

BEOWULF, SIR GAWAIN, AND THE CHRISTIAN INFLUENCE IN OLD AND MEDIEVAL ENGLISH POETRY

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the influence of Christianity in the development of the hero in early British poetry. By looking at the attributes of the hero in *Beowulf* and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, and at what the critics have said about these two poems, this paper investigates the differing degrees of Christianity in each poem, and the effect of Christianity upon each poet's vision of his society. It also examines the influence of Christianity upon the development of a more complex personality in the hero of *Sir Gawain*.

RESUMEN

Este artículo examina la influencia del Cristianismo en el desarrollo de la figura del héroe en los principios de la poesía británica. Analizando los atributos del héroe en *Beowulf*, *Sir Gawain and The Green Knight*, y lo que de estos poemas han dicho los críticos, este artículo profundiza sobre el grado de Cristianismo en cada uno de ellos y su efecto en la visión que de la sociedad tiene el poeta. También se analiza la influencia que tuvo el Cristianismo en el desarrollo de una personalidad más compleja en el caso del héroe en *Sir Gawain*.

While a number of critics agree that the *Beowulf*-poet must surely have been a Christian, the few scriptural allusions—all of them to the Old Testament— provide little evidence that *Beowulf* is a Christian poem. Fred Robinson, in «Apposed Word Meanings and Religious Perspectives,» has shown how the poet could have devised a way of making subtle, vague references to the «divine imaginings» in the poem; a scheme wherein, according to Prof. Robinson, the references within the text are consistently pagan yet call to mind the Christian values that would have been known to the audience of the *Beowulf*-poet:

The same double perspective is maintained, I believe, in the characterization of the heroes in the poem. Their thoughts and their language are circumscribed by the pagan world in which they live, and when at times their speeches seem to have a Christian resonance, the audience is supposed to recognize that these are but coincidences of similar elements in two alien cultures, coincidences which inevitably give dignity to the old heroes as viewed by Christian eyes but which betray no Christian revelation in heathen minds. (84)

Robinson admits that the passages in *Beowulf* which seem to achieve this dual functioning—he points specifically to Hrothgar's «sermon»— can also be seen as embodying universal wisdom which would not have been alien to Germanic culture. Evidently, the *Beowulf*-poet, through selective language, is able to be in two places at once: the poet maintains a consistently pagan verisimilitude in the text, while simultaneously instilling in the minds of his audience the idea that their pagan predecessors had, without the benefit of scriptural indoctrination, the capacity for Christian virtue.

Peter Farina, in «The Christian Color in *Beowulf*: Fact or Fiction?,» does not address Robinson's position directly, but in posing the question of the Christian coloring in *Beowulf* he does offer a different point of view:

How is it, one might want to know, that this Christian poet does not, in his religious fervor, draw from the New Testament with which, we must assume, both he and his audience were much more familiar, and which would have provided more immediate meaningful edification, instead of limiting himself to the Old Testament? (21)

Farina argues persuasively that «there is nothing in *Beowulf* that is Christian and cannot be anything else. All that is there can be found in several ancient pagan religions» (25). Even the seemingly undeniable scriptural reference to Cain does not dissuade Farina, who argues «that Cain's story belongs not to Jewish but to World history—the fourth book of *Genesis*— and we may reasonably assume that it, too, may have come to the *Bible* from heathen sources» (23). Farina also takes on R.E. Kaske's contention that Christianity is at the core of what Kaske sees as the epic's controlling theme of *Sapientia et Fortitudo*; Farina observes that «wisdom and fortitude were idealized qualities in the Germanic code, too» (25). Farina's short article is concise and convincing: though he claims nothing more than the possibility of reading *Beowulf* without the Christian coloring, he ends his argument with one parting shot at those who would see *Beowulf* as a Christian allegory:

It is difficult to discover a Christian allegory in a work that, on the one hand, never mentions Christ or anybody or anything connected with him: his cross (a theme of universal devotion in Old English Christian times), his mother, the angels (a motif that would hardly have had an equivalent in Germanic mythology), a priesthood (a theme of dominating importance in Christian tradition); and, on the other hand, throbs with the spirit of revenge, so alien to the Christian spirit. (25)

It seems reasonable that a Christian poet could have depicted a pagan hero in a poem that ends in such utter desolation, effecting a Christian moral along the way: without faith in God, the culture dominated by vengeance is destined to fall. But the question of the degree of Christian influence in *Beowulf* will probably never be unequivocally resolved.

