

UNIT 7

Beowulf: I

For this Unit please read in Michael Swanton's edition and translation of *Beowulf* the beginning of the poem including the introduction of the monster Grendel (pp. 34–43) and the introduction of Beowulf and the accounts of Beowulf's fights first with the monster Grendel and then with Grendel's mother (pp. 43–125). The battles with Grendel and Grendel's mother are interspersed with a number of digressions from the main narrative. Please ignore them on this first reading; we shall take up the implications of some of them in the next unit.

Introduction to *Beowulf*

Beowulf is the longest and most interesting of the Old English secular poems that survive. It is a poem which survives in a 10th- or 11th-century manuscript, was probably composed sometime between the end of the 7th century and the beginning of the 9th century, and is set in a period sometime between the end of the 6th century and the beginning of the 7th century. Further, while the poem is written in Old English, its materials have nothing to do with Anglo-Saxon England. The poem is set in Scandinavia in the area of southern Sweden and Denmark. See the map in Michael Swanton's edition (pp. 30–31) for the geography of the text. *Beowulf* opens in Denmark, and Beowulf, an outsider, makes his first appearance in this setting, in the court of the Danish king, Hrothgar. The first two episodes, the fight with Grendel and the fight with Grendel's mother, take place in Denmark. The second part of the poem is set in the homeland of Beowulf, among his people the Geats. The race, tribe, or nation of the Geats, Beowulf's people, have vanished from history, and for historians of the poem the Geats have presented a real mystery. However, it is thought that the Geats inhabited southern Sweden but were eventually conquered and absorbed by the Swedish nation. So the geography of the poem and its historical setting and its setting in time are all quite remote from Anglo-Saxon England. Why, one asks, does the most important Old English poem say almost nothing about Anglo-Saxon England? Why did scribes take the trouble to copy it out since it seems so far removed in time and place from 10th-century England, the period in which the manuscript of the poem was copied, or

the 8th century, when the poem as we have it is thought to have been composed, or at least committed to writing?

In one way, these questions are provocative and need to be asked, but they may not have been so to the 10th-century Anglo-Saxon audience of the poem. The poem clearly draws on a strong Germanic tradition of legend and history, history mixed with legend in characteristic medieval fashion, and the poem *Beowulf* would not present such problems for us, as modern readers, if our own mythology and legendary history were Germanic rather than classical and Christian. As readers we have little trouble accepting a poem such as Shakespeare's *Venus and Adonis* or a play such as *Antony and Cleopatra* which spring from classical mythology and history respectively. We are, or can become, fully conversant with classical mythology and history; a mention of the figure of Venus or Adonis, or Cleopatra, conjures up a whole series of associations. The same is not true, however, for Germanic mythological figures and history. A mention of 'Weland the Smith', or 'Mathilda', or 'Ingeld', or 'Sigemund' does not easily bring to mind a legend or association, because we do not grow up with Germanic mythology and history. The Germanic mythological figure 'Ingeld' is referred to a number of times in *Beowulf* as part of the hinterland of the narrative. You will recall the question in the passage from the letter by Alcuin that I gave in the first unit, 'What has Ingeld to do with Christ?'. 'Ingeld', a figure that means so little to us, was central to Germanic mythology in much the same way as Lancelot is a figure central to our own mythology. It is this sort of immediate knowledge of mythology and legendary history which is lacking for the casual modern reader of *Beowulf* and which makes the poem seem out of place in its Anglo-Saxon, Old English medium. Such a response, however, would probably not have been the case for the poem's contemporary audience. We need to recall that Anglo-Saxon culture was of Germanic origin, and a poem written in Old English with a setting in a Germanic region such as Scandinavia in the legendary past would have been probably about as unusual for an Anglo-Saxon audience as a play about Antony and Cleopatra to an Elizabethan or indeed modern audience, or the stories of Arthur and Camelot to a modern reader. It is important that we realize that when we are reading Anglo-Saxon literature we are dealing with a culture and society in many ways very

different from our own, a society for which Germanic history and legend were perhaps more immediate than Christian history and legend, at least in the period following the conversion.

