BEOWULF AND THE MARGINS OF LITERACY

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As a historian I take up the theme of Beowulf and its world with hesitation. The study of the poem must lie mainly with the literary scholars, because they alone have the time and expertise to master the complex problems it raises and the vast international literature devoted to it. It is noticeable, however, that in spite of generations of energy and ingenuity in pursuit of the real Beowulf, he and it are not in sight: not, that is, the subject of a scholarly consensus. There is no agreement as to the date of the poem; there is even less agreement as to its author's intentions, let alone his identity or the places in which he might be found. In the last few years two scholars have written two different books on Beowulf, each of obvious distinction: Dr. Sisam and Dr. Goldsmith. So different, so absolutely contradictory, are their conclusions, it is difficult to believe they are writing about the same poem. Something must be seriously amiss when generations of scholarship can give us no basic facts that are undisputed outside the particular tradition or connection which discovered, I had almost said invented, them.

It seems to me that historians are after all the one relevant group of scholars who have had little to say about Beowulf. Of all the Beowulf scholars only one of the great names was equally famous as historian, Hector Munro Chadwick. A good many of his points seem to me not to have been taken by his fellow-students of literature simply because they were not altogether understood. Chadwick wrote out of a very informed and

1 I have taken some passages from another article "Beowulf and the Limits of Literature", which appeared in New Blackfriars, lii (1971), by kind permission of the editor. Earlier versions of the paper were read to the Sixth Conference of Medieval Studies at the University of Western Michigan and the Medieval Seminar at Columbia University. I am particularly indebted to Professor Hanning and his pupils for a stimulating discussion that greatly improved the paper.

refined sense of the social context of Anglo-Saxon literature. He knew, I think, that some things that seem plausible if the text is studied in isolation must nonetheless be rejected because there was no place for them in that world.¹ Now the study of Chadwick has, I believe, revived somewhat amongst historians in recent years, to their considerable profit. Anglo-Saxon historians have at last learnt from him that they must not ignore the literature, even the imaginative literature, if they would understand the world. The trouble has been that the world of Beowulf was a single world: but its art is studied by the men of manuscripts if it is two-dimensional, by archaeologists if it is three; its literature is the province of philology, its laws, government, and institutions, of history. But whatever the date of Beowulf, its audience knew the fyrd, the here, the sceattas, the wergelds, the bots, the wites, as part of the stuff of everyday experience. The result has been that what must be taken as a whole in order to be intelligible is cut into lumps which are minutely investigated in isolation. What is needed is some recognition that we must move out of the traditional centres of our disciplines to what seem to be the margins: if we do this we shall find, as I think Chadwick found before us, that these margins overlap, and that together we shall be much better placed to distinguish sense from nonsense than we have so far been able to do separately.

Let us begin with the date of the poem. By and large Anglo-American scholarship has come to an agreement that it is not earlier than about 700 and not much later than about 800. The agreement is impressive though it conceals two differing schools who would chose, the one Bede's Northumbria, and the other Offa's Mercia. The choice of names for the epochs is not without significance. But on what is it based? Not, so far as I can see, on hard philological facts, since the manuscript tradition belongs to the tenth century and a different cultural milieu.² In fact, when literary scholars discuss these matters

¹ H. M. Chadwick, The Heroic Age (Cambridge, 1912). The Origin of the English Nation (Cambridge, 1907) is also relevant and deserves to be read more often than it is.
² Cf. the Introduction to Fr. Klaeber, Beowulf (New York, 1922).
they appeal very largely to social and historical criteria and these do not seem to bear quite all the weight sometimes assumed. Recently the late Professor Robert Reynolds has revived in the English-speaking world the hypothesis, never abandoned in the German-speaking world, that *Beowulf* is post-Viking. He has drawn attention to a charter of Æthelstan (CS 677)\(^1\) which has often been noted as containing a reference to a place-name *Grendelmsere*. Professor Reynolds had pointed out that there are a number of other echoes of the poem in the charter. In particular, the ambience of the prologue is much in tune with the proem to the charter. He concluded that the proem might have been a recent one, dating from the time of Æthelstan himself and perhaps made at his court, which it is known was the resort of recently pagan-Danish ealdormen as well as traditionally Christian ones. Its propaganda value is obvious. Since we have Æthelstan's grandfather's testimony as to the state into which religion, especially literary religion, had fallen during the wars, and very little to disprove him, the usual arguments about the relative degrees of pagan and Christian influences in *Beowulf* do not exclude Professor Reynolds's suggested dating.

It is worth citing here Professor Wren's point\(^2\) about linguistic features which suggest that a text of *Beowulf* "was revised in the time of King ÆElfred who did so much to preserve the older poetry". It would obviously not be easy to separate with any certainty revisions made in ÆElfred's reign from those made in the reign of his grandson. The poet's interest in matters of lineage, so obvious from the opening of the poem, is relevant too. Dr. Sisam has shown us that written genealogies are not primitive or Germanic but seem to belong to the time of the Mercian hegemony and to be the product of its propaganda or its vanity. Interest was beginning in the time of Bede who knew, apparently, only the East Anglian lineage which he quotes. It is difficult to believe he would not have quoted the Northumbrian if he had known it, and it is difficult to believe he would not have known it if it had then existed. The Northumbrian genealogy, like the

\(^1\) *Medium Aevum*, xxiv (1955), pp. 101 ff.
West Saxon one, is a palpable forgery and there is obvious common matter to both. Dr. Sisam argued that the West-Saxon list was modelled on the Northumbrian: as, on his showing, the Northumbrian had even more mythical names in it than the West-Saxon, would it not be more plausible to think that the more florid Northumbrian version is an inflated version of its southern counterpart? We cannot deny that Anglo-Saxon genealogies were extant in the age of Bede but the West-Saxon genealogy was hardly one of them. But there are some interesting names in the West-Saxon Pedigree. Geat, the eponymous ancestor of Beowulf’s folc, is there: there is a Scyld and a Heremod, as well as a number of names beginning with H, as is customary amongst Beowulf’s royals, but not amongst real English royals for the most part. It is possible that Professor Whitelock is right, that the characters and incidents from the poem were common knowledge, but I doubt it. It is odd that the fabricator of a genealogy should include Heremod, even on the brief reference to him in Beowulf, and fantastic if fuller and even more villainous tales were also circulating. I cannot help but feel that Professor Reynolds is right and something important was happening to the poem in the early tenth century, but, with hesitation, I cannot agree that it was written then.

The preamble to the charter in question (CS 677) has so much in common with Aldhelm’s latinity that his editor included a closely related text in his edition of the collected works. I take it that this charter lies behind Dr. Whitelock’s hint; it is no more than that, that Aldhelm was a possible Beowulf poet. Professor Ware has, however, cast some doubt on the identification of the latinity of CS 677 with Aldhelm’s hysperical (or would “hysperical” be more appropriate?) style. He has pointed out that it contains indubitably later features. I do not think it quite so obvious as he that the style is the product of Æthelstan’s day. But it is unquestionable—and Dr. Ware does not question
it—that the latinity of the charter and that of Aldhelm have much in common. This “new” latinity was a revived latinity; could not a renewed interest in Beowulf be the product of the same revival? The interest of CS 677 lies in its Beowulf names, personal and place-names. But is it likely that if the poem were new at that time, grown-men or ancient stretches of water would have been named from it? The archaeological evidence certainly suggests a much earlier date, nearer the traditional one.1 Professor Girvan’s well-known study Beowulf and the Seventh Century still seems to me to make a powerful case for an early provenance, though it cannot be a conclusive one. The relationship between authority, birth and property implied in Beowulf is also worth considering. In Ælfric’s day to judge by “his” comments on St. Augustine’s Soliloquies,2 bookland, a perpetual inheritance, was the normal goal, and a goal generally achieved, of the ordinary warrior: this is not true of Beowulf’s world. Of the highest birth and close to the royal office itself, he only obtains his inheritance after proving himself on some scale. There are a number of other references, which will be discussed below, which point to a very different relationship between the rank of companion and the right to heritable property. It seems to me that the type of landholding described in Beowulf is much nearer to that occasionally called folcland.3 This was certainly in decay by the time of Offa. On the other hand, there is much to relate Beowulf to the time of what German scholars have called the Heerkönigtum.4 Likewise, there is some resemblance between Beowulf’s career and his values and those of the unconverted Guthlac.5 I do not think the English Scyld Scefings or even Guthlac’s survived very long into the Mercian hegemony, and I should place their decline on the Continent in much the same period, except of course in the peripheral areas of Carolingian power. It seems to me, therefore, that Professor

1 Rosemary Cramp, Medieval Archaeology, i (1957), 57 ff.
2 H. L. Hargrove, Yale Studies in English, xiii (1902).
3 E. John, Orbis Brittaniae (Leicester, 1966), pp. 64 ff.
4 W. Schlesinger, “Das Heerkönigtum”, Vorträge und Forschungen, iii (Institut für geschichtliche Landesforschung des Bodenseegebietes, Constance), (1954), 105-42.
5 E. John, Land Tenure, p. 53.
Reynolds is wrong in reviving the Schüting hypothesis as to the post-Viking date and provenance of the poem, but very likely right in suggesting that it had a conscious value as propaganda for the conversion of recent Vikings into new Englishmen. I should suppose a revival of interest in the early tenth century, to which it is even possible we owe the survival of the poem.

