

The Theme of Community and the Significance of Digressions in *Beowulf*

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I. Introduction

Beowulf is a poem of many unresolved questions. Some of them--for example, its date--may never be answered with satisfaction. But it is surprising to find out that even such fundamental questions as its controlling theme and structural unity are far from being resolved in the near future. Perhaps one may reluctantly accept H. L. Rogers' pessimistic view of the daunting questions:

I do not believe that *Beowulf* can be regarded as an artistic unity in the modern sense, or that the poem has a higher theme than the life and death of its hero.

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Indeed it may be doubted whether modern conceptions about artistic unity are relevant to a long Old English poem like *Beowulf*. (236)

However, it is absurd to suppose that being "long" and written in an "old" language automatically exempts a literary work from the burden of possessing artistic unity. Modern scholarship has found an extraordinarily high degree of thematic and structural unity in such an old and long--much older and longer than *Beowulf*--poem as the *Illiad*. Another hasty supposition in the quoted passage is to refuse *Beowulf* "a higher theme than the life and death of its hero." This view is bound to regard all the passages irrelevant to the theme--there are plenty of them--as digressions, making *Beowulf* a thematically hollow and structurally episodic poem.

Critical efforts to find out the controlling theme and structural unity of the poem have been chiefly directed either to the time-honored concept of heroism or to the newly found allegorical meaning of the poem. Levin L. Schücking regards the poem as a "mirror of a prince" story (36). His view is greatly elaborated by R. E. Kasse, who applies the heroic ideal of *sapientia* and *fortitudo* to defining the peculiar nature of heroism in the poem. Another trend of criticism regards the poem as a more or less Christian allegory.¹⁾ M. B. McNamee tries to prove that *Beowulf* is essentially a story of Christian salvation. Their suggestions about the controlling theme, however, fail in explaining the digressions; either their attempts to incorporate the digressive passages into their suggested themes are farfetched or the attempts leave the passages untouched altogether.

Among recent critical opinions on the problem of the controlling theme, that of John D. Niles is refreshingly provocative in that he discards obsession about the notion of heroism and turns his attention to the much neglected idea of community

1) FR. Klaeber suggests: "We might even feel inclined to recognize features of the Christian Savior in the destroyer of hellish fiends, the warrior brave and gentle, blameless in thought and deed, the king that dies for his people" (li).

as far as *Beowulf* is concerned. He insists:

Throughout *Beowulf*, interest centers not on man as solitary hero but on people and what holds them together. (233)

Though his argument has the danger of minimizing the importance of heroism, it imparts much valuable light to the nature of such digressive elements as dynastic history, tribal conflicts, and elegiac laments in the poem. This essay examines the significance of the idea of community in relation to the other suggested controlling themes, and applies the concept to the various digressive passages as well as the major events in the poem. The purpose, of course, is to ascertain whether the idea of community as the controlling theme can illuminate the seemingly loose structure of the poem.

II. The Idea of Community and *Beowulf*

It is almost a platitude to say that *Beowulf* is a poem essentially about a hero and heroism. But it is not easy to clarify in what sense *Beowulf* is a hero and the poem is about heroism. Kaske in his article applies to the major characters and nations the concepts of *sapientia* and *fortitudo*, or wisdom and fortitude, which are from pagan and medieval Christian sources. According to him, Grendel is a perversion of *fortitudo*, completely freed from the restraints of *sapientia* and directed instead by *malitia* (malice) (287). The Unferth episode, according to him, provides a hostile test of *Beowulf's sapientia* (278). The problem with his argument, however, is that it gives too much flexibility to the concepts. In a sense all human actions result from a blend of intelligence and will. It is no wonder he explains every character and event with these concepts broad enough to

catch anything. Moreover, curiously enough, he simply ignores an important question: Why are the concepts so important in relation to the ultimate end of heroism?

