In the Name of God

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Reconciliation of Paganism and Christianity in *Beowulf*: The Role of Epic Poetry as a Reconciler of Opposing Cultural Elements a New-Historicist Reading

By
Farbod Azsan

Supervisor
Dr. Maryam Soltan Beyad

Reader
Dr. Hamed Habibzadeh

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We, the committee members, hereby recommend that the thesis entitled **"Reconciliation of Paganism and Christianity in *Beowulf*: The Role of Epic Poetry as a Reconciler of Opposing Cultural Elements a New-Historicist Reading"** submitted by **Farbod Azsan** be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the degree of Master of Arts in English Language and Literature.

Dr. Maryam Soltan Beyad (Supervisor) .....

Dr. Hamed Habibzadeh (Reader) .....

Dr. Mohammad Hossein Ramezan Kiyaee (Internal Examiner) .....

Dr. Sousan Poursanati (External Examiner) .....

Dr. Maryam Soltan Beyad (Head of English Department) .....

Abstract:

Epic poems lend themselves greatly to new-historical reading, because they embrace their role as exposers of power relations in their society, so much in fact that there is not much need for reading between the lines; the epic poet proudly presents cultural elements, historical figures and norms that the dominant hegemony endorses. Beowulf, as one of these epic poems, is a portal to many Anglo-Saxon, Pagan and Germanic cultural norms, namely Comitatus, boasting before battle and the warrior code related to the Germanic Pagan culture. However, it is ultimately a promoter of Christian values. So it is clear that Beowulf is a Pagan story retold by a poet with Christian sensibilities. The writer of this thesis, using Seamus Heaney's translation, approaches the text of Beowulf with special regard to the juxtaposition of Pagan and Christian cultural elements in its text. The relationship between these two opposing cultural elements is manifested in Pagan and Christian tensions which the poet tries to resolve: 1. Wyrd (or the fate that drives men to destruction) and the mercy of the Christian God 2. The presence of mythological monsters in a Christian world 3. The cultural importance of vengeance in the context of a religion that abhors it. 4. The cultural value of treasure and trinkets in the context of a religion that deems them unnecessary 5. The pagan value of personal strength for overcoming challenge vs. the Christian idea of God's grace as a necessary requirement for overcoming evil, etc. These tensions are not just limited to Beowulf; a large number of epic poems from various cultural backgrounds (including

The Aeneid, *Shahname* and the Renaissance epics) also try to reconcile the opposing cultural elements of their respective societies by implementing them in juxtaposition to one another. The writer of this thesis will use the new-historical methodology of Stephen Greenblatt to identify opposing cultural elements in Beowulf and some other epics and to demonstrate how these epics try to reconcile opposing cultural elements through both thematic and formalistic means.

Key Terms: Christianity, Paganism, Warrior Culture, Anglo-Saxon England, Epic Poetry, Cultural Tension, Cultural Reconciliation

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Chapter One:

Introduction

1.1 Introduction

…the distinction between a sacred and a secular poem never seems to me a *poetic* distinction. You can regard all strong poetry as being religious, or all strong poetry as being secular, but to judge one authentic poem as being more religious or more secular than another seems to me a societal or political matter rather than an aesthetic finding. (1)

Beowulf: Bloom's Modern Critical Interpretation – Harold Bloom

When people hear the word "culture", they envision everything that is good and noble about humanity: art, literature, music, traditional customs, national holidays rooted in the proud history of a nation. But when the social, political and historical context that conceptualize famous and beloved cultural artifacts are considered, a different, darker side of culture comes into light; we come to realize that perhaps, culture is the greatest dictator that has ever existed.

Before any further elaboration on the role of culture as a great dictator, it is necessary to define the concept, which is no easy task, for as Raymond Williams has said: "Culture is one of the two or three most complicated words in the English language. This is so partly because of its intricate historical development, in several European languages, but mainly because it has now come to be used for important concepts in several distinct intellectual disciplines and in several distinct and incompatible systems of thought" (87).

When we get to the definition, it might seem that the approach of this thesis towards the concept of culture is too cynical, but it is important to consider that new-historicism, the theoretical approach behind this thesis, is mostly concerned with power relations in society. This thesis is influenced by Stephen Greenblatt's *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare* and *Invisible Bullets*. In these works,

Greenblatt demonstrates how the dominant power manifests itself even in the most innocent literary and non-literary texts. If the approach of this thesis seems cynical, it's because the ubiquitous force that is power has made the human world a cynical place.

Clifford Geertz, one of the main inspirations behind new-historicism, has much to say about culture in his seminal work *The Interpretation of Culture.* Geertz also has attested to the difficulty of defining the word and his solution was to stick with one definition; "eclecticism is self-defeating not because there is only one direction in which it is useful to move, but because there are so many: it is necessary to choose" (5).

Geertz lists the most common understandings that people have of the word "culture":

> (1) "the total way of life of a people"; (2) "the social legacy the individual acquires from his group"; (3) "a way of thinking, feeling, and believing"; (4) "an abstraction from behavior"; (5) a theory on the part of the anthropologist about the way in which a group of people in fact behave; (6) a "store house of pooled learning"; (7) "a set of standardized orientations to recurrent problems"; (8) "learned behavior"; (9) a mechanism for the normative regulation of behavior; (10) "a set of techniques for adjusting both to the external environment and to other men"; (11) "a precipitate of history"; and turning, perhaps in desperation, to similes, as a map, as a sieve, and as a matrix (4-5).

Then he goes on to define his "choice", regarding the definition of culture: "Believing, with Max Weber, that man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun, I take culture to be those webs, and the analysis of it to be therefore not an experimental science in search of law but an interpretive one in search of meaning" (5).

Geertz's definition of culture is more humanistic and less scientific and that's what makes it attractive, because culture is fundamentally a human issue, not a natural one. But in this definition, an important question is left unanswered: why humans feel the need to spin these webs of significance around themselves in the first place? The answer to this question must be included in the definition that is fitting for this thesis, and the definition is a variation of Geertz's: Culture is a web of significance spun around humans by the forces in charge, namely the archetypal figures of the chieftain and the shaman, as a way to homogenize people, through the illusion of "meaning".

Human beings need to have the same idea about certain things in order to be able to live in each other's vicinity, work together, form families, or to be more exact, live as a tribe. The structure of the tribe would fall apart if its members had different ideas about issues everyone had to deal with, i.e. marriage or childbirth. Cultural rituals are meaningful and legitimate, because those in power have given them legitimacy. By themselves, they're arbitrary and worthless.