I have laboured the point because the date of the poem is crucial to identifying the social context to which it belongs. Only those, and they still exist, who see the Anglo-Saxon period as a static, comfortable world of sturdy freemen from the invasions to the Conquest will fail to take the importance of this question. Central to this, and to every other point in Beowulf exegesis, is the question of the nature of the poet’s relationship to the Christian religion. I have so far avoided using any arguments from the nature of the poem’s religious values, and yet these have been the principal arguments for most scholars who have tackled the problems of Beowulf’s date and provenance. This is because this question is the most fundamental of all and because it is also one peculiarly difficult to get right. It is nearly half a century since Klaeber in his great edition put into currency the notion that Beowulf was a type of Christ, and a generation since Professor Tolkien’s famous lecture gave licence to an unbridled speculation unusual in medieval studies. Plainly in some sense Beowulf is a Christian poem, but the problem is in what sense?

Chadwick pointed out: “In Beowulf... there are about seventy... passages [of a religious (Christian) character] of which the significance is not open to question, and seven or eight others which may belong to the same category. Out of the total number thirty-three are limited to single verses or half-verses, while another sixteen affect not more than two verses in each case. The longest passage of all contains at least thirty-seven verses, the next longest fourteen. The rest vary from three to nine verses”. Too many, in other words, to be dismissed as merely superficial colouring, but only two extended

passages nonetheless. He goes on: “The theology which appears in these passages is of a singularly vague type. There are four distinct references to incidents in the early part of Genesis, viz. one to the Creation, two to the story of Cain and Abel and one to the Flood. Apart from these there appears to be no reference to any passage in the New Testament except perhaps in v. 1745 ff., which are thought by some to be based on Ephesians vi. 16, and in v. 3069, which contains the phrase “day of judgement”. We find also few references to rewards and punishments in a future life. The word god is of very frequent occurrence and always used in a Christian sense. On the other hand there is no example of the word gast in a religious sense (Holy Ghost), nor of the name Crist, nor of any epithet denoting “Saviour”. Hardly less curious is the total absence of the word engel, for expressions such as “lord of angels” (engla dryhten) are amongst the more frequent epithets of the Deity in Anglo-Saxon religious poems. Lastly, there are no references to the saints, the cross or to the Church, nor to any Christian rites and ceremonies. It appears then that the religious utterances of the poem are of a singularly one-sided character. Indeed, it has been observed that, with the exception perhaps of verses 977-9, “their theology is covered by the OT. and a pious Jew would have no difficulty in assenting to them all. Certainly the facts are such as to call for some explanation, especially since the religious poems are pervaded by a wholly different tone”.

In recent years, dating from Professor Tolkien’s influential lecture Beowulf; the Monsters and the Critics, a variety of answers has been proposed to the puzzles so succinctly set out by Chadwick, ranging from the pioneer essay of Professor Marie Hamilton, The Religious Principle in Beowulf, published in 1946, to Mrs. Goldsmith’s Beowulf its Mode and Meaning, published in 1970. There are many versions of this new learning and much is to be said in its favour. The centrality of the monsters to the discussion of Beowulf is not likely to be challenged again, for instance, but to the sceptical student what these versions have in common is more important than what divides them. The key assumption is made in the opening passage of Professor Hamilton’s essay. “Reflective Englishmen of the seventh and
eighth centuries, living under the transforming influence of classical and Christian ideas, must have satisfied a special need by revaluating their Germanic patrimony in terms of the new culture”.1 “Must have” seems unfortunate here; the question is “did they”, and it will not do to beg it so early in the day. We may note in passing Professor Hamilton’s wholly anachronistic use of the term Englishman for her period. I have elsewhere sought to show the confusions that flow from an over-hasty attribution of Englishry to the seventh and eighth centuries.2

The argument continues. Beowulf is a pretended pagan poem, using pagan themes and a pagan genre with a single reference to Christ overtly, but full of covert Christian analogies drawn mainly from the fathers. The poem, read in this way, requires a very sophisticated technique of allegorizing and it demands a highly learned and specialized response in its audience. Most recently, Dr. Goldsmith has made what seems to me one of the best and most ingenious defences of this point of view. Writing after the devastating criticism of Dr. Sisam,3 she shows great learning in marshalling a set of patristic allusions to authors who were certainly or probably known to Bede. Like most writers of this school, she assumes that eighth-century England was full of men as learned as Bede.4 She does not ask why the pagan colouring should be, not of interest but even tolerable, to this kind of audience. To most of them the rituals described in Beowulf would be “devils’ rites”. It seems to me important to prove that some men, preferably quite a lot of men, could combine a sympathetic interest in pagan customs and feelings

3 Structure.
4 The comparative bulk of Bede’s output; the great difference in learning and latinity between Bede and any of his contemporaries, including Aldhelm; the very small number of men who can be shown to have written anything; the very small number of genuinely “academic” schools that are known to have existed, all warn us against taking Bede as typical. It has recently been pointed out how limited were the intellectual resources of even so famous a monastery as Whitby (B. Colgrave on the first Life of Gregory in N. K. Chadwick, Celt and Saxon (Cambridge, 1963), p. 130).
with a literary culture that was intended to inculcate exactly the opposite response. If on the other hand we want to argue, as some do, that the pagan atmosphere was a piece of clever missionary strategy designed to lead the newly converted from pagan to Christian things, how could we possibly impute so profound a knowledge of the Fathers to this audience that they could catch such indirect allusions at a hearing? Alcuin's famous attack on the story of Ingeld is often quoted by Beowulf scholars, who then proceed to ignore its implications. Alcuin would certainly not have accepted Beowulf as a Christian poem. What establishment theologian of the period would?

Appeal is made to Gregory the Great. It is true that Gregory makes heavy and sustained use of allegory in his spiritual writings. They do not read to me much like Beowulf and they are unmistakably Biblical and patristic in source and, one would have thought, obviously allegorical and analogical in development. Dr. Sisam has pointed out: "the text [of Beowulf] supplies no references or citations" that could show the author was widely read in patristic writings; no one could make the same claim about Gregory. There is also the problem of the audience. The audience of Gregory, which no one will dispute was wider and longer lasting than that of Beowulf, was offered allegories so obvious that one would have said they could not be missed. But they were missed by the most learned men of the age and Gregory remarkably misunderstood.

A few years ago Dom Henry Wansborough, in a paper that deserves more attention than it has so far received, 2 dealt with the passages in Gregory's Dialogues that treat of the life of St. Benedict. He pointed out what has remained hidden for nearly fifteen hundred years, that the "biography" is not and was never intended to be taken literally, but is a highly allegorized picture of the life of the ideal monk, based loosely on a real monk and real vocation. Most of the characters are not given real names but are virtues and vices like the characters in Pilgrim's Progress. Scholastica, for instance, is a type of contemplation. If the most évolué audience of the seventh and eighth centuries misunderstood Gregory so completely, where is

1 The Structure of Beowulf, p. 27. 2 Revue Bénédictine, lxxv (1965), 145 ff.
the audience that could unravel *Beowulf* if the poem really is a sophisticated and extended allegory?

