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Good and Evil within *Beowulf*

Introduction

An issue with ancient literature in general is that modern readers and critics must confront ideas of good and evil not necessarily conforming with conceptions of them in place long after the writing. In myths and epics of the distant past, there is usually set a contest between “good” and “evil,” but the distinctions are not always clear; for example, heroes from Greek legends are frequently of low character and act selfishly. This being the case, the epic poem *Beowulf* presents what may be seen as a unique and interesting blending of the heroic and the villainous, or good and evil, and chiefly because it was created in an era when paganism was eroding under the force of Christianity. On one level, *Beowulf* frequently brings the Christian God into play, and refers to good and evil in Christian terms. On another, the story and characters themselves strongly suggest a world in which Norse savagery was its own reward, or virtue, and warriors were inspired by the “good” of fame, power, and riches. The boundaries are blurred but the agenda remains clear. Ultimately, and while room for debate exists, *Beowulf* brings pagan forces into Christian conceptions, as the ultimate good of the hero defeats the more pagan and monstrous threats of Grendel, the mother, and the dragon.

Discussion

If *Beowulf*'s author remains unknown, the era and culture are established, and the epic was written in an age wherein an increasingly dominant Christianity was eclipsing paganism. The Norse, as is true of most ancient cultures, cherished their traditions and ideals, but there was no escaping the social and political power of the Church. What occurs then is storytelling

deliberately created to simultaneously honor Norse pagan beliefs and Christianity, which tolerated no pagan references. The anonymous poet weaves “God's will” throughout the narrative, in order to translate pagan forces into the acceptably divine (Bartz). More exactly, and ingeniously, *Beowulf's* author employs the pagan to embody destruction and evil, and his heroes to represent Christian virtue. These opposing forces are alluded to again and again; Beowulf is a glorious and renowned warrior prince, and Grendel as “pure” evil is equally emphasized, as in before the hero kills it/him: “The baneful wight, grim and greedy, fierce and pitiless, was soon alert, and took, when they rested, thirty thanes” (Child, *Beowulf* 4). This monster has terrorized the Danes for years, despite their courage, so the stage is literally set for a great hero to release them from the terror and, not incidentally, serve as an heir to Hrothgar. Beowulf as tailored to meet a Christian concept of good is also blatantly expressed by that king: “Him, I have hope, the Holy God has sent us West Danes of His grace for aid against dread of Grendel” (Child 9). It is then interesting to speculate that an ancient Norse fable completely rooted in paganism has been adapted to meet the needs of the age, in that the oral – or written and lost – tales of Beowulf may well have presented a more savage, or greatly flawed, hero in the style of Greek legend. This aside, however, the reality remains that Beowulf is predominantly good in a Christian sense, as Grendel represents the monstrous and evil darkness of paganism.

It is nonetheless important to note that, as the Norse were likely new to the concept of Christianity or any need to infuse it in their legends, Beowulf himself is a strangely contradictory hero of goodness. He does fight valiantly when called upon by those in need, and he seems to be guided by some sense of honor which may be Christian, or based on good for its own sake. At the same time, however, this hero is very interested in the material rewards his service brings to him, as well as the fame so important to Norsemen of battle. After Beowulf has killed Grendel's

mother and is king of his own people, he learns of the dragon and he offers his service again in a way also promoting his savage nature: “If...I may earn more of thy heart's love by deeds of war than I yet have done, I shall straightway be ready” (Child 37). He is good and he helps the Danes, but he seems pleased that bloodshed is necessary to do more good. Beowulf then goes on to reinforce his own commitments to violence, and he appears to insist on action above anything else. For example, when Aeschere is killed by the mother, Hrothgar refers to her in a strictly Christian sense of evil: “The murderous one, the demon, with her hand hath slain him in Heorot” (Child 27). The endless battles between good and the satanic within Christianity is further underscored. Again, however, Beowulf demands violence as the best means of acting for good: “It is better one should avenge his friend than mourn for him long” (Child 28). In a sense, this may be an Old Testament idea of Christianity, in which violence figures to a great deal. At the same time, however, such violence in the OT is the prerogative of God and, when men engage in it with no direction from God, they do evil. All of this then suggests the uncertainty with which *Beowulf* seeks to serve both Christianity and paganism, and despite the forces of good and evil as defined by, respectively, Beowulf and the monster mother and child.

Then, the *Beowulf* poet essentially reinforces the agenda of pitting Christian good against pagan evil through the actual lacks of consistency. There are questionable elements in the battle with the mother, but these only amplify the central purpose. For example, Beowulf's life is nearly taken by Grendel's mother because her attack is so ferocious. She is even able to survive a blow to the neck from the fabled ax, and it is implied that her drive is based on what may be a Christian or virtuous motive: “She thought to avenge her son, her only child” (Child 31). Certainly, the modern reader must wonder at evil being associated with maternal love. At the same time, however, this is in keeping with a Christian sense of morality, in that even demons

have cares that are based on love and virtue. Similarly, Beowulf again is motivated by both a desire to help the Danes and what rewards he will receive. Even as Grendel's mother nearly has him to kill, he retains his courage and strength: "So must a man do when he thinketh to reach in battle enduring fame" (Child 31). It is fame for himself, not the glory of God, that Beowulf seeks. As noted, then, debate is certainly possible regarding the varying interpretations of Christianity and pagan belief in the poem, but the questionable elements do not of themselves undermine the basic agenda or structure of Christian good warring against pagan evil.

Lastly, the poet basically brings the work to a Christian conclusion in terms of legacy. Upon Beowulf's death, and interestingly, his wife grieves partly because she sees her own position as vulnerable in this new world without the Geat king. Nonetheless, a Christian ethos overshadows this as the natives bury their hero: "The Geat-folk...said that he was a king like to none other...of men the mildest and most gracious to men" (Child 63). Consequently, Beowulf's influence on his people after his death is heroic, noble, and "Christian"; the people adopt as values Beowulf's honor, friendship, and generosity (Jones). The epic itself contradicts the praise of the hero in some ways, even as this praise also goes to his hunger for glory. These elements aside, however, the basic theme is intact and, even in death, Beowulf is the embodiment of Christian values.

Conclusion

An ancient epic is by no means obligated to adhere to later ideas regarding good and evil, and Beowulf is no exception. In this work, however, we see that a changing world was determined to set pagan myth within the confines of the new Christianity ruling the society. As good and evil are universal forces no matter the belief system, the ambition is accomplished, even if "residual" paganism, as in Beowulf's personal motives and craving for violence, appears.

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In the final analysis, and while the theme varies at times, *Beowulf* unites pagan forces with Christian concepts, as the ultimate goodness of the title hero defeats the pagan and monstrous evils of Grendel, the mother, and the dragon.

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