In 2014, Yuval Noah Harari published *Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind* in English. This book was a best-seller, but it has been received with much skepticism from the scientific community. But one of Harari's main argument is worth consideration in regards to this thesis. He believes the reason humans have been able to dominate every other species on planet Earth is their ability to cooperate and the main force behind this talent for cooperation is the humans' ability to make up fiction and believe in it. All the myths and gods of the ancient past were a tool to homogenize people, to prevent discord and disagreement among them. The fact that they didn't exist was the reason they were so effective, because as long as those authority presented them as real, there was no way to prove them wrong (27). Harari's argument and its relation to this thesis will be developed further in chapter 3.

As human societies developed, culture and its role in homogenizing people became more complicated. This complexity has many different aspects, but the aspect that this thesis is concerned with is the mixture of opposing cultural elements and ways those in authority deal with the resulting paradox. The technical term chosen for this paradox is "cultural tension" and the authority's attempt at making sense of this paradox and making it seem as a part of the dominant culture is "cultural reconciliation". In other words, cultural tension happens when two opposing cultural elements (like Christian and pagan or nationalistic and foreign) are co-existing in a way that one could not be eliminated in favor of the other without causing unfavorable consequences. Cultural reconciliation refers to the process in which cultural tension is attempted to be resolved by using opposing cultural elements alongside each other, in a way that they don't seem to oppose each other at all.

In a way, *Beowulf* is the perfect cultural artifact for understanding cultural tension and cultural reconciliation, because it is a unique combination of both Christian and pagan elements. This combination is so eccentric and at some points, has been performed so shrewdly that critics have debated about it for over a century. Some have argued that Beowulf is a pagan poem with later interpolated Christian elements by a Christian scholar and some have argued that the Christian elements are so integral to the poem that it is not possible to separate them from the text and consider them the work of a later interpolator. Both of these views (and anything in-between) will be discussed throughout the thesis, because this unresolved disagreement helps to establish the point of this research further.

Now that the meaning behind the word "culture" is clear, it is also important to clarify what is meant by using the word "pagan", because the word is used in at least three senses: the literal, the vestigial and the ethical (Irving Jr. 121). The literal "is the

most precise, since it refers to the actual practices and beliefs of a pre-Christian religion in which the Germanic people participated" (121-22). The second sense refers to the remnants of pagan culture in the everyday life, like the names of Germanic gods in the days of the week (123). This definition is not relevant to this thesis. The third sense is the most controversial one: it lies in the realm of ethics and morality (124). It is controversial, because the boundary between Christian morality and pagan morality is not always clear. For example, if we attribute truthfulness to Christianity, that would be to imply pre-Christian people idolized lying and deceitfulness. But there is no doubt that one of the strongest and most complicated paradoxes in the poem is the presence of both Anglo-Saxon warrior code and Christian morality (and also the condemnation of pagan practices). These themes will be further elaborated upon in chapter three and four.

1.2 General Overview

The aim of this research is to analyze *Beowulf* from a new-historical perspective, with special regards to the doctrine of early Christianity and the history of Anglo-Saxon England and explain why it was necessary for the Beowulf poet to combine pagan and Christian elements in such a problematic and seemingly paradoxical way. The answer revolves around the power dynamics between the Christian hegemony of the ruling minority and the pagan way of life of the serving majority. Since in the beginning, Christianity didn't have a strong root in the heart of people and there were many shallow conversion and relapses to paganism up to 686 (the last openly pagan king died this year) (Pennick 12), the Churchmen saw it necessary to present Christianity and Christ as not that different from the spirit of Anglo-Saxon paganism. In a way, they were correct. As long as culture is homogenizing people in accordance to the purposes of the ruling hegemony, it's doing its job. The paradoxes are nothing but a mere trifle.

Many scholars have pointed out and applauded the Beowulf poet's sense of history. Behind *Beowulf*'s fantastical façade, there is a deep historical background, both of early 6th century Scandinavia (which is the setting of the poem) and the post-Christianized Anglo-Saxon England. Therefore, chapter two is mainly concerned with explaining the history behind the poem and locating its place in the literary and cultural history of early medieval period. The first part of the chapter is dedicated to locating the time-period that the poem's events could have taken place. There are references to historical figures such as Hygelac and historical incidents such as Battle on the Ice of Lake Vänern. Thanks to these references, the setting of the poem is set as the early 6th century Denmark and Sweden. The second part is dedicated to the intertextuality of *Beowulf* and introducing some of the possible Biblical, Classical and Germanic sources that *Beowulf* could have been inspired by. The last part of the chapter is dedicated to determining the date of the poem's composition and explaining the concept of "Historical Density", which makes an exact date of composition unnecessary for a new-historical analysis.

Chapter three is concerned with identifying the cultural elements in the poem that are clearly pagan. These elements include Beowulf's inclination towards violence and challenges, Comitatus, idolization of courage and shaming cowardice, boasting, revenge culture, decoration of shield and armor, mead-halls and Anglo-Saxon warrior code. Each cultural element is analyzed separately and the goal of this analysis, besides distinguishing between what is pagan and what is Christian, is to determine how successfully this pagan element has been reconciled with Christian values. Sometimes, it is clear that the Beowulf poet makes such attempts.

Chapter four is concerned with identifying the cultural elements in the poem that are clearly Christian, or have the potential to be regarded as Christian. These elements

include associating Beowulf's courage and fame with God, Grendel's lineage, Wyrd vs. God's will, Fæge and Unfæge, Christianization of vengeance, Christian morality/disapproval of pagan traditions and treasure as a symbol of personal valor and not sinful greed. This chapter deals with the Christian force that fuels the poem, with special regard to the verses of Bible and the opinions of Christian thinkers who were influential at the time, such as Saint Augustine and Alcuin.

Chapter five is dedicated to defining and giving legitimacy to the terms "Cultural Tension" and "Cultural Reconciliation" by brining examples and observations from *Beowulf* from the previous two chapters. One of the main reasons cultural tension happens in the first place is a process called "Defanging" and this is another subject that is touched upon in this chapter. Sometimes, in order to make one culture to lose its relevance and hold on people, it is necessary to dissolve it into another culture in shrewd manner and not to fight it directly, otherwise this attempt will be met with strong, often violent, resistance. Finally, instances of cultural tension and cultural reconciliation are touched upon in other epic poems such as *The Aeneid, Shahname, Layamon's Brut* and Renaissance epics. It is shown how epic poems are used as a tool to reconcile these opposing cultural elements and diffusing the contention they might cause in society.

1.3 Methodology and Approach

This writer of this thesis aims to approach the text of Beowulf from a new-historical perspective, with the same investigative method that Stephen Greenblatt, the founder of New-Historicism, uses in his seminal work *Renaissance Self-Fashioning*.