If the poem were such an allegory, it must surely have a Christ figure, and that figure could only be Beowulf himself. A number of scholars from Klaeber onwards have made this identification. It does not seem to me that this can be done without, in effect, rewriting the poem. Professor Leyerle¹ has argued, to my mind convincingly, that the poem means us to suppose that Beowulf's conduct in fighting the dragon was little short of hubris. But even if this be not accepted what are we to make of Beowulf's last speeches? There is no reference to fear of Hell or hope of Heaven. I suppose it might be argued that a Christ figure would have no need of any, but what does he suppose his death has done for others? He wishes to gaze on the treasure he has won “so that by reason of the wealth of treasure I may leave life more calmly and the people I have ruled so long”. If it is sought to evade the inadequacy of this by some theological interpretation of the treasure, then how to explain Wiglaf's conduct and his very different interpretation of the fate of Beowulf's people? The hero gives us a catalogue of his achievements. No other king made him afraid: he did not pick treacherous quarrels: he swore no unjust oaths: he never murdered his kinsfolk. His dying prayer is one of thanks for being able to win the treasure for his people before the day of his death. It seems to me we are rather a long way from “My God why hast thou forsaken me?”. It is noticeable that Dr. Goldsmith has seen the force of this and very rightly does not identify Beowulf with Christ. But, as Professor Tolkien has shown so clearly, one of the certain things about the poem is that its central theme has something to do with Beowulf fighting monsters. If Beowulf is not Christ, and even if Dr. Goldsmith’s alternatives, which she hints at but does not press (St. Martin or St. Anthony), were acceptable—they are not—it still seems to me the impossibility of finding a Christ figure in the poem, that does not distort either the text or the basic *données* of theology, ruins the allegorical approach.

¹ Medium Aevum, xxxiv (1965), 89 ff. and cf. University of Toronto Quarterly, xxxvii (1967), 1 ff.
From a wider point of view the allegorical approach makes a basic mistake about context. Most followers of this school see *Beowulf* as more or less part of the world of medieval chivalry. In Dr. Goldsmith’s bibliography, for instance, Miss Tuve’s *Allegorical Symbolism* is listed, but nothing of Chadwick. At one point in his lively and dangerous translation of the poem, the late Professor Garmonsway speaks of “the chivalry of the Danes”. Basic to this line of approach are some remarks of Professor Tolkien: “The men of these legends were conceived as knights of chivalrous courts, and members of societies of noble knights, real Round Tables. If there be any danger of calling up inappropriate pictures of the Arthurian world, it is a lesser one than the danger of too many warriors and chiefs begetting the far more inept picture of Zulus or Red Indians. The imagination of the author of *Beowulf* moved upon the threshold of Christian chivalry, if indeed it had not already passed within”.¹ It is perhaps worth pointing out that Round Tables are fiction by definition: that probably centuries after *Beowulf* was written even the kings of England were not knights in any sense, and neither *miles* nor *cníht* denoted a person of any importance or status: that the biography of that *nonpareil* of English fighting men, William the Marshal, written when the world of Christian chivalry was indeed upon us, hardly suggests that it had influenced the English court of the late twelfth century very far. With the licence of such high authority, it is not surprising that Dr. Goldsmith should offer *Beowulf* as a model member of the *militia Christi*. She wishes to show that Beowulf’s war-like profession can readily be interpreted in a Christian sense, and need not be evidence of residual pagan sentiment. She, therefore, takes the obvious step, on the chivalric view of the poem, of citing the early medieval *topos* of the *militia Christi* by way of proof. Had she read Chadwick, old-fashioned as some suppose him, she must have realized that *militia Christi* is wholly unmilitary in its connotation: it meant, of course, monks.² I do not find the idea of Beowulf as the model monk very persu-

¹ *Beowulf*, J. R. Clark-Hall, p. 22.

² Cf. Adomnan’s description of Columba’s career, 46: “Per annos xxxiii insulanus *miles* conversatus . . .”
It is noticeable that students of *Beowulf* in my experience do not seem to read the late Carl Erdmann's fundamental study of the origins of the ideology of the Crusade. Erdmann showed that the notion of the profession of arms as a Christian vocation is intimately connected with reforming circles close to the reform movement of the late tenth and eleventh centuries. In the period in which *Beowulf* was written, on whatever view of the date we take, the warrior was very much in a class with the publicans and sinners.

If we turn from the high Christian theses of the allegorical school to the plainer, and in the last resort more serious, defence of *Beowulf*’s Christianity in Professor Dorothy Whitelock’s *Audience of Beowulf*, we are on very different ground. Dr. Whitelock makes no use of analogies from chivalric literature written centuries later. Drawing partly on Professor Girvan’s remarkable study, she shows how Christian things were taken for granted in a wealth of casual allusion. The sun is heaven’s candle: candle being an ecclesiastical loan word that cannot ante-date the coming of Christianity to the Anglo-Saxons. It is assumed that the audience will detect in the line: “the flood, the pouring ocean, slew the race of giants”, an allusion to Genesis vi. 4. Nones or *non* is used, not as a reference to a church-service, but as a mere time reference like teatime. It is obvious, then, that *Beowulf* presupposes a society in which Christianity had had time to make its mark, and that in some sense the poet and his audience were Christian. But does it follow that we need make more of this than Chadwick or Blackburn did in their now rejected arguments?

I do not think we need to. Let me take a simple analogy. I may live in a bungalow and sit on my verandah, call for a bowl of mulligatawney, without the faintest notion that these words are all Indian loan words, the product of the former Anglo-Indian connection. Bungalow and verandah have been common English words for more than a generation but I doubt if more than a tiny minority know their origin. What is more, even fewer could tell you why an Indian would fail to recognize the

1 *Die Entstehung des Kreuzzugsgedankens* (Stuttgart, 1935).
term bungalow as appropriate for what Englishmen normally describe as such. How many people, of whatever standard of education, know, when they are faced with a bottle of tomato ketchup that what they have is a descendant of the Malayan *kechup*, a pickled fish sauce in which, for obvious reasons, tomatoes were never included? In other words, quite a lot of Far Eastern culture has been absorbed by Englishmen without anyone being aware of it. Did the men of Beowulf’s world feel more in touch with classical Rome when they talked of candles than modern Englishmen feel with imperial India when they talk of bungalows? It is perfectly possible, of course, that they did, as it is equally possible they did not. What will not do is to assume an answer to the question and build on it as on a foundation of certain knowledge. What *was* obvious, what *was* typical, in that world is precisely what we ought to be seeking.

In most books on *Beowulf* we are told a great deal more about medieval Christianity than we ever are about Anglo-Saxon paganism. But to say that *Beowulf* is a Christian poem is to deny that it is a pagan poem. It seems to me obvious that in this case it is important to know the notion of paganism with which the writer is implicitly comparing his poem.

Now, there are important intellectual obstacles to answering this very difficult question. In modern times Christianity was the religion of a dominant group possessed of overwhelming economic, political, and social strength compared with the recent pagans they were converting. But, when the Germanic peoples were converted, it was the conquerors who adopted the religion of the vanquished; and that must have made a difference. Social anthropologists have shown us that religion is at least as much a matter of rituals and social structures as it is of doctrines and moral rules.¹ But because it seems improbable that Germanic

¹ Some social anthropologists would dismiss the study of doctrines and the actions of individuals as pointless, explaining everything in terms of social structure and the pressure of social institutions. An historian is unlikely to accept this: but it does not follow that because some sociologists abuse their methods they cannot teach historians anything. The kind of study I have in mind is E. Evans-Pritchard’s classical work on magic and witchcraft amongst the Azande which establishes beyond question the existence of connections between rituals and social structure, and the importance of offering explanations that take
paganism could be compared with early medieval Christianity, either as an intellectual force or, in the Christian sense of the word, a moral force, scholars have largely neglected to make any very close enquiries. The late Max Weber in his classic study of the *Sociology of Religion*, which was so grossly misrepresented by the late R. H. Tawney, has some penetrating remarks on the *ethos* of the warrior *élite*: "As a rule, the class of warrior nobles, and indeed feudal powers generally, have not readily become the carriers of a rational religious ethics. The life pattern of a warrior has very little affinity with the notion of a beneficent providence, or with the systematic ethical demands of a transcendental god... It is an every-day psychological event for the warrior to face death and the irrationalities of human destiny. Indeed, the chances and adventures of mundane existence fill his life to such an extent that he does not require of his religion (and accepts only reluctantly) anything beyond protection against evil magic or such ceremonial rites as are congruent with his caste, such as priestly prayers for victory or for a blissful death leading directly into the hero's heaven."¹

This remarkably penetrating, though over-generalized, comment is by and large sustained by Professor Turville-Petre's essay on the *Myth and Religion of the Pagan Norse*. We have now an attempt at a comparative study of one aspect of pagan Germanic religion and contemporary Christianity. This cannot be ignored by the students of *Beowulf* when the problems of the poem's religious ambience are so central to the discussion. It seems to me that there was something of an overlapping margin between the radically different centres of the two religions. Clearly these centres are as different as religions can be, but the history of Christianity surely shows how different men of different times and social groups have opted for the margins rather than the centre. The late Carl Erdmann, who first, I think, pointed to this overlapping margin and illuminated its importance for the

development of the Christian doctrine of the just war, made a case for thinking that the early popularity of St. Michael is to be explained because he was a kind of baptized Woden: Woden's part in Germanic eschatology has a resemblance to that of Michael in Christian. It follows that we must not assume that what seemed central to the Christian religion to the Beowulf poet is necessarily what seems so to us: the radical discontinuity between the pagan and Christian Ideenwelt of the eighth century, so commonly assumed, needs testing.

