

use for a tomb. Placenames like *Wodnes beorh* "Woden's borrow," which occurs in the *Chronicle* (for 592 and 715) and in charters, and *Punores hlæw* "Thor's barrow," which occurs in the life of St Mildred, suggest that these nouns could also refer to a place for worshipping pagan gods—a shrine or *heroön*.⁷ The noun *bēcn* used of the monument in line 3160 lends it a numinous quality, since *bēcn* means "sign, portent, idol," and it is used in Christian times to refer to the Cross and to Christ's miracles.⁸ It can designate memorial stones (especially in the inscriptions written on such stones) but never refers to a tomb in Old English. The *beorh* which the Geatas prepared for Beowulf is twice described as *heah* "high" (2805 and 3157), and of course it was, both because it stood on a lofty promontory and because the structure itself was built *hēah ond brād* (3157). High *beorgas* are mentioned also in Ælfric's *De falsis diis*, where it says of Woden, *þone macodan ða hæðenan him to mæran gode, . . . and to heagum beorgum him brohtan onsæg[ed]nysse* "the heathens made that one [that is, Woden] their famous god . . . and brought sacrifices to him on high *beorgas*."⁹ Wulfstan's account of the deification of Woden is much the same, noting that the heathens to *heagum beorgum him brohton oft mistlice loflac* "often brought manifold offerings to him on high *beorgas*."¹⁰ Pope and Bethurum offer abundant evidence from other sources confirming that cult was paid to pagan Germanic gods at high mounds,² and the placename *Wodnes beorh* itself would seem to offer some corroboration. These data in aggregate suggest, I believe, that the monument that the Geatas prepare for Beowulf is patient of an interpretation which would view it as a shrine or *heroön*.

This essay proposes, then, a possible rationale for the funeral rites' "mysterious and half-mythic atmosphere" which "hints at some pos-

7. "Association with a mound or tumulus occurs three times in the case of Woden, twice in the case of Thunor," according to Margaret Gelling. "Place-names and Anglo-Saxon paganism," *University of Birmingham Historical Journal*, 3 (1961), 15. Conjunction of tomb and temple is not unusual. Clement of Alexandria in his *Exhortation to the Heathen*, chapter 3, states contemptuously that pagan temples are simply tombs at which the heathen began worshipping, and he provides a catalogue of people who had died and whose tombs became places of worship. (In chapter 2 he says that the native countries, the biographies, and especially the sepulchers of the heathen gods prove that they were nothing but human beings.) We have seen earlier that Snorri Sturluson describes Germanic people worshipping at the tombs of their gods. Even in Christian times the tomb can serve as a shrine. In Spain there is a tradition that a tomb cult developed at the grave of the Cid; see W. J. Entwistle, "La Estoria del noble varón el Cid Ruiz Díaz," *Hispanic Review*, 15 (1947), 206–11, and P. E. Russell, "San Pedro de Cardena and the heroic history of the Cid," *Medium Ævum*, 27 (1958), 57–79.

8. See *Dictionary of Old English: B*, ed. Antonette diPaolo Healey (Toronto, 1991), s.v. *bæcen*. See also Elisabeth Okasha, "'Beacen' in Old English poetry," *Notes and Queries*, 221 (1976), 200–8. Among the senses established by Okasha are "idolatrour monument" (p. 205).

9. *Homilies of Ælfric: a supplementary collection*, p. 684.

1. *The Homilies of Wulfstan*, p. 223.

2. See the notes to these passages in the editions of Pope and Bethurum; cf. Ursula Dronke's note to *at Sigty's bergi* on p. 64 of *The Poetic Edda*, vol. 1: *Heroic Poems* (Oxford, 1969).

sible unknown order beyond the known seas of men."³ It suggests that some in the poet's audience might have sensed a darker purpose in the Geatas' ceremonies than that of having a redundant second funeral, a purpose which the poet intimates through muted hints, as is his wont in alluding to his characters' paganism. An overt statement that the Geatas proclaimed dead Beowulf a god would have alienated a Christian Anglo-Saxon audience,⁴ but by appealing subtly to the knowledge he knew they shared about Germanic apotheosis, he could arouse suspicions that the somber majesty of the ceremonies was an expression of something more precise than the "mysterious and half-mythic," of something more disquieting than mere grief. For those in the audience who thought of pagan deification, the closing rites would have been a powerful culmination of the pervasive tension throughout the poem between inspiring heroism and the sad shame of heathenism. The poet reveres the exemplary conduct of Beowulf and his people while deploring the pagan darkness which leaves that whole world in danger of perdition. His moving depiction of the solemn ritual around Beowulf's *beorh* is his last, melancholy, admiring gaze back on a man so great that people would think him a god; on a people so benighted that they thought a man might become a god.⁵

THOMAS D. HILL

The Christian Language and Theme of *Beowulf*†

One of the traditional topics of medieval English literary criticism is the question of "paganism and Christianity" in *Beowulf*. There have been a number of articles and even books concerned with the problem; recently E. B. Irving and Fred C. Robinson have devoted respectively a major article (Irving, 1984) and a significant portion of a book (Robinson, 1985) to re-examining it. If after over a century of learned discussion and commentary on *Beowulf*, it continues to be necessary to discuss an issue, there must be something rather problematic about it. And there is—most comparable early medieval epic texts are either emphatically and militantly Christian (like the *Chan-*

3. See above, n. 3, p. 194.

4. Howell D. Chickering, Jr., *Beowulf Translated with an Introduction and Commentary* (Garden City, NY, 1977), p. 377, rightly observes that the pagan element "is strong without being explicitly cultic." Allusions to heathenism are common in the poem, but they are always restrained.

5. I wish to thank Robert E. Bjork of Arizona State University for some helpful suggestions he made after hearing this essay read as a lecture.