New-historicism is a method of approaching literary texts that was developed in the early 1980s as a reaction to new-criticism and the idea that nothing matters but the text itself. New-historicism is about the co-dependency of the text and history. Unlike

old historicism, which was only concerned with how historical conditions create texts, new-historicism is also concerned with how texts (even the seemingly unimportant ones, like the diary of a housewife) can create history and change our perception regarding the most basic assumptions we have about it. New-historicism was influenced by two intellectuals: 1. Clifford Geertz, who believed that culture is a text and can be approached like a text. 2. Michel Foucault, who believed that discourse is not simply that which conveys the "struggles or systems of domination", but it contains power within itself, meaning that all the texts produced in a historical context contain clues about the power struggles of their time period and some of these texts do people in power good service by presenting a subversive notion (like the idea of a monarch's assassination) and then containing that subversion by preventing its fruition. The co-related terms "Cultural Tension" and "Cultural Reconciliation" are coined for the purpose of this thesis, to demonstrate how certain societies try to solidify their power and prevent discord and division among their people by reconciling seemingly opposite cultural elements and making their co-existence seem possible through epic poetry.

The critical basis of this thesis is the history of Anglo-Saxon England and early Christianity and no specific intellectual is chosen as s source of reference, because new-historical reading requires a high level of engagement with history itself and focusing on individual theories would limit the scope that the new-historical investigation requires.

1.4 Definition of Key Terms

Christianity: Christianity is an Abrahamic religion that is based on the person and teachings of Jesus of Nazareth. The usage of Christianity in this thesis is limited to its early history, and perception and interpretation of scholars who lived long before the

Great Schism and the emergence of Protestantism. Saint Augustine, Venerable Bede and Alcuin are some of the Christian theologians whose worldview is discussed in this thesis.

Paganism: Paganism refers to any religious belief outside the scope of the main world religions. Any definition beyond that is problematic, because the word "pagan" is sometimes used to demonize or marginalize a group of people who are a threat to Christianity. In such cases, the word "pagan" does not represent any cultural reality.

Warrior Culture: Warrior culture is the kind of culture that idolizes war and battle and advocates the use of force in the face rivals and adversaries. Warrior Cultures are usually free from the machinations and intrigues of the civilized world and their members pride themselves on their (often brutal) honesty, desire for freedom and strong sense of camaraderie among themselves. Examples of Warrior Cultures throughout history: Spartans, Vikings, Huns, Mongols

Anglo-Saxon England: Anglo-Saxon England refers to a period of English history that spans from the fall of Roman Britain in 410 to the Norman conquest of England in 1066. In this period, England was populated by Germanic migrants from Europe who, eventually, divided it to 7 kingdoms: East Anglia, Essex, Kent, Mercia, Northumbria, Sussex, and Wessex.

Epic Poetry: An epic poem is a long serious poetic narrative that deals with the history of a society, usually mixing it with legendary/mythological elements and a hero or a couple of heroic characters at its center.

Cultural Tension: Cultural Tension happens when two opposing cultural elements (like Christian and Pagan or Nationalistic and Foreign) are co-existing in a way that one could not be eliminated in favor of the other without causing unfavorable consequences.

Cultural Reconciliation: Cultural Reconciliation refers to the process in which Cultural Tension is attempted to be resolved by using opposing cultural elements alongside each other, in a way that they don't seem to oppose each other at all.

1.5 Anticipated Findings

The writer of this thesis, by finding relations between the text of Beowulf and the history of Anglo-Saxon England, hopes to persuade the reader that the reason epic poets juxtapose opposing cultural elements is, indeed, to reconcile them. The writer also hopes to give legitimacy to the coined terms "Cultural Tension" and "Cultural Reconciliation" and establish a methodology that can be used to identify the Cultural tensions of a society in all epic poems and decide whether they are being reconciled or not. Any finding which proves that juxtaposition of opposing cultural elements has a reason other than reconciling them will disconfirm this thesis statement, because it proves that the point this thesis is trying to get across is mere speculation.

1.6 Thesis Statement

The writer of the thesis intends to analyze Anglo-Saxon culture and demonstrate how the pagan mindset of its people was challenged after their gradual Christianization in the 7th century. Beowulf, as one of the most important cultural relics of Anglo-Saxon England, is a great manifestation of this paradoxical cultural milieu. On one hand, Beowulf is the stereotype of the Germanic hero: he is a strong hard-headed warrior who enjoys fighting and being challenged and probably would be repulsed by the very idea of turning the other cheek. On the other hand, in the poem, we see that Hrothgar attributes his victories in battle to God and thanks the God almighty when Beowulf advocates vengeance, which is a highly unchristian concept in its essence. It is argued

that *Beowulf* is a Pagan story and all of its Christian elements are late addendums by its Christian composer. One might ask the question: if *Beowulf* is such an essentially Pagan story, why the *Beowulf* poet insists on adding Christian elements to it in such a forced way? Why doesn't he simply compose an epic about a Christian figure? Or why he doesn't retell the story just the way it was, without adding the Christian elements? These questions bring us to the concepts of "Cultural Tension" and "Cultural Reconciliation". The purpose of Beowulf's composition was not just to tell the story of Beowulf; it was supposed to persuade Anglo-Saxon people that the traditions of their forefathers and the religion that they have converted to in recent memory are not at odds with each other. One could be a warrior at heart and be a Christian at heart, just like Beowulf. In other words, the Beowulf poet tries to reconcile opposing cultural elements present in the Anglo-Saxon society (Pagan culture and Christian theology) by putting them alongside each other in a way that seems natural, even when it isn't (like the example of thanking God for vengeful thoughts). We see the same impulse in other epic poems such as *The Aeneid*, *Shahname* and Renaissance epics (*The Lusiads*, *Paradise Lost*) where there is an attempt to reconcile opposing cultural elements by: 1. Telling a story about the foundations of Rome in the context of Greek mythology and history 2. Telling the story of Persia's history and mythology using the conventions of Arabic poetry 3. Telling a Christian epic by including Pagan gods as characters and Pagan poetic traditions such as the invocation of the muse. The main point of this thesis is to provide evidence for these cultural reconciliations and find reasons why epic poetry is used for this purpose, why epic poets lend their art to such cause and what's the importance of this cause.

1.7 Research Question

This thesis was driven by three questions.

The first question is can new-historical analysis can be applied to a work of literature that does not even have a specific date of composition?

The second question is why does the Beowulf poet combine Christian and pagan elements in the text of the poem, as if they are one and the same, when it's clear that they oppose each other?

The third question, and the most essential one, is how cultures gain and lose ideological power?

