

READING BEOWULF: Paradoxical Paradigms

BY JACLYN GINGRICH

When a person thinks of Old English, he or she likely cannot help but think of the most popular piece of literature of that language's time, the legendary Beowulf. In fact, if that same person were to search for discussions on Old English, he or she would find many academic articles covering a variety of theories concerning Beowulf. One can agree that this poem is often under scrutiny; these discussions cover everything from the allegorical meaning of Beowulf to the monsters' roles. A very popular discussion explores the purpose of using both Anglo-Saxon paganism and Christian themes in Beowulf since they are often contradicting in morals and nature. Some scholars dedicate their observations to the thought that Christianity is a fluid, cohesive part of the poem (Fisher 171-172), while others argue that Christianity is just an incoherent concept that was inserted into the poem to appease the beliefs of the poem's scribes and that the story of Beowulf originated far before Christianity infiltrated the Anglo-Saxons (Moorman, "The Essential" 5). Even still, others argue that these two concepts coexist in a unified manner and that this unification is appropriate for the time, as scholars writing the poem were Christian and writing to a Christian audience, although the people still took pride in their Germanic, pagan history.

Another relatively common argument concerning Beowulf is the question of whether it is an epic or a tragedy. Some argue that Beowulf is an epic poem because the main character, Beowulf, exemplifies the characteristics of an epic hero, and the ending is just a tragic component in a poem that reeks of epic quality. Greenfield, in his article "Beowulf and Epic Tragedy," even goes on to make a distinction between what an epic tragedy is versus a dramatic tragedy (91-105). He differentiates these two concepts by focusing on how the hero falls, stating, "[W]e should expect the falls of epic and dramatic heroes to affect their societies differently" (94). The fall of an epic hero directly affects the fate of the society of which the hero is a part, while the fall of a dramatic hero only directly affects himself (94).

One has to ask, then, how characters in Beowulf can possibly be successful if they are asked to be proud, revengeful, and pay monetary amounts when they kill, while at the same time they are also supposed to be forgiving, humble, and ashamed of their killings.

I argue that these two very different discussions are interconnected. Beowulf uses both Christian and pagan elements to create a paradoxical paradigm in which the characters cannot successfully abide by these competing concepts. Therefore, regardless of whether they abide consistently by pagan expectations or Christian expectations that shape the story, or even if they try to abide by both simultaneously, they are hypocritical, which becomes their tragic flaw in a sense, and they are damned to destruction or tragic fate. In order to fully understand this concept, though, it is appropriate to revisit each theory individually beforehand.

The first concept is that Christianity is a cohesive element of Beowulf. Fisher argues in his article "The Trials of the Epic Hero in Beowulf" that Beowulf's trials are a test displaying the "basic struggle between the divine, the natural, and the demonic within the field of the hero's experience.... [T]he natural is made to serve the purpose of redemption, while the demonic is resisted and uprooted" (172). He exemplifies this concept in his discussion of Heorot. Heorot is the "natural" that becomes demonized by Grendel (172). Heorot's eventual purging of Grendel is "a preparation for rule over this field of experience which is later represented by the realm of the Geats and the fifty-year reign of the heroic king—the successor in epic myth to the original 'divine king'" (172). What Fisher assumes is that Beowulf takes on "divine" qualities (172). It is my position that Beowulf is caught in the paradoxical paradigm between paganism and Christianity. He tries to abide by

both, unsuccessfully, and his tragic flaw of hypocrisy creates his tragic downfall. After all, one cannot ignore the pagan elements of the poem. One could take out the Christian elements in the poem, and the plot would remain for the most part unchanged, but to take out the pagan elements would result in the deconstruction of the poem altogether. Therefore, the Christian elements cannot exist without the pagan elements.



Unfortunately, this scenario makes it rather difficult for all the characters found in Beowulf, including the title character. Paganism and Germanic tribal beliefs centered on the concept of comitatus and wergild which demanded that deaths of kin were avenged, or the perpetrator paid wergild as compensation for these deaths. Revenge and bribery are completely contradictory elements to

Christianity, which centers on forgiveness and penitential atonement. Germanic tribes also sought to achieve *lf* or fame; they were very prideful and often boasted of their accomplishments. Again, this concept is in complete opposition to Christianity. In Beowulf, "The relationship between heroes, monsters, and gods can be said to experience a sea change...if we realize that the important pagan virtue of pride has become the principle vice for Christianity" (Asma B14). In Christianity, pride is seen as one of the seven deadly sins; Christian followers should remain humble and not boastful, and in biblical stories, monsters are often seen as possessing hubris (B14). However, in Beowulf, killing monsters is Beowulf's job, and he is celebrated for doing so. In the pagan realm, victory is celebrated in the current life; in Christianity, it is celebrated in the afterlife (B14). So how should Beowulf act when he slays Grendel?