† From *Companion to Old English Poetry*, ed. Henk Aertsen and Rolf H. Bremmer, Jr. (Amsterdam: VU University Press, 1994) 63–77. Reprinted by permission of the publisher.

son de Roland) or unapologetically pagan or secular in their viewpoint (like the *Táin Bó Cúailnge* or *Egils saga*). *Beowulf* is neither. Klaeber has spoken of "the problem of finding a formula which satisfactorily explains the peculiar spiritual atmosphere of the poem," (1953:cxxi, n.2) and this question remains an important issue in modern *Beowulf* criticism.

Obviously any issue which has received as much attention as this one is difficult and the "solution" or, to be more precise, the way of understanding this issue which I am proposing will inevitably be somewhat controversial. To put the matter succinctly, I think the *Beowulf*-poet is presenting a radical synthesis of pagan and Christian history—which is without parallel in Anglo-Saxon or Anglo-Latin literature (so far as I am aware). There are, however, parallels in Old Irish and Old Norse-Icelandic literature; it is a fascinating although perhaps unresolvable question whether there was any direct intellectual or literary influence between these literatures in the early Middle Ages.

It is necessary first to define the ideological problem which the *Beowulf*-poet (and reflective Anglo-Saxons throughout the era) faced. To begin with, the Anglo-Saxons (like most archaic peoples) were deeply conservative and venerated antiquity. The evidence for this proclivity is massive and pervasive. Good swords in *Beowulf*, for example, are inevitably "old"—ideally a sword is "the work of Weland" the archetypal, oldest and thus the best smith. Anglo-Saxon ideas about—their legal definition of—aristocracy and kingship are obscure to some degree, but it is clear that Anglo-Saxons venerated "old" families and that the ideal of an ancient royal line extending far back into the past was an important ideological concern shared even by a Churchman as hostile towards Germanic antiquity as Alcuin.¹ As far as Anglo-Saxon secular literature is concerned, there is ample evidence of its deliberately archaic and archaizing character. Leaving aside *Beowulf* itself, *Widsith* and *Deor* reflect remarkable and extensive knowledge of the Germanic past.² There is also evidence within and without *Beowulf* that Anglo-Saxon poets knew and recited poems now lost about the heroes of the major cycles of Germanic heroic legend as they are known to us from the extant heroic literature preserved in Middle High German and Old Norse-Icelandic.

Anglo-Saxon Christians, however, had to deal with a problem which all European Christians of the first millennium faced, the

1. On the Anglo-Saxon genealogies see Sisam (1953), and Hill (1988). For an interesting comment by Alcuin reflecting his belief in the *gæfa* (victory bringing luck) of a Woden descended king, see Epistola 129 (Duemmler, 1895:129).
 2. The editions of those poems by Kemp Malone (1962/1966) provide a useful and illuminating compendium of information which graphically illustrates the extent of the Germanic learning of these poets.

What counts as 'old'?

simple and unarguable historical fact that Christianity itself, and in particular their Christianity, was not particularly old. The date of *Beowulf* is much controverted, but there are no conclusive arguments against dating the poem to the age of Bede, a date which was favoured by a majority of *Beowulf* scholars of the last generation, and which is still perfectly possible and plausible. Indeed the arguments for a late dating of the poem are motivated in part by a quite understandable scholarly concern that the reasonable guess—that *Beowulf*, is relatively early rather than relatively late—should solidify into a secure "fact" by dint of much repetition.³ I should perhaps add that while I myself am agnostic about the dating of *Beowulf*, I find the arguments for an early dating suasive and the possibility congenial.

At any rate whether we accept the early or the late dating of *Beowulf*, it is clear that a reflective Anglo-Saxon must have been aware that the roots of his nation and culture were pagan and Germanic and that Christianity was a relatively recent innovation among a people to whom antiquity was precious and innovation suspect.

One of the ways in which medieval authors dealt with the problem of paganism and its consequences was to pretend that the history of their nation began with the conversion to Christianity and that nothing of real consequence happened before that momentous date. Bede is a conspicuous exemplar of this tradition of historiography—the pagan Anglo-Saxons receive very muted treatment in the *Historia Ecclesiastica*. The sins of the Christian Britons receive much more emphasis than the heroic accomplishments of the pagan Anglo-Saxons and Jutes. But a secular Anglo-Saxon aristocrat, whose claims to prestige and authority depended in part on an ancient and therefore necessarily pagan lineage, would be much less inclined to ignore the achievements of his pagan ancestors than a monk cut off from his own family and culture.

Some literary histories address the "pagan" heritage of the Anglo-Saxons as if that heritage was limited to the few references to Woden in the poetic corpus and the Anglo-Saxon charms—which are almost always treated as if magic was as marginal and "low" in Anglo-Saxon society as it is in ours. If we had a fuller corpus of Anglo-Saxon secular poetry we might well have more material about the Anglo-Saxon pagan pantheon rather than having to depend so heavily on Old Norse-Icelandic texts for information about Germanic paganism in England. Certainly we would know more about "pagan" heroic legend since there is ample evidence in the surviving literature that the Anglo-Saxons were deeply and abidingly interested in Germanic heroic legend—legends whose heroes were after all pagan. But leav-

3. On this problem see the essays collected in Chase (1981).

even a couple of hundred years is long enough to "forget" the origins of a cosmology. Why should Anglo-Saxons be aware of origins of that?

OK maybe

is this clear? not necessarily (why should it be?)
 this action actively suppresses the oldest knowledge

a pretty big "if" show this evidence

- why leave it aside?

ing aside the literary evidence of interest in the pagan past in Anglo-Saxon England, this heritage was of interest to Anglo-Saxons in ways much more immediate than in their choice of songs and stories to listen to. The Anglo-Saxon state—the kingdom itself (or for most of this period the various Anglo-Saxon kingdoms)—was founded by pagans. The kings ruled by virtue of a claimed descent from Woden. And if royal descent and royal genealogies were presumably rather remote from the daily experience of most Anglo-Saxons, the genealogies of the lords of the shires were of more immediate concern. Every Anglo-Saxon freeman was expected to have a lord whose claim to aristocratic status was based on aristocratic descent extending into the far past. And in the age of Bede (a perfectly possible milieu for the composition of *Beowulf*) no Anglo-Saxon could claim more than three or four Christian ancestors. Modern historians would of course insist that most if not all of these claims to genealogical antiquity were fraudulent or exaggerated and that powerful men simply adorned their present power with fantastic claims that their ancestors had been similarly powerful in the remote past. For the purposes of the literary historian, however, it is not the truth or falsehood of these claims which is at issue, but rather the ideology implicit in such claims and the fact that royal and aristocratic authority—no matter how devout a Christian a given Anglo-Saxon might be—had to have pagan roots. Anglo-Saxon law was similarly Germanic and pagan in origin, and in so far as it was law based on the idea of personal vengeance, could be reconciled with Christian ideals of forgiveness and universal justice with difficulty.

