6 (1953) 1.
[62] Chickering, 256.
[63] Tolkien, Monsters, 15.
[64] Clark, 127.
[65] Robert J. Schrader, "Succession and Glory in Beowulf", Journal of English and Germanic Philology 90 (October 1991) 502. *An* may also be translated as *one*.

The dragon is real, and if not human, it shows higher emotions such as joy, loss, anger, and spite. How, then, would a contemporary audience have considered these emotions? The position that the dragon has no inherent enmity towards man must be discarded; in western letters, since the Garden of Eden attacking man has been the *raison d'etre* of serpents. Secondly, the view that the dragon has been unjustly provoked must also be rejected. A continuing theme in the text is the wrongness of stinginess and parsimony with possessions, which is condemned in both Heremod and Modþryðo as being contrary to the generosity and kinship of Hrothgar and Beowulf. This sentiment continues with the dragon, for whom the operative motivation is spite: "ne byð him wihte ðy sēl"- "nor is he at all the better for it" (2277). The hiding of treasure held a particular moral opprobrium for contemporary eyes; Eccl 20:32 asks, "wisdom that is hid, and treasure that is not seen, what profit is there in them both."[66] Historically, the burying of money was illegal in Christian Iceland,[67] and buried treasure was traditionally associated with the devil. Beowulf has realistic purposes in opposing the dragon, not only because "wrōht wæs genīwad"- "strife was renewed" (2287), but because the dragon burns Geatland out of "nearofāges nīð"- "cruelly hostile malice" (2317) and not from a justified feeling of outrage. The modern ethicist may not agree, but it is the poet's opinion which is important.

The thorniest issue of all concerning the dragon's depredations is Beowulf's decision to fight him unaided, explaining to his men that "nis þæt ēower sīð"- "this is not

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[66] Williams, 60.

[67] The Vinland Sagas, trans. Magnus Magnusson and Hermann Pálsson. (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1965) 87.

your exploit" (2532). Sisam argued that Beowulf fights alone as a tactical maneuver.[68] Beowulf's actions have variously been interpreted as his highest act of "pure, unrewarded altruism"[69] (as he no longer has a need for land or *lof*), to an irresponsible act of romantic glory-seeking. This was the germ of Leyerle's "fatal contradiction" thesis: that Beowulf's action exposed the contradictory impulses in Germanic society for leaders to be both courageous warriors and responsible kings.[70] By turning down assistance, Tolkien argued that Beowulf does the same as Byrhtnoth at Maldon in allowing the Vikings to cross the channel: by leaving his *folc* at risk of being leaderless he makes a "sporting fight" at other people's expense.[71] Whereas in youth he has a plausible yearning for fame and endangers only himself, in age Beowulf risks all of Geatland by exposing them to foreign threats with his death. But to make this reproach goes too far and ignores the technology of the time period; the iron shield Beowulf orders made would have been considered extraordinary.[72] Additionally, in comparison to his cocky resolve to seek out Grendel's dam, "gā þær hē wille"- "go where she will" (1394), Beowulf does not enter the mound in a valiant act of suicide but calls the dragon out to neutral ground.[73]

The retainers are also a factor; if his warriors abandon him anyway, Beowulf turns out to be a sensible judge of character to fight alone. Beowulf's actions have

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[68] Chickering, 368.
[69] Guy Bourquin, "The Lexis and Deixis of the Hero in Old English Poetry", Heroes and Heroines, Carruthers, 7.
[70] Leyerle, 89.
[71] Tolkien, "Homecoming", 15.
[72] Irving, Introduction, 29.
[73] Kemp Malone, "Beowulf the Headstrong". Peter Clemoes, ed. Anglo-Saxon England 1 (Cambridge University Press, 1972) 143.

literary parallels in writings such as the Vita Oswini, where king Oswine wishes to face death by Oswy alone rather than endanger his men.[74] But Oswine's men refuse and rally around him, which is the appropriate (if not always observed) response for Germanic warriors who, as Tacitus described them seven centuries earlier, saw surviving their lord as high disgrace. Beowulf may expect the same response from his men; Wiglaf asks, why else were they chosen but because "gārwīgend gōde tealde, / hwate helmberend"- "he considered [us] good spear-fighters, brave helmet-bearers" (2641-2).[75] Beowulf, significantly, does not refuse Wiglaf's assistance or chastise him as he dies; indeed, he blesses him as "Wīglāf lēofa"- dear Wiglaf (2745). Ultimately, Beowulf's action is both justified and realistic, for Wiglaf has altruistically helped to kill the dragon which Beowulf could not dispatch alone. This action, combined with Wiglaf's response, may have been part of an implicit object lesson on the part of the poet to inspire a listening warrior audience to "ellen cyðan, / cræft ond cēnðu"- display courage, strength, and boldness (2695-6).

If Beowulf had survived the dragon's bite, fewer modern readers would gripe about Beowulf's decision to fight by himself, but the poet would be left with the difficulty of explaining away the disappearance of the Geats. There would also be the loss of Beowulf's death-scene and the beatific manner in which Beowulf accepts his fate and gives heavenly thanks. Beowulf cannot escape death any more than his audience, but

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[74] Colin Chase, "Beowulf, Bede, and St. Oswine: The Hero's Pride in Old English Hagiography", Basic Readings, Baker, 186. Andreas' men have a similar objection (405-14).
[75] Irving, "Heroic Role-Models", 365.

he can negotiate the best terms for it.[76] Few wish to die, but an honorable death is still admirable; Beowulf's emotions are credible and his passing can be held up as a role model for imitation. As ever, the determinant is the text. The retainers do not disparage Beowulf, but accept their due condemnation from Wiglaf without protest. His people build a funeral mound which is meant as an object of veneration. Wiglaf himself begins the funeral address with a criticism of Beowulf, bewailing that "oft sceal eorl monig ānes willan / wræc ādrēogan, swā ūs geworden is"- "Often many earls must endure misery through the will of one, as has happened to us" (3077-8). But Wiglaf's speech is more soliloquy than lament, and he makes a poetic progression from complaint toward lauding Beowulf as "wīgend weorðfullost wīde geond eorðan"- "the most worthy warrior throughout the world" (3099), and finally as "lēofne mannan"- our beloved man (3108).[77] To Wiglaf as well as the author, if Beowulf has made an error in judgment, his motives make him all the more agreeable, just as Roland's failure to blow the horn makes a poem celebrating him all the more heroic.[78]

The overall picture is that of a contemporary audience which would have likely accepted the bogeys in Beowulf as flesh-and-blood opponents within the story. Many more would have believed in real-world monsters and dragons and would have had much less disbelief to suspend; whoever wrote out the first 1,939 lines of the poem also copied a treatise on other monstrous races, The Marvels of the East.[79] Similarly, Beowulf is no symbolic wheat-god but a realistic and sympathetic character within the story, one into

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[76] Davis, 154.
[77] Chickering, 12.
[78] Edward B. Irving, Jr., "Christian and Pagan Elements", Beowulf Handbook, 180.
[79] Niles, Homo Narrans 116.

whom the hearer is given personal insight and who is presented as a man to be emulated. As real people do, Beowulf shows qualities of youth and age, and combines his great strength with human fallibilities. He admits that his adventure with Breca was done "wæron bēgen þā gīt / on geogoðfēore"- "when we were both still in youth" (536-7), and while he makes a bold boast (*gilpspraece*) to face Grendel, he does not guarantee success, only that he will either accomplish the "eorlīc ellen"- courageous deed (637) or die in Heorot trying.[80] The decision to face the dragon unaided may or may not be the best course of action; but then, we know he will die through the poet whereas Beowulf "ne cūðe / þurh hwæt"- did not know by what means he would meet his end (3067-8).[81] It must also not be forgotten that in every battle with the monsters, including the dragon, Beowulf *wins*.