Like *Beowulf*, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is an anonymous poem composed in the alliterative style. It is not, of course, an oral-formulaic composition like *Beowulf*, but rather the artifact of a literate culture (c.1400 AD). Indeed, the structure of the poem, unlike the convoluted yet magnificent lumbering of *Beowulf*, is taut, with an Aristotelian-like unity of form. *Sir Gawain* is a Medieval Romance wherein a secular code of idyllic chivalry is inextricably bound up with what we can safely assume to be *bona fide* Christianity. The «bob and wheel» that marks the end of each stanza and functions as a linking mechanism and a method of conveying thematic recapitulations, is a stylized literary device, as is the linear plot in a cyclical frame.

Both poems convey the dominant themes of history, society, and human culture. *Beowulf* scholars note the juxtaposition of opposites as a method of characterization and of conveying thematic material: after Beowulf defeats Grendel at Heorot, the *scop* rejoices with a story of the Danish king Heremod, who was infamous in his failure to uphold the ideals of the heroic code. In the text of *Beowulf* this is juxtaposed with Beowulf's feat of heroism; serving, by negation, as an admonition that chaos and order, good and evil, are constantly in conflict. The *scop* also details in song the exploits of Sigemund, a positive role model for Beowulf. The two songs of the *scop*, coming when they do, convey the theme of the precariousness of cultural progress. In *Beowulf*, these historical contraries are rendered by the poet in what Adrien Bonjour has referred to as «digressions»:

...the very number and variety of the episodes renders the background of the poem extraordinarily alive; they maintain a constant interest and curiosity in the setting and, by keeping continuously in touch with «historical» events, represent the realistic note serving as a highly appropriate foil to the transcendental interest of the main theme with its highly significant symbolic value. (*The Digressions in Beowulf*, 71).

Bonjour's term has fallen out of favor with some of the newer scholars, such as Theodore Anderson, who would substitute Bonjour's term with «temporal dilation.»

In *Sir Gawain*, the theme of the precarious nature of social stability is introduced subtly in the cyclical frame with which the poem begins. In the poem's conventional opening stanza, which cites Britain's link to Troy, Aeneas is described as both a traitor and the truest of men:

The tulk that the trammes of tresoun ther wroght
Was tried for his tri-
cherie, the trewest on erthe. (*SGGK*, ed. Tolkien & Gordon, lines 3-4).

The Britain of *Sir Gawain* exists «in blisse and blunder» (1.18), which Virginia Carmichael, in «Green is for Growth: Sir Gawain's Disjunctive Neurosis,» recognizes as a «conjunction of opposites... elegantly echoed and elaborated throughout the entire poem in structure and characterization» (30). Carmichael makes this assertion in order to introduce a complex, psychological reading of Gawain which we will examine below; for now we only wish to note that both poets are concerned with the precariousness with which history unfolds. The inherent differences in the characterizations of Beowulf and Sir Gawain are contingent upon, and logical within, the overarching significance of Britain's development from a pagan heroic to a chivalric Christian culture:

This social context is by and large that of the early Christian society transforming its heathen institutions into Christian ones. The resistance of the pagan institution of kinship to this transformation is a central theme both of Anglo-Saxon history and of *Beowulf*. With its reliance on the ethical and legal efficacy of vengeance and feud, the pagan institution of exclusive kinship was irreconcilable with the Christian vision of universal kinship and brotherhood. So basic was it, however, to the social and psychological structures of the Anglo-Saxons, and for that matter of all Europeans, that the ethic of vengeance was eliminated as a social value only after centuries of patient undermining by Christian

propagandists. The historical moment of the composition of *Beowulf* is one in which the success of the Christian mission to universalize the concept of kinship and eliminate vengeance as an ethic could not have been predicted with sureness. The presentation by the *Beowulf*-poet of a panorama of the social and moral disasters of the past resulting from this ethic suggest not only that the poem is one of social relevance to its immediate audience, but that its function is didactic and ideological. (Williams, *Cain & Beowulf: A Study in Secular Allegory*, 9).