I would submit that a young Anglo-Saxon warrior who was schooled in Germanic heroic legend, whose claim to aristocratic status extended far into the pagan past, whose law was the old law confirmed by his people since time immemorial, whose homeland had been won by pagan warriors, who bore on his person ancient pagan ornaments, who defended himself with an old sword purportedly made by Weland and certainly made by pagan craftsmen, and whose landscape was dominated by magnificent burial mounds in which the great men (and women) of his race were buried in pagan splendour, had much reason to respect the pagan heritage of his people no matter how pious he was and no matter how deeply he venerated the Church and the priests, the monks, and the nuns who served it. Such a young (or old) aristocrat faced a deep cultural conflict since the dominant authorities in the Church in this period would not, or to put the case more accurately, could not accept the claim that the paganism was a legitimate mode of religious and cultural self understanding. If paganism was legitimate, if pagans too could be saved, what was the point of Christian faith and Christian asceticism?

enough to make them thoroughly Christian, however

This cultural problem of how to reconcile Christian faith with an appreciation for the cultural achievements of the pagan past is an issue which recurs throughout the history of Western European thought—this was after all a central concern of that complex intellectual movement we call Renaissance humanism. And there have been different responses to this problem at different places and times in the history of Christian thought. The spectrum of these responses varies from Augustine's statement that the virtues of the ancient Romans were splendid vices, to Erasmus's invocation of Socrates as a saint. Roughly speaking, we may say that Christian thinkers who felt relatively secure about their own culture and faith have tended to be receptive to the merits of pagan past whether it be classical Latin and Greek or Celtic or Germanic paganism, and those who felt themselves threatened by it have harshly rejected "paganism" and pagan culture. Certainly in the history of Western European Christianity the humanists won their case and the classical pagan authors became central in the tradition of Christian European education. The beautiful quotation from Leo XIII with which E. K. Rand concludes his magisterial review of this problem is the utterance of a man supremely confident in his own faith and Christian culture:

Quarum rerum utilitate perspecta Ecclesia Catholica quemadmodum cetera quae honesta sunt, quae pulchra, quae laudabilia ita enim humanarum litterarum studia tanti semper facere consuevit quanti debuere in eis provehendis curarum suarum partem non mediocrem perpetuo collocavit.

Perceiving, then, the usefulness [of the literatures of Greece and Rome,] the Catholic Church, which always has fostered whatsoever things are honest, whatsoever things are lovely, whatsoever things are of good report, has always given to the study of the humanities the favor that it deserves, and in promoting it, has expended no slight portion of its best endeavor.⁴

The point is that while there is a tradition of Christian hostility and suspicion towards the pagan past, there has also been a more positive and receptive attitude which is clearly recognisable in the high Middle Ages and later and which seems to be reflected in *Beowulf*. Hostility towards pagan culture was based in part on the historical situation of any given Christian author, but it was also based in part on individual temperament. The teaching of the Catholic Church is not univalent and unequivocal concerning this problem. It is perfectly true that a famous clause from the Athanasian creed states that "extra ecclesia nullus salvus est", but even for the rigorous theologians who constructed this creed, the term "ecclesia" must

4. Quoted from Rand (1928:68, 299).

Does this fly? (see p. 200)

Philippians 4:8

include the patriarchs and such righteous gentiles as Melchisedech and Job. Dante's equivocation suggests something of the complexity of the problem. In accordance with the austere tradition of Catholic rigorism, he situates such pagans as Virgil and Aristotle in a pleasant but sad limbo situated before Hell, but Cato who is as much a pagan as any other is a guardian of Purgatory, and a certain Rifeo—known only from two lines in the *Aeneid* as the "iustissimus unus / qui fuit in Teucris et servantissimus aequi" (II. 426–27) is, according to Dante, in heaven. Dante, like the *Beowulf*-poet seems to have thought that some gentile "pagan" heroes could be saved, but unlike the *Beowulf*-poet, he is very cautious and hesitant about this possibility.

There are of course various solutions to the problem of the "peculiar spiritual atmosphere" of *Beowulf* and indeed it is possible to ignore the problem altogether, but it seems to me that the most consistent way to read the poem as we have it is to assume that the *Beowulf*-poet had thought long and hard about the problem and had arrived at (or had been taught) an essentially "humanistic" reading of his forefathers' paganism. He seems to have believed that the best and greatest of these men knew about God, creation, and natural moral law, and that when they died their souls went to heaven.⁵ All of these beliefs can be explicitly supported from the text, but there are two problems which must be faced before we can simply define the *Beowulf*-poet as a Germanic humanist and turn to other problems. One is internal—the other and more serious one—external.

(A) From the point of view of the literary historian concerned with "the peculiar spiritual atmosphere of the poem," *Beowulf* is a remarkably consistent text in that the religious language of the poem reflects the religious knowledge of those patriarchs who lived before the covenants and the creation of Israel. It is useful to have a term to define the religion of *Beowulf*, Hrothgar, and the good Germanic heroes in the poem and I would suggest that we define them as Noachites, that is, as gentiles who share the religious heritage and knowledge of Noah and his sons without having access to the revealed knowledge of God which was granted to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, a tradition culminated by the revelation of the Law to Moses and continued by the charismatic tradition of prophecy in Israel. Every reference in the poem which touches on religion can be understood in these terms except for one—lines 179–83 in which the poet apparently condemns Hrothgar and the Danes for idol worship.