The poet makes a point of soberly mentioning the disposal of dead bodies in Beowulf, whether it be Grendel's decapitation, or the "scufan"- shoving (3131) over the cliff of the dragon's remains, or the funeral pyre of the hero himself where his "bānhūs gebrocen"- his bone-house is broken (3147). Beowulf is no more ethereal in the poem than the monsters he faces. The poet is skilled at adding subtle visual touches to the text, always a strength of Old English. There is a rough and real physicality to Grendel's grasping of Beowulf from his *hleorbolster* (pillow); as Beowulf grapples with his attacker, "hē onfēng hraþe / inwitþancum ond wið earm gesæt"- "he quickly perceived his hostile intent and sat up against the arm" (748-9). Grendel does not die from being exposed to sunlight but from the simple means of bleeding to death. Yet he does manage

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[80] Shippey, 9.
[81] Shippey, 40.

to escape from Heorot, an unavoidable fact for which Beowulf feels he must apologize; Beowulf is not a superhero, and in being unable to prevent the future burning of Heorot, is not an allegory of Christ. His realness is echoed in the stages of his life, from the heady action of the first sections of the poem to the more contemplative mood of the last section. His goodness as king, having ruled honestly and avoided contrived hostilities - "hēold mīn tela, / ne sōhte searonīðas" (2737-8), inspires the supporting characters, who learn to act like their lord in "speaking, fighting, and dying with equal eloquence."[82] In the same way, the audience would have been expected to see Beowulf as a relevant role model for their own lives.

As ever, decoding the poem is as frustrating as determining how its audience might have responded. It may have been intended as a didactic view of a heroic life to emulate; equally, it may have been intended as a tragic illustration of a misguided obsession with gaining *lof*. There may also have been no intention to argue either theme consistently; as Robinson has suggested, the poet's ambiguity may be a calculated effect.[83] Yet if Beowulf is meant to be a flawed hero, the glory given him by his people and their encomium to him as "mannum mildest" (3181) - the same epithet that is given to Moses in the OE Exodus (550)[84]- is also misdirected and the entire Geatish community shares in the tragedy by its fatal ignorance of what has happened. If so, the poet may, as some have suggested, have written the poem in order to discredit the heathen world of the comitatus and the *hæleð* in order to encourage its abandonment in favor of Christianity.

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[82] Irving, Heroic, 370.
[83] Robinson, 11.
[84] Bourquin, 13.

But such a prolonged object lesson of moral censure seems painfully unlikely; an epic poem where everybody goes to hell "could have had little appeal except for spiritual sadists."[85] The relationship between the new faith and the loyalty between warrior and lord was not antagonistic; the bond between man and God could be depicted in the same way, with God described as *helm* (protector) or *waldend* (ruler). The old Germanic values were suffused and subsumed into the new ones of Christianity; the poet was not talking about antiquated ideals, but rather about a world which his audience was meant to recognize, and a hero whose merits were meant to be imitated.

[85] Shippey, 43.

Chapter 4

Time and the Hero in Beowulf from a Bakhtinian Perspective

Beowulf has not been a national English possession in the manner that Homer's works were to the Greeks. The manuscript likely owes its survival to a Tudor antiquary, Lawrence Nowell, who rescued it during the dissolution of the monasteries. After Nowell's death in 1576, the book eventually passed into the library of Sir Robert Cotton (1571-1631), which was donated by his grandson in 1700 to the government trustees who would later found the British museum.[1] After being shuffled between buildings after Cotton House had deteriorated beyond repair, the library ended up in a Westminster firetrap "ominously named Ashburnham House."[2] In 1731 just such a "great Smoak"[3] destroyed such original Anglo-Saxon manuscripts as the one containing the Battle of Maldon; Beowulf escaped with only scorched edges.

If the fire had consumed it, the Beowulf manuscript would have perished as little more than a museum artifact, unreadable and uncopied. Sparse attention to the text of Beowulf was paid until 1787, when an Icelandic scholar, Grímur Thorkelin, prepared a transcript of the poem, which was published with a parallel Latin translation in 1815. Thorkelin is better remembered for preserving now-lost bits of text from the manuscript than the accuracy of his translation. Readers lacking Latin proficiency had to wait even longer for Mitchell Kemble's modern English translation in 1833.

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[1] Kevin Kiernan, Beowulf and the Beowulf Manuscript, 1981 (Repr. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1996) 67.
[2] Kiernan, 67.
[3] "A Narrative of the Fire which happened at Ashburnham-House, Oct. 23, 1731, and of the Methods used for preserving and recovering the Manuscripts of the Royal and Cottonian Libraries". British Library MS Add 24932, p.11. Kiernan, 68.

Yet the purported "epic amplitude of Beowulf"[4] has made it the subject of literary scrutiny for nearly two centuries. It has been described as a courtly epic[5] and as a work directly influenced by such ancient works as the Aeneid. Such deliberations not only betray a Romanizing bias and fallacy (it is worth reading; *ergo* it must somehow derive from classical sources), but also assume that Beowulf itself was by definition an epic work to its hearers. Such designations as *epic* and *novel* involve a set of genre restrictions and expectations that the poet would probably not have cared about if Beowulf was indeed simply a good folk story intended to affirm and inspire a royal audience. There is no way of knowing either way while basic questions about the poem's genesis and purposes continue to go unanswered.

The subject of genre studies, as with everything else Beowulfian, is a ticklish and controversial ground. But the label of *epic* as applied to the poem must be considered nevertheless, for it applies a critical mindset to the poem from which it is difficult to escape. M. M. Bakhtin, in his essay "Epic and Novel", described the epic form as one in which a key aspect is "the transferal of a represented world into the past."[6] The narrator of the epic has the "reverent point of view of a descendant."[7] Tolkien also cannot avoid a classical reference for long, arguing that the Beowulf poet, like Virgil, has "an antiquarian curiosity"[8] about his subject. Bakhtin cannot be faulted for describing the epic genre; his only indication that works such as Beowulf cannot be novelistic lies in his

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[4] Tom Burns Haber, A Comparative Study of the Beowulf and the Aeneid (New York: Hafner Publishing, 1931) 1.
[5] William Witherle Lawrence, Beowulf and Epic Tradition (Hafner Publishing, 1961) 4.
[6] M.M. Bakhtin, "Epic and Novel", Michael Holquist and Caryl Emerson, ed. & trans., The Dialogic Imagination (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981) 13.
[7] Bakhtin, 13.
[8] J.R.R. Tolkien, Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics (1936) (Norwood Editions, 1976) 20.

statement that "only the novel is younger than writing and the book."[9] But Tolkien errs in arbitrarily applying the rules of the epic to Beowulf; the poem is not set in a lost and primal past, but in a time relevant to and recognizable to its audience. As will be explored below, most of the physical and cultural features of Beowulf would have been familiar through most of the later first millennium A.D. to an Anglo-Saxon audience.[10] The poet's construction of chronology is built upon genealogies and successions rather than on dates. Hill notes:

> This makes the concept of time one of descent more than of clocks and numeration. Time becomes an extended or specious present rather than an array of past, present, and future wherein the past is alienable and the future redemptive.[11]

It is the critics who have reconstructed a timeline of events in the poem, and not the poet. The sequence of events in the poem lacks the order of a chronicle; but it can be seen textually that these time relationships are not important to the author.