Let us take the Old Testament ethos of the poem which no commentator can afford to ignore. It seems to me, in the light of the foregoing, that we assume too readily a rapid dissemination of biblical knowledge and we fail to realize that the Bible of the early Middle Ages may not have been our Bible. I do not mean to point to textual variants or whatever, but to the fact that the Bible is a very large book and even its most devout readers tend to select some things and neglect others. Now this process of selection is primarily socially and historically conditioned; personal predilection is a secondary matter. This is particularly evident when it comes to quotation. Even these days a writer might quote the Gospels and rightly assume his point would be taken. But how often, even in specialist gatherings or journals, is Numbers or Maccabbes quoted? Recently Dr. Mary Douglas has pointed out¹ that it is the limitations of our culture, not that of the Old Testament authors, that makes the ritualistic passages boring and unrewarding. Now the educated person's selection of passages that adds up to "our" Bible is not the product of random reading and aesthetic taste. It is part of being English and it was created by many different channels: pamphlets like Pilgrim's Progress and oratorios like Handel's Messiah have created the English-speaking man's Bible. It does not seem to me safe to assume that any intelligent reader left to his own devices would make the same selection, let alone an early medieval man living on the edge of a pagan world, in which Christianity was the loser's religion to a much greater extent than it seems now.

I have already cited the line of Beowulf that shows its author

expected his audience to be familiar with Genesis vi. 4. I wonder, if one read a translation of the poem to an audience of professional theologians, how many would catch the allusion? Giants and monsters and devastating floods were much more part of the thought-world of the Anglo-Saxons than they are of ours. It is not unnatural that the passages of the Bible which struck a response in their own experience, real or imaginative, should have appealed to them in a way they cannot to us. The only passage in the Bible cited twice is that referring to Cain and Abel. The manuscript certainly, and the poet probably, got Cain's name wrong. He is called Cham, by confusion with one of the sons of Noah. Now the story of Cain and Abel is one of those stories that have become an integral part of the English-speaking ethos. No man who knew the Bible at all well could make this kind of mistake. I shall be told that the confusion is or was a tradition—as though an error made by a number of persons is any the less an error—which only proves that early knowledge of the Bible was derived more from spoken or written commentaries than from the study of the actual text. The error was, of course, made by Alcuin: this is a world in which a man of Alcuin's learning and stature could make such an elementary mistake.

We are dealing with new Christians learning to read a massive and complex text and having to acquire one alphabet and two languages to do so. We have no grounds for supposing that the means of doing so were numerous: there must have been more schools than the sources reveal, but even allowing generously for their silence there cannot have been many and, what is worse, we cannot assume that necessary continuity of endowment and resources continuing from generation to generation. A man like Bede is an exception (I am sure a very lonely one) but Beowulf scholarship too easily takes him as the rule, the norm. Consequently, when the author of Beowulf quotes or alludes a good deal to the Old Testament and hardly, if at all, to the New Testament, it is assumed that he must have the same kind of knowledge of the Bible that any right thinking readers, i.e. we ourselves, have. Consequently he is quoting for a purpose and he may be assumed to have had quotations from the
New Testament at his finger-tips if only he chose to use them. It seems to me, on the contrary, that he quoted what was for him and his audience their Bible: it is a warrior's Bible not a scholar's. Is it, then, strange that the Old Testament should appeal to warriors more than the New? I cannot think the Virgin's words about the lowly being exalted and the mighty humbled would have found more of an echo in the hearts of Beowulf's audience than they would in the chapel of an English Public or American private school. I do not think that turning the other cheek was much of a medieval virtue. But Moses and David, Saul and Samuel they could understand and, as we now know, they served as themes for political thinking and action of the highest importance. Nor do we have to rely on Beowulf and conjectures about social influences for evidence that early medieval Christianity was unusually Old Testament centred. M. Fountain has pointed to evidence for a fairly wide-spread interest in the Old Testament. Mr. Mayr-Harting has pointed out, or is just about to, how St. Wilfrid's biographer presents him as an Old Testament prophet revived. Professor Hanning has noted the very Old Testament view of history that informs Gildas and Bede.2

Putting all this together and reading the evidence in the light of its world, not ours, we can, I think, see that this world is the world of the Heerkönig—that is what Beowulf, Scyld Scefing, Hrothgar, and Hygelac were, as was the undoubtely historical St. Guthlac, who points the moral by returning one-third of his loot to the victims upon conversion. Guthlac's biographer Felix thought this admirable, praiseworthy, and thoroughly saintlike conduct, yet he was writing in the middle of the Mercian hegemony and was, to judge by his sources, a learned and cultivated man. It seems to follow that we cannot make easy
or safe inferences about the poet's silences from assumptions that would be sound enough in a different world. It is clearly much more difficult to solve the riddle of the Christian and pagan elements in the poem than has usually been supposed. Above all, nothing of this can be done simply by attending to the words on the page: we shall get nowhere by asking what the words mean; what we need to know is how in this world were they used.

This seems to me a point worth labouring because Beowulf is a poem in the margins of English literature and cannot be studied like, say King Lear, which is at the centre. Even the language and diction of the poem have their mysteries. Professor Tolkien has remarked: "If you wish to translate, not rewrite, Beowulf, your language must be literary and traditional: not because it is now a long while since the poem was made, or because it speaks of things that have since become ancient; but because the diction of Beowulf was poetical, archaic, and artificial (if you will) in the day that the poem was made." ¹ Professor Tolkien seems to assume that the mode of the "archaic" is as fixed and concrete a thing as the French language. Fixed and concrete, that is, so far as to allow any sensible person to say with precision and truth when and when not somebody is speaking "archaic" in the way it is possible to determine whether somebody is speaking French or not. But this is not true. Take the opening of the translation Professor Tolkien is commending: "Lo! We have heard of the glory of the kings of the people of the Spear-Danes in the days of yore how these princes did valorous deeds". This sounds distinctly Wagner period to me. Let us compare it with something of which it is certainly true that its language and diction were artificial and archaic on the day it was made: "After this it was noised abroad that Mr. Valiant for Truth was taken with a summons, by the same post as the other; and had this for a token that the summons was true, that his pitcher was broken at the fountain. When he understood it, he called for his friends, and told them of it. Then said he, I am going to my fathers and with great difficulty I am got hither, yet now I do not repent me of all the

¹ Clark-Hall, op. cit. p. xvii,
trouble I have been to arrive at where I am. My sword I give to him that shall succeed me in the pilgrimage, and my courage and skill, to him that can get it. My marks and scars I carry with me, to be a witness for me, that I have fought his battles, who now will be my Rewarder. When the time that he must go hence was come, many accompanied him to the riverside, into which as he went he said Death where is thy sting? And as he went deeper, he said, Grave where is thy victory? So he passed over, and the trumpets sounded for him on the other side”. There are, in fact, as many kinds of archaism as there are authors who try out the mode. Bunyan is successful, and the revised Clark-Hall a failure, because the one has its roots, makes its appeal, to a readership steeped in King James’s Bible and the solemn ritual occasions so many of the allusions recall, whilst the other has no roots in anything at all other than a vague sense that tradition is best expressed in outlandish locutions and a vocabulary used only by the authors of children’s books of a generation ago. This is not the translator’s fault. A prose-style has its roots in a way of life and this is just as true of the style of a narrative poem such as Beowulf. But the way of life of Beowulf’s audience is at least partly lost to us and with it some, perhaps the major part, of the poet’s intentions and the poem’s point.