One has to ask, then, how characters in Beowulf can possibly be successful if they are asked to be proud,

revengeful, and pay monetary amounts when they kill, while at the same time they are also supposed to be forgiving, humble, and ashamed of their killings. They cannot act successfully within these contradicting demands, creating a paradoxical paradigm. To abide by one is to neglect the other, resulting in a damned-if-you-

do-damned-if-you-don't situation. The characters are bound to choose one over the other even though the plot holds them to both standards, consequently forcing them to be hypocritical.

First, one can look at the relentless struggle of the Danes and the Geats to see this contradiction. Fratricide is a constant theme seen in both these tribes. By fratricide, I am including not only kin-killing, but also violence to in-laws and

close friends in my examples since comitatus suggests that loyalty did not just extend to blood relations. On the Danes' side, a reader can see fratricide in the character Unferth. When Unferth questions Beowulf about his incident with Brecca, Beowulf replies after extensive boasting, "[T]hough indeed you, Unferth, were the killer of your brothers: for which, clever as you are, you will certainly be damned in hell" (Beowulf 40). There is an issue here. Unferth kills his brothers; therefore, he commits a crime against the Danes as a tribe. But he is also a part of this tribe.

The Danes choose the Christian-like route and forgive these killers, but they hold Grendel to the pagan expectations and do not forgive him. They are not consistent, thus they are hypocritical in their expectations.

According to the pagan expectations, Unferth has committed a crime against the comitatus, and according to the concept of comitatus, the Danes should avenge Unferth's brothers' deaths, or Unferth should pay wergild. But Unferth is a Dane, so if the Danes avenge his brothers' deaths, they will also disobey the law of comitatus. The Danes, and Germanic tribes for that matter, have no answer for fratricide (Reinhard 371). The Danes do not reprimand Unferth, nor does Unferth pay wergild, but instead he "sits at the foot of the Danish throne" (371). This solution, or lack thereof, suggests that the Danes are not living by the expectations of pagan rule. One could argue that the Danes are acting more Christianly by forgiving Unferth for his mishaps. Unfortunately, the Danes are not abiding by the Christian rule either; Christians have an answer for fratricide. According to the story of Cain and Abel, Cain is banished by God after He finds out Cain killed his brother Abel. The Danes do not banish Unferth, though. Hence, they are acting hypocritically. They uphold these expectations when Grendel kills Danes, but Unferth is not punished.

Another example of fratricide is seen in the relationship between Hrothulf and Hrothgar's sons. Wealhtheow is worried about Hrothulf, so she talks to Hrothgar about Beowulf and says, "They tell me that you are going to treat this heroic fighting-man as your son.... [L]eave your people and your kingdom to your children when the time comes for you to die!" (Beowulf 55). Hrothgar's attempt to adopt Beowulf suggests that he would rather have Beowulf than his own sons as his heir. Wealhtheow reminds him that it is proper to pass ruling down to a biological family member, but she also is unsure of her sons' abilities. Later, she asks Beowulf to watch over her boys, suggesting that she does not necessarily trust Hrothulf (56). She implies that she is concerned for her sons, and she should be, as evidence and scholars suggest that Hrothulf kills his cousin after Hrothgar's death (Hughes 390).

Fratricide can be seen even before Hrothgar and his children. During one of the many digressions in the poem, we learn of a man named Heremod who ruled the Danes long before Hrothgar. He is described as one who "took no pleasure in the happiness, but in the death and destruction of the Danes.... [H]e used to kill his drinking companions and close friends" (Beowulf 67). The curse of fratricide can thus be seen as a theme through the entire ruling line of the Danes. But again, the people in the poem are being held to the expectations of both the pagan and Christian ethics. To kill Unferth, Heremod, and Hrothulf would avenge the deaths they committed and allow the Danes to remain loyal to the concept of the

comitatus in a way, but the Danes would not be abiding by the Christian morals of forgiveness. To forgive Unferth, Heremod, and Hrothulf would abide by Christian expectations, but the Danes would not abide by the rule of the comitatus. The Danes choose the Christian-like route and forgive these killers, but they hold Grendel to the pagan expectations and do not forgive him. They are not consistent, thus they are hypocritical in their expectations.

The Geats are no better. A reader sees the theme of fratricide extend to this tribe with the story of Haethcyn and Herebeald. Beowulf tells a story about these two, saying:

For Haethcyn struck down his friend and liege with an arrow from his bow. He missed his aim and shot his brother Herebeald. One brother killed the other with a bloodstained shaft! This was an inexpiable accident, and a heartrending crime; for whatever happened, Herebeald must die unavenged. (Beowulf 84)

The combination of the Christian and pagan expectations creating an environment the characters cannot live by also leads the characters to tragic fates.