Klaeber misses the point in dismissing the poet's handling of plot as "circuitous,"[12] assuming that all good ancient literature should be chronologically linear. As ever, the easiest recourse when finding difficulty in the poem is to question the competence of the author or the copyist, in the same way that the ability of scribes was suspect even in contemporary documents.[13] The poet's mixing of epic and novelistic

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[9] Bakhtin, 3.
[10] Catherine M. Hills, "Beowulf and Archaeology", Robert E. Bjork and John D. Niles, ed. A Beowulf Handbook (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 1997) 297.
[11] John M. Hill, "Social Milieu", A Beowulf Handbook, 264.
[12] Fr. Klaeber, Beowulf and the Fight at Finnsburg (New York: D.C. Heath & Company, 1950) lxiii.
[13] Ælfric's distrust of scribes is well-documented: "micel yfel deð se unwritere, gyf he nele his gewrit gerihtan" – "the inaccurate scribe does much evil, if he is unwilling to correct his writing" (Preface to Genesis). In R.D. Fulk, "Textual Criticism", A Beowulf Handbook, 50.

elements was probably entirely unconscious; or, if he knew of such Aristotelian distinctions at all, he may not have seen them as applicable or relevant to lay works. Learned Anglo-Saxons do not seem to have believed so; Ælfric's writings on Latin grammar draw a distinction between serious writings and "idele spellunga" – the "frivolous stories" of the scop.[14] Old English had terms for various types of elevated speech and metrical song, such as *giedd* and *leoþ*, but such oral modes were totally alien to Latin modes; "teachers of *grammatica* did not teach this skill."[15]

But the question of genre in understanding Beowulf is secondary; Bakhtin's writings on the epic hero in "Epic and Novel" are important here only insofar as they help elucidate the matter of the perspective of time in the poem and its repercussions on Beowulf as a character. Bakhtin's statements on the facets of the epic are not in question, but rather how Beowulf (or Beowulf) conforms to or contradicts these rules in its structure, characters, and themes. As a living organism to its hearers, the poem includes aspects of both genres, and the text of the poem must, as ever, come first in establishing the contemporaneity of the story to its possible Anglo-Saxon audience.

The overall polarity in Bakhtin's writings is that between the gravity of the epic and the levity of the novel; whereas in the epic format the narrator elevates events to a valorized and solemn plane of respect, the essence of the novel is in its "familiarization of the world through laughter and popular speech."[16] Bakhtin sees an early example of this progression in late Greek satire, where the gods are described disrespectfully and

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[14] Quoted in John D. Niles, Homo Narrans (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999) 11.
[15] Niles, Homo Narrans 20.
[16] Bakhtin, 23.

comically, in everyday speech and situations. But more important is the concept of *distancing* implicit in this literary development. The epic operates on a distanced and elevated plane, but "laughter demolishes fear and piety before an object, before a world, making of it an object of familiar contact."[17] Returning to the poem, if Beowulf were meant to suggest a feeling of familiarity and contemporality to its audience, it must be examined for indications of this lessening of somber gravity. Is there indeed humor in the poem?

As wags have noted, few matters are less humorous than the study of humor. The danger is also ever-present of imposing modern standards of levity on a former culture, so that one ends up like Benson's lowbrow undergraduates, who "think the very title The Faerie Queene is a real belly laugh."[18] Yet the nature of humor itself is that it must often be lowbrow to be contemporary to its audience. If there is the same sort of dry jokes and situations in Beowulf based on current events which Shakespeare is so fond of, their referents are now lost. Nor does the literary stereotype of the Anglo-Saxon warrior carrying out his duties with cheerful stoicism in the face of inevitable doom leave much room for wit and levity.

Yet there is a sort of subtle, ironic humor in much of Old English literature. An example of this sort of deliberate understatement is Hrothgar's description of Grendel's mere; the king's truly hellish picture of the mere is capped with the observation that "nis þæt hēoru stōw"- "it's not a pleasant place" (1372). Beowulf himself indulges in this sort

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[17] Bakhtin, 23.
[18] Larry D. Benson, "The "Queynte" Punnings of Chaucer's Critics". Contradictions: From Beowulf to Chaucer (Brookfield, VT: Ashgate Publishing, 1995) 221.

of dry wit when he assures Hrothgar that, if he is eaten by Grendel, "nō ðū ymb mīnes ne þearf / līces feorme leng sorgian"- "You will have no further need to worry about my upkeep" (450-1). Some critics additionally see a sort of "comic psychology" in Grendel's last approach to Heorot, "done from the fumbling loser's point of view."[19] The tone is not satirical, as in much late Icelandic poetry where the gods dabble in humorous adventures;[20] the subject of the poem is still Beowulf's heroic deeds. However, Beowulf's character is that of a mortal man, and such occasional touches of subtle levity remind the poem's audience of their connection to him as men.

The style of conversation in the poem also has genre implications. Chickering asserts that in Beowulf "characters do not converse; they deliver formal speeches in the epic style."[21] This opinion is not universally held; Klaeber points out that, of some 1300 speech-lines in the poem, about one tenth are indirect discourse involving more pedestrian verbs such as *gecwæð* (said) rather than the more formal *maþelode* (made a speech).[22] Klaeber also notes stylistic constructions such as the "simple way of connecting sentences by the monotonous *þa*"[23] as indicating more of an everyday speech style. Conversational tones shift throughout the poem; Beowulf is more formal with the aged Hrothgar and more familiar with Hygelac, who initiates Beowulf's report with the easygoing welcome, "Hū lomp ēow on lāde, lēofa Bīowulf"- "How did you fare, beloved Beowulf?" (1987). Such prosaic usages suggest a style departing from the valorized

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[19] Chickering, 10.
[20] W.P. Ker, Epic and Romance (1908) (New York: Dover Publications, 1957) 43.
[21] Chickering, 15.
[22] Klaeber, lv.
[23] Klaeber, lxvii.

prose of the epic format and its purported chronological distance from the audience's speech.

Shifts in speech tone may even take on more political aspects. Bakhtin argues that the development of the novel happened only with Europe's "emergence from a socially isolated and culturally deaf semi-patriarchal society, and its entrance into international and interlingual contacts and relationships."[24] But this argument that *polyglossia* begins only in the late middle ages assumes that Europe consisted of one homogeneous linguistic and cultural group, which it did not; by most calculations of Beowulf's dating, Europe was already a mix of Germanic and Romanic peoples who would form (or had formed) the uneasy conglomerate of the Holy Roman Empire. Latin had already long failed to become a universal lay language and was beginning to compete with literature written in progressively divergent tongues.