This may be illustrated by considering the following piece of deathless prose composed for the occasion: “Then a bird in her Mary Quants awaited her escort in front of the Hilton. Across the street another bird tarted up to the nines in her C and A Modes came out of the Vault of the King’s Head, waved to a young man on the pavement, stepped into his E type and drove off. A moment later the first bird’s expected turned up in a Beetle. She took one look, turned on her heel and swept into the King’s Head”. Even to most Americans of the present time the point of the episode would be incomprehensible. You would need to know the status difference between clothes from Mary Quant and clothes from C and A Modes: you would need to know that well-conducted girls do not drink in the Vaults of public houses and you would need to know the status difference between E Type Jaguars and Volkswagens. No one
in England, unlike the United States, would drive a Volkswagen if he could afford something better. Thus not even in the "common" language of the English-speaking world would such a trivial piece of drivel be intelligible. Suppose that the passage were to be translated into a language that had only one word for automobile, and belonged to a people that did not use clothes as status symbols. Translation would simply not be possible and understanding could only be conveyed by a commentary, and such a commentary requires an author familiar with the ways of life of both societies.

If we bear this in mind and return to Beowulf, we can guess, though many authors who have written on the poem have not, that in a world where survival depended to a large degree on swords, men would have special feelings about them. The text of Beowulf tells us, if we look at it with this question in mind, that certain kinds of swords were status symbols, particularly swords of pedigree, and this is supported by the Wills, but we cannot know what a man would feel about a sword if his life and fortune depended on it. Swords and other weapons are the subject of an intricate vocabulary in the poem: the late Dr. Harmer, who was one of the few Old English scholars whose command of the "historical" sources and literature equalled her command of the literary, always maintained that many of the so-called synonyms conceal a variety of differences amongst the actual weaponry at which we can only guess. It is obvious that feelings about swords are important in Beowulf. Beowulf refuses to use one against Grendel. Against Grendel's mother, whose inferior strength is emphasized, he uses a sword that fails him, as does his sword in his last fight with the dragon. Yet Grendel's mother is killed by a sword in the end. This theme must have a point and one that we can reasonably suppose was intelligible to an audience who shared the poet's attitude towards swords, but how can we ever hope to know exactly what this point, based on lost feelings, was? We are in the same case as the man who has only one word to render E Type and Beetle. We cannot, therefore, without more ado, read the poem against a generalized background of medieval chivalry and courtly love, looking up the words we do not understand in a glossary. We
must constantly look outside the poem into the poet’s world for guidance as to how the words were actually used. If I am right, it is obvious that some, and perhaps, much, of the life-style—and the feelings that style entailed—are lost irretrievably, but it is possible from the poem itself to get some kind of guidelines that can be followed up outside the poem. That is, we must follow up the themes of the feud and loot.

Chadwick, years ago, pointed to the importance of loot in the poem: if we count the references to “rings” and feuds, or weigh them according to the importance of the episodes in which they occur, it is obvious that *Beowulf* is just as much about feuds and loot as it is about fighting monsters. By following out these themes we can, I suggest, get something of the “feel” of the poem’s world and a rather more precise idea of what sort of man he was and what his religious attitudes were.

If we follow up the theme of loot we can see immediately how realistic the poet is about the economic basis of the social group to which all its characters belong. The opening episode has Scyld Scefing taking tribute and property from others in its first lines. When he dies (lines 25 ff.) he is put to sea in a boat laden with treasures and the artistic unity of the episode, if that is the right word, is in the contrast between Scyld’s beginning—he was disposed of as a child by being put to sea in a boat—and his ending with his ceremonial funeral voyage and his treasures. The sense of the passage seems to me to be that dying prosperous and famous, with prosperity and fame duly recognized by the funeral rites, was a fitting consummation to a successful career. If there were rewards and judgement to come, there is no allusion to them. The episode is complete as it stands. Scyld Scefing is succeeded by a son called Beowulf, who appears to have no connection with the hero of the poem, unless there was a connection obvious to the audience but lost to us. The poet approves of him in the following lines: “So ought a young man to compass by noble deeds, by liberal gifts in his father’s possession, that afterwards in later years, willing companions may stand by him—that men may come by service when war comes”. One could not get a franker statement of the commercial side of the war band—“the local chivalry”—than this.
Unless, that is, one rates Wiglaf's closing speech even franker: "Now shall the receiving of treasure and the gift of swords, all joy of ownership and comfort be wanting to your race: each man of your family will have to wander, shorn of his landed possessions, as soon as the nobles far and wide hear of your flight, your despicable act".

The theme recurs not only frequently but at crucial points in the action. When Hrothgar is introduced to the audience and is planning the building of Hereot, the scene of Beowulf's triumphs, it is on the occasion of a considerable distribution of what the context suggests was the spoils of war. We are told without question approvingly: "He did not break his promise, but gave out rings and treasure at the banquet". But, most significant, here is the motivation of Beowulf's visit to Hereot and his endeavours to dispose of Grendel.

Nothing is said about Beowulf's reasons for going to Hrothgar's help when he first appears. He would seek Hrothgar's court and sensible men do not dissuade him but consult the omens—a practice that would have been anathema to an instructed Christian. When he returns and tells his story to his kinsman, it is frankly admitted that he had been thought of previously as somewhat slack and Hygelac had given him little, withholding what seems to have been his father's land. Now Beowulf gets 7,000 hides and a proper status. It seems to me that this is not the conventional theme of an apparent sluggard proving himself. It is rather something the poem's audience would have been well-acquainted with: a young warrior proves his right to folcland, to "warrior's land": and I think they would have taken it for granted that this was Beowulf's intention in fighting Grendel in the first place. Beowulf gathered a small band of companions to help him, as did the historical St. Guthlac, and Beowulf's actions seem to parallel precisely Bede's account of the typical warrior's career of his own day, who likewise entered a foreign lord's service if there was no endowment for him at home. Again, Beowulf's reward has

1 John, Orbis Britanniae, pp. 120 ff.

2 Ep. ad Ecgbehrtum. This is true not only of a warrior's career. The element of seeking a place in life, if necessary in far away places, is to be found in the career of the great Wilfrid, see John, Social and Political Problems, passim.
the flavour of reality. We are told that Hygelac: "... gave
him the rank of chief. To both alike was there land by natural
right, an estate, a patrimony: but a great kingdom belonged
rather to the one who was higher in rank".\(^1\) This land
amounted to 7,000 hides. It looks as though Hygelac had
conferred on Beowulf a sub-kingdom\(^2\) and its rating corresponds
to the valuation of real provinces if we may believe the Tribal
Hidage. It is noticeable, too, that Beowulf first handed over his
treasures before he got his preferment. It is possible to read
the poem as meaning he gave up his valuables out of pure
affection for his lord, but I do not think the original audience
would have taken this view. In this poem, valuables are given
for consideration, for favours done and benefits expected. I
think we are meant to understand that, Hygelac being willing
at last to hand over the land which is in some sense Beowulf's
patrimony, Beowulf preceded the gift in the usual fashion by
paying a heriot. If we read the poem in the light of early
medieval accounts of energetic warriors and the companions
with whom they surrounded themselves, especially Bede's
valuable insight into the normal career of the youthful warrior,\(^3\)
Beowulf's conduct makes complete and quite unromantic sense
from beginning to end. From the first his motive was to rise
in the service of his kinsman and earn his "patrimony", and
through his deeds he did just that. These motives would have
been perfectly acceptable to contemporaries and the values they
imply unquestioned. It is difficult if one reads the poem and
remembers how real people behaved at this time to miss the

\(^1\) I have softened the traditional translation of lines 2197 and 8. This is
because natural rights and hereditary rights do not have the same, strict, force
they have in later societies, as any study of the lawsuits will show. The loose force
of *lond gecynde* is shown by a surprisingly late source. The Chronicle, s.a. 1086,
in its obituary of the Conqueror says: "Normandige \(\dagger\) land wees his gecynde".
This is meant to contrast with the lands he conquered, but William, being a
bastard, had less natural right than Beowulf, and likewise had to fight his way
into his right.

