Anglo-Saxon Language and Traditions in

Beowulf

Barry Tharaud

In the following essay, Beowulf scholar and translator Barry Tharaud explores the dominant culture established by the Germanic tribes that invaded and settled Britain. The social obligations and traditions that bound this civilization together are different from modern values, and must be understood before Beowulf can make sense. Tharaud also explicates the literary and epic principles in the poem.

The original inhabitants of Britain were Celts. In 55 B.C. Roman legions began to invade Britain, and by A.D. 43 Romans began to establish settlements on the island. For the next four hundred years Britain was part of the Roman Empire, until the Romans were forced to withdraw during the gradual disintegration of the empire. The Germanic tribes that invaded the Roman Empire (and were in part responsible for its disintegration) also invaded Britain and established the dominant culture there. The Middle Ages in England thus began with the withdrawal of the Romans and the arrival of various Germanic tribes during the mid-fifth century, and ended in 1485 with the conclusion of the Wars of the Roses, the beginning of the revival of learning, and the beginning of a new political stability—conditions that were part of a cultural development we now call the Renaissance.

Moreover, the Middle Ages in England can be divided into the Anglo-Saxon (or Old English) period, and the Norman-French (or Middle English) period, which began in 1066 with the invasion and conquest of Britain by a Norman duke, William the Conqueror. There are substantial political, literary, and temperamental differences between the two periods, but by the end of the Middle Ages the foundations of
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modern English language and culture had been established through a rich mixture of Anglo-Saxon and Norman-French cultures. When we read Beowulf and other Old English poems, we encounter the foundations of Anglo-American culture, including ideas and traits of temperament that are still with us today.

**Excellence in Warfare**

The Anglo-Saxons who began to invade Britain in the fifth century were members of Germanic tribes from what are today the Netherlands, Denmark, northern Germany, and southern Sweden. The invasions occurred over several centuries and were part of a larger movement of northern tribes that eventually overran the Roman Empire. The Germanic tribes shared a common cultural heritage that included closely related languages, customs, and tribal organization, but they apparently lacked the ability or inclination to form a large permanent political confederation—although they were capable of sporadic cooperation during military campaigns. In this respect they were like the Mycenaean Greeks that Homer celebrates in the Iliad and Odyssey; in fact, readers who are familiar with the heroic ideals expressed in the Homeric epics are already familiar with some of the most important aspects of Anglo-Saxon ideals.

The most important Anglo-Saxon ideal was “excellence”—which ancient Greeks of the heroic and post-heroic ages called aretē. Although this excellence could be expressed in various ways, it above all was demonstrated by skill and courage and resourcefulness in battle. Ideally, the warrior with the greatest courage would be the king, or “lord,” and his courage would be measured by his success in battle and demonstrated by the spoils of war that he and his warriors captured. These spoils were handed over to the lord, who then partially redistributed them to his warriors (“thanes” or “retainers”) to reward them according to their courage in battle. Hence such epithets as “ring-giver” and “dispenser of treasure” are commonly applied in Anglo-Saxon poetry to the tribal king or lord. The spoils of war thus determined the status of the individual in the warrior band, or comitatus, and the comitatus itself was based on the reciprocal loyalty and recognition between thane and lord. These rewards were distributed in the mead hall, which was a symbol of social unity. (“Mead” is a fermented drink.)

**The Spoils of War and Heroic Virtue**

The spoils of war were not regarded as material wealth as in a modern market economy in which the value of goods and services is determined primarily by the laws of supply and demand. Instead the spoils of war were accounted valuable only as symbols of the courage and resourcefulness that won them. Such spoils would be meaningless in the hands of a person who did not acquire them through valor. For example, when an outlaw steals a gold cup from a dragon’s treasure hoard in Part Three of Beowulf, it is not only an act of theft; it is also a blow against the entire heroic system because it reduces the symbolic value of things to mere material value. It is a fall from the heroic world to a less ideal world in which symbols are deceptive and equivocal: Material objects no longer accurately represent ideals but are merely “things.” It is appropriate therefore that the wealth of the dragon’s hoard is not distributed at the end of the epic: First because Beowulf the “ring-giver” is dead; and secondly because all but one of his thanes deserted him in his time of need and therefore the treasure cannot symbolize the excellence of these men: They have failed to fulfill their vows and obligations to their lord, and therefore the spoils of battle from the dragon’s hoard are symbolically meaningless.

