

## Disunity in Beowulf

by Joshua M

The author of Beowulf, whether he was a monk, minstrel, or of other occupation, wrote this Anglo-Saxon epic in a way that makes reading it more like sailing through the choppy waters of shoals rather than the clean, smooth sailing of most literature. The choppy water, if you will, isn't necessarily bad; it makes Beowulf unique from other works and lets one contrast the ways of the Dark Ages with present times. The main reason that Beowulf forces readers into rough seas is the epic's visible disunity in several respects. Namely, this first of all English epics displays a lack of unity in its inconsistent poetry, its ever present conflicts of pagan and Christian beliefs, and its breaks from the characteristics of an epic plot.

When one looks at the poetic characteristics of Beowulf, it becomes apparent that Old English verse differs drastically from that of modern poetry. With this difference some take the position of Conybeare, that "[it] may perhaps be thought scarcely worth while to offer any opinion on the poetical merits of our author" (56). Beowulf does, however, have poetic worth in lines containing a unique strain of rhythm, as is seen in lines like the following:

The old king kissed him,

Held that best of all warriors by the shoulder

And wept, unable to hold back his tears (Beowulf 1870-1872).

Such lines of excellent poetry are found throughout the work, containing poetic devices such as rhythm, kennings, and alliteration, [written at e. alamance hs in 04] but they are not unified into a metrical pattern or rhyme scheme. Instead, Tolkien relates that "[the

lines] are founded on a balance; and opposition between two halves of roughly equivalent phonetic weight, and significant content, which are more often rhythmically contrasted than similar” (83). Overall the poetic value of Beowulf comes from sporadic rhythms found in the way lines sound instead of a unifying design or pattern.

Similarly, there are many inconsistencies to be found in the spiritual values and beliefs described in Beowulf. The poem refers often to pagan beliefs, like when Hrothgar’s advisors sacrifice “to the old stone gods” (Beowulf 175), when Beowulf and others prioritize on glory after death, and, most of all, by the way Fate rivals God in importance. That is not to say that Beowulf is a pagan epic; quite the contrary is true according to Klaeber, who relates that “[the] Christian elements are almost without exception so deeply ingrained in the very fabric of the poem that they cannot be explained away as the work of a reviser or later interpolator” (70). Familiarity with Christianity is shown through references to things like creation, Cain and Abel, and the existence of Hell. [Written at e. alamance high school in 04] Throughout the epic Christ is never mentioned, but on innumerable occasions God is praised, acknowledged as all powerful, and thanked. Fate is given a good deal of power by the author, but even it is outdone by God in line 1056 and 1057 where it says that “God, and the hero’s courage,/ Turned fate aside” (Beowulf).

Probably the most unique thing about Beowulf as an epic is the way that it turns aside from the usual tendencies of epic plots. The goal of the poem’s composer was not to follow stylistic guidelines but instead to tell its audience what makes a good king. For that reason the author had to include digressions that wander from the central storyline to serve as foils to Beowulf. These are the tales of Finn, Hermod, and Freawe, which

impede the story's progress but successfully warn kings not to enlist defeated enemies, give in to selfishness and pride, and try to solve feuds with marriage ties. Perhaps more important, however, is the way that Beowulf breaks from the very structure of an epic. Instead of being a story like The Aeneid or The Odyssey where the whole poem focuses on one goal, Beowulf completes its goal and then goes on to include a separate sequel that tells of his fatal fight with a dragon fifty years later. Ker says that it "is as if to *The Odyssey* there had been added some later books telling in full of the old age of Odysseus... and his death at the hands of his son Telemachus" (60). The plot has a lot in common with that of *Heracleids* because the author "imagined that because Heracles was one person the story of his life could not fail to have unity" (Ker 60).

Although Beowulf lacks unity in certain areas that cause issues for us today, one has to remember that to the intended audience the inconsistencies did not matter. To the warriors listening, the tale may have had an Anglo-Saxon strain of poetic unity that has been lost in translation, [written at e. alamance hs in 04] it expressed the same mixture of paganism and Christianity that fashioned the audience's own beliefs, and hearing about good leadership was more important to the Anglo-Saxons than a progressive and unified plot. The disunity of Beowulf is not something that necessarily holds it back as literature; it instead gives the epic uniqueness and flavor that lets us see the character of writing and culture in eight century England.

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