One might still ask, however, why the poem was preserved and written down. What might it have represented to its Anglo-Saxon audience? In other words, what type of poetry is it? Or, what tradition of poetry does it grow out of? There are a number of threads to these questions. First, as I have pointed out, *Beowulf*, the hero, is of the nation of the Geats, a people which has vanished from history, but for which there is historical evidence of their existence at one time in what is now southern Sweden. The end of *Beowulf* actually prophesies the end of the Geatish nation and the conquest of the Geats by the Swedes because of the death of Beowulf, the last king. The latter part of the poem can be seen as an elegy both for the death of a king and the death of a nation. It has been correctly observed that the poem ends on a note of gloom; the only positive note is the memory of the exploits of the hero Beowulf. One might argue that the poem is the epitaph for both the Geats and the hero, Beowulf, and one can recall here some lines from another Anglo-Saxon poem, *The Seafarer*:

The best epitaph for a man is the praise of those living and speaking
about him afterwards for what he did while on earth, brave deeds
against the enemies

Beowulf ends on a note of gloom, but the poem also celebrates the deeds and exploits of the poem's central character, *Beowulf*, and in this respect the poem can be said to be an heroic poem, in the same way as *The Battle of Maldon* is an heroic poem. Both describe the ultimate defeat of a nation, a hero, or a group, but this sense of defeat is mixed with a sense of pride in the glory of the heroes. In both texts the deeds of the heroes are celebrated as examples of the past glories of the nation, and as examples or models for the contemporary audience.

In one sense, then, *Beowulf* is an heroic poem; it celebrates the glories of a hero of a past age. In this respect, however, the poem was probably not merely an historical curiosity for the Anglo-Saxons, for as we can see from *The Battle of Maldon*, heroic poetry not only celebrated the glories of the past, but provided or suggested models of behaviour and ideals of society and culture. Certainly the

poem *Beowulf* is not meant to suggest that people ought to go around slaying monsters and dragons, but the text does show codes of honour and correct behaviour in the face of adversity, and in this respect it has a moral theme.

The poem has other purposes as well, and one is always provoked to ask what relevance it was thought to have to the Anglo-Saxon Christian culture in which it circulated. How did the Anglo-Saxons see their pagan, heroic past in relation to their Christian culture? The period which *Beowulf* evokes is pre-Christian and therefore pagan, but one asks if this means that the poem is without Christian colouring and without Christian relevance. This is a central problem for interpretations of *Beowulf*.

I want to raise here another issue which is relevant to our reading of the poem. I think that we need to imagine what we might call 'layers of composition' in the poem as we have it. There can be little doubt that elements in the poem, perhaps the basic story-line or the legends about Beowulf the hero, have their origin in an oral tradition. Perhaps there was a whole series of stories about Beowulf and his exploits. At some stage this material from oral tradition was probably gathered together and given some shape as a literate poem; in other words, it was written down. What relationship such a putative text had to the poem as we have it in our 10th-century manuscript is difficult to say, but it is not unlikely that the poem as we have it represents a very late stage in a process of composition and recomposition and addition. We need to be aware of the possibility that the poem represents almost an interpretation of ancient Germanic legendary material, directed to a Christian Anglo-Saxon audience. The heroic character of the text survives, but it may survive along with others sorts of material, interpretations and colourings.

Grendel and Beowulf

For the first mention of Grendel see Swanton pp. 38–39. The *Beowulf*-poet introduces Grendel in the context of a version of the story of creation and the fall and the origin of evil. Grendel represents and embodies the force of evil because he is associated with Cain; he is a descendant of the race of Cain who was

excluded or exiled from society because he murdered his brother. Grendel, the descendant of Cain, is described as an outcast, an exile, and a solitary figure. The Old Testament story of Cain was a powerful one because, for the Anglo-Saxons, Cain's crime, the murder of his own kinsman, was the most devastating crime for a family to endure. The ethics of heroic society were governed by the idea of the vengeance for wrongs done to a member of a family. In the account of aspects of Anglo-Saxon society in **unit two** there is a discussion of the law codes, and the obligation on the part of an individual or family to pay compensation, 'wergild' or 'manprice', for crimes committed against another family. Practically and on a much deeper level this system of payment breaks down in the case of crimes, be they intentional or accidental, involving members of the same family. Thus, the crime of fratricide, Cain's crime, could never be avenged. The profound tragedy that even accidental fratricide could cause is illustrated by a passage in the latter part of *Beowulf*. See Swanton's edition, pp. 150–53. This is part of Beowulf's account of his youth. To make sense of this look at the genealogy of the 'Geatish Royal House' in Swanton's edition (p. 206). Beowulf describes how 'Hæthcyn', the second son of the Geatish king 'Hrethel', had accidentally killed his brother 'Herebeald'. He articulates the legal problem in this way:

That was a conflict without compensation, a wicked crime wearying
to ponder in the heart; but nevertheless, the prince ('Herebeald') had
to relinquish life unavenged. (Swanton, p. 151)

What follows illustrates how enormous was the emotional effect on the father, king Hrethel, who died of grief. This passage gives some indication of how for Anglo-Saxon heroic society fratricide was devastating, and it suggests something of the significance that the Anglo-Saxons attached to Cain's crime. For Anglo-Saxon heroic culture and in the context of a poem like *Beowulf*, it served more effectively as a myth to explain the introduction of evil into the world than did the story of the serpent tempting Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden.