There can be no question that this passage presents a major difficulty for those of us who would argue that the *Beowulf*-poet is

5. For a magisterial study of Christian ideas and Christian language in *Beowulf*, see Klaeber, 1911–12. For a recent discussion of the salvation of the heathen in *Beowulf*, see Hill (1988).

consistent and careful in depicting the good pre-Christian heroic figures in the poem as monotheistic Noachites. One simple solution to this difficulty is to assume that these lines are an interpolation by a scribe who was offended by the "humanistic" depiction of pre-Christian heroes and heroines in the poem. This solution was favoured (with some reservations) by Tolkien (1936:294, n.34) and Whitelock (1951:78). We have only one manuscript of the poem and there are a number of junctures in the poem in which lines or entire passages have been lost. Interpolations are easily understandable from a paleographical and codicological point of view; and the motivation for an interpolation at this point is also readily understandable. The usual criterion for determining whether a given passage is integral or an interpolation in a given text is whether the suspect passage differs either stylistically or conceptually from the text in which it occurs as a whole. If it is in some way markedly different from its immediate context, then one can reasonably argue that it was not part of the original text.

In this instance there is an immediate discrepancy between this condemnation of paganism in *Beowulf* and the remainder of the poem. The poet who is responsible for this passage states unequivocally that pagans such as the Danes do not "know" the identity of the true God, "metod hie ne cuþon, / dæda demend, ne wiston hie drihten god / ne hie herian ne cuþon, / wuldres waldend." (II.180–83: "They did not know the Lord, the Judge of deeds nor did they know of the Lord God, nor did they know how to praise the Ruler of Glory.") This claim is of course generally true of "real" "historical" Germanic paganism. Germanic pagans, like the Romans and the Greeks, worshipped a variety of gods and did not know either the appropriate names for God or the formulas of worship which were current in Christian Latin tradition. In *Beowulf*, however, such historically pagan figures as *Beowulf* and *Hrothgar* know, worship and thank the one God of Judeo-Christian faith for the blessings of their lives, know that God judges deeds, and if we accept the straightforward literal significance of the formulas which characterise their deaths, ascend to heaven after their deaths. Indeed, forty-five lines or so after the flat assertion that the pagan Danes do not know how to worship the Lord, the *Beowulf*-poet speaks of how the equally pagan Geats gave thanks to God after their successful sea voyage: "gode þancodon / þæs þe him yðlade eaðe wurdon." (II.227–8; "They gave thanks to God since the sea passage had been easy for them.") *Beowulf* and his men cannot be Christian, but their prayer is characterised by a Christian formula and they are praying at an appropriate time and in an appropriate manner from a Christian perspective. And there are numerous other passages in the poem in which characters who would have been "historically" pagan, speak

Hill central claim?

ok, fair enough

about God and religious issues from a "Noachite" perspective. The discrepancy between the poem as a whole and the condemnation of the Danes' idol worship is absolute; either the *Beowulf*-poet forgot for a moment to maintain the careful balance which he maintains elsewhere in the poem—in which the admirable heroic figures in the poem speak about religious matters from a monotheistic perspective, but know nothing of revealed religion—or someone else added that passage to the poem.

This condemnation of the idol worship of the Danes is in itself a problem for this argument, but one which can be dealt with by the simple assumption that the text of *Beowulf* is corrupt at this point. A larger problem, however, which bears on this argument, and which has led a great many distinguished scholars to be very hesitant about accepting what the simplest and most direct understanding of what the language of the poem would seem to imply, is that no other Anglo-Saxon or Anglo-Latin authors who deal with the pagan past of the Germanic peoples seem to have been at all sympathetic to paganism or to any other aspect of the culture of the ancient Germanic peoples. At various times in the history of Christian thought, Christian authors have been more or less sympathetic towards the excusable ignorance of those who lived before the advent of Christianity, but in the Latin west in the early Middle Ages Christian Latin authors were univocal in their condemnation of the pagan past. Alcuin's famous remarks about the monks at Lindisfarne who listened to heroic poetry are so frequently quoted that Anglo-Saxonists are weary of them and yet the passage is worth citing because of the clarity, force, and directness of Alcuin's language:

Verba Dei legantur in sacerdotali convivio. Ibi decet lectorem audiri, non citharistam; sermones patrum, non carmina gentilium. Quid Hinieldus cum Christo? Angusta est domus: utrosque tenere non potuit. Non vult rex celistis cum paganis et perditis nominatenus regibus communionem habere; quia rex ille aeternus regnat in caelis, ille paganus perditus plangat in inferno.

Let the words of God be read at the meal of the clergy. There it is proper to listen to the lector, not a harp-player; the sermons of the Fathers not the songs of the people. For what has Ingeld to do with Christ? Narrow is the house; it cannot hold both. The King of Heaven wants nothing to do with so-called kings who are pagan and damned. For the eternal King reigns in heaven; the damned pagan laments in hell.⁶

The *Beowulf*-poet is even more anomalous in the context of early medieval Christian thought in that the admirable characters in *Beo-*

6. Alcuin, "Epistola 124" (Duemmler, 1895:183).

maybe

(B)

within extant texts, that is - the corpus is not that large. (see Hill's own claim, p. 206)

wulf are not strictly speaking pagans, but rather monotheists, Noachites, as I have chosen to call them. In this respect we may begin by observing that the *Beowulf*-poet is (as far as we know) historically wrong since the pre-Christian Germanic peoples were in fact pagans who worshipped a number of different gods and there is no historical evidence that any of these peoples anticipated the distinctive Judeo-Christian claim that there is one God, who created the heavens and the earth (*Beowulf* lines 90-98) and who governs the course of history (*Beowulf* lines 696-702). In a strict sense the *Beowulf*-poet is not being particularly sympathetic to pagans—with the problematic exception of lines 175-88 he does not even mention pagans or pagan worship. (He does mention pagan burial practices, but that is another and a special topic.) → see Robinson herein (p. 18)