Writers of Old English could not have failed to be aware both of internal dialects within England and linguistic mixings with Scandinavian and Frankish languages. Tolkien argues that the diction of the poem "was poetical, archaic, and artificial (if you will) in the day that the poem was made";[25] but this position assumes that there was a pre-existing archaic mode in Anglo-Saxon English for poets to make use of, and with the number of continually shifting Anglo-Saxon dialects this can hardly have been so.[26] When the language truly did become archaic in post-conquest England, the story seems to

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[24] Bakhtin, 11.
[25] J.R. Clark, trans., Beowulf and the Finnsburg Fragment (London, 1940), 12. Quoted in Eric John, "Beowulf and the Margins of Literacy". Peter S. Baker, ed. Beowulf: Basic Readings (New York: Garland Publishing, 1995) 63.
[26] John, 63.

have been forgotten. Both arguments, that Beowulf's diction was *monoglossic* and therefore unable to assume novelistic attributes, and that the language was already intentionally archaic, are thus untenable; the two scribes who transcribed the poem use differing spellings and abbreviations and may not have even come from the same dialectal region.

Beowulf as a character provides further difficulties in ascertaining the classification of the poem. Beowulf has variously been typified as a Christ figure, a damned heathen, a wheat-god, or a mortal man and role model. Any of these views is modified by Bakhtin's statement that the epic hero is "a fully finished and completed being. This has been accomplished on a lofty heroic level, but what is complete is also something hopelessly ready-made."[27] Certainly, it is necessary to generalize in order to state the point; even Odysseus is not ready-made in the sense that he learns to control his pride after paying dearly for antagonising the Cyclops. But the "obvious woodenness"[28] of the epic hero is seen in Beowulf, where development of self occurs throughout the hero's life; part of Beowulf's character is his change from being an "æðeling unfrom"- "a cowardly noble" (2188) to being "lofgeornost"- eager for fame (3182), and his progression from the daring of youth to the thoughtfulness and reflection of age. Bakhtin claims that both epic "heroes and authors alike"[29] lack an ideological initiative. But Beowulf ends his life in an ethical defence of his actions, stating that he sought no intrigues and did not swear false oaths - "ne sōhte searo-nīðas, nē mē swōr fela āða on

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[27] Bakhtin, 34.
[28] Bakhtin, 35.
[29] Bakhtin, 35.

unriht" (2738). Whereas the Greek gods "hardly embody a superego"[30] and simply demand unfailing allegiance, Beowulf follows a faith which involves a complex moral code of behaviour.

An additional aspect of the epic hero for Bakhtin is his lack of interior character, or rather an absence of distinction between private and public persona:

> He is, furthermore, completely externalised. There is not the slightest gap between his authentic essence and its external manifestation. All his potential, all his possibilities are realized utterly in his external social position... His view of himself coincides completely with others' views of him....[31]

An example of this "exposing of self"[32] is seen in Hamlet, who privately reflects on the murder of his father and who undergoes changes through the play as he carries the burden of the secret. In Beowulf, the speaker is indeed in accord with Beowulf's actions; but the story can hardly be faulted for having an omniscient narrator. Furthermore, there are at times lacunae between Beowulf's private persona and his public. Only Beowulf knows the serious danger he faces in the mere-cave, where he is "aldres orwēna"- despairing of life (1565) as he battles Grendel's dam. Nor do his people know of his personal angst over the dragon's depredations: "brēost innan wēoll / þēostrum geþoncum, swā him geþywe ne wæs"- "his breast inside welled with dark thoughts, as was not customary for him" (2331-3).

Despite the wistful tone of Beowulf's last speeches to his men, only Wiglaf is given full insight into Beowulf's private grief as the latter reflects, upon death, that he has no son to give his "guðgewædu"- war-garments (2730). Clark complains of Beowulf that

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[30] James Earl, Thinking About Beowulf (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994) 127.
[31] Bakhtin, 34.
[32] Bakhtin, 34.

"we only know him from the outside";[33] but this reserved nature and self-sufficiency would have indicated strong character and not lack of it to an Anglo-Saxon warrior, in comparison to classical heroes who tend to be more vocal about their tribulations. At any rate, Beowulf's emotional moments with Hygelac and with Wiglaf, as well as his oblique references to his own personal problems (Hrethel's childlessness echoes his own), do much in delineating internal character. Beowulf does not fit neatly into the epic hero form, nor into a genre presumably dealing with past events.

And yet the past is always firmly in the background of the characters, informing their actions. What is the *chronotope* of Beowulf – its conception of time?[34] The central aspect of Bakhtin's view of epic time is, "in Goethe's and Schiller's terminology,"[35] the 'absolute past' of the genre. In this view, the epic is concerned with "beginnings" and "peak times" of a shared national history. To this extent, Beowulf participates in the epic schema, for the work begins by invoking the audience's ancestral Nordic heritage: "Wē Gār-Dena in gēar-dagum, / þēod-cyninga, þrym gefrūnon, / hū ðā æþelingas ellen fremedon!"- "We have heard of the glory of the people's kings of the Spear-Danes from days of yore; how noble princes showed great courage!" (1-3). The problem of chronological distancing begins with the first pronoun of the poem, for *we* implicitly suggests a familial or national link to the people and events in the poem. Bakhtin argues that the epic

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[33] George Clark, "The Hero and the Theme". A Beowulf Handbook, 275.
[34] Bahktin does not mention Beowulf in "Epic and Novel", and may not have read it. He does have an extended treatment of the concept of 'chronotope' in "Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel" (1938).
[35] Bakhtin, 13.

> lacks any relativity, that is, any gradual, purely temporal progressions that might connect it with the present. It is walled off absolutely from all subsequent times, and above all from those times in which the singer and his listeners are located. (15-16)

Again, the task is not to prove or disprove Bakhtin, but rather to follow his argument and to consider whether Beowulf has such characteristics. This may be pursued in two ways: by examining the textual contemporality of the poem, and by looking for evidence of architectural or social clues in the story which place it in the rough time period of its hypothetical hearers. It is not necessary to debate the poem's exact time of composition, but rather to question how much the narrator expects his audience to relate to the world he creates for it.

The poet begins by addressing the events of Scyld Scefing as happening "in gear-dagum"- in days of yore, in long-ago days (1). But there are few such indications of past time in the poem other than occasional references such as Hrothgar's hall-thane, who provides services "swylce þy dōgore / heaþo-līðende habban scoldon"- "such as battle-voyagers used to have in those days" (1797-8). The only tangible yardstick of time sequence is the royal progression of rule from Scyld to Hrothgar; time is not marked on calendars but conceptualized as *descent*. In other places, the poet mixes the time-frame of Cain freely with that of Beowulf, and seems as unconcerned with accurately measuring time as he is with lengths and measures. As the dragon is referred to by the fixed expression of 'fifty feet' long, these are also the measures of both Hrothgar's and

Beowulf's reigns - a fixed expression in the same way as 'to have and to hold' is echoed in Hrothgar's instruction to Beowulf to "hafa nū ond geheald" Heorot (658).[36]

Early critics faulted the poem for lacking chronological unity; more charitable commentators such as Leyerle (1965) argue that the poem has a sort of interlaced structure showing "the recurrence of human behavior, and the circularity of time."[37] What the poet's ambiguity represents is not a closed circle of time past, but rather a sense of time as a continuous flow from then to now; evil is an abiding force to be fought, and the dragon is only *an* - another one (2210) - of the pestiferous legacy of the "socially ever-present" Cain.[38] The narrator himself in Beowulf is someone who is an evolving part of the story with the formula *ic gefrægn* - I have heard. A *scop* like the narrator is even depicted reacting to contemporary events in the story when a new lay is composed to Beowulf on the morning that he has killed Grendel.[39]