Though much earlier written than Kaske's, Schüking's article gives a far broader perspective to the theme of heroism. His exposition of the theme is based on the theories of early Christian and Medieval theologians--for example, St. Augustine--who defined the necessary virtues a just king (*"rex justus"*) should possess. According to Schüking, Beowulf and Hrothgar exemplify a set of personal and public virtues necessary to promote and sustain harmony (*"ordinata concordia"*) between states, within the state and within the family (39). The important point is that the German scholar puts ideal kingship in its appropriate place: ideal kingship or heroism is not an end itself but a means for the ultimate end of harmony in a human community.

Christian allegorical interpretations of *Beowulf* are a natural development from earlier heroism-oriented interpretations. Schüking merely employs some Christian concepts of ideal kingship to clarify the idea of heroism in *Beowulf*. However, Morton W. Bloomfield very cautiously suggests the possibility of regarding the poem as a Christian allegory. For instance, though he does not reduce the relation of Beowulf to Unferth to the purely allegorical level of Faith or Concord versus Discord, he insists that such concepts were in the poet's mind (162). But still he shows no ambition of explicating the whole poem as a consistent allegory.

McNamee's interpretation goes one step further than Bloomfield's, claiming that the poem is an allegory of Christian salvation. He finds out many parallels between the plot of the poem and Christ's harrowing of Hell and struggle with Satan. His main concern lies in how Beowulf's three fights can be seen as an allegory of Christian salvation. Beowulf's fight with Grendel, therefore, allegorizes the need of a Savior and His coming. His second fight allegorizes the effects of redemption in the descent into and purification of the Hell-like mere. His fight with the Dragon, finally, allegorizes the price of salvation--the very life of the

Savior himself (347). His interpretation has two weaknesses. First, *Beowulf* is so saturated with pagan mentality that a sustained Christian allegorical interpretation like his fails, for instance, in explaining why the poem begins and ends with thoroughly pagan funeral rites or why Beowulf is so concerned about earthly fame.²⁾ Second, it cannot explain the poet's sustained interest in such matters as kinship ties, loyalty, revenge, courtly behavior, and Germanic tribal history.

A solution to the difficulty of identifying the controlling theme of the poem comes from shifted emphasis on the time-honored concept of *comitatus* rather than on that of heroism. The central fact underlying *Beowulf* is the war band or the *comitatus* as the Roman historian Tacitus called it in his *Germania* (Ogilvy and Baker 96). The fame Beowulf seeks for through his heroic life is utterly meaningless if he has nothing to do with his *comitatus*; his *raison d'être* is conceivable only in his relationship with the *comitatus* to which he belongs and for which he does lead his heroic life. His loyalty to his lord, Hygelac, and his deep concern for his retainers clearly show that he is a man of deep-rooted obligations to his fellowmen. Rosemary Woolf points out:

(*Beowulf*) strikingly shows the fictional use of a *comitatus* society and the value of this function to the poem. (68)

In the Germanic warrior society the hall was the center of life; Heorot becomes the symbol of all the joys of the Danish warriors' communal life. *The Wanderer*, an Anglo-Saxon elegiac poem, amply shows that the greatest misfortune for a

2) H. Munro Chadwick interestingly suggests that the poem might have had little direct knowledge of the Christian religion, but that he might have been acquainted with some religious poems (25). Even though *Beowulf* itself does not present a story of Christian salvation, there is a possibility that the Christian editor of the poem, who interpolated some Christian notions in it, deepened a gloomy sense of futility pervading the pagan world of *Beowulf* from the Christian perspective. Fred C. Robinson points out: "Even as the great deeds of the heroic age are described, we are constantly aware that through no fault of their own these people are ignorant of the one thing needed for true hope--Christian revelation" (152).

warrior is separation from the *comitatus* he belongs to by exile or for other causes. Significantly enough, it is to protect Heorot from being ravaged by Grendel that Beowulf comes to Hrothgar.