Beowulf never falters from the relentless pagan heroism that marks his society's demise: his victories are martial and temporal, unlike the victory that is Gawain's recognition of his own human frailty, which is both psychological and transcendent. Norma Kroll, in «*Beowulf: The Hero as Keeper of Human Polity*», asserts that «the primacy of political over spiritual needs in the moral design of *Beowulf* is made clear in Hrothgar's 'sermon', the most Christian part of the poem» (120). Whereas *Sir Gawain* is concerned with humankind's relationship with God, Kroll argues that «the *Beowulf*-poet gives primary value to men's responsibility to and dependence on other men, rather than to their relationship to God» (119):

By substituting Cain's secondary transgression for the primary sin of Adam and Eve, the poet transforms the idea of original sin. It is not just that Grendel is a descendant of Cain and that Cain sired an evil line, a traditional medieval motif, but that Cain's destruction of Abel provides the moral pattern that is inherited by every man and woman in all times and places. (119)

Both *Beowulf* and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* are poems of failure: for *Beowulf* it is the failure of the heroic code to guarantee any temporal stability for his society, not to mention any thoughtfully worked out conception of spiritual salvation for the hero after death; for Gawain it is the failure of the human quest for perfection, the chivalric ideal, that leads to his singular failure. Yet in *Sir Gawain* the lesson learned concerning human frailty

points toward the strengthening and development of social institutions. Though Arthurian legend would have been familiar to the audience of the *Gawain*-poet, and thus the knowledge of the eventual fall of the legendary Camelot through internal strife (which is not altogether unlike the *Beowulf*-poet's foreboding of doom for Heorot), Gawain's failure leads to spiritual development, which reinforces, perhaps only temporarily, the stability of his society. Lynn Staley Johnson, in her excellent book, *The Voice of the Gawain-poet*, notes the poet's concern for his society:

Although Chaucer is the most well known critic of his age, the *Gawain*-poet may take his place beside Chaucer as a commentator upon his times. Particularly in *Sir Gawain*, we find a concern for the nature of chivalry, the ultimate strengths of human institutions, and a recognition of the sorts of weaknesses that can precipitate ruin. These were contemporary issues in the fourteenth century, an age that saw the young Edward III bring glory to England, watched his decline, and then found its hopes for a renaissance dashed by the follies and weaknesses of Richard II. (xii)

While Tolkien's famous article, «The Monsters and the Critics,» puts us on the road to recognizing the elegiac mood that pervades *Beowulf*, many critics rightly emphasize the comic qualities of *Sir Gawain*, «the blend of wisdom and folly... pointing up the ambiguities of human nature in general» (Johnson, xiv). The culture of *Beowulf* contained no such ambiguities: the world inhabited by the Danes and Geats is more Manichean: win, kill, survive; or, lose, die, and society will perish. While both poems are alleged to be the work of anonymous Christian poets, it is the unmistakable influence of the teachings of Christ and the veneration of the Virgin Mary that mark Camelot's ability to transcend, albeit not indefinitely, «the instability of national efforts and thus the cyclical nature of human history» (Johnson, 43). As Lynn Staley Johnson reminds us, «for medieval Britain, its mythic links to Troy and Rome added glory to the present, but they also served as remin-

ders of the fall of cities» (42). Like the digressions in *Beowulf*, so well chronicled by Bonjour, the *Gawain*-poet's portrayal of the mythic lineage of England «adumbrates the power of change without slipping into didacticism» (Johnson, 42). Both poems treat thematically the mutability of human history; but while for «Hrothgar, death always overcomes — 'dead oferswyded' (I.1768)— man's endeavors and neither the narrator or the situation suggests any mitigating forces» (Kroll, 120), the *Gawain*-poet rejoices in the consolation of salvation through faith:

[Since] Brutus, [the] bolde burne, boged hyder fyrst, After [the] segged
and [the] assaute watz sesed at Troye,
i wysse,
Mony aunterez here-biforne
Haf fallen suche er [this].
Now [that] bere [the] croun of [thorn],
He bryng vus to his blysse! AMEN.
(*SGGK*, 69. Please note that words containing the OE «thorn»
have been substituted with modern spellings.)