There is another formal literary device which the poet uses to establish the continuum between Beowulf's world and that of the audience, and this is the gnomic statement; lying somewhere between the folk saying and the cliché, the gnome is a concise epigram which passes on many otherwise unrecorded cultural values. Some medieval proverbs, as Susan Deskis (1996) calls them, which are found in Beowulf

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[36] Ursula Schaefer, "Rhetoric and Style". A Beowulf Handbook, 111.
[37] John Leyerle, "The Interlace Structure of Beowulf" University of Toronto Quarterly 37:1-17, 8. Repr. in Shippey, "Structure and Unity", 166.
[38] David Williams, Cain and Beowulf: A Study in Secular Allegory (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1982) 41.
[39] Andreas Haarder, Beowulf: The Appeal of a Poem (Viborg, Norway: Akademisk Forlag, 1975) 174.

change little from Germanic antiquity until the time of Chaucer.[40] A common theme in the poem's gnomic sayings is the unchanging rule of God, and the poet uses these sentential phrases to establish the time continuity between Beowulf and the audience. God is presented as ruling all men, "swā hē nū gīt deð"- "as He now yet does" (1058), and God's judgment applies "gumena gehwylcum, swā hē nū gēn deð"- "to every man, as it now yet does" (2859). Spring itself brings pleasant weather, "swā nū gyt deð"- as it still does now (1134). The continuing rule of God bridges epic distance. Greenfield (1976) claims that the formula "on þæm dæge þysses lifes"- "on that day of this life", used both to describe Beowulf's size and Grendel's death (197, 806), suggests an intentional chronological separation from the audience.[41] Yet this overlooks the religious continuity which the poet wishes to emphasize between the Geats' lives and the audience's. Both groups share in *this* life before the next, and adversities such as the monsters will always be a part of these *lændaga* - transitory days (2341) - for all people. The *lif is læne* theme comprises a common background: "wundur hwār þonne / eorl ellenrōf ende gefēre"- "it is a wonder where the courage-famed man will reach his end" (3062-3). Both the Geat and the Anglo-Saxon, as Greenfield notes, have a shared awe of what lies "beyond mortal ken."[42]

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[40] Susan E. Deskis, Beowulf and the Medieval Proverb Tradition. Medieval & Renaissance Texts & Studies (Tempe, AZ: Medieval & Renaissance Texts & Studies, 1996).
[41] Stanley B. Greenfield, "The Authenticating Voice in Beowulf" Anglo-Saxon England 5 (Cambridge, 1976) 54.
[42] Greenfield, 59.

Similarly, characters and plot events provide the poet with gnomic opportunities to emphasize principles common to both the past and present. The poem ends with the building of Beowulf's barrow:

> forlēton eorla gestrēon eorðan healdan,
> gold on grēote, þær hit nū gēn lifað
> eldum swā unnyt, swā hyt ær wæs. (3166-8)
>
> (The warriors left the wealth for the earth to hold, the gold in the grit,
> where it now yet lies, as useless to men as it was before.)

The poet includes many such indications of an unbroken link between Beowulf's society and that of the audience. He notes that, in comparison to Beowulf's deeds, there have been few men who could prevail "wið attorsceaðan oreðe geræsde"- "against the breath of the venomous ravager" (2839). In referring to Scyld's burial at sea, "men ne cunnon / secgan tō sōðe"- "men cannot say truly" (50-1) what happens to the ship; even the narrator is prevented from knowing. The poet at times makes reference to such archetypal situations as gold-greed: "sinc ēaðe mæg, / gold on grunde, gum-cynnes gehwone / oferhīgian, hyde sē ðe wylle!"- "treasure, gold in the ground, may easily overpower anyone, hide it who will!" (2764-6) The dragon itself is no long-ago fairy-tale nuisance, but is proverbially presented as a commonplace and recurring menace. The poet's description of him widens into a gnomic statement on dragons in general, who act in the present tense: "Hē gesēcean sceall / hord on hrūsan, þær hē hæðen gold / warað wintrum frōd; ne byð him wihte ðy sēl."- "He will seek out a hoard in the earth, where he guards heathen gold for ages; nor is he any the better for it." (2275-7). Whatever the dragon's nature, it is intended to be recognizable to the poem's audience, and to reinforce the continuing presence of monsters; in reference to Grendel, "men ne cunnon / hwyder

helrūnan hwyrftum scrīþað"- "men do not know where hellish demons go in their wanderings" (162-3), whatever men they are.

Gnomes may also have a morally didactic function. At numerous teachable moments in the story, the poet includes a proverbial statement approving of a character's actions, making the behavior timeless by generalizing it into a universal moral imperative. These gnomes are almost always in the present tense: 'So should a man *do*'. Specific behaviors are lauded as being agelessly and unchangingly right; in defending his king, Wiglaf acts as a man ought to: "swylc sceolde secg wesan"- "such should a man be" (2708). Even a character as early in the Geatish time frame as Scyld's son is praised as a man whose behavior should be emulated: "swā sceal geong guma gōde gewyrcean"- "so should a young man bring about by good actions" the loyalty of his men (20). The advice is meant for all time, and writers as late as Gower teach that "with yifte a man mai frendes make."[43] The *swa sceal* formula is repeated throughout the poem, and is used to approve of Beowulf's self-reliance when Hrunting breaks: "Swā sceal man don, / þonne hē æt gūðe gegān þenceð / longsumne lof, nā ymb his līf cearað"- "so should a man do, not care about his own life, when in battle he hopes to gain long-living fame" (1534-6). The phrase is also used in affirmation of Beowulf's loyalty to Hrothgar when he refuses to deceive his uncle in an "inwitnet"- a net of malice - (2167). There is no epic distancing intended, but rather practical advice to address shared problems.

One scene in the poem, the 'backsliding Danes' sequence, has drawn particular critical attention from commentators:

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[43] Gower, Confessio Amantis V, 7724. G.C. Macaulay, ed. John Gower's English Works II. EETS Extra 82, 1901 (repr. Oxford University Press, 1957) 163. Quoted in Deskis, 107.

Hwīlum hīe gehēton æt hærgtrafum
wīgweorþunga wordum bædon,
Þæt him gāstbona gēoce gefremede
wið þēodþrēaum. Swylc wæs þēaw hyra...
Wā bið þæm ðe sceal
þurh slīðne nīð sāwle bescūfan
in fyres fæþm, frōfre ne wenan,
wihte gewendan! (175-86)

(Sometimes they vowed at heathen temples to honor idols, prayed words that the destroyer of souls might bring help against this calamity of a nation. Such was the heathen custom...
Woe be with him who shall through terrible hostility shove his soul in the fire's embrace, comfort not hoped for, change in any way!)

Some consider the scene to be a late interpolation, for it creates an immediate plot-related problem: if Hrothgar thanks God for Beowulf, why are his warriors permitted to pray to heathens? Yet the assumption that Hrothgar has enough authority to control his men's religious beliefs in a Heorot weakened by Grendel, again, imposes a much later form of kingship on the poem.