The idea of community not only incorporates the concept of *comitatus* but complements the theme of heroism, giving it its proper position in the larger picture of Germanic warrior society. *Beowulf* is not a heroic poem in the sense that it refuses to exhibit heroic endeavor for its own sake as embodying the highest human aspirations and capabilities. Beowulf does not fight with Grendel, his mother, and the Dragon simply to display his strength and courage; he fights because they pose direct threats to the human community to which he belongs. His fights are expressions of his sense of obligation to the community. As Norma Knoll aptly suggests, *Beowulf* presents "problems inherent in a practical politics of civilization" (117). The controlling theme of *Beowulf* is community; the poem is concerned with the factors that maintain a community and its occasional collapse and disintegration.

III. The Significance of Digressions in *Beowulf*

One of the great advantages of regarding community as the central theme of the poem is that the idea of community imparts much light to the passages usually considered as digressions. The earlier discussions about other suggested controlling themes have made it clear that to consider Beowulf's heroic life—whether secularly or religiously interpreted—as the central subject tends to ignore the large amount of material that concerns other characters and events. They cannot merely be "desirable embellishments" (Ogilvy and Baker 27). John A. Nist in his valuable study on the structure of the poem insists that the *Beowulf* poet interweaves his basic themes by means of variation and the association of ideas (22).³⁾ He classifies the themes of the poem into eight

categories and shows how these basic thematic motifs repeat themselves throughout the poem.⁴⁾ But the problem with his argument is that even though he sees the poem intricately interlocked, he overlooks the fundamental unity behind the themes because the digressions of the poem are always directed to an elucidation of the social context of the main action.

It is interesting to observe how much the most obvious digressions--allusions and references to history--bear vital significance in relation to the whole scheme of the poem. First, there are references to Heremod. He is referred twice in the poem: after Beowulf's victory over Grendel and his victorious return from the mere. It is rather curious that in both cases the bard and Hrothgar begin to celebrate Beowulf's enterprises only to end up presenting pathetic images of Heremod, who dies in misery because he is cruel to his own people. The important point is the relationship between his personal vices and their social and political consequences. Before he becomes king, he is expected to end the Danish people's sorrow and ensure prosperity (911-933); but after he mounts to the throne, he becomes a life-long care--"aldorceare" (906)--to his people. As Hrothgar points out, his greatest folly is to direct hatred and cruelty to his own people, destroying the inner harmony of the nation--"ne geweox he him to willan / ac to waelfealle" (1711). He becomes a longsome public bale--"leodbealo longsum" (1722). His greatest misfortune is not so much his miserable fall and death as his alienation from his own people; nobody will avenge him. If one considers these repeated references to Heremod to be merely moral lessons to Beowulf, he misses their

3) Bernard F Huppe also gives a penetrating insight into the structure of the poem, which he insists is based on an arithmetic principle (89).

4) These eight basic thematic motifs are: 1) To recount the well-known adventures of the bear's son hero. 2) To portray the details of Beowulf's life in a pointillist manner. 3) To satisfy the antiquarian interests of the audience by acting as the mirror of society. 4) To point Christian morals to a people not far removed from pagan times and heathen customs. 5) To deliver courtesy-book examples. 6) To provide a kind of epic setting for the major plot of the poem. 7) To uphold the relationship between lord and comitatus members by showing that princeless people are defenseless. 8) To substantiate the pervadingly sombre mood of the poem (23-4).

political and social implications. They clearly remind Beowulf in his victorious moments that he is a public man whose first duty is not to violate, drawn by his unsocial impulses, the integrity of the community he belongs to.