Kroll illuminates the contradistinction of the *Beowulf*-poet: «although the poet does show some concern for the fate of the soul, he never brings the idea of eternity clearly into focus» (120). For Kroll, «the earthly realm is the only fully realized plane of existence in the poem» (121), and the *Beowulf*-poet's use of the Cain reference stresses humankind's temporal relationships:

By implication, *Beowulf* is heroic not because, like Abel, he acts rightly toward God, but because, unlike Cain, he acts rightly toward men. *Beowulf* provides a counterbalance to the Cain-like denial of responsibility for his brother by becoming his brother's keeper, an essentially political role that involves relationships broader than those of blood or even tribal kinship. (121)

Beowulf is on the path toward salvation, though he is unaware of the fact. He is the noble pagan. *Gawain* is aware of his path, though the difficulty with which he comes to terms with the les-

son in humility meted out by the Green Knight seems a result of Gawain's conflicting codes of allegiance; the more secular code of chivalry—a social development of the older heroic code—having become inextricably linked with Christian ideology. Gawain must accept his own imperfection along with the imperfection of any mortal institution (Chivalry)—presumably a fate worse than death for an epic hero like Beowulf.

Bernard Huppé's analysis of the changing character of the medieval hero addresses this cultural evolution. For Huppé, the prototype of the true hero is Aeneas: the pagan Trojan battles with the sword, shields clashing in the physical nature of martial combat. Beowulf, of course, fits the prototype; but Gawain, the chivalric hero, does battle on a different field: his tests involve ethics and morality; the strength he requires to meet his challenges is not confined to merely physical prowess. In his *Concepts of the Hero in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance*, Huppé sees the advent of the written Saint's lives as a significant influence concerning the change in focus in regard to the attributes of the medieval hero. For Huppé, the influx of Christianity in Britain usurped the older heroic ideal; the new hero would emulate Jesus Christ. This transformation is, of course, seen most prominently in «The Dream of the Rood,» but in looking at the changing heroic attributes that distinguish Beowulf from Gawain, Huppé's thesis is convincing. But Gawain, like Beowulf, is a man, and not Christ:

...Gawain's experience is a model for the process of spiritual growth which begins in acknowledged failure and humility. The nick he receives for justice's sake is a reminder of the harsher judgment due him under the law. By choosing humility and penance he exchanges mercy for justice and evades the debt he otherwise must pay for broken covenants.... Gawain's journey, like the mythic journey of Aeneas, like the spiritual journey of the medieval Christian, opens up possibilities for nations that otherwise will remain delimited by the power of time. (Johnson, 96)

In *Epic and Romance*, W. P. Ker states that «the form of society in an heroic age is aristocratic and magnificent... they have no such elaborate theory of conduct as is found in the chivalrous society of the Middle Ages» (7). In the heroic age a relationship between «a great man and his followers...is found to be the most important and fundamental relationship in society...[A]s society becomes more complex and conventional, this relationship ceases» (Ker, 8). Unlike the chivalric Romances, which concern themselves with British nationalism, the earlier heroic epic «does not say a word about the national or the ecumenical importance of the themes of the epic poets» (Ker, 18):

Heroic poetry implies an heroic age, an age of pride and courage, in which there is not any extreme organization of politics to hinder the individual talent and its achievements, nor on the other hand too much isolation of the hero through the absence of any national or popular consciousness. There must be some unity of sentiment, some common standard of appreciation, among the people to whom the heroes belong, if they are to escape oblivion. But this common sentiment must not be such as to make the idea of the community and its life predominant over the individual genius of its members. In such a case there may be a Roman history, but not anything approaching the nature of the Homeric poems. (Ker, 20)

