

Beowulf's Baptism

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The poem "Beowulf" was written around 800 A.D., a time of transition for England from a pagan culture into a Christian one. This change must have pervaded society, sowing strife and eventually transforming England into a Christian nation. Given Christianity's recent ascendancy, one imagines that England lacked Christian heroes, a gap that the earliest English writers were quick to fill. Thus enters Beowulf, leader of the Geats, "a daunting man, dangerous in action / and eager for it always" (629-630). Just as in traditional pagan epics, Beowulf believes in fate, yet he always maintains a certainty in God. Beowulf's triumph over evil Grendel symbolizes the recent triumph of Christianity over paganism. Despite the frequent allusions to paganism throughout the poem, the omnipresent references to God and symbolic fights illustrate the increasing Christian power and diminishing pagan influence, and make "Beowulf" a more Christian text than a pagan one.

The repeated references to fate in "Beowulf" initially indicate a pagan text. All the characters seem to accept the concept of fate. For instance, when Hrothgar, a wise king, feels forebodings of events that occur much later in the story—that Beowulf and he will never meet again—he never questions such premonitions. Later, Beowulf himself states that "[F]ate spares the man it has already marked" (573). Evidently, fate exists in "Beowulf" and controls people's lives. Nonetheless, the poem suggests that God may overturn fate. For example, God seems to control fate when "the Lord was weaving / a victory on His war-loom..." (696-697). The weaving is an obvious allusion to paganism and fate; in Roman paganism the three Fates, immortal goddesses, determined how long one would live by cutting string or yarn. In "Beowulf," however, God is more powerful than fate. The mixing of the ancient and modern religions shows that pagan symbolism has been appropriated by Christianity.

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The numerous conflicts between Beowulf and monsters also represent victories of Christianity over paganism. "Beowulf" is strewn with man-eating monsters. The sea monsters, Grendel and Grendel's mother, personify paganism but are nonetheless easily dismissible. Although these two ogres initially do as they please, God manages to overcome them by interceding on behalf of mortals. For example, when Beowulf starts to lose his fight against Grendel's mother, "holy God / decided the victory. It was easy for the Lord, / the Ruler of Heaven, to redress the balance / once Beowulf got back up on his feet" (1553-1556). Beowulf's numerous fights against monsters, like the entire poem, must be read not only as a literal clash of hands and claws, swords and vertebrae, but as a symbolic conflict between Christianity (supporting the Geats' hero) and paganism, which spawned the hideous creatures of the day. Perhaps even more obvious than the glutted and gutted monsters are direct invocations of a Christian god and the Bible. God is first revealed to the reader as early as the fourteenth line. Soon afterwards, Grendel is said to have "dwelt for a time / in misery among the banished monsters, / Cain's clan, whom the Creator had outlawed" (104-107). Later, God is described as "He who wields power / over time and tide: He is the true Lord" (1610-1611). God repeatedly triumphs over both Grendel and his mother for "as long as God disallowed it, / the fiend [Grendel] could not bear them to his shadow-bourne" (707-708). The omnipresence of God and his superiority over the monsters haunting the pages of "Beowulf" demonstrate a strong bias in the author towards Christianity.

The relationship between Christianity and paganism is further developed in the conflicts between pious Beowulf and his "God-cursed" (711) nemeses. First of all, the reason for Beowulf's triumphs is not solely his strength; it is also the will of God for Beowulf to win. While deciding the future, God chooses that "they [Beowulf's men] would crush their enemy and come through / in triumph" (699-700). After Beowulf tears off the arm of his first enemy, Grendel staggers back to the swamp until "hell claimed him there" (851). Even a pagan monster like Grendel, "the Lord's outcast," (169) is forced into a Christian mold. When Grendel's mother poses a threat to Heorot and Beowulf decides to defend the hall, Hrothgar thanks God, not fate. Later, when Beowulf is fighting Grendel's mother, he struggles until he finds a giant's sword

and, more importantly, does not win until “holy God / decided the victory.” (1553-1554). Throughout the poem the various human characters believe that God can decide what happens, especially in viscera-splattered battles.

Thus “Beowulf” illustrates the struggle between Christianity and paganism that swept northern Europe around 800 A.D., a struggle that Christianity eventually won. The poem demonstrates the triumph of Christianity by making the protagonist Beowulf a symbol for the religion itself. The great Geat overcomes pagan monsters, but always with the aid of God: He allows Beowulf to win by dictating fate. “Beowulf” should therefore be perceived as more of a Christian text than a pagan one. Perhaps unwillingly, “Beowulf” also demonstrates how some pagan beliefs eventually morphed into Christianity, as God controlled fate. Few people today realize, for instance, that candle-lighting on Christmas derives from the ancient Roman holiday Saturnalia. Only with the help of texts like “Beowulf” can one track the course of religious change over time. ●

Works Cited

Heaney, Seamus, trans. *Beowulf*. Norton, 2000.