In this respect the *Beowulf*-poet seems wholly (*sui generis*) no other Anglo-Saxon author seems to have made such claims and since most medievalists are very reluctant, and generally rightly so, to accept any feature of a medieval poem as essentially original, many *Beowulf* scholars are not inclined to accept the implications of the Christian language of the poem at face value. Thus when *Beowulf* says of his grandfather Hrethel that when he died "godes leoht geceas" (line 2469) 'he chose God's light'—language which in a Christian context would clearly imply that the person who died went to heaven—many scholars implicitly assume that the poet is more or less thoughtlessly using Christian formulas without careful attention to their implications. If there were only a few instances of this kind of usage, or if there was more in the poem which reflected conventional Christian hostility to the pre-Christian past than one suspect passage, then one would, in my judgment, be justified in assuming that the *Beowulf*-poet was conventional or muddled in his thinking about these problems. The poet is, however, quite careful and consistent in his treatment of religious issues and his use of religious language, and I would argue that it is necessary to view this aspect of the poem from a somewhat broader perspective than Anglo-Saxonists generally do and to consider the poet's depiction of the religion of such figures as *Beowulf* and *Hrothgar* in the context of Celtic (particularly Old Irish) and Old Norse-Icelandic literary history as well. In so doing I am following the suggestions of J. R. R. Tolkien and in particular the arguments of Charles Donahue (Donahue, 1949-51).

We may begin by observing that Anglo-Saxon literature is preserved in fragmentary form in that we only have a small portion of what was once a very extensive corpus. Almost every Anglo-Saxon poem, for example, is preserved in a single manuscript copy. Even the much more extensive corpus of Anglo-Latin literature is only a portion of what once existed. Did the abbot or monks at Lindisfarne, for example, defend themselves against Alcuin's attack? This raises

↳ wholly unique (literally "sui generis")

↳ moving on

another problem which needs at least to be noted. Alcuin's works were preserved because he was an eminent and orthodox Catholic authority. The protest of a secularized abbot would have received much less respectful attention. This is not to raise again the fantasy of narrow minded monks erasing the remembrance of a religiously "incorrect" past, but simply to observe that the preservation of the texts which we have occurred in a particular religious and social milieu, and that the character of that milieu affected what was preserved. For better or worse, *Beowulf* is the only lengthy secular poem preserved in Old English and it is preserved in one manuscript which was nearly lost. By contrast there are over thirty manuscripts of Aelfric's second series of *Catholic Homilies*. It is hardly a novel observation that secular texts, even secular texts written by Christian authors, reflect a significantly different perspective than specifically Christian literary texts, particularly so if the latter are written by clerics or monks. If we had more Anglo-Saxon secular literature, *Beowulf* might seem much less anomalous than it does when compared with the rest of the Old English poetic corpus, which is almost all specifically religious.

Again it is important to remember that much of the Christian Latin literature which deals with the conversion of the Germanic pagans was written generations after the actual conversion process and the authors of these texts had an obvious interest in depicting the conversion as a straightforward and relatively quick one in which the missionaries had no occasion to make compromises and in which their new converts understood and accepted their new faith without hesitations or doubt. The actual process of conversion must inevitably have involved many ambiguities and complexities, and even willing converts could only have acquired a relatively sophisticated understanding of their new faith after years of instruction and worship. In fact, on the level of popular Christianity there is ample evidence for the existence of semi-Christian magic and folk-belief as exemplified most clearly in the Anglo-Saxon charms which were current for generations after the conversion. Thus if the *Beowulf*-poet seems to exhibit anomalous views about such topics as the salvation of unbaptised Germanic kings and heroes, we must remember that there is a great deal of evidence for other "unorthodox" religious ideas being current in Anglo-Saxon literary culture, even if this particular unorthodox idea seems unique to *Beowulf*.

If the *Beowulf*-poet's ideas about the existence and salvation of Germanic Noachites cannot be paralleled in Old English or Anglo-Latin literature as such, these ideas can be paralleled readily enough in the two vernacular literatures which are geographically and culturally closest to Old English literature. Both Old Irish and Old

Norse-Icelandic literature are "insular" literatures in that both languages were spoken as native languages in England and Scotland during the Anglo-Saxon period. Again, both Old Irish and Old Norse-Icelandic literature possessed a rich literary tradition which was originally pagan. One of the immediate contrasts between Old French epic tradition and the heroic literature of the Anglo-Saxons, the Norse and the Irish is that the heroic literature of these insular peoples is much more archaic and looks back to the pagan roots of these nations. For linguistic and historical reasons the historical memory of the romance speaking peoples of Europe simply did not extend before the advent of Christianity; their "pagan" epics were the classical Latin epics.

In Old and (early Middle) Irish secular literature the *ollaimh*, *ollaves* and the bards faced an ideological problem quite similar to that which the *Beowulf*-poet faced in that the traditional heroic literature of the Irish peoples concerned heroes born long before the advent of Christianity. It seems clear, however, that the learned secular authors of Ireland were willing to argue that their great heroes were saved and are now in heaven although the ways which the authors of these texts devised to achieve this happy result reflect a bold and imaginative effort on their part. Thus in the death tale of Conchobor, Conchobar is wounded (the solidified brain of a slain enemy is embedded in his skull) and only partially healed—any excitement will kill him. He remains seven years in this parlous state until he is told of the passion of Jesus, leaps up to lead an onslaught of the Ulstermen to avenge this crime, and dies as an Irish martyr to the faith (Cross and Slover,⁷ 1969:346). According to "The Phantom Chariot of Cu Chulainn" Cu Chulainn was summoned out of hell by Saint Patrick in order to convince the high king of Ireland of the merits of Christianity, and Cu Chulainn persuaded Patrick to arrange for his salvation during this process (Cross and Slover, 1969: 354). The death tale of Cu Chulainn concludes with Christian prophecy by the spirit of Cu Chulainn and in "The Colloquy of the Old Men" Patrick's guardian angels specifically assure him that it is appropriate for him to listen and to record the stories of the *fián* and so Patrick himself and his clerics record the stories from the lips of Ossin (Cross and Slover, 1969:464). It is difficult for someone who is not a specialist in the field to evaluate and interpret the complex narrative strategies by which the authors of these texts reconcile—at least on a formal level—the conflicting world views of Old Irish heroic legend and Christianity. A broad generalisation does seem

7. The 1969 reprint of this anthology contains a bibliographical supplement which directs the reader to the Irish editions of these texts.