Jerome Oetgen's essay, «Order and Chaos in the World of Beowulf,» posits that «underlying the entire, multiform thematic structure there exists a fundamental struggle for dominance between order and chaos» (134). Oetgen sees this conflict operating on personal, political, and social levels, structured in an alternating pattern of narration which «illustrates the fatal struggle between the two forces, personified by Beowulf and the monsters he fights, which vie for dominance in the life of man» (141):

When Beowulf leaves Hrothgar's court, order has been restored, but the triumph of order does not fit the poet's vision of the ultimate fate of man and society. (135)

Oetgen goes on to assert that «Germanic mythology supposed the ultimate victory of chaos...a pagan view...not necessarily antithetical to the faith of the Christian society of Anglo-Saxon England» (134), which would have supposed the victory of order, but only in an otherworldly context. Much scholarship has been devoted to the question of Beowulf's relationship to Grendel: Oetgen sees Grendel as representing the chaos that is «external to the society he attacks» (141), and therefore unable to completely destroy it:

Like Grendel they (the merewife and the Dragon) are external threats to society, and though they are by no means impotent, they are not totally successful in destroying the order which men have created. (141)

Oetgen's essay makes for good reading; yet in seeing Beowulf as representative of the order of society, it would seem that the dragon's final assault upon the hero, followed as it is by the imagery suggestive of such utter desolation and the foreboding of doom, would represent the destruction of society. Perhaps it is Wiglaf's sense of loyalty that is the ultimate saving grace of the society, though this seems unlikely. In any case, Oetgen presents a coherent view of the poem, a view wherein neither the heroic nor Christian qualities of the poem are compromised:

The underlying heroic dimension of *Beowulf*, then, in no way denies the validity of Christian orthodoxy. That chaos will prevail in the «middan-gæard» is not unsound doctrine in a religion which promises a catastrophic end to the world, an end accompanied by fire and terror, and the *Beowulf* poet is absolutely faithful to that doctrine in his depiction of a world view which implicitly reconciles man's earthly fate with his hope of eternal salvation. (152)

While Oetgen has no problem seeing in the poet a world view «at once heroic and Christian» (152), Kroll sees a different relationship between Beowulf and Grendel. In listing the ambiguous epithets that refer to both the monster and the hero, Kroll

posits that the «epithets highlight the mix of the human and the monstrous, the civilized and the uncivilized, and the protective and destructive in each» (122):

The correspondences are extensive enough to indicate that Grendel is not only Beowulf's ironic counterpart, as Edward Irving has shown, but also the hero's «monstrous double», as S.L. Dragland believes. We shall see that the doubles paradigm both accounts for the curiously equivocal elements in the hero's nature and deeds and highlights the human dilemmas that make the preservation of political order problematical. (121)

Between Oetgen and Kroll, then, it seems that Grendel is, whether personal, social, political, or simply other, the chaotic impetus. This is not to be confused with the inner sources of disorder to which the poet alludes in the historical narrative thread that is interwoven with the so called monster narrative. Heremod is the most memorable example of this type of allusion to humankind's innate capacity for descending into the uncivilized realm of chaos; and, as an illustration of Oetgen's theory of alternating patterns, the Heremod «digression» is balanced by the *scop*'s song of Sigemund, an example for *Beowulf* to emulate.

This type of digression in *Beowulf* performs a function similar to the *Gawain*-poet's use of Britain's mythic link to unstable societies: both poets, on one level, are discerning in singular men the divided self that is ultimately responsible for the unpredictability of history. Oetgen sees Grendel as a symbol of the chaos that is external to society, while Kroll couples Beowulf and Grendel together as a set of paradigmatic doubles. A Jungian interpretation is likewise an interesting notion. In *Man and His Symbols*, Jung asserts that we should «make a serious attempt to recognize our own shadow and its nefarious doings. If we could see our shadow (the dark side of our nature), we should be immune to any moral and mental infection and insinuation» (73). A case could be made, it seems, for such an interpretation of Beowulf's

vicarious participation in Grendel's savagery on the first night the monster and hero meet at Heorot. Why is Hondscio sacrificed? What is the significance of this unexplained lapse on Beowulf's part in regard to the heroic code?