The great difficulty to maintain or restore peaceful coexistence between tribes is no more vividly demonstrated than in Hildeburh's and Freawaru's royal marriages. It is important to notice that the Finnsburh episode is narrated by the bard just after the Geats are given gifts by Hrothgar as a token of intertribal cooperation and solidarity. The story goes: the Danish king Hnaef's friendly visit to his sister Hildeburh married to Finn the Frisian king turns out to be a source of deadly conflict between the Danes and the Frisians. The irony is that even though Hildeburh is given to Finn as a matter of politics to bring peace between the two countries, she is utterly helpless before her brother's and son's deaths. That's exactly what Beowulf predicts of Freawaru's tragic destiny. The reference to Freawaru, another peace-weaver--"frithusibb" (2017)--comes even before Beowulf seriously narrates his adventures to Hygelac, which reveals that Beowulf's mind is as much preoccupied with intertribal relationships as with his honor. Hrothgar thinks it politically wise to try through his daughter to settle the bloody feud with the Heathobards (2028-9). Beowulf has much doubt on the alliance and friendship between Heathobards and Danes. Beowulf's concern is not an interested bystander's; his lord Hygelac will be killed in the war with the Franks, and he himself will be caught up in an endless feud with the Swedes. *Beowulf* is deeply concerned with the problems inherent in the complex relationship between tribes.

Before fighting with the Dragon, Beowulf broods over his past. Except for King Herethel's death his reminiscences are chiefly concerned with his involvement in the feuds between his country and the Franks on the one hand and the Swedes on the other. Beowulf's reminiscences of these deadly feuds are obviously digressions but they are far from being irrelevant in thematic significance. While Beowulf is at the Danish court, historical references are mainly directed to the feuds in which the Danes are caught; but after Beowulf comes back home, this

unpleasant subject no longer exclusively belongs to the Danes. The Geats also have to face this problem. Beowulf well knows that if he dies in the fight with the Dragon, his nation has to face the hostility of its two neighboring tribes that might radically threaten the security of his nation. Earlier, the feuds in which he was caught resulted in the deaths of whole generations of both Geatish and Swedish nobles, breeding intense enmity between the nations. Therefore, his digressive reminiscences of the feuds form an ominous background to the destiny of the Geats.

Moreover, Beowulf's reminiscences are directly related to the Messenger's grim prophecy on the Geats after his death. The poem views the death of Beowulf not primarily as a personal matter but as a political one. The Messenger's grief comes not only from his sense of loss but from the helplessness of his nation being cut from a powerful support. It is significant that he reviews the causes and results of the feuds and ends his message with a grim vision of the Geats destroyed and dispersed by their rival nations ⁵⁾: "No sound of harp shall raise the warrior"--"nalles hearpan sweg / wigend weccan" (3023b-3024a). Only the raven and wolf will hover around the ruined hall (3024b-3027). The hero's death is seen as the beginning of the catastrophe of a nation.

A sense of the rise and fall, integration and dissolution of the human community pervades *Beowulf*. Having this thematic concern fully in mind, the *Beowulf* poet presents two powerful images testifying to this solemn idea at the beginning and the end of the poem. After his ascendancy to the Danish throne Hrothgar makes up his mind to build a great hall which will be the center of the Danish community, and summons many nations to adorn the hall. Thus, the hall Heorot becomes not simply a public monument for the Danes but a magnificent symbol of mutual cooperation among tribes whose efforts are directed to constructive ends. Hrothgar is great not because he is a great warrior but because

5) Linda Georgianna insists that in the second half of the poem the forward movement of story is sometimes halted by the poet to suggest the limits of heroic action (830).

he is able to direct peoples' energies to consolidating peace and prosperity among them. This image of a harmonious community is painfully contrasted to the terribly desolate image that the last survivor of a race presents (2231-70). He has lost all his kinsmen and fellow warriors at war. His tribe is wholly wiped out from the earth except him. Even though he is left with a great amount of treasure, he feels no comfort from the fact. His anguish and grief come from his loss of all the communal life that gave meaning to his own. The image of an empty and desolate hall will be repeated later in the Messenger's grim vision, which gains more poignancy as it is the culmination of all the dismal images of disintegrated human communities in the poem. The idea of community is vitally important in understanding the significance of the digressions in the poem.