Secondly, the Anglo-Saxons - as would the Danes - had "no Book of Common Prayer";[44] acceptance of Christianity did not always mean automatic rejection of pagan practices, and this sort of religious syncretism is found as late as Cnut's prohibition against tree-worship. Even Hygelac's advisors "hæl scēawedon"- "observed omens" (204) before encouraging Beowulf to set sail for Heorot. The poet intends no distancing from an audience which would have recognized the practice, even if the beliefs behind them were fading or entirely forgotten, just as people ten centuries later still 'thank their

[44] C. Tidmarsh Major, "A Christian Wyrd: Syncretism in Beowulf". English Language Notes 32:3, March 1995, 2.

lucky stars' and Christian children hunt Easter eggs oblivious to the fertility myths behind them.[45]

Yet the present tense of the scene is too compelling to overlook; the poet makes the warning universal, predicting woe to whoever *shoves* their soul into hellish fire.[46] Benson (1967) argues that the scene may have had topical importance for the poet, who wishes both to warn against backsliding and to elicit sympathy from the audience for their cousins on the continent by "emphasizing their very paganism."[47] Certainly there is a tone of compassion in the poet's words; he faults them not for heresy, but for ignorance: "ne wiston hīe Drihten God"- "they did not know the Lord God" (181). While the poet goes out of his way to draw attention to the pagan practices of the Danes rather than glossing over their behavior, it must also be noticed that he picks relatively innocuous aspects of heathenism in order to preserve the audience's sympathy; the Danes are not presented exposing children or performing human sacrifice.[48] The later Anglo-Saxon period is a time of missionary activity directed towards the continental Germans, and real reports of heathen temples may possibly have echoed this scene in the poem as a means of building support for such efforts.

Actual history and archeology may make strange bedfellows for Beowulf, but such information also serves to demonstrate how contemporary the characters and events would be to its audience. Bakhtin asserts that in the epic form, clothing and etiquette

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[45] Craig R. Davis, Beowulf and the Demise of Germanic Legend (New York: Garland Publishing, 1996) 42.
[46] Greenfield, 59.
[47] Larry D. Benson, "The Pagan Coloring of Beowulf". Contradictions: From Beowulf to Chaucer, 24.
[48] Fred C. Robinson, Beowulf and the Appositive Style (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1985) 11.

operate on a "distanced plane."[49] Once again, the poem sits uneasily with this specification. Archeologists such as Leeds (1936) strenuously argued that the "boastfulness" of northern sagas had little real relevance to their work;[50] but findings such as that at Sutton Hoo in 1939 proved disconcertingly that "descriptions of lavish burials and gold-adorned armor in Beowulf could no longer be dismissed as poetic exaggeration or folk memories."[51] Such evidence that the Anglo-Saxons had seen and experienced the objects and buildings depicted in Beowulf continues to suggest its contemporaneity to them. Heorot is such an example; at Yeavering, Northampton, and Somerset, large timber halls have been found. The one excavated at Yeavering is complete with the same type of iron fittings which, according to the poet, bind Heorot.[52] These halls, in addition to those actually built in Denmark in Lejre, suggest that the poet was familiar with his subject material.

In places the poet's uses are anachronistic, stating that Beowulf's men walk along a *stanfah* street leading to Heorot (320); Roman stone-paved roads existed in England but not in Denmark.[53] The progression of technology offers other clues; pre-eighth century Scandinavian ships are driven by oars, but Scyld's ship has a sail and mast (36).[54] It is tempting to conclude from these anachronisms that the poet errs, but it is also possible that the poet freely updated his materials where he saw fit in order to remain relevant to his audience, and Sutton Hoo suggests that he knew well what regal trappings looked

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[49] Bakhtin, 20.
[50] Quoted in Catherine M. Hills, "Beowulf and Archeology", A Beowulf Handbook, 295.
[51] Rosemary Cramp, "Beowulf and Archeology". Donald K. Fry, ed., The Beowulf Poet (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1968) 114.
[52] Hills, "Archeology", 302.
[53] Hills, 303.
[54] Ritchie Girvan, Beowulf and the Seventh Century (London: Methuen and Company, 1935) 35.

like. Beowulf's probable genesis as an oral tale must be remembered, and as an oral tale it would be fluid, with slight changes made in each performance to suit the audience.[55] Before being fixed in a written document, the authorship of folk stories matters little; such poems are a "social praxis"[56] involving many collaborators and much unconscious updating to accommodate a changing society.

History makes problematic Bakhtin's argument that the epic world is "absolute and complete. It is as closed as a circle; inside it everything is finished, already over."[57] Scholars who give "literal value to the dire predictions"[58] of the demise of Geatland in the poem often overlook the absence of evidence that the historical absorption of the Gautar into Sweden was violent. Bede's translator even renders the Jutes (*Iutae*) as the *Geatum*.[59] Textually, the Geats must be depicted as seriously weakened; the loss of king Beowulf can hardly be depicted as a trifling inconvenience soon to be overcome with Wiglaf as replacement. Critics often see a sort of circular construction in the poem as it begins and ends with a funeral,[60] but this does not necessarily indicate closure. In the end and future, as in the beginning, war and Cain's progeny are still a menace to man, and there are still men like Wiglaf with the courage to face them.

The continuity of Anglo-Saxon social customs suggests that the audience of Beowulf would have felt familiar with the depictions of royal life in the poem. Scholars have pointed to the use of burial rites such as cremation and inlaying of grave goods to

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[55] Niles, Homo Narrans 121.
[56] Niles, Homo Narrans 87.
[57] Bakhtin, 16.
[58] John D. Niles, "Myth and History", A Beowulf Handbook, 227.
[59] Bede, Ecclesiastical History of the English People, trans. Thomas Miller, I, 52. EETS 1890 (repr. Oxford University Press, 1959). Cited in Niles, Homo Narrans 139.
[60] Chickering, 1.

indicate an intentionally antiquarian atmosphere, since the practice is said to have disappeared after the conversion. More recent findings have clouded the picture, however; cremation persists in Scandinavian nations as late as 1000. The ritual was at times re-introduced to England and even Anglo-Saxon ecclesiastics were buried with grave goods,[61] suggesting that, again, traditions can continue long after their pagan significance is lost. Whitelock finds it odd that the poet describes Scyld's ship-burial so vividly that it is seemingly "based on eye-witness accounts,"[62] when such a heathen ritual would surely have been odious to an audience not yet fully secure in its conversion. But this assumes that the church consistently opposed cremation, and such a doctrinal uniformity is unlikely to have occurred. The cremated remains of Saint Peter are to be found beneath his church in Rome today.[63]

Contemporary documents paint an equally clear picture that the practice of vengeance, such as seen in the Finnsburgh episode, would have been recognizable to a late Anglo-Saxon audience. Whitelock agrees that there was no time in Anglo-Saxon history when "the interest taken in the carrying out of vengeance would be merely antiquarian."[64] Loyalty of man to lord was never merely a poetic device until the breakdown of feudalism forced it to become so. Although vengeance was hardly illustrative of turning the other cheek, it was more easily assimilated into Christianity as a secular than a pagan tradition;[65] in 801 Alcuin himself recommended a Northumbrian

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[61] Hills, "Archeology", 298.
[62] Dorothy Whitelock, The Audience of Beowulf (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1951) 12.
[63] Hills, "Archeology", 298.
[64] Whitelock, 17.
[65] Benson, "The Pagan Coloring of Beowulf", Contradictions, 15.

nobleman to Charlemagne for having "boldly avenged the blood of his lord."[66] Legal practice, always a conservative domain, had still to deal with the problem of vengeance; any possible pre-Norman audience of Beowulf would have been able to empathize with the anguish of Hrethel's inability to legally avenge his lost son, as the law was still in effect. In all, the poet consistently assumes continuity between the written and unwritten customs of Beowulf's world and that of his intended audience. The poet praises Wulfgar, stating that "cūþe hē duguðe þēaw"- "he knew court custom" (359): "clearly he does not mean that particular court's custom, he means everybody's."[67] Possible hearers of the poem, likely hearing it read or sung in the same sort of hall as described in Beowulf, can hardly have failed to see such a continuity of social principles.

