

BEOWULF AS KING IN LIGHT OF THE GNOMIC PASSAGES

There is no doubt that Beowulf was exceedingly brave. He was received by the Danes as a great warrior; he saved Hrothgar's people from shame and doom by destroying Grendel; he avenged Hrothgar's chief thane by slaying Grendel's mother; he was rewarded with the great treasure of a hero; he was later made king, and went on to fight the dragon single-handedly. However, despite his abilities, Beowulf has been criticised by many important, well-respected, modern-day scholars, especially in regard to his decision to fight the dragon. The argument is that, as king, his decision to fight the dragon alone was an unwise one with serious consequences not only for himself, but for the rest of society. W. F. Bolton, for instance, interprets Beowulf's actions as avaricious (p. 150), J. R. R. Tolkien presents him as excessively proud (p. 1), and Margaret Goldsmith, who wishes to interpret *Beowulf* as a Christian poem, sees him as unsuccessful in Christian terms (p. 98). Leyerle, at best, sees Beowulf as a victim of the "fatal contradiction at the core of [the Anglo-Saxon] society," (p. 89).

Taken from a twentieth-century point of view, these interpretations may be quite valid. However, we would all recognise that basic mores within Western civilisation have changed drastically in just this century. Is it really fair, then, to judge Beowulf, who lived in a society of warriors over a thousand years ago, by our standards? Rather than merely accepting a critic's opinion of what ought to be considered right or wrong in Anglo-Saxon society, we should look to the culture itself for a correct interpretation of what was considered appropriate or inappropriate. One way to get a better picture of the *Beowulf* author's intent is to review the gnomic passages that are scattered throughout the work. As wisdom literature, these passages should present the values of its author and his society just as the proverbs in the Old Testament of the Bible relate the Jewish values of the time or Ben Franklin's sayings reflect important values in 18th century America. In light

of the gnostic expressions of *Beowulf*; Beowulf is an ideal, both as hero and king.

It is important to understand that the Beowulf poet was a most deliberate writer. He constructed his poem carefully, both the parts and the whole, in some respects very clearly and in other ways inconspicuously. The abrupt scene changes near the beginning of the poem, which contrast the joyful hall of Heorot with the approaching Grendel; the selection of fighting scenes, each one further from the safety of society; and the subtle mention of the progressively decreasing number of Beowulf's *comitatus* (ll. 207, 1641, 2406, 3170; Howlett, p. 317) are all examples of the thematic intent of the author. According to Adrian Bonjour, even the digressions, or episodes, which have often been faulted as distracting from the story,

may be very useful and may contribute to the value of the work of art: they may add to the colouring of a poem, they may provide--just as some digressive scenes in a play--a welcome relaxation from tension; they may also serve as a foil to a given situation and, in some cases, possess a symbolic value contributing to the actual effect and understanding of the poem itself" (p. 12).

He goes on to examine the digressions in *Beowulf* and asserts that their purpose--whether they relate moments in the life of Beowulf and/or the Geatish nation, historical events not Geatish, or themes of a Biblical nature -- is to point to the more immediate situation of the main action of *Beowulf*; either directly or indirectly, and to support the structural and thematic unity of the poem.

Given the deliberate nature of *Beowulf* overall, it is logical to believe that the wisdom literature of the poem also contributes to the structural and thematic unity of the poem, and that the author was as intentional in regard to the wisdom passages as he was to any of a number of other aspects of the poem, such as have been mentioned thus far. In response to the criticism of some of the most important and highly regarded scholars in the field, I will examine Beowulf's character in light of the gnostic passages in *Beowulf* to show that, in fact, he was a good leader, acting in a way that is not only acceptable but commendable in Anglo-Saxon society.

The gnomic expressions fall under the strictest definitions of wisdom literature, whose purpose is to answer questions like, “what is the world like?” and “what is good for man?” They are characterised as pithy utterances. Technically, they differ from proverbs in that the latter are popular expressions while the former are not (Williams, p. 7). However, such a distinction is artificial; many gnomes are proverbial in nature, that is, they relate world-realities in short expressions, and through exposure and propagation may very well become proverbs. Consider, for instance, the gnome in *Beowulf* 572b-73, which we will examine more closely later:

572 Wyrð oft nereŀ
unfæµgne eorl, bonne his ellen deµah!¹

“Fate often saves an undoomed man, when his courage is good.”

