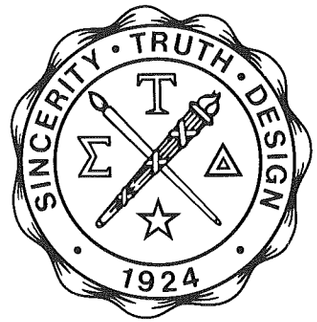
THE RECTANGLE

VOLUME 63
NUMBER 2
FALL 1988



JOURNAL OF SIGMA TAU DELTA
THE INTERNATIONAL ENGLISH HONOR SOCIETY

ROBIN STRATTON

College of Notre Dame of Maryland

The Eternal Struggle Between Light and Darkness: The Transformation of Mythic Themes in a Christian Context in Beowulf

If one wishes to gain a fuller appreciation of the epic poem *Beowulf*, it is necessary to understand something about myth. In his, "*Beowulf* in the Context of Myth," Michael N. Nagler quotes Salustius' definition of myth: "something that never took place, but which is always true" (155). Myths situate us outside time and enable us to understand what happens in time. In other words, the mythical world is the world of "once upon a time"—not a make-believe world, but a world we enter through stories that seek to explain the meaning of life and human history. James W. Earl states that "the mythical world is not the physical world and mythical history is not human history" (365). Rather, mythical history is that level of reality which underlies human history.

Myths, according to Earl, are "statements about human experience and values, about human existence and its meanings" told "in a language of imagination" (363). He contends that myths are created when we make stories about our symbols (363). The mythic world concerns itself with universal "themes and symbols" (Nagler 143) which point beyond themselves to truths greater than we can express in ordinary language (Earl 363). Women have, through the ages, taken symbols such as light and darkness, order and chaos, creation and destruction, and have woven stories around them to explain how the world came to be, and why the world is the way it is. The fact that these stories are re-worked in every age and among all peoples indicates that they are too all-embracing to be contained in any one story (Nagler 144). For example, if we examine the Creation Story in the Hebrew Scripture and compare it with the Indo-European creation myth, we realize that the latter is transformed in the former (Nagler 147). In *Beowulf*, further transformation occurs. Both the mythic struggle between light and

darkness and the Christian struggle between God and Satan are reworked by the poet. The manner in which he narrates the conflict between Grendel and the joyous people gathered in Heorot to listen to the Creation Story, and the struggle between the good, heroic Beowulf and the evil Grendel makes this apparent.

Literature enfleshes myth (Nagler 143) but never exhausts it. Myth is not abandoned in the enfleshing process. In the poem *Beowulf* the Creation Story and the character Grendel are two examples of the manner in which a myth was transformed and incorporated into literature for a Christian audience during a period after the Anglo-Saxon's conversion to Christianity. The theme of "the eternal struggle between order and chaos" in *Beowulf* indicates that "the move from myth to heroic legend did not leave myth behind" (Nagler 150). Howell D. Chickering, Jr. claims that there is an overlapping and intertwining of pagan and Christian mythic traditions in *Beowulf*. He states: " . . . for the themes of creation and destruction, the *Beowulf* poet would have found a basic story structure in both pagan and Christian myth" (283). According to Margaret E. Goldsmith, the poem brings together in a unified way allusions to the Old and New Testament, the Church Fathers, and "proverbial phrases about 'wyrd' which men would recognize as belonging to their ancestors" (383).

Chickering maintains that it is not difficult to understand why the Anglo-Saxons were so ready to accept a religion that gave purpose to their lives if we examine the beliefs to which they subscribed before the Christian missionaries arrived (270). This people "believed that life was a struggle against insuperable odds," and that there was no way to achieve victory (Chickering 269). Although there was no "active malevolent force," the concept of "wyrd," or fate, made life a transitory and pointless experience (Chickering 269). "The hopeless eschatology of the primitive Anglo-Saxons," writes James Earl, "helped them accept the Church with minimal resistance and maximal results" (36). Christianity provided the Anglo-Saxon people with a God who gave "stability and order to the world," and a Devil who was the personification of evil, but who was always subject to

the power of God. Chickering contends that, because of this shift, the Anglo-Saxon belief that good and evil, order and chaos, light and darkness are locked in an eternal struggle, emerged as an important concept (271).[1] An assurance that God would ultimately triumph, even if the victory was experienced only in heaven, was coupled with the motif of struggle. These themes in the poem cannot, Goldsmith believes, be separated from Christian faith and hope (380).[2]

We now turn to a brief discussion of the catechesis of the early Anglo-Saxon Christians. Dorothy Whitelock, in her book *The Audience of Beowulf*, insists that the people were first taught the major doctrine of Christianity—that salvation came through Jesus Christ. Only later would they have learned, through examples in the teachings of the Fathers of the Church and of Bede, how the Old Testament foreshadowed the New Testament (6-7). However, Margaret Goldsmith disagrees with Whitelock in this regard. She claims that there was never a time in the evangelization of the Anglo-Saxons when the new Christians would have known the Gospels and not have known the "symbolic commentaries of the Fathers." According to her, both would have been learned together. The Gospels would have been taught by using examples from the Fathers of the Church (381)[3]. Although the works of Augustine of Hippo and Gregory the Great were taught in the monastic schools, only the priests were educated. It is probable that these men passed on what they had learned, through the homilies they preached (Goldsmith 382).

