INFALLIBILITY THROUGH DUALITY

Jakob Johnson

Abstract: This paper examines the puzzling interplay of Christianity and paganism in the English epic, Bēowulf, adopting a new psychoanalytical approach to explain the blending of two (seemingly) mutually exclusive faiths. Applying Saunder L. Gilman's theory of stereotyping, an extension of Lacanian psychology, this essay analyzes the Bēowulf-poet's motives for including such opposing religions, taking into consideration the time period's rocky transition from Saxon paganism to Christianity. This a crucial step for scholars, since so few primary documents address the practicalities of Christianity's adoption into Britain, and any inkling into how the common people (such as the Bēowulf-poet) responded to this shift would be greatly insightful to this virtually undocumented period of Western history. Bēowulf may in fact be the unique window into the battle between the faiths, a singular moment in history captured in the person of its stalwart protagonist.

*B*ēowulf is the beginning of the English Literary Canon, one of the oldest surviving examples of Anglo-Saxon, and yet scholars know embarrassingly little about its origins and creation. The *Nowell Codex*, the earliest manuscript of the epic, tentatively dates from around 1000 AD, and yet the first iteration could have been written any time after 550 AD (Clark). Although we don't know the *Bēowulf*-poet, or even how close the lay is to the original, much can be deciphered about them through the text, specifically the poem's titular character. Bēowulf is heroic to a fault. His Christian benevolence, coupled with pagan dauntlessness, creates one of the most infallible and ethically puzzling heroes in literature. Saunder L. Gilman's concept of the "good" Other, manifesting itself in the infallible hero stereotype, elucidates this interplay of pagan and Christian themes in *Bēowulf,* offering a striking insight into the mindset of someone grappling to transition between two incompatible religions. Using this concept, what can the reader learn about the *Bēowulf*-poet? What centuries-old anxieties can be extrapolated from Bēowulf? My goal is to take this archaic hero stereotype, and reverse-analyze *Bēowulf's* characterization, looking for specific compensations and what they would reveal about the *Bēowulf*-poet's anxieties.

Gilman queries the nature of stereotypes in his book, *Differences and Pathology: Stereotypes of Sexuality, Race, and Madness* (London, 1985). In the introductory essay, "What are Stereotypes and Why do We Use Them?" Gilman proposes that the stereotype is formed as a coping mechanism to the "anxiety" that surrounds the lack of perception of control; by stereotyping, by compartmentalizing the world, we "buffer" our fears, separating them from us with a cushy layer of stereotype, thereby creating comfort. One of the most integral steps in this process happens early in life, when the developing mind makes its first distinction between the perceived "good" and "bad."

Gilman describes that in the world, there is the Self and the Other, each divided further into the "good" and "bad." The "bad" Other is a reflection of the "bad" Self, and often mirrors the perceived causes of the Self's loss of control. The "good" Other is what we *aspire* to be, it's everything we could be, *but cannot achieve*—that's the crucial part. The "good" Other is the main idea that I'll be working with; according to Gilman, "the 'good' [Other], with its infallible correctness, becomes the antithesis to the flawed

image of the self, the self out of control…. the 'good' Other becomes the positive stereotype…. which we fear we cannot achieve" (Gilman 20). The "good" Other differs from the reciprocal "bad" Other because it becomes fixed in our minds. We desire and reject it because we both crave and cannot have it. Again, to cope with this anxiety of never being able to have control of the "good" Other, we create a stereotype around it, a stereotype "labeled with a set of signs paralleling (or mirroring) our loss of control" (Gilman 20). The "good" Other stereotype is what we *want* to be, it is our ideal self, free from the anxieties that weigh us down; that is what Gilman means by "infallible correctness."

This positive stereotype is often expressed in writing, in the form of the protagonist. Writing allows the author to express their ideal self in a controlled environment: a simulation of how that positive stereotype would function. Gilman states that it is "within texts that we can best examine our representations of the world" which allow us to "buffer" our positive stereotype *with the text* (16). When distanced by the metaphorical 'space' between fantasy and reality, the "good" Other becomes contained and loses its power of anxiety, creating a unique situation where the "good" Other can be fully fleshed out and explored without feeling that passive envy that it would normally generate. It becomes a thing of fiction, so prevalent it becomes a stereotype, and loses that 'realness' whence comes its chief stress.

The *hero*, then, becomes the author's "good" Other, in complete control of the narrative, free from anxiety, and expressing that "infallible correctness" that is the "antithesis" of the author's self-image. Typically, these infallible heroes will have the societal markers of control: intelligence, strength, charisma, beauty, and any cultural norm that is prevalent at the time. Mary Bowman comments on this same change in values in her essay, "Words, Swords, and Truth: Competing Visions of Heroism in Beowulf on Screen." She analyzes various modern iterations of *Bēowulf* and how they differ from the original:

> As scholars of medievalism are well aware, the way heroes of ancient and medieval tales are re-imagined for contemporary audiences says a great deal about our own conceptions of the heroic: what is desirable and what is possible in a hero for our time. (Bowman 147)

We reimagine our heroes because the "ideal" becomes reimagined. The societal "good" Other slowly changes, leading to a change in the infallible hero stereotype. However, the infallible hero is also marked (albeit more subtly) with the specific anxieties of the author: the "set of signs" which compensate for the author's negative self-image. These personal markers are the aspect of the stereotype I'll be looking at in *Bēowulf*, which reveal intimate details about the poet's internal conflicts and aspirations. But to fully analyze Bēowulf, it is crucial to have an understanding of the poem's history, and why a piece like it is so rare.