This passage would be as at home in a book of proverbs, grouped with other sayings concerning fate and/or courage, as in an epic poem; it expresses a view based on experience which would readily have been assented to by most Anglo-Saxons. Since the wisdom literature of a society represents the commonly shared values of that society, it seems reasonable to judge the character of *Beowulf* in light of the gnomic expressions in *Beowulf*.

Blanche Williams finds twenty-three gnomes in *Beowulf* (p. 29); Kemp Malone counts twenty-eight, though he takes liberties in including a couple of passages in which the wisdom is obscure or implied (e.g. 1282b-84, 2272-77). In comparing the two lists, I also count twenty-eight gnomic passages, about half of which indicate proper action within society. Though some of these statements are uttered by *Beowulf* himself, most of them are related by the poet, and few of them are meant to point directly to *Beowulf* within the context of the poem. However, since the gnomes, as wisdom literature, present the ideals and outlook of the Anglo-Saxon society, they all apply to *Beowulf* indirectly (with the exception of two, which are truths about women in particular); his actions either correspond to or contradict what was considered proper within Anglo-Saxon society.

¹ All of the Anglo-Saxon citations come from Klaeber’s *Beowulf and the Fight at Finnsburg*, 3rd edition with supplement, D. C. Heath and Company (Boston), 1941.

The first gnostic portion relating proper action comes early in the poem. It is in reference to Beow, Scyld Scefing's son, and his generosity in gift-giving:

20 Swaμ sceal (geong g)uma goμde gewyrcean,
fromum feohgiftum on fæder (bea)rne,
pæt hine on ylde eft gewunigen
wilgesiμpas, ponne wig cume,
leμode gelæμsten; lofdæμdum sceal
in mæμgpa gewhære man gepeμon.

“So should a young man with free-handedness, with handsome goodly gifts in his father's lap, bring it about that afterwards, in his maturity, well-wishing retainers stand by him when war comes, tribesmen serve him. By praiseworthy deeds a man shall prosper in his country.”

We can assume that Beowulf followed the conventions of gift-giving properly, not only in his youth, but throughout his entire life. As this passage indicates, had he not been generous when he was young, he would not have had such a hearty group of “well-wishing retainers” to accompany him on his venture to fight Grendel. Also, when he returned, he handed the treasures that Hrothgar had given him over to Hygelac, to be distributed by him. We know that Beowulf was generous in his old age as well, because Wiglaf plainly says so in his complaint to his cowardly companions. In fact, therein lies the irony of the gnostic statement-- Beowulf was meeting the conditions that appropriate action required of him, yet, when he fought the dragon, his men did not stand by him.

There is a complementary gnostic passage in ll. 2764b-66, which warns against avarice and miserliness.

2764 Sine eμaíe maeg,
gold en grund(e) gumcynnes gehwone
oferhiμgian, hyμde seμ íe wylle!

“Easily may treasure, gold in the ground, overpower each of mankind, hide it who will.”

It is difficult to understand how Beowulf can be seen as avaricious. First, his generosity is clearly attested to in several places in the text. More than that,

he fought the dragon, which itself epitomised avarice. Bolton asserts that Beowulf was avaricious because he wanted to win the goldhoard: “the goldhoard is a dramatic and extreme example of all earthly riches” (p. 150). However, Beowulf did not want the treasure for himself, but for his people (ll. 2794-98); he wanted to put it back into circulation within society. The hoarding of treasure was so serious a matter because distribution of treasure was one of the main elements that kept a society functioning properly--to hoard it, as the dragon was doing, was a threat to society. Thus, Beowulf’s fight with the dragon was a fight *against* avarice, not an exhibition of it.

The next gnomic utterance is the well-known statement by the coast-guard upon his meeting Beowulf:

287 Æghwæpres sceal
scearp scyldwiga gescaþd witan,
worda ond worca, seþ pe weþl penceþ.

“The sharp-minded fighting man, he who thinks well, ought to be a good judge of each [of two things]: words and deeds.”

By this statement, the coast-guard implies that his own judgement is good, that he can see that Beowulf is a good warrior and intends no harm to the Danes. However, Beowulf himself exhibits good judgement in this passage as well. He understands that the coast-guard, with his haughty greeting, is only doing his job, and, so as not to offend, he submits to the coast-keeper’s demands. Not only is Beowulf a good judge of words, he is very skilful in speaking, as is demonstrated in his flyting with Unferth. When confronted with Unferth’s challenge, Beowulf immediately knew that Unferth was speaking foolishly, and he was easily able to justify himself to Unferth, Hrothgar, and the rest of the Danes.