1.8 Literature Review

The history of *Beowulf* scholarship officially began in 19th century. In the beginning, the interest towards the poem was mostly philological (Shippey and Haarder xvi). The first person who addressed the presence of Christian elements in the poem was the Danish-Icelandic scholar Grímur Jónsson Thorkelin, who is the first person who translated the poem to another language. His translation into Latin was published in 1815. In *Beowulf, the critical Heritage*, a valuable collection of the early pre-Tolkien scholarly works on *Beowulf*, it is mentioned that "in the dominant German nineteenth-century tradition, it became normal to see the poem as essentially heathen, with an unnecessary and removable Christian top-coating" (9). However, Thorkelin did not see much difference between paganism and Christianity. In fact, he believed that Germanic paganism was also another form of monotheism and Odin and God the father were the images of the same truth. The so called heathens in the book were not primitive idol worshippers, but virtuous Odinic monotheists. But this opinion did not have any scholarly merit and it was soon put aside (9).

For much of the 19th century and early 20th century, scholarly interest in *Beowulf* had been mostly philological and the scholars showed little interest in the poem as a great work of literature with rich content that deserves thorough examination. A notable exception is F.A. Blackburn, who in his influential article *The Christian Coloring in Beowulf*, published in 1897, argued that *Beowulf* was originally a pagan poem to which Christian elements were interpolated by a Christian scholar. Since then, critics have attempted in various ways to prove him wrong and have concluded that the poem exhibits a unified Christian character.

Beowulf's status as a mostly linguistic and historical document was elevated to a great work of literature by the publication of J.R.R. Tolkien's seminal article (initially a lecture) "Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics", published in 1936. Tolkien talks about different aspects of the poem and his view is not limited to only one aspect of it. He makes some general statements about the Christian elements in the poem (i.e. Grendel are the dragon are the enemies of the Christian God) and in that regard, he doesn't have anything groundbreaking to say, but his article inspired future scholars to treat the poem as a serious work of literature.

Friedrich Klaeber, in the introduction to his book *Beowulf and the Fight at Finnsburg*, published in 1950, was the first major critic to argue that the Christian elements in *Beowulf* are so integral to the poem that they cannot be separated from the text and are not the result of a later interpolation by a Christian scribe. Nowadays, his view is more accepted than Blackburn's. However, his view has inspired some scholars to deny the presence of pagan traces in the poem, which is not correct.

Arthur Gilchrist Brodeur took a middle ground between these two opposing view. In his book, *Christian and Pagan: The Art of Beowulf*, published in 1960, he argued that although the traces of the pagan spirit, motifs and situations is discernible in

the poem, but they have been refashioned so thoroughly that poem has essentially turned into a Christian epic. In other words, Brodeur does recognize the poem's pagan roots, but he points out that its Christianization is more than a simple interpolation.

Since then, many critics have talked about the Christian and pagan elements in the poem and their combination, and in more detail. But their stance doesn't deviate radically from that of Blackburn, Klaeber and Brodeur.

A Critical Companion to Beowulf by Andy Orchard is one of the best anthologies of *Beowulf* criticism ever published. It is evident from the numerous references in the book that Orchard has done his homework. Chapter four and five of the book are especially useful for the purpose of this thesis. These two chapters, subsequently titled "Myth and Legend" and "Religion and Learning" try to find textual parallels both to the inherited Germanic past, with special regard to the figures such as Scyld Scefing, Sigemund, and Ermanaric, and to the Christian tradition and Biblical heroes such as David, Samson, Moses and Judas Maccabaeus, who all seem to influence the narrative in separate, but equally effective ways.

Harold Bloom has gathered a useful set of articles in *Beowulf: Bloom's Modern Critical Interpretation*. Of special importance is the essay "Christian and Pagan Elements" by Edward B. Irving Jr., who has a vast knowledge of the scholarly literature about the topic and his thorough analysis of the findings of different scholars provided much insight for developing the arguments for this thesis.

In *Honor, Exchange and Violence in Beowulf*, Peter S. Baker has tried to make sense of the pagan sensibilities of the characters in the poem and put them in the context of Anglo-Saxon history. His heavy reliance on historical documents, especially those written by the Church fathers, influenced the development of this thesis, because it is quite similar to the method that Stephen Greenblatt uses in his new-historical works.

For the same reason, *Goldgyfan or Goldwlance: A Christian Apology for Beowulf and Treasure* by Joseph E. Marshall was integral to the development of this thesis, because Marshall uses many quotes from the sermons and edicts of the Churchmen of the time to develop his arguments.

No scholarly work related to the history of Anglo-Saxon England would be complete without a reference or two to *Ecclesiastical History of the English People* by the Venerable Bede. This work is one of the most important original references about Anglo-Saxon history and it is especially important for this thesis, because it was written by a monk with a clear bias in favor of Christianity. The mindset of the *Beowulf* poet must have been quite similar to him. The translation that is used for this thesis belongs to A.M. Sellar.

The Anglo-Saxon World by Nicholas J. Higham & Martin J. Ryan and *The Saxon and Norman Kings* by Christopher Brooke are two straightforward historical books that are used as supplementary sources for the historical information provided in the thesis, unless specified otherwise.

As it was mentioned in the introduction, the approach of this thesis is influenced by Stephen Greenblatt's works. He has written many books and articles on the subject (which he likes to call "cultural poetics"), but the two works that influenced the writer of this thesis the most were *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare* and *Invisible Bullets.* These two works are especially influential, because their emphasis on the power relations in society, and Greenblatt's nuanced view towards these relations, has been tried to be replicated in this thesis.

It's worth to mention that all the passages from *Beowulf* are taken from Seamus Heaney's translation of the poem, because for better or worse, it is considered to be the definitive translation. Of course, in a way, his translation is a good fit for this thesis,

because in the introduction he has written for it, he compares the English/Irish duality to the Celtic/Saxon one and talks about what learning Old English meant to him as an Irish (Heaney XXV). In other words, in his approach to Beowulf, he is also concerned with ideology and power relations.

As it is evident, the wealth of material about the presence of Christianity and Paganism in Beowulf is vast. The juxtaposition of two strong ideologies in a text is already an interesting topic for a new-historical analysis, but the peculiar way this juxtaposition is presented in *Beowulf*, almost makes this analysis a necessity. That is the gap that this thesis is trying to fill, to take the books and articles about this subject to their logical extreme and analyze what they all tell about the power structures in Anglo-Saxon England and what does this power structure tell us about the way culture and ideology function.