We can see then that the heroic society depicted in Beowulf and in Anglo-Saxon poetry generally is based upon a system of ideals that includes courage, strength, and loyalty, which are then symbolically expressed through material objects (battle spoils). But such is the nature of all societies, and hence it seems fair to enquire what symbols and ideals form the foundation of one’s own society, and to ask how worthy such ideals appear when they are compared with the Anglo-Saxon ideals of Beowulf.

One can also go a step further in the examination of Anglo-Saxon ideals: Battle spoils embody heroic virtues such as courage and skill, but heroic excellence is itself a divine spark within man. Hence it is not surprising that Beowulf is superhuman or semi-divine, since he possesses such a great capacity for divine excellence. And because immortality is an attribute of divinity, the hero who expresses such divine excellence in actions is worthy to be immortalized by the song of the poet (“bard” or “scop”) who preserves the fame of the hero in a society where writing does not exist.
FEATURES OF ANGLO-SAXON POETRY

The Anglo-Saxon bard's poetry, which confers immortality on the hero, is both stylistically and linguistically different from modern English poetry. In fact, Old English is a different language from modern English, and so when we read the poem in English, we are reading a translation from a "dead" language that is no longer spoken.

Anglo-Saxon poetry generally does not use rhyme as a principle of structural organization. Instead, it uses a system of alliteration, whereby stressed syllables beginning with the same sound are linked together. Each line is divided by a pause, or "caesura," and there are two stressed syllables in each half-line. At least one of the two stressed syllables in the first half of the line must alliterate with the first stress in the second half of the line, and stressed vowels are considered to alliterate with each other.

Another technique that distinguishes Anglo-Saxon poetry is the use of compound metaphor, or "kenning," whereby the sea is called the "whale's road" or the "swan's path." Alliteration, which is the main principle of organization in Old English verse, gives Anglo-Saxon poetry a characteristic forcefulness that seems to be a reflection of the Saxon temperament. In the poem Beowulf and a number of other Old English poems, the Anglo-Saxon attitudes and values stand out: We are shown glimpses of a life that is harsh and dark and filled with uncertainty—a life in which the principal value is the courage that enables one to face such a world with a grim realism that bears little relation to the romanticized courage expressed by some later poets.

EPIC CONVENTIONS

But the poem does a great deal more than portray a kind of courage. Beowulf belongs to a special kind of literature known as epic, which is characterized generally by great length, a dignified tone, and elevated style. An epic tells the story of a people or race during its origins or during some period of crisis. Originally, epics were composed orally—usually in a preliterate culture—and were sung by a bard accompanied by a lyre. This kind of oral epic is sometimes designated "primary epic" by scholars, to distinguish it from the more sophisticated "secondary epic" of literate societies.

Epic is often anonymous and is not written down until centuries after its composition, while secondary epic is composed to be read rather than sung. Some examples of primary epic are Homer's Iliad and Odyssey, and the Anglo-Saxon Beowulf; examples of secondary epic are Virgil's Aeneid and Milton's Paradise Lost.

Whether an epic is composed to be sung or to be read, its most important characteristic is that it tells the story of a society or culture—usually during a time of crisis—in such a way as to expose contradictions inherent in the values of that society. For example, the contradiction often centers around the conflict between the individual and society. In Beowulf, the pre-English Anglo-Saxon culture exists in a climate of violence and uncertainty: The central events of the poem are the depredations of Grendel, Grendel's mother, and the fire dragon—violent cataclysms that threaten the very existence of society.