Despite the scholarly criticism, Beowulf’s best judgement is seen at the end of the poem in his decision to fight the dragon alone: apparently, he was familiar enough with the character of the members of his troop to know that they were not ready for such a challenge. Wiglaf comments that Beowulf chose them for their bravery, but he had enough discernment to know that, by the time they reached the barrow, they were not up to the fight. As John D. Niles points out, the outcome might have been much worse had an entire troop of cowardly men entered the lair (p. 241). Thus, Beowulf’s decision to

fight the dragon alone--for certainly he had to be fought--was one based on his good judgement of his men.

The gnostic expression in ll. 1838b-89 is uttered by Beowulf. He says:

1838 feorcypp ƿe beƿoƿ
seƿlran gesoƿhte ƿæƿm ƿe him selfa deƿah.

“Far-off countries are better visited by he who is himself strong.”

Though he is speaking to Hrethric, encouraging him to visit the Geatish kingdom, the application to Beowulf himself is evident, and it is particularly appropriate here, as he prepares to leave the Danish kingdom. Through his strength of character, he won the confidence of king Hrothgar; through his physical strength, he killed two monsters, gained the respect of a nation which had been terrorised for twelve years, and won great treasure for his liege-lord back home.

The following two passages stress propriety in kinship relationships. Here the poet states right action in positive and negative ways, as he did in the gnomes concerning treasure, where he both emphasized the importance of generosity and warned against avarice. Thus, he writes,

2600 sibb' æƿfre ne mæg
wiht onwendan ƿæƿm ƿe weƿl penceƿ.

“Nothing can and also ever set aside kinship for him who thinks well.”

2166 Swaƿ sceal mæƿg doƿn.
nealles inwitnet oƿrum bregdon
dymum cræfte, deƿaƿ reƿn(ian)
hondgesteallan.

“So ought a kinsman do, not at all weave a net of evil for the other with hidden cunning, contrive death for his comrade.”

The poet allows us to know Beowulf in regard to both the positive and negative statements. Beowulf's attitude toward his kinsmen is seen in his service to Hygelac. Certainly, he loved him and served him because he was his lord, but that he was related to him strengthened his loyalty to him. In fact, in his

greeting to Hrothgar he introduced himself first as Hygelac’s kinsman, and second as his thane. Thus, when Hygelac, battling alongside Beowulf was slain, Beowulf returned to his homeland *earm aμnhaga* “forlorn and alone”; certainly, he felt that loss of *mæugdryhten* “kinsman lord” deeply, as was normal and appropriate according to the gnomic utterance in 3174b-77, which says,

<p>3174 pæt mon his winedryhten ferhūm freμoge, of liμchaman</p>	<p>swaμ hit gedemu(fe) bií, wordum herge, ponne heμ forí scile (læμded) weorían.</p>
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“So it is fitting that one honor his friend and lord, leve him in heart,
 when he must be led forth from the body.”

After Hygelac’s death, Beowulf was asked to rule the kingdom in place of the rightful heir, the young Heardred. However, instead of seizing the opportunity, as most would probably have done—perhaps killing Heardred in the process in order to secure his position—Beowulf opted to honour his kinsman, supporting him and advising him until he was capable enough to rule himself.

In fact, that Beowulf never “contrived death” for his kinsmen or comrades is almost unusual for someone of his position and age. Indeed, it seems not to have been an easy accomplishment. Men and women were frequently plotting against kinsmen and comrades, either for personal gain or because of conflicting obligations. For instance, despite his seemingly honourable position in Hrothgar’s service, Unferth *heμ his maμgum næμre / aμrfæst æt ecga gelaμcum* “was not honourable to his kinsmen at sword-play” (ll. 1167b-1168a); Heremod also killed his *beμodgeneμatas* “table-companions” and *eaxlegesteallan* “shoulder-comrades”; Modthryth had her suitors killed; Signy, Sigmund’s sister, plotted against her husband in order to avenge the death of her father and brother; and the list goes on.¹ Beowulf’s conduct in this regard was remarkably exemplary, so much so that he himself recognized the fact and made special reference to it while he was dying (ll. 2741-43).