There are a number of references to fratricide in *Beowulf*, and each one carries with it a profound sense of devastation. Indeed, fratricide could be seen as one of the controlling themes of the narrative, and I think it is possible to see it as a metaphor for the whole system of vengeance and feud that governed heroic

culture. Further, I think it is possible to argue that the *Beowulf*-poet has chosen to develop this theme in the way that he has in order to show the weaknesses and limitations of pre-Christian Anglo-Saxon heroic culture.

What are we to make of Grendel? In origin Grendel is troll, a member of the living dead. Trolls are found frequently in Germanic literature and are related as a type to the zombie. What the *Beowulf*-poet has done is take the traditional figure of the troll or zombie and develop that figure in Grendel into a more significant or mythological figure of evil within what we would recognize as a Christian context. There is a mixture here between traditional Germanic mythology and Christian mythology. It is important to recall as well that in addition to kin-killing, the *Beowulf*-poet has built into Grendel associations of feud, vengeance, and exile. I discussed the significance of exile within Anglo-Saxon heroic culture in connection with *The Wanderer*, and this theme is taken up by the *Beowulf*-poet in another way in the figure of Grendel. Overall, what the *Beowulf*-poet has done in creating Grendel is to 'demonize', that is, he has created a demon from the most deep-seated fears of Anglo-Saxon society: fratricide, feud, vengeance, exile. In other words, the *Beowulf*-poet has created in Grendel a figure of profound evil, a mythological figure, similar to Satan in more traditional Christian representations of evil.

The figure of Beowulf is drawn from the Germanic tradition of the 'strong man' or the 'berserker', a warrior of exceptional strength. This is a feature of Beowulf, his great strength, that is frequently mentioned in the narrative. In an important sense Beowulf is a traditional type of figure and would have been recognized as such by the contemporary audience. The *Beowulf*-poet has used this traditional type, but has given to him and to the task that he has to perform a different dimension. Grendel is not just a troublesome troll of traditional Germanic legend, but an embodiment of profound evil. What role does the *Beowulf*-poet conceive for Beowulf in his fights with Grendel and Grendel's mother? What is the nature of his mission in taking on these battles? The situation that the *Beowulf*-poet creates is highly suggestive. Read the account of Beowulf's fights with Grendel and Grendel's mother, and pay special attention to the hints and suggestions that the *Beowulf*-poet builds into the narrative; see:

- Swanton, p. 53: Hrothgar's speech: 'I knew him ...'
- Swanton, p. 67: 'The King of Glory ...'
- Swanton, p. 67: '... And then may the wise God ...'
- Swanton, p. 67: '... But to these, the people of the Weders, the Lord granted ...'
- Swanton, p. 95: See the paragraph beginning 'Grendel's mother, a woman, she-monster ...', and especially the description of the nature of Beowulf's power.
- Swanton, p. 109: The paragraph beginning: 'Then she sat upon ...'
- Swanton, p. 111: The paragraph beginning: 'Then, because of the battle-gore ...'
- Swanton, pp. 117-9: The story of Heremod and Hrothgar's sermon.

The passages and contexts that I have listed above are, as I have said, suggestive, and can be used to form a picture of the kind of hero that the *Beowulf*-poet wanted to develop. The world of *Beowulf* is pre-Christian or pagan, but this does not mean that the narrative cannot encompass Christian ideas. Christianity early on developed the notion of the 'righteous pagan', and something of this way of looking at pre-Christian heroes may be relevant here. It is as if the *Beowulf*-poet, like the poet of *The Dream of the Rood* and *The Wanderer*, sought to redefine heroism in Christian terms. It has often been observed that Beowulf is shown doing battle with monsters, not men, and the *Beowulf*-poet has given a dimension to his monsters and hero himself that lifts the narrative above the level of the traditional heroic narrative.

How has the *Beowulf*-poet conceived the conflict between Grendel and Beowulf? How can we characterize Beowulf as a hero? What is the nature of Beowulf's heroism?

BEOWULF

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