Albert B. Lord takes this particular incident and draws a parallel to other classical epics, feeling that «it is possible that the deaths of Hondscio and Aeschere can be interpreted as vestiges of the death of the substitute. They, together, are Beowulf's Patroclus or Enkidu (Gilgamesh's companion)» (Lord, 138). Lord sees a significance in whether or not the companion is «marked», that is, named in the text. He points to Odysseus's loss of Elpenor on the island of Circe. «After this, Odysseus goes to the land of the dead and there learns when death will come to him» (139). Though Beowulf has no explicit presaging of his own demise — unless we consider his momentary feeling of doubt in regard to the dragon's burning of the «giftstol» — the descent into the mere seems more akin to Odysseus than it does to Christ's harrowing of hell. Lord draws sound parallels between Beowulf and the mythic patterns in both the *Odyssey* and *Gilgamesh*. The plot of *Beowulf*, not the temporally dilated, moody amalgam of dynastic feud materials but rather the linear, monster-plot narrative, seems to be the *Beowulf*-poet's own reworking of primal, mythic material.

While the plot of *Sir Gawain* has been observed to be ingeniously fresh and new, W. A. Davenport, in *The Art of the Gawain-Poet*, notes that it «may be broken down into at least three narrative elements found separately in Celtic and French analogues, and known as the Beheading Game, the Exchange of Winnings and the Temptation» (138). In unifying these seemingly diverse folk motifs the Gawain-poet makes his Romance his own; but like the *Beowulf*-poet, he too is working with ancient material.

Unlike Beowulf's fatalistic sense of «wyrð» (fate), Sir Gawain has a more complex personality that is perhaps best symbolized by the two images that appear on his shield. The pen-

tangle represents his outer, secular, chivalrous self; while the inner image of the Virgin Mary reveals Gawain's allegiance to the Christian faith. Herein lies the crucial distinction between the two heroes. Virginia Carmichael sees in *Sir Gawain* the «transition or movement from symbol to sign, from exclusive disjunction to nondisjunction, from mythic hero to personality and psychology as strikingly descriptive of the transformation that both occurs and fails to occur...in *Sir Gawain*» (27). Carmichael sees in Gawain's inability to accept his human condition, «in his refusal to accept the nondisjunction of qualities that makes him human... an unresolved tension at the end of the poem» (27). Carmichael's essay takes note of Manning's Jungian analysis of Gawain's ego and its shadow, as well as Derek Brewer's Oedipal reading of Gawain's quest, but she herself invokes Kristeva's semiotic approach, asserting that

The poem is an exemplary articulation of a movement from an idealized symbolic abstraction to a realistic human personality embodying complex contraries the *recognition* of which generates a fundamental meaning in the poem. The structure of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* provides the possibility for the hero's movement from the disjunctive, repetitive, open-ended ambiguity, and complexity of the sign, from idealism to realism, from stasis to change, from innocence to maturity. It provides the possibility for development of psychology and personality —that is, for open-ness to surprise, change, and growth, for a turning point where the subject restructures himself. (26)

In looking at the many ways in which critics and scholars treat *Beowulf* and *Sir Gawain*, we cannot help but notice the development in early British poetry from the primal simplicity and grandeur of the mythic hero in all his stoical fatalism, to the more complex human characterization of Sir Gawain, which illustrates the influence of both the growth of political systems and the invasion of Christianity, with its emphasis on the written word. *Beowulf* and *Sir Gawain*, despite the different times in which they

were composed, and despite glaring differences both mechanical and ideological, are remarkably similar. The most obvious elements in the development of the hero from *Beowulf* to *Sir Gawain* are the more complex attributes of the hero's personality, and the more markedly Christian conception of an after-life. Unlike *Beowulf*, Gawain is not larger than life; yet we admire him for that.

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