Chapter Two:

The History behind *Beowulf*

The History behind Beowulf

Meanwhile, a thane
of the king's household, a carrier of tales,
a traditional singer deeply schooled
in the lore of the past, linked a new theme
to a strict meter. (Lines 866-70)

The second chapter shall put the events of *Beowulf* in historical context, identify some of *Beowulf*'s literary analogues and go over the popular theories in regards to *Beowulf*'s date of composition.

2.1 Beowulf's Historical Context

Like all epics, *Beowulf*'s story, as fantastical as it may seem, is rooted in history and some of the events and characters described in the poem have a definite real-life equivalent. Strangely enough, the name of the titular character of the poem, Beowulf, is not mentioned in any other extant text, Germanic or English, outside of this one poem (Neidorf 553). So we have to look for less obvious clues.

The most historically sound character in the poem is Hygelac. Thanks to Hygelac and the mention of his raid on Frisians (which was a real historical occurrence), critics have managed to determine the historical setting of the poem.

There are a few of mentions of Hygelac in the historical works of the late antiquity/early medieval period. Gregory of Tours (ca. 538-94), in his *History of the Franks*, Jordanes (who lived in 6th century), in his *The Origins and Deeds of the Goths*

and Aldhelm[1] (ca. 639-709) in *Liber Monstrorum* all mention the name of Hygelac as a real historical figure. The mention of his name in *Liber Monstorurm* is especially interesting, because in it, he is described as a monster due to his large size:

> And there are monsters of an amazing size, like King Hygelac, who ruled the Geats and was killed by the Franks, whom no horse could carry from the age of twelve. His bones are preserved on an island in the river Rhine, where it breaks into the Ocean, and they are shown as a wonder to travelers from afar. (Orchard 134)

In *History of the Franks,* in which his name is Latinized as Chlochilaich, his attack on Gaul and his death by Theudebert is recounted as such:

> The next thing which happened was that the Danes sent a fleet under their King Chlochilaich and invaded Gaul from the sea. They came ashore, laid waste one of the regions ruled by Theuderic and captured some of the inhabitants. They loaded their ships with what they had stolen and the men they had seized, and then they set sail for home. Their King remained on the shore, waiting until the boats should have gained the open sea, when he planned to go on board. When Theuderic heard that his land had been invaded by foreigners, he sent his son Theudebert to those parts with a powerful army and all the necessary equipment. The Danish King was killed, the enemy fleet was beaten in a naval battle and all the booty was brought back on shore once more (Thorpe 163).

Theuderic died in 534, so that means the year of Hygelac's raid and death is in early 6th century. N.F.S. Grundtvig, the prominent Danish scholar, has speculated Hygelac's year of death to be 516 (Shippey & Haarder 235). Apart from Hygelac,

[1] The authorship of *Liber Monstrorum* is unknown. Aldhem is just a likely candidate.

Hrothgar, Halga, Hrothulf (Who is better known as Hrólfr Kraki), Eadgils, Ongentheow and Ohtere are all real or semi-legendary historical figures from Scandinavia who lived (or died) in the first half of the 6th century and whose names are also mentioned in Scandinavian sources.

Battle on the Ice of Lake Vänern, a real historical conflict is mentioned in the poem, but without the direct mention of its name. In one of the episodes of the poem, when Beowulf is chosen as the successor of the Hygelac, he helps one of his Geatish country men to avenge the death of his kin. The story is described in lines 2379-96 as such:

> After the death of Ohthere (the first historical king of Sweden), his brother Onela usurps his throne and Ohthere's sons, Eanmund and Eadgils are forced to escape from Geatland and seek refuge with Hearded, the king of Geats at the time. Onela attacks the Geats and kills Eanmund and Hearded. Beowulf decides to help the survivor of this conflict, Eadgils, to avenge his kin. Eadgils kills Onela and becomes the king of Sweden. The battle between Eadgils and Onela over the throne of Sweden is called the Battle on the Ice of Lake Vänern.

This battle is described in Norse sagas (by none other than Snorri Sturluson) and it's supported by archeological evidence. The date of its happening is estimated to be 530. All this evidence gives us a clear reliable idea about the setting of the poem: early 6th century (500-550) in modern day Sweden and Denmark.

2.2 *Beowulf*'s Analogues

Beowulf has the advantage of being a cultural mesh-up of all the major cultural traditions that an Anglo-Saxon scholar could be exposed to: Judeo-Christian, Classical

and Germanic. There are many parallels we can draw between *Beowulf* and the texts from the aforementioned traditions. Here, the most important and noticeable parallels are mentioned.

Beowulf is not the only Anglo-Saxon poem that mixes Christian and Pagan elements. As a matter of fact, the tension between Christianity and paganism can be sense in all the major Old English poems such as "The Wanderer", "The Seafarer" and "Dream of the Rood".

"Dream of the Rood" might be the most interesting example. This poem is a dream poem in which the narrator talks to the cross on which Jesus was crucified. The very idea of a talking piece of wood could be considered as a form of Animism (the belief that lifeless objects have spirit), which is in direct contradiction with the teachings of Abrahamic religions.

Another parallel is the similarity of Jesus's depiction to that of Beowulf. Both are described as extremely virtuous warriors. There is no trace of meekness or weakness in the description of Christ when he is about to be crucified:

> The young warrior stripped himself then—that was God Almighty—
> strong and firm of purpose—he climbed up onto the high gallows,
> magnificent in the sight of many. Then he wished to redeem mankind.
> I quaked when the warrior embraced me—
> yet I dared not bow to the ground, collapse
> to earthly regions, but I had to stand there firm.
> The rood was reared. I heaved the mighty king,
> the Lord of Heaven—I dared not topple or reel. (Lines 39-45)

As one critic has noted, Christ, as described in the poem, can be seen as "an Anglo-Saxon warrior lord, who is served by his thanes, especially on the cross and who

rewards them at the feast of glory in Heaven" (Dockray-Miller 2). The image of Christ as a warrior is seen many times in Anglo-Saxon literature, which is an indication that these poets and scribes mixed these two competing cultures in order to make people, who were still pagan by heart and spirit, regard Christianity as something not too different.

Another poem that was possibly influenced by *Beowulf* (or influenced it) is *Exodus*. This poem is re-telling of the story of the Israelites' escape from Egypt and Crossing the Red sea in the manner of a heroic epic. Frederick Klaeber has noticed some structural and narrative similarities between the two poems (and to some extent, the story of *Exodus*). For example, in the poem *Exodus*, "the bloody waters of the Red Sea are reputedly brought before the reader in violent word-pictures. There is no mention of the blood in the *Vulgate*, but the idea could very naturally have suggested itself to the poet" (Klaeber 219-220). Such imagery is repeated in *Beowulf*. "In *Beowulf*, the surface of the Grendel lake is stained with blood as a result of the slaying of Grendel's mother" (220).