¹ Phillpotts cites several examples (pp. 8-10) of people who plot against kinsman and comrade because of divided loyalties.

The next three gnostic passages are concerned with the importance of honour and glory before death. That these statements are uttered by three different speakers--Beowulf, Wiglaf, and the narrator --demonstrates the importance of this concept within the society. Again, it is important that we not view such an attitude with twentieth century eyes. Tolkien accuses Beowulf of excessive pride because of his decision to fight the dragon alone, and, certainly, one of the reasons that Beowulf fought alone may have been to achieve glory in battle (though it is doubtful that that was his only reason). Even so, to possess great confidence and desire for glory in such situations was not a negative characteristic in the mind of an Anglo-Saxon but, rather, just the opposite. Edward B. Irving notes the resemblance of Anglo-Saxon "pride" to the Greek *hybris* (p. 462), which was definitely a heroic virtue. Striving for glory was not only acceptable for a warrior within Anglo-Saxon society, but expected, as the following gnomes indicate.

The first of these is from ll. 1384b-89, and is really a three-part piece of wisdom.

1384	Seþlre biþ æmghwæm,
pætt heþ his fremond wrece,	ponne heþ fela murne.
Ure æmghwylc sceal	ende gebiþdan
worolde iifes;	wyrce seþ pe moþte
doþmes æþ deþape;	pæt biþ drihtguman
unlifgendum	æfter seþlest.

"[1] Better for everyone, that he avenge his friend than that he mourn much. [2] Each of us is destined to come to the end of worldly life; 131 he who may should acquire glory before death; that is best afterwards for a man not living."

The second part of this quotation links the other two in a very practical way. It looks back to the first part as a comfort to anyone who has lost a comrade. It presents death as a part of life, which everyone will endure, and because of this, there is no need to mourn much. (Implicit here is also an idea which is more conspicuous in *The Wanderer*, that is, that it is proper for one to bind such thoughts up in his breast-coffer and not allow them to be known in public.) It also looks forward logically and practically to the third part: since we are all destined to die, we should strive for glory here in this life, which entails

taking an active part in the important aspects of society, one of which is battle. “That is best afterwards.”

The other two gnomes which also encourage seeking glory in battle have bearing on the character of Beowulf in regard to all of the fights that he has ever undertaken, but particularly in regard to his decision to fight the dragon:

1534 Swa sceal man doƿn,
ponne heƿ æt guplfe gegapn pencef
longsumne lof; naƿ ymb his lif cearaf

“So should a man do when he thinks to win long-lasting glory in battle; he cares not for his life.”

2890 Deƿaaf biif seƿulla
eorla gehwylcum ponne edwiftlif!

“For every man of rank, death is better than a life of shame.”

Nobody would argue that Beowulf did not achieve a great glory throughout his life in the battles which he fought, including his victory over all three of the monsters in the poem. Despite this he is criticised for his decision to fight the dragon. He took similar risks as in his other fights--he could have fallen in any of them--and made similar preparations in regard to these risks, yet, ultimately, a good warrior “cares not for his life.” The poet relates this fight because it fits thematically with the other monster fights, but also because it shows that Beowulf died as honourably as he lived. He acts consistently throughout the poem, throughout his life, always aware of what was expected from a warrior and a leader, and always ready to perform those duties,

Had he not fought the dragon, what would have happened? Perhaps the dragon would have attacked again, perhaps several times, and Beowulf might have been presented with a situation not unlike Hrothgar’s. We are told that no one blamed Hrothgar for not being able to stop Grendel, that there was no shame in it, but no matter what anyone says or does not say, there must have been some amount of shame for any king who was terrorised for twelve years. The mere fact that the poet makes a point to mention it indicates his defence against the natural inclination to see Hrothgar as an inadequate king. In any case, Beowulf’s people--not to mention the audience of the poem — know him as greater than Hrothgar. They would feel great disappointment in

Beowulf had he not decided to fight the dragon, and, as the gnomes indicate, it is better for him to die winning glory than to live in shame.

The next utterance may be the most representative of all the gnomes in *Beowulf*, because it combines the two essential types of wisdom presented in the gnostic statements, wisdom relating proper action, as well as a statement concerning metaphysical reality. It says:

572 Wyrð oft nereŀ
unfæµgne eorl, þonne his ellen deµah!

“Fate often saves an doomed man, when his courage is good.”