\(^2\) It is very easy to interpret, or rather misinterpret, the relations between
over and under-kings in the early Middle Ages by later analogies that do not
hold. For a penetrating discussion of such a relationship at the turn of the
ninth century, between the Emperor Arnulf and his son Zwentibold, king of
Lotharingia, see E. Hlawitschka, *Lotharingien und das Reich* (Stuttgart, 1968),
pp. 158 ff.

\(^3\) *Ep. ad Ecgbehrtum.*
strictly economic aspects of lordship and vassalage, especially if we do not start out with the assumption that a ring bestowed is somehow heroic where a cheque earned is not. It seems that being brutally frank about the economic basis of his age’s heroism is one of the characteristics of this poet and is what marks him off from the poets of chivalry, with whom he is so misleadingly compared.

The second basic theme is the feud, and there cannot be much doubt that here we are very close to the mind and heart of the poet. There are twenty-five references to feuds according to my calculation: the poet is obsessed by them. In his account of the building of Herot his thoughts turn immediately to the feud, though there is nothing in the narrative at that point which requires this. “Nor was the time yet near at hand that cruel hatred between son-in-law and father-in-law should arise, because of a deed of violence” (lines 84-86). This is the first reference to a feud and, interestingly, it is one between kinsmen. Unferth is said “in the play of sword blades...” to have “shown no mercy to kinsmen” (line 1165). In line 2167 the poet observes that kinsmen should not lay snares for others. In Beowulf’s farewell speech he reminisces about the killing of one brother by another in his own family. “For the eldest a bed of slaughter was prepared—and not as might befit him—but through his own kinsman’s deed... brother slaying brother with a bloody shaft” (lines 2435 ff.). His comment on this is interesting too: “that was a slaying for which there could be no blood money, an act of guilty violence... the noble prince had to lose his life unavenged”. In this world the feud was the principal form of protection for the individual, and an institution that must have had some deterrent value.1 The feud is a serious and unromantic institution, much as the police force

1 Cf. the important discussion by J. M. Wallace-Hadrill, “The Blood Feud of the Franks” in _The Long Haired-Kings_ (London, 1962), pp. 121 ff. A pope of the period might expect to take part in a feud (ibid. p. 127). The most extreme example of a Christianized view of the feud is Gregory of Tours: “... he visualises (divine vengeance) as nothing less than God’s own feud in support of his servants, who can have no other kin” (ibid. p. 127). It seems to me that, a comparison between _Beowulf_ and Gregory’s _History_, which here treat of the same topic in the same mode, shows that the poem’s religion is a good deal less classical and a good deal more Germanic than the _History’s_.

is to us. Beowulf continues to reflect on this tragic event and implies that the man's father died of a broken heart, sorrowing for the son he could not avenge. "He could never make the killer pay the price of his bloody deed, nor could he show his hatred for that warrior by hostile acts, although he was far from dear to him". The section is one of the gravest in the poem and deeply touched by that sense of the tears of things which is such a prominent ingredient of the tone of the poem.

We may notice here that nothing can be done about the killing of one kinsman by another. The feud simply does not work if the kin is divided. We may guess that sometimes something was done and kinsman fought kinsman, and part of the poet's horror at the killing of kinsman was due to the disastrous social consequences of such unappeasable feuds. We have, after all, the recorded history of the Merovingian family to show us an actual historical example.¹

We might ask how the poet's theology affected his view of the feud. The obvious point is that the story of Cain and Abel is quoted twice in the poem: it is easy to see why this story had such force for a man of this world. But by and large the poet's religion affects his view of the feud very little. In the passage already cited at the end the bereaved father dies too. "So then in his sorrow which had fallen all too bitterly upon him, he forsook the joys of men and chose the light of God; when he deserted this life he left his sons land and the stronghold of their people, as a wealthy man does". It is a little reminiscent of "When he died the little port had seldom seen a costlier funeral", is it not? But it is noticeable how utterly inadequate is the context as a means of giving meaning to the phrase "light of God". The poet's religion is hardly brought to bear at all on the feud: it is in quite a separate compartment.

Beowulf proses on about old feuds and the farewell speech concludes with yet another, this time Beowulf's own: "I will

¹ Wallace-Hadrill, (ibid. p. 135) has an important comment on this: "... it was the wrong kind of feud; not feuding but feuding within the kin was what led to pointless bloodshed that stopped nothing and offered few of the normal opportunities for compromise and settlement...". The poet's attitude to the feud is then reasonably historical and was likely to be common to him and his audience.
once more seek a feud and a deed of glory (line 2513). This refers to his intention to fight the dragon. In his dying speech he yet again reverts to the theme: “the Ruler of Men will have no cause to accuse me of a murderous slaughter of any kinsmen”.

Wiglaf, in his role of Cassandra, envisages a future feud consequent on the death of Beowulf at the very end of the poem.

The feud appears at every crux in the story. When Grendel is introduced he is having a feud with Hrothgar, and it is a sign of his fiendish nature that he will not pay compensation for the men he has killed; the payment of wergeld is one of the objects of the feud or threat of it. Grendel is also described as waging a feud with God (line 810). When Grendel is killed Hrothgar himself pays wergeld for the last of his men Grendel slew.

Grendel’s mother appears as seeking vengeance for her dead son (line 1278), and, as I have already pointed out, Beowulf himself claims to be waging a feud against his last monster. It is the feud, not the Fathers, that offers the key to this poem. The poet’s imagination is filled with the idea and the whole poem is simply a series of feuds working themselves out. The poet’s attitude is plainly ambiguous. It is clear that he considered some feuds right and proper for the men who took part in them and he says so without mincing words. In line 2616 King Onela did not speak of the feud when Weohstan killed his nephew; I think the poet implies criticism of Onela here. This is understandable: a man depended on his kinsmen, especially the powerful ones, for his protection and security. But when in pursuance of her feud Grendel’s mother carries off a warrior from Hereot, the poet does not criticize her but says: “No good barter was this, when those on both sides must pay with the life of friends (line 1305)”. The comment is generalized and does not seem meant for Grendel’s mother alone. It appears to me not unreasonable that men of feeling had mixed reactions to the feud. In their world, the feud was so important, and they might well have confused reactions to it, as in our world many of us have towards the automobile.

If we try to understand what a society in which the feud was a basic institution was like, it follows, I think, that we cannot take the three monsters as evil in the same way and on the same
level. Grendel’s mother is up to a point doing her duty, and it seems to me that the poet would expect his audience to have somewhat different reactions to her than they had to Grendel. The last dragon seems a very different case and it is hard not to conclude that Wiglaf and, I think, the audience, would see Beowulf as guilty of a display of empty *machismo*, reprehensible because of the consequences to which it laid the innocent open. It seems to me that a glance outside the poem to its world strongly reinforces Professor Leyerle’s powerful argument for a much more critical view of Beowulf’s conduct.1

Putting the themes of treasure and feud together, and taking them from the realm of fairy-tales to the serious business of everyday life, which is just what they were to the original audience, we can see the beginning of the ideology of feudalism. This is not the settled world of the feudalism of the High Middle Ages, when the social order was strong enough, bureaucratic enough, sufficiently unfeudal in other words, to afford the delights of litigation and the luxury of legal definition. But feudal it is none the less. The political order depicted in *Beowulf* was fragile and dependent on the lives of kings, but it was also an order in which the relationship of lord and man was the political order. There are no *ministri*, no career officials, no police, no formal legal profession, nothing of the bureaucratic order whatsoever. The lord is several times equated with the senior kinsman, as when Hrothgar paid wergeld for Grendel’s victim. Wars between different lords and their respective bands of retainers are treated as feuds, as in the war Wiglaf expects when: “the Swedish folc attack us when they hear our lord has lost his life (line 3000)”. It seems clear that by and large the bond of lord and man was stronger than that between kinsmen—this is implied in places by the very loose use of the word “feud”, which seems applicable to any war-like activity engaged in by a lord and his companions.2 Men got away with

1 Art. cit.
2 Wallace-Hadrill (ibid. pp. 125-6) points out that it was not easy in practice to separate the claims of kindred and lord in the business of the feud. The famous story of Cynewulf and Cyneheard shows that for one writer at least it was right and proper to prefer the claims of one’s lord to one’s kin. It is interesting that no such notion can be attributed to the *Beowulf* poet.
the murder of kinsfolk easily enough but their posture before their lord is one of utter subordination. Lords (the classic case is Heremod) sometimes slaughtered their own vassals. "He would cut down companions who feasted at his table and the comrades who feasted at his side (line 1713)."¹ No one seems able to call him to account and the poet notes the climax of his villainy: his refusal to give treasure to the Danes. The poet has to content himself and us with the news that at last Heremod died unhappy. Beowulf by way of contrast never kills his vassals, even when in his cups; and this is a comment by the poet, not an extract from one of Beowulf's interminable speeches, unlike the parallel remark that Beowulf never killed kinsfolk.