Haethcyn, for whatever reason, kills his brother, and just like the Danes, the Geats handle the situation the same way. They do not avenge Herebeald, though later Beowulf avenges Heardred's death (Beowulf 83). Therefore, the Geats, just like the Danes, are hypocritical. They

do not hold their own accountable to the comitatus and act more Christianly towards them, but they understand when others outside their own tribe remain true to the comitatus.

The Danes and the Geats are not the only tribes that are forced to be hypocritical; Grendel is caught in the paradoxical paradigm as well. Grendel is said to have been a descendent of Cain, therefore, he is banished (Beowulf 29). Grendel, although originally not a committer of fratricide, is punished for his ancestor's mistake. This anger and suffering boils into jealousy, and Grendel avenges himself by essentially destroying the people who continue to enforce this unfair retribution. Even though no one was killed in Grendel's "tribe" originally, Grendel is forced to live a life of expulsion that he did not cause. This is the reason for his attack; he is following an inner sense of comitatus. Unfortunately, that is not how it is seen from the Danes' point of view. When Grendel kills many of the Danes, he does not truly fulfill all the aspects of the pagan beliefs, as he does not pay wergild for those he kills. He also does not follow Christian beliefs because he does not feel remorse for his actions. As Reinhard puts it, "[H]e is a thoroughly unrepentant penitent, a determined transgressor of penitential practice" (372). Maybe this is why he is seen as such a monster in the poem. He is, after all, "not just in violation of the human conven-

tions of wergild.... He is a rebel against the divine law of the penitential, too, an enemy of men and an enemy of God" (378). However, Grendel is following something that the Anglo-Saxons stressed: pride. He is too proud to forgive the humans for their unfair banishing, and he is too proud to pay wergild for his revenge. He also temporarily follows the Christian solution for fratricide, banishment, even though he did not personally commit it. Even still, he does not consistently follow either pagan or Christian doctrines and is thus a hypocrite.

What is even more interesting is that if we assume Grendel is a direct descendant of Cain, then Grendel is kin to the Anglo-Saxons, especially if they believe they are all God's children. So should we not consider the killing of Grendel as a form of fratricide? As Phillips describes it, "[T]he monster is unsettling not simply because it is intent on our destruction, but also because it is related to us: the uncanniness of the monster is tied up with the questionability of what it means to be human" (42). Grendel is inhumane and defined as a monster, maybe even the ultimate monster, because he does not abide by either the pagan or Christian expectations that shape the poem. Yet, he is also a reminder of what we as humans can become, of what our epic hero can become—monstrous—for the implication is that Grendel

is kin since he is related to Cain. Beowulf kills Grendel; therefore, Beowulf commits fratricide. He is not expected to pay wergild, though, and is instead celebrated for killing Grendel. Kahrl would even argue that this hypocrisy is seen through a linguistic connection. He says that the same word choice pattern is used: "The effect of the normative maxim is to underline that fact that Beowulf's attitude is praiseworthy, whereas Grendel's is not, yet the same words are used to describe both" (Kahrl 191). Both characters get no joy from participating in feuds, but Grendel's response to the feud is seen as monstrous while Beowulf's response is seen as praiseworthy (191).

The pattern of inconsistencies continues. By killing Grendel, Beowulf commits a crime against the comitatus of the monster tribe. In the vicious cycle of comitatus, the monsters have every right to avenge Grendel's death, or Beowulf should pay wergild. The incident with Grendel's mother shows the true hypocrisy of Beowulf. Beowulf is somewhat forgiving of Unferth and his fratricide; he does not take action, but assumes God will handle this sin (Beowulf 40). However, when Grendel commits a similar sin, Beowulf seeks revenge. It is acceptable for him to do this, and the Danes accept this as a noble pursuit. When Grendel's mother does the same thing and avenges Grendel's death, the Danes are not so forgiving. They see her too as a monster, even though she is simply abiding

by the same pagan beliefs by which they are abiding. Beowulf does not pay wergild to Grendel's mother for her son's death, and Grendel's mother does not pay wergild for the life she took as compensation for her son's death. Yet, even though Beowulf's and Grendel's mother's actions are the same, Beowulf is seen as the hero and Grendel's mother, the villain.