We have already seen that a man must be courageous in order to fight well and win glory in battle, to bring honour to himself and his lord. However, the Anglo-Saxons also understood that ultimately there is a higher reality which controls the events that take place on earth.

Of the gnomes in *Beowulf* which present an Anglo-Saxon world-view, three speak of death as inescapable (ll. 1002-08; 2265-66; 2590-91), and the rest speak of fate (ll. 455b; 3062b-65), God (ll. 700b-02a; 730b-31; 1057-62; 2855-59; 3054b-57), or fate *and* God (ll. 183-88; 2291-93a). The relationship between fate *and* God in *Beowulf* is too complex to discuss here, but, as these gnomes indicate, the Anglo-Saxons at the time *Beowulf* was written were fatalistic, insofar as they believed in the sovereignty of a higher power or powers. That is not to say, though, that they were futilistic. Fate and God, at least in the mind of the *Beowulf* poet, could be influenced. For instance, the stopping of Grendel is attributed to the combined action of wise God and courageous Beowulf. Then a gnostic statement is presented:

1057 Metod eallum weµold
gumena cynnes, swaµ heµ nuµ giµt deŀ.
Forþan biŀ andgit æµghwæµr seµlest,
ferhŀes foreþanc.

“God had control of men [then] just as he does now. Therefore, discernment is best, forethought of mind.”

Hence, it is because of God's sovereignty--*Forpan*--that man is encouraged to use discernment and exercise forethought of mind.

Beowulf undertook all his ventures--no less his fight with the dragon--with the understanding that man's actions work in conjunction with fate and the will of God. There was resignation in Beowulf's attitude to the final judgement of God--to refuse to acknowledge God's judgement would be impious, as Phillpotts asserts (p. 23). However, there was not resignation in the apathetic sense in Beowulf at all, as she implies; rather, he strove with great zeal to kill the dragon even after he had been mortally wounded. Had Beowulf been resigned to fate in the sense that Phillpotts suggests, perhaps he would not have even tried to fight the dragon at all. As it stands, Beowulf, because of his courage, did venture to fight, and, though he was killed himself, he was successful in his undertaking, and *heμold on heμahgesceap* "he held to his high destiny." Any "impression of universal melancholy" (Phillpotts, p. 22) comes not from Beowulf's actions or his belief in fate and God, but from the fact that there was no one strong and courageous enough to replace him after he died.

The last gnome in reference to proper action presents somewhat of a crux in the interpretation of Beowulf's character, depending on how it is interpreted. It is a statement by Wiglaf after Beowulf's death:

3077 Oft sceall eorl monig anes willan
wræuc aμdreμogan

"Often shall many a man suffer distress anes willan."

The problem is how to interpret *anes willan*. Klaeber interprets it "for the sake of one man," which makes good sense in the context. Such a statement would simply imply that many men mourn when a comrade --especially a *winedryhten* "lord and friend" like Beowulf--dies. However, Kemp Malone provides the equally possible rendering, "on account of one man's self-will," in his survey of the gnomes, a translation with which Tolkien and Goldsmith would likely agree. If the gnome is to be translated in that way, it is a direct comment upon the character of Beowulf, who, then, may be understood as excessively proud and, thus, a poor king. In choosing which interpretation is to be accepted it only makes sense to appeal to the other gnostic passages

and the general attitude toward Beowulf throughout the entire poem. If the poet is as deliberate and consistent I have argued, it does not make sense that the presentation of Beowulf's character in light of one gnome would contradict the attitude toward him in light of all the other gnostic passages. Hence, in this case, it makes much more sense to interpret the passage in terms of Beowulf's character rather than the other way around.

To disregard the wisdom literature of Beowulf in interpreting Beowulf's actions is to disregard the world-view of the Anglo-Saxon society at the time of the Beowulf poet. Those critics who do so fail to understand the values of a different culture. They are unable to see that striving for glory in battle could be an honourable thing; that to kill a treasure-hoarder may not be an act of avarice, but preservation of one of the fundamental elements of society; that a belief in God and fate may mean an opportunity to work with them for the good of the community. Beowulf is not a twentieth-century Western work. As Niles so aptly puts it, "[Beowulf's] people ... honour him 'as is proper' for what the narrator calls his 'courageous deed' (ll. 3173-74), and there is no reason why critics should fail to do the same" (p. 240).

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