Why so?

such as?

Yeah, why not?

appropriate however—the Irish bards and *ollaves* were sure enough of themselves and their literary and cultural traditions to claim that their great “pagan” heroes and kings were saved and rejoicing in the Christian heaven—heaven itself would be a poorer place without them.

In some ways Old Norse-Icelandic literary tradition is more directly relevant to *Beowulf* than Old Irish secular heroic prose. Old English and Old Norse-Icelandic are cognate languages and can be defined as cognate literatures. There are many striking parallels between the two literary traditions and there was much contact and mutual influence between the two. Hence the treatment of “paganism” or to be more precise, pre-Christian religious ideas in the family sagas is important for students of *Beowulf* in that Icelandic secular literature provides the closest approximation of the lost secular literature of Anglo-Saxon England which still exists. Obviously we cannot treat Icelandic texts of the high middle ages as if they could provide direct evidence of what we have lost, but Icelandic literature is an important resource for the Anglo-Saxonist and indeed has long been recognised as such.

For the purposes of the present discussion, one immediate problem with the issue of the presentation of the conversion from Germanic paganism to Christianity in Old Norse-Icelandic literature is that this literature is so rich that one could write extensively about the problem without even beginning to treat it adequately. For two relatively recent discussions see Lönnroth (1969) and Harris and Hill (1989). In the context of this paper I wish to concentrate on one particular literary text which is strikingly similar to *Beowulf* in its treatment of “pagan” heroes who are nonetheless committed monotheists set apart from their pagan surroundings. *Vatnsdœla Saga* is an interesting text of considerable literary merit, but no one would claim that it is one of the great literary monuments of the period. The saga is a family saga concerned with the history of a given family over generations and the author of the saga makes several quite distinctive claims about the early history of this family. One is that unlike the other great founding families of Iceland who were at odds with Harald the Fairhaired, the leading men of this family were actually on good terms with him and emigrated to Iceland because of the power of fate as articulated by the disappearance of a magic amulet and its reappearance in Iceland. Again the family had their own distinctive form of religious commitment. When the first bishop arrives to convert the Icelanders Thorkel krafla demurs:

Porkell kvazk eigi vilja aðra trú hafa—“en þeir Þorsteinn Ingimundarson höfðu ok Þórir fóstri minn; þeir trúðu á þann, er sólina hefir skapat ok öllum hlutum ræðr.”

(*Vatnsdœla saga*, kap. 46 [Sveinsson, 1939: 125])

(But Thorkell said he did not want a faith different from that Thorsteinn Ingimundarson and the rest of them had held—and Thorir my foster father. They believed in Him who made the sun and ruled all things.)

The bishop, of course, quickly explains that this faith is perfectly compatible with Christianity and Thorkel and his family, after some hesitation, are converted. The monotheistic and ethical principles of the pre-Christian *Vatnsdœla* dwellers are mentioned repeatedly throughout the saga. These men not only knew that one God had created the sun and ruled all things but that aggressive behavior was morally wrong (cap. 11) and that God would punish or reward men according to their deeds (cap. 23) and the theme of the one god who made the sun recurs repeatedly. In terms of historical plausibility the edifying moral monotheism of the *Vatnsdœla* family before the conversion is historically unlikely and since there is much magic and fantasy woven into the saga, one might be tempted to dismiss this aspect of the saga as simply late pious fantasy projected into the far past. It is important, however, to distinguish between *Vatnsdœla saga* as an aesthetic success or failure and its literary historical interest as an attempt to bridge the gulf between the pagan Germanic past and the Christian present. The author of *Vatnsdœla saga* like the *Beowulf*-poet was attempting to reconcile pious antiquarian sympathy for the Germanic past and the claims of Christian truth. The kind of dogmatic hostility to the Germanic past reflected in Alcuin's letter about the monks of Lindisfarne was as current in thirteenth century Europe and Iceland as it was in Anglo-Saxon England, but it did not prevent the author of *Vatnsdœla saga* from depicting noble monotheistic pre-Christian Germanic heroes just as the *Beowulf*-poet had done before him. To summarize then, the peculiar spiritual atmosphere of *Beowulf* looks a good deal less peculiar and unique if one compares the poem to the other heroic literatures of Northern Europe whose poets and learned men faced the kind of ideological problem which the *Beowulf*-poet faced. There are other similar depictions of the pagan past current in Old Irish and Old Norse-Icelandic literature and a simple solution to the problem of Christianity in *Beowulf* is to assume that the *Beowulf*-poet approximated the solution that these other authors arrived at either independently or as the result of the influence of poems and histories now lost.