IV. Conclusion: Beowulf' Heroism Redefined

The idea of community gives new light to the major characters and events of the poem as well as to the digressive passages. The character of Grendel is best defined by his intense hatred against the human community. What he wants to destroy is not so much human beings in general as their joyful communal life which is marked by loud merriment in the hall and sound of the harp (88-9). Sharply contrasted to this bright life, his life is shrouded in darkness (87); he is a deeply alienated being. His alienation from mankind is explained by his being a descendant from Cain, who was also alienated from mankind for killing his own brother. The denial of the bonds that hold a community together characterizes both Cain and Grendel.

In contrast, Beowulf tries to restore the possibility of order to a community broken apart. As Niles points out, the hero's actions follow "a network of reciprocal social obligations" (229). The reason Beowulf departs for Denmark is not to show his strength and courage but to be responsive to the call of Hrothgar who was in need of men--"tha him waes manna thearf" (201). Not only the best

men and the most wise of the Geats persuade him to go to Demark (415-18) but he is in debt to Hrothgar, who gave refuge to his father and settled the feud between his father and the Wilfings (459-72). He has many reasons to come to Hrothgar other than his desire for personal fame.

The Grendel mere and Beowulf's fight with Grendel's mother further deepen the meaning of communal life and emphasize the importance of heroism in relation to its proper end. The poet describes the mere as a place completely alienated from and hostile to the human community. The mere is exactly the opposite picture of Heorot, where the joyful communal life of the Danes flourishes. These are the two powerful contrasting images that remain in the reader's mind after he reads the descriptions of the mere. The fact that Beowulf overcomes his enemy not by his own strength but by the supernatural aid of the magic sword (1557-69) suggests that what is important may be not so much Beowulf's actual proof of his heroism as his determination to pursue his duty as a member of the human community he belongs to.

The Dragon represents a far greater threat to a peaceful human community than Grendel and his mother. He burns up both Beowulf's hall and the people's houses (2313-26). His hatred is so intense that he wants to leave no one alive (2315). It is against this menacing threat to the human community that Beowulf with the help of loyal Wiglaf fights heroically. Beowulf's heroism should be redefined in the light of the idea of community.

The main purpose of this essay has been to ascertain whether the controlling theme of community can contribute to clarifying the seemingly loose and episodic structure of the poem as well as the significance of the major characters and events of the poem. One of the chief reasons the idea of community is better suited for the controlling theme of the poem than other suggested themes is simply that the idea better explains the seemingly digressive passages; they do not exist independently of the main events but are closely related with them both thematically and structurally. The analysis of these digressive passages as well as

the major events of the poem clearly shows that *Beowulf* is a poem whose ultimate concern is not a hero's destiny but a nation's. Beowulf's heroic life is meaningful only in relation to its contribution to the community he belongs to. It is a significant fact that *Beowulf* both begins and ends with funeral rites, which are highly communal in nature. If the reader turns his eyes from the dead king and looks around, he will find the king's sorrowful retainers and subjects, whose lives must continue in spite of their terrible loss.

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Abstract

The Theme of Community and the Significance of Digressions in *Beowulf*

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Critical efforts to find out the controlling theme and structural unity of the poem have been chiefly directed either to the time-honored concept of heroism or to the newly found allegorical meaning of the poem. This essay examines the significance of the idea of community in relation to the other suggested controlling themes, and applies the concept to the various digressive passages as well as the major events in the poem. The idea of community not only incorporates the concept of *comitatus* but complements the theme of heroism, giving it its proper position in the larger picture of Germanic warrior society. The poem is deeply concerned with the factors that maintain a community and its occasional collapse and disintegration. When applied to the most obvious digressions--references to Heremod, the Finnsburh episode, and Beowulf's reminiscences of the feuds with the Franks and the Swedes--, the idea of community reveals how vitally they bear significance in the whole scheme of the poem. The theme of community also imparts new light to such major events as Beowulf's fights with Grendel, his mother, and the Dragon. An analysis of these digressive passages as well as the major events of the poem clearly shows that *Beowulf* is a poem whose ultimate concern is not a hero's destiny but a nation's. Beowulf's heroic life is meaningful only in relation to its contribution to the community he belongs to.