Ultimately, Beowulf scholarship comes up against the problem that various passages are unclear enough so that various interpretations can be asserted. Yet the situation may have been identical for an Anglo-Saxon audience, which could have been made up of members of widely divergent classes, occupations, and religious backgrounds, and for whom poetry accessible at many different levels was required. This "polyphony"[68] of views and interpretations may have been as common to the Anglo-Saxon as to the modern reader, whether or not the poet consciously had in mind what Barthes would call a "writerly text."[69] All this does not settle what sort of poem Beowulf is, for in Bakhtin's terms it shares in both characteristics of the epic and the novel,

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[66] Alcuini Epistolae, ed. Ernst Dümmler (Mon. Germ. Hist., Epist. Karolini Aevi, ii) 376. Quoted in Whitelock, 14.
[67] T.A. Shippey, Beowulf (London: Edward Arnold Publishers, 1978) 27.
[68] John D. Niles, "Introduction: Beowulf, Truth, and Meaning", A Beowulf Handbook, 10.
[69] Roland Barthes, S/Z (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990) 4.

particularly in terms of the conceptualization of time. Far from lacking "gradual, purely temporal progressions that might connect it with the present,"[70] the poem shares in a continuity of architectural and social customs.

Textually, through the use of gnomic passages and other present-tense statements of contemporaneity, as well as thematically, the poet subtly integrates the world of the Geats and the Danes into the world of his audience. The hearer is not meant to wonder at an antiquarian fairy-tale place, but rather to see heroes and situations he could aspire to in his own life. In this lies the attraction of Beowulf. In its time, the physical trappings of everyday life had changed little from those depicted in the poem, and even a thousand years later, modern culture still re-visits the same themes in popular entertainment: the broken oath, the failed promise, and the conflict of loyalties.[71]

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[70] Bakhtin, 15.
[71] Earl, 167.

Chapter 5

Conclusion

In relation to the amount of ink expended over the last two hundred years in criticism of the poem, this discussion of the contemporaneity of Beowulf has been brief. Yet it is necessary to return to the original points in summary of the issue at hand. First, the contention that Anglo-Saxon literary themes were walled off from continental themes must be addressed again. Love is not restricted to that of a martial nature in Anglo-Saxon literature, as seen in the doleful tone of the speaker in "The Wife's Lament", who cannot rest from her *longaþes* (longing) and envies those "leofe lifgende, leger weardiað" – "lovers alive, who hold their bed together." Her interest is in her husband's return, not in whatever *lof* he may be achieving. In Beowulf we witness the sad poignancy of the newly widowed Hildeburh, who watches the funeral pyre of her murdered husband and son "þær hēo ær mæste hēold / worolde wynne"- "where she had earlier held the most of worldly joys" (1079-80). It is Beowulf's sad prediction that Hrothgar's marriage pact will fail, and that "him wīflufan / æfter cearwælmum cōlran weorðað"- "his [Ingeld's] love for his wife will cool after his surging of sorrow" (2065-6).

The audience of Beowulf was not being treated to a story whose sentiments were antiquarian; rather, the Anglo-Saxon poet's attitudes continued into post-conquest literature. The conflict of loyalties between wife and lord are equally problematic in Arthurian romances, and despite the "romantic aura"[1] which continental poets might

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[1] Michael J. Swanton, Crisis and Development in Germanic Society 700-800 (Göppingen: Kümmerle Verlag, 1982) 94.

attach to the figure of the solitary wanderer, one of Chaucer's most positive figures is his rural parson and his most odious the pardoner, an oily transient who fleeces the faithful by offering "pigges bones"[2] as relics. The tourist-travelers in the Canterbury Tales join voluntarily in a pilgrimage; they are hardly exiles. As with all reflections of daily life, medieval literature is less than unified in values. The sentiment that the warrior fights unflinchingly to the end is echoed in Malory, parodied in Don Quixote, and later questioned in Shakespeare, who has Henry IV refuse to risk his son meeting young Percy in single combat,[3] just as Hygd does not shun Beowulf for refusing to fight on to certain suicide in Frisia after Hygelac has fallen.

Medieval literature can hardly have presented a monophonic set of values, for it reflected real life in all its variations; the Anglo-Saxon age was, as most ages are, a period of fluctuations and change. Despite Bakhtin's claim that European letters remained stiltedly closed to other cultures until the Renaissance, it embraced many varying views from penmanship to its relationship with monarchial power. The Anglo-Saxons especially, being a migratory and seafaring people, would have mixed with many peoples and experienced many variations in political order. Beowulf demonstrates such a flux, not only in the spelling variations between the scribes of lines 1-1939 and 1939-3182, but in the changing view of the institution of kingship seen in the respective rules of Hrothgar and Beowulf. Hrothgar represents the old-style mode of kingship which rests

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[2] Chaucer, Geoffrey, The Canterbury Tales (GP). Larry D. Benson, ed. The Riverside Chaucer. 3rd ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1987) 34.

[3] Loretta Wasserman, "Honor & Shame in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight". Larry D. Benson and John Leyerle, eds. Chivalric Literature (Kalamazoo: The Board of the Medieval Institute, 1980) 82.

upon the *witan* and the unsteady support and consent of fellow warriors. In killing Grendel, Beowulf breaks the stalemate physically and politically, for he defeats a foe who refuses to comply with the system of *wergild* which no longer works. As a new type of prince and king, Beowulf enjoys success, but if the poet intends to discredit the *witan* or the kinfeud as a didactic goal,[4] it is a relatively muted theme. At the end of the poem Beowulf dies gloriously, battling the ever-present monsters of the world rather than dying at an opposing warrior's hand.

Beowulf as a character must not be allowed to become a symbolic placeholder. While he represents a competing form of kingship in the story, one which is more successful than one based upon the settlement of injuries through revenge and contract marriages, Beowulf is a real man. The critical temptation has been to over-sophisticated symbolizations of Beowulf as a god or monster and the monsters themselves as abstract forces, but the text does little to support this conclusion. Grendel and his ilk occupy real space and eat Hrothgar's men with real teeth, and to assume that an Anglo-Saxon audience would have seen them as fanciful bogies is to project a modern mindset on premodern listeners; no less sober a document than the Leechdoms has a recipe for protection from "ælfcynne & nihtgengan & þam mannum þe deofol mid hæmþ"- "the race of elves and night-stalkers and people who lie with the devil."[5] Beowulf is similarly a man with mortal limitations, and a close reading of the text is enough to remind the reader of this fact: he is raised in a splintered family, must overcome a lacklustre youth.

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[4] David Williams, Cain and Beowulf: A Study in Secular Allegory (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1982) 10.