This is why I call the poem feudal. These bands, in spite of the translators use of modern words like "comrades" or "bosom friends", are not free and easy, overgrown troops of boy scouts. They are social groups, strictly authoritarian and hierarchical in structure, in which the so-called companions depend for their livelihood and their lives on their lord's pleasure. The men called kings have a very exalted status indeed and are apparently less vulnerable to trouble than common mortals. Even a really bad one like Heremod met no worse fate than a miserable deathbed. If we read the poem as a sort of early Public School story, as I think many commentators do, it is hard to feel that Beowulf's companions deserved the hard things that Wiglaf said about them at the end. They only did as they were told. But this is not a game and the failed vassal was in a terrible position. This is a world in which Alcuin could truly remark that the death of kings brought great sorrow. As Wiglaf puts it: "Now the acceptance of riches, the bestowing of swords, and all the delights of your own land and your beloved homes—all this must come to an end for your race. Every man within the circle of your kindred will have to become a wanderer, stripped of all right to hold land, once high born nobles far away have heard of your flight... (lines 2884 ff.)". The famous inalienable Anglo-Saxon family land appears unknown to this poet. There is an

¹ Clark-Hall's "boon-companions" and "bosom friends" in his translation of this line are most unfortunate: they quite fail to convey the sense of inferiority, the status distance, that separated lord and retainer.
extreme, if not legally defined, connection between holding one's land and fighting for one's lord. It is because of the consequences of Beowulf's death, in part inevitable however it happened, that it is difficult to avoid the implication that the poet, very gingerly it is true, intends criticism of Beowulf. His attitude to the treasure is quite different from that attributed to Beowulf. He did not incur the curse out of greed but, I think, it is implied that he should have left it alone just the same. Beowulf's dying wish is to look on the treasure he has won for his people, but Wiglaf, and the poet, I think, rejected the treasure and buried it again: "They left the wealth of nobles to the earth to keep— left the gold in the ground where it still exists, as unprofitable to men as it had been before (lines 3166 ff.)." This is a comment made by the poet himself and is totally at variance with the sentiments he makes Beowulf utter about the hoard.

The poem, then, seems essentially a feudal poem shot through with the values of a warrior society, and a very insecure one at that. It seems to me to have no affinities whatsoever to the sentimentalizing literature of high medieval chivalry. It has affinities to the high medieval world certainly, but to the realities of that world, to the ethos and institutions of what we call bastard feudalism; but none, it seems to me, to the rationalizations and fantasies of chivalry and courtly love. It seems to me, also, to be a religious poem and, what is more, a Christian poem of uncommon power and feeling, though again with sources for that power and feeling quite other than the Fathers or the kind of books that Bede, for instance, read. Nothing in the poem—as distinct from the analogies scholars have claimed to find—compels us to assume that its author had a profound knowledge of theology. There is a good deal of traditional paganism there: taking the omens, the funeral ceremonies that would have been devil's rites to a man like Alcuin—the very worldly concern for reputation shown by the good characters on their death-beds and the very feeble signs of any hope of Heaven or fear of Hell. But for all that, the ethos of the poem is very far from that of the religion of Woden. Thanks to Professor Turville-Petre we have now more idea of what being a follower of Woden implied. The quality his followers seem to have attributed to Woden, and
admired in him, was simply *chutzpah*, and *chutzpah* is exactly the quality that the poet has eliminated from his poem, replacing it with a very strong sense of duty and restraint, and unlike Bede, for example, refusing to present success and *fortuna* as the rewards of virtue. I would say that the religious sentiments of the poet were like those of the unnamed man at King Edwin’s court, who compared human life to the flight of a sparrow through a lighted hall. I would argue that neither this man nor the author of *Beowulf* had much formal theological knowledge and little concern with the great questions of patristic theology, but that they did have questions of their own and these were not negligible.

To illustrate this let me take a work that might have been known to the poet, at least at second hand, the first *Life* of Gregory the Great. It would be absurd to compare this jejeune piece of spiritual biography with the masterpieces of an Augustine. But for all that, its author could raise a theological point of the first importance that never occurred to Augustine and would have become him if it had. In the story of the Emperor Trajan and St. Gregory, the problem of the good pagan, who died unbaptized through the accident of time and place, is raised for the first time. One of the miracles in Adomnan’s *Life of Columba* suggests that the problem had been raised at Iona—or possibly Iona was the source of the questioning—but Adomnan plays safe and evades the issue. The *Life of Gregory* does not. It is interesting that a fundamental question such as this should have been raised on the margin of the classical world by new Christians with as yet little knowledge of the metaphysical profundity of classical thought. It is to this climate of thought that I think *Beowulf* belongs. It is a new Christian poem by a man still deeply affected by an older way of thinking and feeling, but a man capable of comparing the two and wholly on the side of the new ways. But he is still sufficiently aware of the power of the old ways to attempt what is in effect a radical critique of them from a Christian point of view. Since, removed from the cult of Woden, these warrior-like values accommodated themselves comfortably to the cult of

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Christ, the poem had a continuing relevance but not, perhaps, a very agreeable message.

It is a common social experience with the bonds of lordship and vassalage; with the feud; with constant and frequent social collapses; with the enormous importance of the conduct of a few highly-placed individuals, that prompted the spiritual directions the new Christians were to take, quite as much as the book-knowledge that came in with the Conversion. Not surprisingly in a world of lords and vassals, feuds and murderous brawls, it is the transitoriness of human life that is of more immediate concern than the pleasures of salvation. Equally obviously, the Old Testament is of much more obvious relevance than the incomprehensible and strange doctrines of the New Testament. The poet of Beowulf is not on the same comparatively easy terms with his God as was Bede, and not necessarily the worse for that. We too easily assume that the pagan Anglo-Saxons were incapable of any moral or spiritual reflection until they learned it from books in strange tongues, when they then acquired the habit with remarkable rapidity. I suggest that a consideration of the religion of Woden and its interaction with the religion of Jesus would throw some light on Beowulf, and that the poem in its turn has something to tell us about the Ideenwelt of the early Anglo-Saxons.

It seems to me that the poem has nothing of the hallmark of the learned clerk in it. It seems to me impregnated with the social and personal experience of the retainer. I take it the poet has plenty of experience of actual fighting—or so I would interpret his concern for the physical experience of battle and the abundance of the references to weapons. I should say that his sense of the constant imminence of feuds, his feeling that decisions are made from above him and from outside his competence—Beowulf's decision to fight the dragon, the way it was made, its contempt for the vital interests of his dependants, and above all the delicately critical treatment it gets, illustrates this very well—his sense of the precariousness of the vassal's life and his social existence; all point to a man who came himself from the class of retainers. It is noticeable that he has a sense of the powerlessness of the retainer faced with even a drunken
and murderous lord, and he always gives the impression of utter helplessness in this kind of situation. Yet in practice we know that some checks were available on the conduct of lords, because vassals would and could defect; sometimes vassals murdered lords and the poet must have known it, but he never admits it. It is essentially a poem, it seems to me, written from, about, and to, the class of retainers: at any rate, if one reads the poem looking at the feuds and the loot as well as the monsters that is how it seems to read.

Having said this, I must leave the problem in the air. A mere historian cannot do more than point to a direction for studies he cannot undertake himself. I have sought to suggest that we complete the revolution begun by Professor Tolkien’s famous lecture. He rightly pointed out that you cannot push the monsters aside, since they are what the poem is about. I wish to suggest that the poem is scarcely less obviously about swords, feuds, and loot. We need, I think, to rest the theological Beowulf for a while, and try out a less familiar sociological Beowulf. At the same time we must realize, in my view, that some of the poem, including the qualities that would really enable us to make secure judgements on its literary merits, has been lost irretrievably. It is obvious that we ought to know just how good a knowledge of weapons and fighting the poet had: did his first audience approve his acumen or deride his ignorance? We shall never know. I do not mean loss in the sense that a manuscript might be lost, but the much more profound sense in which only the meaning of the words has remained whilst the knowledge of how and when to use them, and the feelings that went with them, have quite escaped us.