Around 1000 years ago, an anonymous East Anglian monk diligently transcribed all of *Bēowulf* into a small manuscript which then lay in the "secure neglect of a monastic library" for a few centuries where its only worries were rainwater and mites (Clark 3). During the dissolution of the monasteries by Henry VIII, the document was in the path of direct harm. "Most of the poetry of the Anglo-Saxon period and much else besides perished in a riot of looting led by the King's favorites; many ancient manuscripts were torn up, some to wrap fish, some for bookbinding materials" (Clark 3). However, the document was providentially spared, and later bound by an antiquarian named Laurence Nowell (hence the name *Nowell Codex*), who squirreled it away for modern scholars to marvel at. Thanks to that monk of East Anglia, we have *Bēowulf*, but at the cost of any other concrete information about its author, place of origin, or time of creation. That is why any inkling into the *Bēowulf*-poet's artistry would be so important for medieval and *Bēowulf* scholars.

In order to make judgements about the *Bēowulf*-poet, it is important to have a firm grasp of what was happening in the span of

Bēowulf's inception, and the major events that would have impacted the life of someone like the *Bēowulf*-poet. Within that 500-year window, England was going through one of the largest cultural clashes in the island's history. The Romans had abandoned the Britons a few centuries earlier, resulting in the invasions by the German Saxons. England, along with the rest of the previous Roman Empire, fell into the Dark Ages; education became passé, leaving very few written documents from that era. Yet following the Saxons came the steady inflow of the Christian Gospel to the isles, and the evangelization of the residents out of Saxon paganism. With that in mind, the themes of Christianity versus paganism in *Bēowulf* have an entirely new meaning. *Bēowulf* is a glimpse into this period of religious contention, a (slipping) compromise between two diametrically opposed moralities, reflected in the wrestling within Bēowulf's religious duality.

As a character, Bēowulf is obviously pagan. The plot of the epic follows his quest for glory: slaying beasts, becoming a beloved king, and earning for himself immortal fame after his glorious death fighting the wyrm. In all respects, these are in tune with Saxon ethics, which held that pride and fame were the great accomplishments that engendered immortality. In Heorot, Bēowulf shamelessly applauds his past deeds, recalling zealously his feats of strength clearing the ocean-ways of sea-beasts to Unferth: "Truth I claim it, / that I had more of might in the sea/ than any man else, more ocean-endurance" (MIT, lns. 532-4)[1]. His tone does not reflect tentativeness or even jest; Bēowulf factually believes that he is stronger than any man in the water. It's not just an idle boast either. On top of pride and skill, he demonstrates almost inhuman ability, claimed to have "thirty men's/ heft of grasp in the gripe of his hand" (MIT lns. 379-80), and his outward

appearance is so stunning, that upon laying eyes on him, a horseman of Hroðgar states: "A greater ne'er saw I/ of warriors in world than is one of you, / yon hero in harness! No henchman he/ worthied by weapons, if witness his features, / his peerless presence!" (MIT lns. 247-50). This is only one example, but anywhere that Beowulf goes, his "peerless" countenance always heralds his arrival. These traits are representative of the old lays and heroes imported from Saxony that the *Bēowulf*-poet would have been exposed to. With Christianity being so new, so authoritative, wanting to be like the old pagan heroes would be a nostalgic comfort for the poet, a reach towards the familiar. After all, there was still a lot of fear and doubt in the population about the switch. In her essay, "Blurred Lines: Does Religious Polarity Create Problematic Heroes in the Poem, Bēowulf?" Doctor Elizabeth Bell Canon marks the nonlinear trajectory of the assimilation of Christianity on the island, and how during the black plague in 664, many returned to pagan gods, making sacrifices in old places of worship (Canon 58). Paganism was safer than Christianity and its Almighty God, and by having these values in their "good" Other, the *Bēowulf*-poet was trying to emulate that pagan control which Bēowulf had in his life.