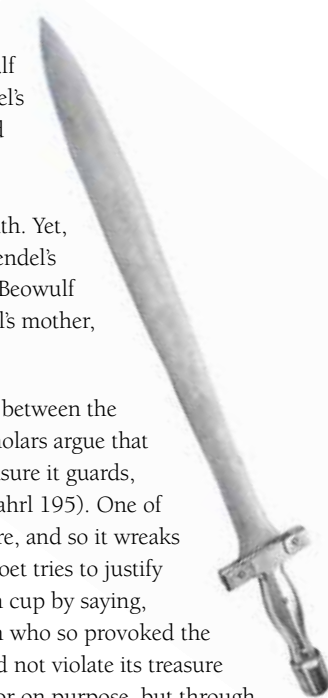
A similar situation develops between the dragon and Beowulf. Some scholars argue that the dragon is hoarding the treasure it guards, and that it represents greed (Kahrl 195). One of the Geats steals from its treasure, and so it wreaks havoc on the Geat tribe. The poet tries to justify the stolen cup by saying,

"The man who so provoked the Worm did not violate its treasure willfully or on purpose, but through sheer necessity" (Beowulf 79). Even so, this act goes against Christian doctrine. Beowulf does not see this act as such, though, and does not commit to Christian expectations in this case, even though he earlier acts Christianly towards Unferth when Unferth insults him. But one could

speculate that he has a political agenda in impressing Hrothgar, and killing Unferth would jeopardize that agenda, so one has to question what his intentions are in being forgiving to Unferth's insults. Of course, the dragon has committed a crime against the Geat comitatus, and so Beowulf must avenge his tribe's deaths. Beowulf chooses to follow the rules of the pagan doctrine and does not take into consideration the wrong that is done to the dragon beforehand; he only looks at the fact that the dragon burns down his property and kills his people. He has different expectations for Unferth than for the dragon and thus is a hypocrite because in one situation he acts like a Christian and in the other he acts like a pagan.

The corkscrew in all of these accounts is the last character who is trapped in this paradoxical paradigm, Grendel's mother. All the other characters act based on selfish tendencies, choosing to abide by Christian expectations and pagan expectations separately when they are most convenient. Grendel's mother is probably the only character who successfully tries to abide by both for selfless reasons. She is an ancestor of Cain as well, so she abides by the Christian expectations of fratricide; she willingly remains banished and keeps to herself. When her son dies, she avenges his death as the pagan laws prescribe, taking one life for the life of her son. After that, she goes back to her dwellings and wreaks no more

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havoc on the Dane tribe. Beowulf takes no time to go after Grendel's mother, and whereas Beowulf is capable of killing Grendel with his bare hands, Grendel's mother is harder to kill. Some have suggested this is the case because she is not monstrous; she is a tragic character caught in the middle of a feud she did not create nor of which she was a part. She cannot be killed with just bare hands because she is not as deserving of being killed. Basically, she did not kill just to kill (Moorman, "Beowulf" 67). Even still, she finds the same fate that the Danes, Geats, and Beowulf find: death.

The other discussion concerning Beowulf is the concept of whether this poem is an epic poem or a tragic poem. I argue that these two discussions: Christian and pagan expectations and the epic poem versus tragic poem question are interrelated. The combination of the Christian and pagan expectations creating an environment the characters cannot live by also leads the characters to tragic fates. After all, every character mentioned dies or is conquered. The poem suggests that the Geats and the Danes suffer tragic downfalls after the deaths of their kings, Beowulf is eventually conquered and killed by the dragon, and the monsters are killed by Beowulf. Greenfield argues that Beowulf is more an epic poem than a dramatic tragedy (91-105). His biggest support for this is that Beowulf is not an affirmation of defeat but is more aligned to the concept that there is no chance to achieve (101). This may be true, as all the characters are eventually defeated, and this concept is consistent with pagan perceptions that life does not get better and chaos reigns supreme.

However, Aristotle defines a tragedy as "an imitation not only of a complete action, but also of incidents arousing pity and fear" (57). He defines tragic heroes as needing to be consistent even if that means consistently inconsistent (59-60). Lastly, he also defines the tragic hero as one "whose misfortune, however, is brought upon him ... by some error of judgement" (58). All of the characters mentioned—the Danes, the Geats, Grendel, Grendel's mother, and even Beowulf—can exemplify these definitions of tragedy. They all are pitied because the poet writes with contradicting themes that force them to live hypocritically and inconsistently. They cannot abide by both Christian and pagan doctrines; these implications

suggest that Christianity and paganism cannot exist simultaneously. From the very start, the poet creates a situation in which the characters cannot survive. If they choose to live by one belief system, they are neglecting the other. Their flaws are inevitable because they are forced to choose. Their tragic flaws force them to become hypocritical, and eventually they all die as a result. Therefore, regardless of whether the poem was originally a pagan story or a Christian story, the poet writes a tragic story of right versus wrong, and the characters can do nothing but be both.

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