There is a passage in *Exodus* in which the terror of the Israelites is described in the face of their enemy. There is a passage in *Beowulf* in which the lamentation of the Danish court is described at the discovery of Grendel's ravages. According to Klaber, "the similarity between these two passages is striking. If there has been borrowing, it can hardly be presumed to have been on the part of the *Exodus* poet" (222).

Generally speaking, the juxtaposition of pagan/Christian elements is prevalent in Old English literature and even the style of this juxtaposition is similar (i.e. presenting religious figures as warriors or vice versa), so many of the arguments that is made in this thesis about *Beowulf* can be extended to Old English literature as well.

Richard North has found certain similarities between *Beowulf* and *The Aeneid*. The first is the Virgilian aspect of Heorot, which becomes more evident when it is compared to the presentation of Hrothgar's tale in Germanic analogues (North 80). In Germanic literature, hall building is important and some kings even become famous and well-regarded by showing presence of mind in creating a mead-hall. In *Atlakviða*, one of the heroic poems of *Poetic Edda,* king Gunnar is described as such a king (82).

However, the scene in which Heorot is constructed has more in common with Dido's founding of Carthage in *The Aeneid* than the similar episode in *Atlakviða.* In both *Beowulf* and *The Aeneid*, the poet puts an emphasis on the role of Heorot/Carthage as a place in which the main goal is to respect public interest (83). The trace of decorum and bureaucracy could not be found in *Beowulf*, if the work was purely Germanic. In that case, the mail goal would have been to preserve Heorot for future kin.

Another similarity is between Grendel and the Cyclops in the book III of *The Aeneid*. Grendel's Germanic roots, and even the etymology of his name is unclear. Although there are plenty of monsters in Norse works of literature, but none of them are a cannibal. The closest Germanic analogue to Grendel is Glámr, Grettir's undead opponent in *Grettis saga,* who, according to North, is "part of an Icelandic tradition inherited from *Beowulf*" (84).

Grendel also has a reputation as a creature who, as a descendant of Cain, is predestined to be damned. This element obviously does not have any pagan Germanic analogues either. Surprisingly, this element does have an analogue in *The Aeneid*.

The story of the Cyclops in The Odyssey is well-known. Odysseus manages to escape his lair by tricking him. However, the Cyclops eats most of Odysseus's men before he manages to do so. The devouring of these men by the Cyclops is described in detail in lines 622-27 of *The Aeneid*. The man who is describing the Cyclops's story

with Odysseus to Aeneas is Achaemenides. He also warns him to put to sea immediately, because there are hundreds of other Cyclops monsters in the sea. When Aeneas manages to escape in time, the Cyclops gives out a roar "at which the sea and all the waves trembled" (Line 673 of *The Aeneid*).

Grendel's identity as a descendant of Cain remains unique, but there are many other analogues to recognize. "Grendel is a giant. His atrocity is a banquet in a dark hall. His eyes produce a light like a flame. He consumes human flesh and blood. There is a quiet witness to his consumption of the witness's companion (Beowulf/Achaemendies). Other monsters keep company with Grendel in the marshes and moors outside. Grendel's howling frightens not only the Danes in the immediate neighborhoods, but also the Danes who live in the north" (North 87). All these attributes can be found in the book III of *The Aeneid* and Virgil's description of the Cyclops monster.

Another parallel is the similarity between Beowulf's descent to the mere of Grendel's mother and Aeneas's descent to the underworld through Avernus, the entrance to the imderworld. In both cases, the heroes enter the underworld with a drawn sword in hand (Beowulf's is actually named; it's called Hrunting).

Although Hrothgar is presented as a pious Christian figure in the poem, but his knowledge about the mere shows that he had been previously exposed to it:

> A few miles from here
> a frost-stiffened wood waits and keeps watch
> above a mere; the overhanging bank
> is a maze of tree-roots mirrored in its surface.
> At night there, something uncanny happens:
> the water burns. And the mere bottom

has never been sounded by the sons of men (Lines 1362-70).

In *The Aeneid*, Aeneas also travels to the underworld by the guidance of an authority figure like Hrothgar: sibyl of Cumae. At first glance, the similarities between Hrothgar and Sybil of Cumae might seem scant. Hrothgar is a man, a king and he is much more involved in the story compared to Sybil of Cumae, who is just an oracle. But Hrothgar's predictions about Beowulf's kingship, and his warning about pride (which some scholars argue, caused his death) might be considered an oracle-like prophecy (North 90-91).

The final parallel that is going to be discussed here is the similarity of the initial Danish scenes in *Beowulf* with the premise of Virgil's story in the second half of *The Aeneid*.

Initially, Hrothgar has promised to marry off his daughter, Freawaru, to Ingeld, son of king Froda of the Heaðobards, in an attempt to end the feud between the Danes and the Heaðobards. This plan is disturbed by the arrival of a new stranger: Beowulf, but queen Wealhtheow, Hrothgar's wife, decides to stick to the original plan. Beowulf predicts that using Freawaru as a peace-weaver (freoðuwebbe) will be unsuccessful and Ingeld will turn against his father in law:

Then on both sides the oath-bound lords
will break the peace, a passionate hate
will build up in Ingeld and love for his bride
will falter in him as the feud rankles (Lines 2063-66).

A similar scenario takes place in *The Aeneid*. "As the Trojans arrive in Latium with their fleet, having taken part in many adventures from Asia Minor through Carthage, it becomes clear that their leader, Aeneas, is destined to vie with King Turnus of the Rutuli for the hand of Lavinia, the only daughter and heir of Latinus and Queen

Amata" (North 124). The difference between the two scenarios is that Aeneas doesn't give up on the competition actually ends up marrying Lavinia, but Beowulf lets the Ingeld-marriage go ahead (125).

There has been much debate about whether *Beowulf* was essentially a pagan/Germanic work with interpolated Christian elements or a Christian work in essence. It is difficult to answer this question, because there is no Germanic work that could be considered as a basis for *Beowulf*'s Old English composition. As it was previously mentioned, the Icelandic Grettis saga is the strongest known candidate, as an analogue. This connection was made as early as 1878, by the prominent Icelandic scholar Gudbrand Vigfusson (Andersson 130-13).

It is not clear which one is older, *Beowulf* or *Grettis Saga*. Of course, *Grettis Saga* was written down much later, but when it comes to oral and folkloric literature, especially of the composite kind, it is difficult to make an accurate estimation about the exact date of their conception. Scholars have debated on the issue. In 1910, Friedrich Panzer wrote a thesis, in which he argued that both of these works drew from a common folkloric source. This inspired W.W. Lawrence, another scholar to posit the notion that some elements in both poems (like the mere in *Beowulf* and the waterfall in *Grettis Saga*) are branched from an older common form (130). However, these similarities could be accidental.