Whitelock supports a date for the composition of *Beowulf* that would fall about a hundred years after the conversion of the Anglo-Saxons. She believes that it would have taken this length of time for the people to have become so accustomed to Christian terminology and thought that the references in the poem, though quite subtle, would have been immediately understood by them in a Christian context (100)[4]. The matter of dating is important. Although the evidence seems to support the theory that the *Beowulf* poet was making use of a known heroic tradition, Goldsmith contends that internal evidence supports her thesis that the poem was written by a Christian and for a Chris-

tian audience. She deplores the fact that, while scholars have generally been attentive to the "allusions, reminders, and suggestions" found in *Beowulf* concerning traditional heroic stories, they have been less so with regard to the Christian tradition (380). Whitelock states categorically that the audience who heard *Beowulf* was rooted in Christianity and familar with the Christian allusions in the poem. She believes that the poet takes the audience's ability to understand his subtle references to Christian teaching for granted (8).

We have seen how the mythic theme of light and darkness was transformed into a Christian motif about God and Satan. Now we are in a position to examine how this motif was changed by the scop who composed *Beowulf*. To do this, we will briefly explore the Creation Story in its relationship to Grendel. In line 86 the poet speaks of "the great monster in the outer darkness," who "heard happy laughter loud in the hall..." (Chickering 53). Immediately after the telling of the beautiful and lyrical Creation Story, the scop informs us that

> the brave warriors lived in hall joys,
> blissfully prospering, until a certain one
> began to do evil, an enemy from Hell.
> That murderous spirit was named Grendel (55).

The author has set the Creation Story between two mentions of Grendel. The "clash between death, cold, and darkness" and "life and light" is obvious (Nagler 143).

The Great Hall of Heorot is "transformed into creation itself, the goodness of which is metaphysically obnoxious to the demonic Grendel" (Chickering 283). God's power is depicted in images of light and warmth, while the power of sin and evil is portrayed in those of darkness, cold, and chaos (Nagler 151). Good and Evil are locked in eternal conflict. An island of light is surrounded by a sea of darkness—a darkness that always threatens to engulf it. For the *Beowulf* poet, this is the human story. Chaos is but held at bay. We live in a time of struggle, yet we are not without hope. For a thousand years, the scop has sung his song across the centuries, inviting us to believe that it is ultimately the Christian God, a God who still wears traces of the Germanic myths, who is lord of the darkness and source of the light.

End Notes

1. The Germanic myth of "wyrd" was recast as "dark Christian realism" (Earl 367). Germanic and Christian ideas melded in a "dark Christian vision" (Earl 366). This "dark vision" theme creates a paradox. One is caught between "seeing" (vision) and "not seeing" (dark). These paradoxes occur repeatedly in *Beowulf.* It would be fascinating to pursue this theme at greater length.

2. The three theological virtues, so called because God is their object, are faith, hope, and charity. Their importance lies in the fact that the Judeo-Christian tradition is rooted in them. "They crown the whole moral life of the justified person and direct it toward eternal life as its goal" (Karl Rahner).

3. The Christian images of the Church Fathers are at times quite similar to those found in *Beowulf.* For instance, a favorite image of Gregory the Great is that of "the soldier keeping vigil against the onslaught of the Enemy," which we find reflected in Hrothgar's "Sermon" (Goldsmith 383).

4. Perhaps a good contemporary example of the same phenomenon would be to compare the understanding of Christianity possessed by an older "cradle Catholic" with that of a recent convert.

Works Cited

Chickering, Howell D., Jr., trans. *Beowulf.* Garden City: Doubleday, 1977.

Earl, James W. *"Apocalypticism and Mourning in Beowulf."* *Thought* 57 (1882): 362-370.

Goldsmith, Margaret E. *"The Christian Perspective in Beowulf."* *Comparative Literature* 14 (Winter 1962), 71-80. Rpt. in *An Anthology of Beowulf Criticism.* Ed. Lewis E. Nicholson. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1976. 373-386.

Nagler, Michael N. *"Beowulf in the Context of Myth."* *Old English Literature in Context.* Ed. John D. Niles. Totowa, N.J.: Rowman and Littlefield, 1980. 143-156.

Whitelock, Dorothy. *The Audience of Beowulf.* London: Oxford University Press, 1951.