This brings up the other half of Bēowulf's duality: on top of his pagan characteristics, Bēowulf is the ideal Christian. His speech and intelligence reflect his godly beliefs. King Hroðgar praises him on this as they depart Heorot: "These words of thine the wisest God/ sent to thy soul! No sager counsel/ from so young in years e'er yet have I heard. / Thou art strong of main and in mind art wary, / art wise in words!" (MIT lns. 1841-5). Bēowulf is more than just a worshipper, he is God's tool; God speaks through him, and he was sent by Him to purge the lands of Grendel (or "Cain's kin" as

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[1] Also note, that since my analysis relies so heavily on the specific tonality of the original poet, I am using MIT's 2003 bilingual translation of Bēowulf, which is as close to the original Anglo-Saxon as I can readily find without quoting the Old English itself.

the poem often labels the demon, further adding to Bēowulf's Christian mission). Very literally, God was speaking through Bēowulf; his quest was ordained and blessed by God, who even intervenes in the plot. As the hero wrestles with Grendel's mother, the narrator says, "The Lord of Heaven allowed his cause;/ and easily rose the earl [Bēowulf] erect" (MIT lns. 1555-6). Before he dealt the final blow, his faith in the Almighty slipped ever so slightly, but just as a literary tactic to make his victory seem even more impressive: "But [Bēowulf] remembered his mighty power,/ the glorious gift that God had sent him,/ in his Maker's mercy put his trust/ for comfort and help: so he conquered the foe" (MIT lns. 1270-4). Bēowulf conquers Grendel's mother by faith. This battle transcends strength (thereby transcending paganism) and becomes a spiritual battle between Bēowulf (God's proxy) and Grendel's mother (primordial Evil). This characterization is illuminated even further against the backdrop of anti-pagan rhetoric the narrator expresses about Hroðgar and his following. In the exposition, the narrator highlights the pacts Hroðgar made with pagan "devils" in a vain effort to help purge Heorot of Grendel before Bēowulf arrived: "Woe for that man/ who in harm and hatred hales his soul/ to fiery embraces; nor favor nor change/ awaits he ever" (MIT ln. 183-6). The juxtaposition between the "harm and hatred" and the "peerless" Bēowulf adds depth and pristinely defines the "good" versus "bad" that this poem sets up. Perhaps out of context, Bēowulf wouldn't appear so saintly, but against Hroðgar and the other Danes, Bēowulf is a stunning example of saintly principles. The *Bēowulf*-poet doesn't just want to be a Christian, they want to be the best Christian. Bēowulf is an example of not only being a believer in God, but being chosen by God. God has seen Bēowulf, accepted his traits, and selected him for this holy task of purifying great evils. In a way, God is blessing Bēowulf's pagan traits, and by including this in their "good" Other, manifests the *Bēowulf*-poet's desire to excel in the new and dangerous

faith that is sweeping England.

Moreover, the pagan themes directly contradict the humility and tone of the Christian narrator (it has even led many scholars to believe that the Christian elements were added later, amending an originally Saxon epic). Ideally, the *Bēowulf*-poet would have a unique agreement of the two, just like the titular character: God's support with Saxon ethics. But, because paganism and Christianity are mutually exclusive, the *Bēowulf*-poet knows he can never achieve the desired balance, which is why in his hero stereotype (reflecting the "good" Other), Bēowulf is that unity. Canon claims that Bēowulf is the "'worthy' pagan" (Canon 63), but the very nature of his religious duality creates an *imperfect* hero. Her argument is that Bēowulf is "in a state of religious limbo— moving imperfectly from pagan to Christian" and by trying to "zig zag" between Christian and pagan elements, the epic ultimately fails, creating neither a perfect Christian hero, nor a working pagan one (Canon 60).

> He [Bēowulf] is a pagan hero with Christian morality but lacking salvation. Although he does not complicate his religious image with the same link to pagan devil worship that Hroðgar does, he is buried in the pagan tradition—adding to the problematic nature of Bēowulf as Christian-like hero. (Canon 62)

I disagree that Bēowulf is problematic. His death is a failure by Christian terms (not having the "salvation" of a righteous end), but is by all means a pagan success. He won for his kingdom a trove of unimaginable riches to spread among the citizens, and tales of his valor will be sung by minstrels for generations after. Although Bēowulf fails for not being either purely pagan or Christian, I don't think that was the point. This epic was the fulfilled product of the author's fantasy of having the best of both worlds. Historical Christians were not very tolerant of "part-time believers," and the resulting anxiety of not being able to reconcile your faiths— the core contradiction of Anglo-Saxon life for many—would cause tremendous stress to the

individual. A perfect blend like Bēowulf is impossible, something that the *Bēowulf*-poet would aspire to achieve, and the knowledge that it could never be actualized is that perceived lack of control that they would have to confront. In the *Bēowulf*-poet's "good" Other, paganism and Christianity harmonize. That harmony is then represented in the *Bēowulf*-poet's take on the infallible hero stereotype, and manifests itself in the curious emulsification of religions in Bēowulf that has intrigued scholars for decades.

Bēowulf is incredibly important to the greater English Canon, not just as one of the rare pieces of Anglo-Saxon literature, but because it peeks into one of the most paradigmal shifts in English history. The battle between faiths reveals the internal battle that many, like the *Bēowulf*-poet, were experiencing. This is important since there are so few primary documents discussing this change. The revisionist views of the Catholic Church would (and have) largely overlooked the assimilation difficulties of Christianity into a pagan setting. With *Bēowulf*, however, medieval scholars are presented with an epic that successfully eluded the Church's Orwellian censorship. Understanding Gilman's "good" Other, and its relationship to the infallible Bēowulf, we can hold up a mirror to the Church's own internal conflicts, reluming the rightly-named Dark Ages.

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