Apart from Judo-Christian, Classical and Germanic analogues (there are parallels made between *Beowulf* and Irish folk tales, but due to their dubious nature, they are not mentioned here), there is also a parallel between *Beowulf* and a universal group of narratives called "Bear's Son Tale". Panzer has argued in his thesis that *Beowulf*, with some additions and subtractions, follows a narrative found among folk tales around the world. In this narrative, a hero raised by a bear, descended by a bear, or

with bear-like strength, must guard a place against a monster with the help of his companions. The companions ultimately fail to be of much help, but the hero manages to wound the monster and make him escape. The hero, in his pursuit, descends into a netherworld or underground domain and in there, faces a second round of adversaries (Panzer 5-13). There are certain deviances from *Beowulf* and Bear's Son narrative, but the basic plot of Beowulf's battle with Grendel and Grendel's mother follows the same pattern that Panzer describes.

Some scholars have argued that the similarities are not close enough for the parallel to be a legitimate one (Andersson 137). Later on, Peter Jørgensen introduced another narrative pattern called the "two troll tradition", which both Bewoulf and Grettis Saga follow. It is "a Norse 'ecotype' in which a hero enters a cave and kills two giants, usually of different sexes" (134). Andersson consider this a stronger parallel compared to the Two Bear's son narrative (146).

Overall, all of the parallels and analogues between *Beowulf* and other works of literature are of dubious nature and subject to speculation. According to Andersson, Klaeber's arguments in favor of borrowings from the Old English poem *Genesis A* (which is going to be discussed later) is the strongest case of parallelism we have (125). But one thing is for certain and that's the Beowulf poet's strong literary and historical sense. *Beowulf* might have been inspired by works and sources that are now lost to history, but it was part of a strong tradition.

2.3 Beowulf's Date and Place of Composition

The seeming futility of writing a new-historical analysis of a poem without a clear date and place of composition is not lost upon the writer of thesis. Because new-historicism, as practiced by Greenblatt, is extremely dependent on the material produced at a

particular date in history. But there is a 300 year gap between the earliest and the latest assessment about *Beowulf*'s date of composition. How should one deal with such a problem?

In order to make sense of *Beowulf* historically, it is necessary to talk about "historical density", which is coined for the purpose of this thesis. This concept refers to the degree of eventfulness and the richness of culture in a historical period. For example, the historical density during the Paleolithic period was at its lowest and it is the highest in the age we are living now. As the world becomes more complicated, the cultures clash and absorb elements from one another, and as the number of sub-cultures increases, historical density becomes higher and the need for a more thorough study of cultural elements increases. In the age we live in, each decade has its own distinct cultural flavor, but throughout much of human history, especially in uncivilized and isolated societies, centuries could pass, without a single thing changing.

The culture of Anglo-Saxons, their laws, level of technology, system of government, etc. remained fairly stagnant through much of their existence, up to the Norman Conquest. It is thanks to this relative sameness that the exact date of composition of *Beowulf* becomes unnecessary for a new-historical analysis, because the historical elements present in the text corresponds to issues that Anglo-Saxons had to deal with throughout much of their history and it was not just limited to a certain time and place. As Andy Orchard observes: "Wulfstan, writing in Old English at the beginning of the eleventh century, has as much to say in condemnation of heathen customs and practices, as Aldhelm, writing in Latin at the end of the seventh" (Orchard 100).

Beowulf's date of composition (and to a lesser degree, place of composition) is among the most debated issues in the history of medieval English literature. The reason

for that is there are many clues that point at a certain direction, while others point at a different one. We'll go over some of the most plausible theories and clues in regards to Beowulf's date and place of composition.

Scholars have two basic ideas about *Beowulf*'s date of composition: those who suggest an early date (8th century) and those who suggest a later date (any date after that). The sole surviving manuscript of *Beowulf* is easier to date, and with more accuracy: it came into being roughly between 975 to 1025. 1025 is the latest date *Beowulf*, in its current form, could have came into being.

Determining *Beowulf*'s date of composition can influence the way we read the poem and interpret its juxtaposition of pagan/Christian elements. For example, one of the questions that can be asked about the poem is whether it was composed before or after the Viking invasion. *Beowulf* is a celebration of Geats (Swedes) and Spear-Danes (Danes) and the Vikings who attacked England and ravaged it were mostly Danes. This begs the question: why the Anglo-Saxons felt the need to compose or preserve a poem about a nation that was overtaking their country?

R.I. Page, by analyzing a number of historical documents from 835 to 10th century has argued that the period "cannot be thought of as a single one in which the Anglo-Saxons are lined up against the Danes" (122). Page believes that Anglo-Saxons reacted to the Viking raids on religious terms, rather than racial. Anglo-Saxons made a distinction between the Danes who attacked them and the Danes who stayed in their homeland and even were on friendly terms with some of them. He concludes: "if there is no other reason for placing *Beowulf* after, say, 835, there is nothing in the political situation in England to preclude it" (122). So it is safe to assume that if *Beowulf* was composed after the Viking invasion, its Scandinavian roots was meant to inspire the

pagan newcomers to adapt Christianity and act as Beowulf or Horthgar would act, despite of their pagan nature.

Richard North, in *The Origins of Beowulf: From Vergil to Wiglaf,* has analyzed the historical material surrounding *Beowulf* and drew the conclusion that "*Beowulf* was composed in the winter of 826–7 by Eanmund, abbot of the minster of Breedon on the Hill in north-west Leicestershire, not only as a requiem for King Beornwulf of Mercia who was killed in battle earlier that year, but also as a work of recommendation for Wiglaf, an ealdorman who was plotting to succeed him" (vii). Needless to say, his theory is one, among many. The question of *Beowulf*'s date of composition is still doesn't have a definite answer.

Another issue surrounding the poem is its place of composition. There are a couple of candidates. The poem could have been composed in Northumberia, during a period which is referred to "Northumberia's Golden Age" (mid 7th century to mid 8th century) and gave birth to great intellects such as Bede and Alcuin and it is likely that the Beowulf poet was one of these intellects, whose name is lost to history.

Another strong candidate is the kingdom of East Anglia. Sam Newton, in his book *The Origins of Beowulf and the Pre-Viking Kingdom of East Anglia* argues that heroes whose names are mentioned in Anglo-Saxon royal genealogies are a sign that such Northern dynastic concerns are most likely to have been fostered in the kingdom of East Anglia (ix).