This discussion of the Christian context of *Beowulf* is necessarily controversial and partial; there are a number of smaller problems which could receive fairly extended discussion in their own right. Thus, for example, the poet alludes to the practice of sortilege in lines 202–04; this is a “pagan” practice but one sanctioned by the precedent of Old and New Testament practice. Again, there is the problem of lines 589–90 in which *Beowulf* apparently threatens

comes back to confidence again (compare p. 20)

duration by the drawing of lot; or, more generally, sorcery/magic

Unferth with hell-torment, an anomaly convincingly explained by Fred C. Robinson (1974:129-30). These smaller problems lead us to a larger issue, however, which is that there is no received answer to the question of the "peculiar spiritual atmosphere of *Beowulf*" and eminent and well respected Anglo-Saxonists have offered quite divergent interpretations of this problem in the poem. Of the most recent discussions of the issue I particularly recommend that by Fred C. Robinson in *Beowulf and the Appositive Style*; Robinson's conclusions are quite different than mine, but they merit careful attention. Again, E. B. Irving has reargued the more traditional view that the *Beowulf*-poet was bound by and committed to the traditions of Germanic poetry and simply was not concerned with theological consistency. In a sense both these scholars are arguing for a more traditional and "orthodox" view of the Christianity of the *Beowulf*-poet than my argument would imply. Robinson is arguing that the *Beowulf*-poet was deeply concerned about the paganism of his characters, but had to accept the harsh traditional views of churchmen such as Alcuin, whereas Irving simply thinks that the poet was unconcerned with theological issues. In contrast, I am arguing that on this crucial ideological issue the *Beowulf*-poet was willing to question the authority of what must have been the majority opinion of the church of his time. The language of the poem can be most readily understood in these terms, but many scholars are reluctant to grant that an Anglo-Saxon poet could have challenged the authority of the church so directly. There are other Old English and Anglo-Latin texts which reflect the tension between a natural respect for traditional Germanic culture and the radical and exclusive claims of Christian faith; but there are none which so clearly affirm the positive, admirable, spiritual dimension of Old Germanic culture as the *Beowulf*-poet does. (It may also be added that the *Beowulf*-poet was keenly aware of the problematic features of the Germanic heroic ethic, but that would have to be the occasion for another paper or monograph.) When one considers the problem in a somewhat broader perspective, however, both the achievement and the ideological perspective of the *Beowulf*-poet come into sharper focus. We can see more clearly if we broaden our perspective.

I would be surprised if the problem of the "peculiar spiritual atmosphere" of *Beowulf* did not continue to be the occasion of scholarly controversy, but I do think it is important that the "humanistic" sympathy which the *Beowulf*-poet exhibits towards the best of the pagan past is not "heretical" even if it was (apparently) a minority view in the Anglo-Saxon church. As time passed and the western church emerged from the trauma of the destruction of the Roman empire, "high" medieval and renaissance philosophers and theologians began to reconsider the ramifications of

alt. main claim

the contempt for the pagan past implicit in such texts as Alcuin's letter to the monks at Lindisfarne, and a much more nuanced and appreciative view of the achievements of the pagan past became possible. The question of the salvation of the heathen became an important issue for poets such as Langland and Dante and the philosophy of Thomas Aquinas is based upon the recovery and assimilation of Aristotle's thought. Great poets often see more deeply than their contemporaries; and if the *Beowulf*-poet seems to have anticipated by generations the humanism and tolerance of thinkers like Erasmus, we need not be surprised. Irish *ollaves* and Icelandic saga-men and women learned to recognise the spiritual validity of their own heritage and its essential compatibility with Christianity. This tradition of tolerance and respect for the past is as much part of the heritage of early medieval Europe as the rigid and bigoted contempt for the pagan past which we commemorate in school handbooks. We could even argue that this was the better way, and we may hope that it will be the more enduring part of that heritage.

*What are the various motives for such views (esp. in opposition, or at least opposition)?

- REFERENCES
- Chase, Colin (1981). *The Dating of Beowulf*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- Cross, Tom Peete, and Clark Harris Slover (1969). *Ancient Irish Tales*. Rev. bibliography by Charles W. Dunn. New York: Barnes and Noble.
- Donahue, Charles (1949-51). "Beowulf, Ireland and the Natural Good." *Traditio* 7.263-77.
- Duemmler, Ernestus (ed.) (1895). *Alcuin: Epistolae Karolini Aevi II*. Monumenta Germaniae Historica. Berlin: Weidmann.
- Harris, Joseph and Thomas D. Hill (1989). "Gestr's 'Prime Sign': Source and Signification in *Norma-Gests Bätir*." *Arkiv för Nordisk Filologi* 104. 103-22.
- Hill, Thomas D. (1988a). "The 'Variegated Obit' as an Historiographic Motif in Old English Poetry and Anglo-Latin Historical Literature." *Traditio* 44. 101-24.
- . (1988b). "Woden as 'Ninth-Father': Numerical Patterning in Some Old English Royal Genealogies." In: *Germania: Comparative Studies in Old Germanic Languages and Literatures*. Ed. Daniel G. Calder and T. Craig Christy. Exeter: D. S. Brewer. 161-74.
- Irving, Edward B. Jr. (1984). "The Nature of Christianity in *Beowulf*." *Anglo-Saxon England* 13. 7-21.
- Klaeber, Fr. (1911-12, 1912). "Die christlichen Elemente im *Beowulf*." *Anglia* 35. 111-36, 249-70, 453-82; 36. 169-99.
- . (ed.) (1953). *Beowulf and the Fight at Finnsburg*. 3rd ed. Boston: D. C. Heath.
- Lönnroth, Lars (1969). "The Noble Heathen: A Theme in the Sagas." *Scandinavian Studies* 41. 1-29.
- Malone, Kemp (ed.) (1962). *Widsith*. *Anglistica* 13. Copenhagen: Rosenkilde and Bagger.
- . (ed.) (1966). *Deor*. 2nd ed. New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts.
- Rand, E. K. (1928). *Founders of the Middle Ages*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Robinson, Fred C. (1974). "Elements of the Marvellous in the Characterisation of *Beowulf*: A Reconsideration of the Textual Evidence." In: *Old English Studies in Honour of John C. Pope*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press. 119-37.
- . (1985). *Beowulf and the Appositive Style*. Knoxville, TN: The University of Tennessee Press.
- Sisam, Kenneth (1953). "Anglo-Saxon Royal Genealogies." *Publications of the British Academy* 39. 287-348.
- Sveinsson, Einar Ol. (ed.) (1939). *Vatnsdæla saga*. Íslenzk Fornrit VIII. Reykjavík: Hið Íslenzka Fornritafélag.
- Tolkien, J. R. R. (1936). "Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics." *Publications of the British Academy* 22. 245-95.
- Whitelock, Dorothy (1951). *The Audience of Beowulf*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

How?/Why?