ADDENDUM

In the above paper I have followed a line that has never been dominant in Beowulf studies of supposing that in the final section of the poem, just as the dragon represents a different kind of monster from Grendel and his mother, so a different type of evaluation of Beowulf’s conduct is required: in his first two fights Beowulf is entirely the hero, in his third some very tentative criticism is intended. The plausibility of this point of view depends on the assumptions one supposes the original audience to have brought to the poem, and I have argued for this section in particular to be read in the context of early English social structure. Recently the late Professor Kemp Malone has defended Beowulf’s last fight in a purely
literary reading posthumously published in *Anglo-Saxon England* (i, ed. Clemoes). Up to a point, as I have stressed, the debate is about the subjective reactions of the original audience. The strength of Kemp Malone’s reading is that it assumes a timeless literary mode: the words on the page mean what they mean and that is that. I do not myself believe that this is really a strength at all. It is not meaning but usage that is the important thing about language; there is a built-in subjective element that has to be accepted. But undeniably Kemp Malone’s approach makes for a clear, straightforward, reading that is attractive in its simplicity. Most Anglo-Saxon scholars in their heart of hearts believe that the primitive English were somehow simpler and more straightforward than their modern descendants. It seems to me interesting that if one accepts Kemp Malone’s reading at its face-value and then examines it as an interpretation of the words on the page, it is apparent that the defence of Beowulf involves at least two violations of the text, as well as several sins of omission.

Kemp Malone thought the poet offered Beowulf as a hero pure and simple who died the proper death of a hero. “Many great men have died in bed but for the heroic story Beowulf’s way of dying as it should be: fighting to the utmost against an evil foe of his people, a foe stronger than he” (op. cit. p. 145). His main point, and it is a fair one, is to compare the actions of Beowulf’s companions before his Grendel fight and before the last combat. In both cases after the event it is indicated that they did not approve of his action. Kemp Malone supposes that they advised Beowulf to avoid the fight beforehand and that the poet means us to suppose they were as wrong in the second case as they were in the first. He concedes that there is a difference in the enemy. He does not, as Professor Tolkien tends to do, see the three monsters as examples of Evil so intense that to argue for differing degrees of vileness would be like arguing the precedence between a flea and a louse. Kemp Malone makes a neat distinction between the dragon, a chronic menace, and Grendel, an acute one. But he does not think that this matters to the interpretation of the poem. It seems to me that what Professor Tolkien has taught us is that the monsters are the key to the poem’s moral ambience in the deepest sense. Kemp Malone notes that the poet makes it clear that the thought of Grendel made Beowulf’s companions shake in their shoes. There can be no doubt that he is right in thinking the attempt to dissuade Beowulf from fighting Grendel came from fear of the consequences. None the less, the companions did accompany Beowulf on his expedition. I have suggested that the motives of all of them were at least partly socio-economic. Kemp Malone supposes a parallel situation at the end. The companions are cowards, they give faint-hearted advice which is rightly rejected. This cannot be supported from the text.

The rejected advice rests on line 3079, which Kemp Malone renders “we could not make the dear lord... listen to reason”. But the literal meaning of the line is as it is given in Clark-Hall “We could not give any counsel to our dear lord”. (Garmonsway is similar). This does not imply that advice was given and rejected but that retainers were not in a position to give counsel to their lord when it was unasked and plainly unwelcome. Kemp Malone says of the retainers “Yet how well he [Beowulf] took the measure of his retainers! When put to the test, all but one fled the field, hardly to their lord’s surprise” (op. cit. p. 143). The last adventure is given a very different context from the Hereot
episode. Here Beowulf is an old, tried, and successful king, the veteran of many feuds and wars. No longer a landless prince, thought somewhat slack, he is a powerful king. This must mean he had the services of a much greater number of retainers to choose from. As a preliminary to his fight we are given a sort of premature obituary. Its account of Beowulf's career introduces much new matter. The monsters who dominate the earlier part of the poem are hardly not be won by single-combat as could the fights with the monsters. We must, then, take Wiglaf seriously when he speaks of the retainers who accompanied Beowulf on his last fight; lines 2635-46 tell us "By his [Beowulf] own will he chose us from his hosts for this expedition, thinking of us when there was glory to be won; these treasures he also gave me, because he judged us to be good warriors and keen men in our helms—even though the dear lord and shepherd of our people meant, for our sakes, to achieve this deed of valour alone, since he above all other men had achieved deeds both glorious and rash". I am sure Garmonsway is right to render dollicra as "rash" since this is the normal meaning of the word. The rendering "audacious" or "daring" suggested by Klaeber and Clark-Hall seems to depend entirely on this line of Beowulf and a determination that the hero be spared any breath of criticism. It is impossible to write off these retainers as cowards, still less to suppose Beowulf knew this and fought alone because they abandoned him, as he expected them to. We need now to look at Beowulf's part of the action, when the force of dollicra becomes clear.

The final battle is a feud and one begun by accident and necessity, by "fate" if one likes, not by anyone's will. The dragon is quiet enough guarding its treasure until a man finds its lair and steals a valuable cup. The thief is the "slave" of some warrior who has earned his lord's wrath. Anxious to escape a flogging he has fled and takes shelter, as it happens, in the dragon's lair. Seeing his chance to restore his favour with his lord, he steals a valuable cup. Since the cup and the "slave" finish up in Beowulf's hands, it seems likely that the "slave" was one of his own men: it is only a failure to grasp the extremely subordinate position of the retainer that makes some scholars offer a convoluted and obscure explanation of how Beowulf got the cup. The poet does not approve the theft of the cup. The dragon is described as bitterly wronged (line 2221). The dragon's reaction is savage. He had destroyed "all the coastline and the nation's impregnable fortresses" (lines 2333 et seq). Plainly Beowulf had to do something. It seems to me that one possibility, since this was a feud, was to compose it by at least offering to return the cup. We have surely learnt from Dr. Wallace-Hadrill that early medieval feuds were not undertaken lightly and that the processes of composition were important. But Beowulf chooses not to do this but to fight, and what is more "The ring-giving ruler was too proud to go with a host and a great force to seek out the creature" (line 2346). He takes twelve men only with him (some scholars would read eleven) including the "slave" who has to show them the way to the dragon. But even this reduced company is too much for Beowulf. They are explicitly instructed to watch. "This is no adventure for you, nor is it in any man's power save mine to pit his strength against the monster" (line 2532). So Beowulf had scarcely the right to be surprised if the retainers left him alone. The poet is absolutely clear that
Beowulf was wrong in this. The dragon would have won had not Wiglaf rejected Beowulf’s assertion that only he could slay the dragon and equally his command to stand back. Nor, pace Professor Malone, does Beowulf slay the dragon; it is killed jointly by Beowulf and Wiglaf. “They had felled the foe, their valour taking his life by force; both these high-born kinsmen had struck him down together” (lines 2706 et seq.), a death so contrived that it must be significant. The poet comments on Wiglaf’s act “That is what a warrior should be, a true thegn in the hour of need”. From now on I believe it is Wiglaf who speaks with the poet’s voice, rejecting the treasure Beowulf still delights in, and recognising the curse on the treasure. (It is true that we are never told that Beowulf knew the treasure bore an ancient curse, but then we are not told Wiglaf knew either, until his actions reveal his knowledge. I think the poet means us to assume they all knew, or at any rate inferred, that the treasure was accursed from the beginning). Wiglaf is the one who berates the retainers—Beowulf was hardly in a position to do so—and what he accuses them of is in effect not disobeying their lord and coming to his rescue when they saw the dragon was too strong for him.

Of course the poet admired his hero, and he lived in a world in which lords took the decisions and retainers were not expected to comment. But the strength of the poem, a strength that may well draw its roots from the poet’s religion, or perhaps simply from the reflection of a courageous and clear-sighted man, is precisely that heroes are mortal and even the best of them susceptible to *hubris*. 