[5] Leechdom, 2.344. Quoted in Craig R. Davis, Beowulf and the Demise of Germanic Legend (New York: Garland Publishing, 1996) 39.

and is no more immune from dragon's venom than any other warrior. The poet was capable of inducing in his audience an aura of mystery and heroism in his scenes while keeping his characters realistic. The mere is a magical place, but Beowulf cannot hold his breath forever; he must surface in an underwater cavern. If this suggests ambiguity, it is an intentional ambiguity and reflects the skill of the poet.

Is Beowulf a role model? Earl remarks that, while we identify with the hero, "Freud taught us there are forms of identification that do not stem from admiration and imitation."[6] Thus to identify is not to imitate, for we may empathize with the hero, but "no one in his right mind would choose to be Achilles- not to mention Oedipus, Hamlet, or Lear."[7] Yet Beowulf, who does not shy away from adventure, does not seem to fall into this category; it is childish to object that he dies when all human characters must. Again, in all of his battles Beowulf wins, and one can hardly ask for more than to rule well for many years and die valiantly. Yet to see Beowulf as a role model does not fix him as a two-dimensional character, just as his abandonment by his friends does not make him a Christ or an Everyman. The attraction of Beowulf, as with any believable character, is his humanity and fallibility. He compensates for his youth with brave deeds, he overcomes his belief in his guilt over the dragon's attacks with action, and like Shylock, he bleeds when pricked by the dragon.

As for the application of Bakhtin's theories on genre to Beowulf, the character of Beowulf fails to conform to the qualifications of the epic hero. While the poem in many ways has the characteristics of the epic in that it deals with a valorized subject and, as

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[6] James W. Earl, Thinking About Beowulf (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994) 143.
[7] Earl, 143.

Bakhtin notes, likely derives from a pre-literate people as epic stories generally do,[8] Beowulf lacks the gravity and stiffness of the epic hero. Nor does the poem have the sense of chronological distance which the epic form necessitates; there is no sense, as in Paradise Lost, of a lost and magical time when different rules applied. Bakhtin dryly describes the futility of an ultra-contemporaneous epic when he writes as an aside, "Onegin, my good friend, was born on the banks of the Neva, where perhaps you were also born..."[9] Yet this familiarity, albeit handled with much more subtlety, is in operation in Beowulf, where monsters and heroes inhabit named lands, and in the poet's careful emphasis on the fact that, while men do not know where such monsters go, all is still under the power of God.

Bakhtin argues that epic time is "as closed as a circle,"[10] and the poem indeed opens and ends with a funeral. But it is more in keeping with the poet's intentions to say that the time frame is cyclical, in that the forces in the poem, both good and evil, are expressly presented as being continuous and ever-present, just as the cycle of the seasons: "oþ ðæt ōþer cōm / gēar in geardas, swā nū gyt deð"- "until the next season came among the dwellings, just as it now yet does" (1133-4). Few paradigms as basic as the rotation of the seasons could be more effective in driving home the timeless link between the world of the characters and that of the audience, and "any listener could empathize with Hengest's impatience for the end of winter."[11]

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[8] M.M. Bakhtin, "Epic and Novel", Michael Holquist and Caryl Emerson, ed. & trans., The Dialogic Imagination (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981) 3.
[9] Bakhtin, 14.
[10] Bakhtin, 16.
[11] Susan E. Deskis, Beowulf and the Medieval Proverb Tradition (Tempe, AZ: Medieval & Renaissance Texts & Studies, 1996) 17.

Formally, the use of gnomic sentiments also helps to universalize the sentiments in the story. Folk statements which dispense advice or help to explain the everlasting perversity of dragons or the folly of greed connect past events to the present. The dominant mood is one in which God rules all, and this rule is seen as applying to all ages, past and future. The religious faith of the characters is unclear, and perhaps intentionally so; the poet may have wished to avoid controversy by simply portraying them as "intelligent monotheists."[12] There are those in the story who appeal to heathen temples; but the scene is depicted as an act of backsliding out of desperation, and not normal practice. It may also have been designed to reflect contemporary missionary efforts. To project late Anglo-Saxon modes on an earlier tale may be anachronistic, but it reflects a desire to make the world of the Geats recognizable and comfortable to the poet's audience, just as Anglo-Saxon audiences were happy to accept Moses in the OE Exodus as a martial *freom folctoga* - bold leader.[13] In the same way, movie audiences will freely permit historical figures to have rather modern attitudes and motivations. The same sort of artistic license is in operation in Beowulf in order to make past situations conformable to the present. The basic social institutions of the poem, such as gathering halls, mead, royalty, and ornamented swords, were everyday realities for the aristocrat throughout the later Anglo-Saxon period, just as at one time the potter's thumb and the beggar's dish were more than symbolic concepts.[14]

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[12] Marie Padgett Hamilton, "The Religious Principle in Beowulf". Lewis E. Nicholson, ed. An Anthology of Beowulf Criticism (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1963) 107.
[13] Guy Bourquin, "The Lexis and Deixis of the Hero in Old English Poetry". Leo Carruthers, ed. Heroes and Heroines in Medieval English Literature (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1994) 13.
[14] W.L. Renwick and H. Orton. The Beginnings of English Literature (London: Cresset Press, 1939) Pt. I, 2nd ed., 1952, 23.

Such statements still assume a hypothetical audience for the poem. Yet, as with any work of literature, the intentions of the poet indicate much about the culture in which he or she writes. The Roman missionaries did not encounter an ignorant people, but one with a sophisticated culture of poetic values, symbols, and meanings, and to criticize Beowulf for not following classical forms is misdirected criticism. As a complex story which may have fused together various folktales, the poem resists being reduced to a blunt allegory or a monster story (in this school of criticism, King Lear is a fairy-tale of "an old man and his three daughters"[15]). Nor is Beowulf likely to have been a "secular saint's life."[16] As a character, Beowulf shows impressive strength and a sort of diplomatic acuity which makes him worthy of imitation; but he also shows touches of human fallibility and personality which make him sympathetic.

Understanding the Anglo-Saxon response to the incredible in a skeptical world which no longer usually believes in monsters will always be problematic. At times Beowulf does inhabit the wonderful, but never the rationally unrealistic; his severed head does not appear, as does St. Edmund's, in a forest shouting "hēr, hēr, hēr!"- "here, here, here!" There is an ongoing concern with the continuity of actual court customs and the gentility which is so much a theme for Chaucer. Beowulf now has a strange atmosphere to modern readers, who no longer rely on the economic systems of loyalty and kingly patronage; but at one time these institutions were an everyday reality just as parliamentary democracy (for some) is now. The poem was not intended to be

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[15] Edward B. Irving, Introduction to Beowulf (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1969) 14.

[16] In Paul F. Baum, "The Beowulf Poet", Nicholson, Anthology of Beowulf Criticism, 356.

antiquarian to an Anglo-Saxon audience of clerics, royalty, and warriors. It was rather a story meant to entertain and educate people who lived in the same sort of world that Beowulf does, and to possibly inspire the Wiglafs in the mead-hall to aspire to be the same type of good warrior, prince, and king. Most enduring modern works of fiction from science-fiction to pure fantasy incorporate some element of audience identification; the author of Beowulf, in featuring realistic characters who inhabited known lands, made this element absolute for Anglo-Saxon listeners who hoped to see themselves in familiar situations, *swā nū gyt deð* - as audiences now still do.

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