W. W. NORTON & COMPANY, INC.
Also Publishes

THE NORTON ANTHOLOGY OF AFRICAN AMERICAN LITERATURE
edited by Henry Louis Gates Jr. and Nellie Y. McKay et al.

THE NORTON ANTHOLOGY OF AMERICAN LITERATURE
edited by Nina Baym et al.

THE NORTON ANTHOLOGY OF CONTEMPORARY FICTION
edited by R. V. Cassill and Joyce Carol Oates

THE NORTON ANTHOLOGY OF ENGLISH LITERATURE
edited by M. H. Abrams and Stephen Greenblatt et al.

THE NORTON ANTHOLOGY OF LITERATURE BY WOMEN
edited by Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar

THE NORTON ANTHOLOGY OF MODERN AND CONTEMPORARY POETRY
edited by Jahan Ramazani, Richard Ellmann, and Robert O'Clair

THE NORTON ANTHOLOGY OF POETRY
edited by Margaret Ferguson, Mary Jo Salter, and Jon Stallworthy

THE NORTON ANTHOLOGY OF SHORT FICTION
edited by R. V. Cassill and Richard Bausch

THE NORTON ANTHOLOGY OF THEORY AND CRITICISM
edited by Vincent B. Leitch et al.

THE NORTON ANTHOLOGY OF WORLD LITERATURE
edited by Sarah Lawall et al.

THE NORTON FACSIMILE OF THE FIRST FOLIO OF SHAKESPEARE
prepared by Charlton Hinman

THE NORTON INTRODUCTION TO LITERATURE
edited by Jerome Beaty, Alison Booth, J. Paul Hunter, and Kelly J. Mays

THE NORTON INTRODUCTION TO THE SHORT NOVEL
edited by Jerome Beaty

THE NORTON READER
edited by Linda H. Peterson, John C. Brereton, and Joan E. Hartman

THE NORTON SAMPLER
edited by Thomas Cooley

THE NORTON SHAKESPEARE, BASED ON THE OXFORD EDITION
edited by Stephen Greenblatt et al.

For a complete list of Norton Critical Editions, visit
www.wwnorton.com/college/english/nce_home.htm

A NORTON CRITICAL EDITION

BEOWULF
A VERSE TRANSLATION



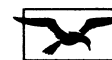
AUTHORITATIVE TEXT
CONTEXTS
CRITICISM

Translated by

SEAMUS HEANEY
HARVARD UNIVERSITY

Edited by

DANIEL DONOGHUE
HARVARD UNIVERSITY



W • W • NORTON & COMPANY • New York • London

This title is printed on permanent paper containing 30 percent post-consumer waste recycled fiber.

Copyright © 2002 by W. W. Norton & Company, Inc.

BEOWULF: *A New Verse Translation* by Seamus Heaney. Copyright © 2000 by Seamus Heaney. Reprinted with the permission of W. W. Norton & Company, Inc.

All rights reserved.

Printed in the United States of America.

First Edition.

The text of this book is composed in Fairfield Medium with the display set in Bernhard Modern.

Composition by Binghamton Valley Composition.

Manufacturing by the Maple-Vail Book Manufacturing Group.

Book design by Antonina Krass.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Beowulf—a verse translation : authoritative text, contexts, criticism / translated by Seamus Heaney ; edited by Daniel Donoghue.

p. cm.—(A Norton critical edition)

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN 0-393-97580-0 (pbk.)

1. Epic poetry, English (Old)—Modernized versions. 2. Epic poetry, English (Old)—History and criticism. 3. Epic poetry, English (Old)
4. Scandinavia—Poetry. 5. Monsters—Poetry. 6. Dragons—Poetry. 7. Heroes—Poetry. 8. Beowulf. I. Heaney, Seamus. II. Donoghue, Daniel, 1956– III. Series.
PR1583 .H43 2001
829'.3—dc21

2001042554

W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 500 Fifth Avenue, New York, N.Y. 10110
www.wwnorton.com

W. W. Norton & Company Ltd., Castle House, 75/76 Wells Street, London
W1T 3QT

4 5 6 7 8 9 0

Contents

| | |
|----------------------------------|-------|
| List of Illustrations | vii |
| Preface | ix |
| Acknowledgments | xiii |
| Old English Language and Poetics | xv |
| Translator's Introduction | xxiii |

The Text of *Beowulf* 1

Contexts 79

| | |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------|----|
| Bruce Mitchell and Fred C. Robinson • <i>The Beowulf</i> Manuscript | 81 |
| Genesis 4.1–16 Cain and Abel | 84 |
| Hall-Feasts and the Queen | 85 |
| Grettir the Strong and the Trollwoman | 86 |
| The Frisian Slaughter: Episode and Fragment | 89 |
| Alcuin • “What has Ingeld to do with Christ?” | 91 |
| Gregory of Tours • History of the Franks [Hygelac's Raid into Frisia] | 93 |
| William of Malmesbury • [Genealogy of the Royal Family of Wessex] | 93 |
| On the Wars between the Swedes and the Geats | 94 |
| Genealogies of the Royal Families in <i>Beowulf</i> | 95 |
| The Kingdoms and Tribes of <i>Beowulf</i> | 96 |
| MAP: The Scandinavian Setting of <i>Beowulf</i> | 97 |
| R. D. Fulk and Joseph Harris • <i>Beowulf's</i> Name | 98 |

Criticism 101

| | |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----|
| J. R. R. Tolkien • <i>Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics</i> | 103 |
| John Leyerle • The Interlace Structure of <i>Beowulf</i> | 130 |
| Jane Chance • The Structural Unity of <i>Beowulf: The Problem</i> of Grendel's Mother | 152 |
| Roberta Frank • The <i>Beowulf</i> Poet's Sense of History | 167 |
| Fred C. Robinson • The Tomb of <i>Beowulf</i> | 181 |