Moreover, throughout the poem we are given flashbacks of previous violence and chaos, and allusions are made to future violence and chaos. Hence the central events of the poem may be more spectacular than normal, but the portrait of a society fighting for its very existence is typical rather than unusual. Under such conditions, the survival of the individual warrior is dependent on a strong social organization that not only protects him but also gives meaning and structure to his life. Furthermore, if the individual is dependent on society for security and a sense of coherence in his life, society is in turn dependent on a strong and skillful leader for its survival.

THE SURVIVAL OF SOCIETY

 Ideally, the great deeds of the hero affirm both the hero and society, and bind them together in a mutually beneficial relationship: Society needs heroic deeds to survive, and the hero needs a social context to give meaning and recognition to his deeds.

The potential conflict between individual and society is suggested in Beowulf when Hrothgar warns the hero against the sin of pride. Beowulf successfully slays Grendel and Grendel's mother, and is therefore generously rewarded by King Hrothgar; but Beowulf obviously has the power to take whatever rewards he desires. Instead, he acts for the good of society and subjects himself to Hrothgar's authority. Moreover, when he returns to his homeland, he presents his
battle spoils to his lord, Hygelac, and after Hygelac’s death he supports the natural succession of Hygelac’s son to the throne. Clearly, the outstanding prowess of a hero like Beowulf must be matched by outstanding wisdom and self-mastery, lest he destroy the very society that gives him recognition and humanity. . . .

Because Beowulf is heroic both physically and spiritually, he at times seems like the warfaring Christian hero of a later age—and perhaps the poem does reflect some Christian values in addition to pagan heroic values, although scholars disagree about the extent and the nature of the influence. Beowulf was probably composed by a single poet sometime between the eighth and tenth centuries, after Britain had been converted to Christianity by missionaries from both Rome and Ireland; but the poem also reflects Anglo-Saxon pagan culture before its conversion to Christianity and before its invasion of Britain. (Although the poem was composed in Christian England, the events take place centuries earlier in the continental homeland of pre-Christian Anglo-Saxons.) . . .

THE UNION OF VALUES

Anglo-Saxon heroic ideals were apparently so ingrained that when Christianity was reintroduced to Britain in the late sixth century (it had previously been introduced in the fourth century by the Romans, who left in the mid-fifth century), Christian and heroic ideals became fused. In Caedmon’s poem, “Hymn to the Creator,” for example, God is patterned after the Anglo-Saxon lord who rewards his thanes and leads a comitatus: He is described as “Eternal Lord,” “Guardian,” “Glory-Father,” and “Master Almighty,” while in another early Anglo-Saxon poem, “The Dream of the Rood,” Jesus is described as a strong, stout-hearted young hero, and heaven is a sort of fast in the great mead hall that is paradise.

Although Anglo-Saxon ideals and literary style remained strong and intact to the end of the Old English period, they were rapidly supplanted by new attitudes and literary styles after the Norman invasion of England. The difference between the two periods is immediately apparent when one compares and contrasts Anglo-Saxon with Middle English literature: There are striking differences in style and subject matter, just as in daily life there were striking differences in social and political attitudes between the two periods.

But above all, the most obvious difference between the Old English and Middle English periods is to be found in the language: Old English is a different language from modern English, while Middle English can be easily read and understood, after little or no training, by anyone with a knowledge of modern English. Nevertheless, the Anglo-Saxon influence remains a strong and permanent basis of modern American culture. Although the Normans imported a great number of French and Latin words into the English language, Anglo-Saxon is still the backbone of the language: More than sixty percent of the vocabulary in English can be traced back to Latin roots, but of the one thousand most commonly used words in English, some eighty-three percent come from Anglo-Saxon roots. And perhaps Anglo-Saxon moral and cultural influences are as pervasive today in our culture as in our language. The poem Beowulf, which embodies Anglo-Saxon culture and language more completely and intensely than any other work of literature, still stands as a great fountainhead of our culture and our language. To understand and appreciate this great epic is to be more intimately acquainted with our culture and ourselves.