The poem could have also been composed in Wessex, Kent or near London. The reason it is so difficult to determine the poem's place of composition is that it preserves dialectical features from all of these areas. For example, in the poem, the name of Beowulf is spelled two different ways, representing different pronunciations: Beowulf and Biowulf.

Back in 1897, F.A. Blackburn noticed that the presence of Christian elements in the poem is an anomaly and it is possible they might be interpolation by a later poet. According to him, there are 3 possible explanations for the composition of the poem:

> 1. The poem was composed by a Christian, who had heard the stories and used them as the material for his work.
>
> 2. The poem was composed by a Christian, who used old lays as his material. (This differs from the first supposition in assuming that the tales had already been versified and were in poetical form before they were used by the author.)
>
> 3. The poem was composed by a heathen, either from old stories or from old lays. At a later date it was revised by a Christian poet, to whom we owe the Christian allusions found in it. (This hypothesis differs from the others in assuming the existence of a complete poem without the Christian coloring.) (205)

If we go with the third theory, the ambiguity regarding the poem's date and place of composition should not be an obstacle against a new-historical analysis, because it shows us that the process of writing down *Beowulf* and revising it was continuous throughout Anglo-Saxon history and the concerns expressed in the poem (namely the tension between paganism and Christianity) remained unchanged throughout this period.

Since then, many people have argued for or against Blackburn's theories and provided different explanations for *Beowulf*'s date of composition. But what is clear is that due to the relatively low historical density of the Anglo-Saxon period, for the purpose of this thesis, the difference between these theories won't make a difference, unless specified.

Chapter Three:

Identifying the Pagan Elements in the Text

Identifying the Pagan Elements in the Text

It is always better
to avenge dear ones than to indulge in mourning.
For every one of us, living in this world
means waiting for our end. Let whoever can
win glory before death. When a warrior is gone,
that will be his best and only bulwark. (Lines 1384-89)

This chapter shall explain the general history behind the pagan elements in the text and discuss how they relate to general idea of "cultural tension" and "cultural reconciliation". The pagan elements that are going to be discussed are as follows: Beowulf's inclination towards violence and challenges, Comitatus, idolization of courage and shaming cowardice, boasting, revenge culture, decoration of shield and armor, mead-halls and Anglo-Saxon warrior code.

3.1 Beowulf's Inclination towards Violence and Challenges

Beowulf is an epic hero, and an Anglo-Saxon one at that. So it is no surprise that violence is an inseparable part of his nature. Although there is something surprising about the poem and that is much of it consists of speech, rather than action; to be more exact, more than 1200 lines (Orchard 203). But when characters talk, "they vow or elicit vows to fight, thank people for fighting or blame them for not fighting, remember or anticipate fights, offer advice about how to become a better fighter" (Baker 1).

Beowulf is raised in a warrior culture (Geatland) and his story is told for an audience raised in a warrior culture (Anglo-Saxon England). A warrior culture is a

culture in which people who fight battles (warriors) are considered to be a separate class or caste, and hold special importance, because since the dawn of civilization, tribes have been under constant existential threat by other tribes, and more importantly, civilized nations, who were larger and better organized.

However, there is something paradoxical about violence. On one hand, violence has always been a necessary evil as a preemptive measure. Humans become violent when something violent happens to them and out of the fear of this impending threat, they turn violent first. It's a never-ending cycle. This is something that warrior societies understand very well. On the other hand, violence is deeply impractical, because it leads to death and death is irreversible damage. Even the most savage, immoral and evil societies imaginable have to ensure the survival of their own members in order to remain in power, and violence for sake of violence works against that interest. That's why we have the term "warrior culture", because in such cultures, violent behavior, as necessary as it may be, adopts ritualistic significance, so that its chaotic nature can be controlled.

Guy Halsall, in his book *Violence and Society in the Early Medieval West* has argued that "violent relationships can often be seen as a discourse, structured around shared norms" (16). So it shouldn't be surprising to our modern sensibilities that in Beowulf's age, people would talk about killing as a way to bond, in the same way that the modern people talk about the abhorrence of killing, as a way to seem acceptable to each other. As a matter of fact, for people of the ancient times, violence would only become abhorrent when it didn't quite fit their preconceptions on how it should be done. Halsall goes on to say:

> To read the intentions or significance of violence, to know what kinds of reply are deemed 'correct', or to try to anticipate the responses of

> opponents or third parties, requires mutual acceptance of norms, especially those governing the legitimacy of these actions. Such norms are often founded on religious belief and spiritual sanction, and this is especially true in considering the ritual side of violence. Where the actions of one side are not based upon these norms, as was obviously the case with pagan Vikings, the other will not be able to understand them, put them into perspective, or know how to respond. Regardless of how the perpetrators see them, their actions will always seem to break the rules, and, in short, to be extreme, unfettered violence. This lack of comprehension surely generated the ninth-century terror of the Vikings and the effects which this in turn produced, and helps us to reconcile this terror and its consequences with the fact that, from an abstracted viewpoint, Viking warfare encompassed the same types of action, fought for the same purposes, as western European Christian warfare (11-12).

The main reason Vikings seemed so scary to Anglo-Saxons was not their violence, (Anglo-Saxons were just as violent and they were fighting each other all the time), but that their kind of violence was different.

We see traces of this sensibility in *Beowulf*. In the poem, Grendel's introduction couldn't be more rancorous:

> So times were pleasant for the people there
> until finally one, a fiend out of hell,
> began to work his evil in the world.
> Grendel was the name of this grim demon
> haunting the marches, marauding round the heath
> and the desolate fens; he had dwelt for a time

in misery among the banished monsters,
Cain's clan, whom the Creator had outlawed
and condemned as outcasts. (Lines 99-107)

But the human foes of the Geats and Danes, namely Heathobards, Swedes, Franks and Frisians are all described in a surprisingly neutral way. It's as if the Beowulf poet doesn't really look at them as enemies. This is especially interesting, because it is implied, near the end of the poem, that after the death of Beowulf, these tribes will probably destroy the Geats, as predicted by Wiglaf:

Now war is looming
over our nation, soon it will be known
to Franks and Frisians, far and wide,
that the king is gone. Hostility has been great
among the Franks since Hygelac sailed forth
at the head of a war-fleet into Friesland:
there the Hetware harried and attacked
and overwhelmed him with great odds.
The leader in his war-gear was laid low,
fell amongst followers; that lord did not favour
his company with spoils. The Merovingian king
has been an enemy to us ever since. (Lines 2911-21)

So in a way, they were far bigger threats than any of the fantastical creatures in the poem, but it's hard to paint them as villains, because their style of violence is familiar. Whatever they do, it is fair game.

To make a difference between these two kinds of violence was necessary, because Anglo-Saxons had to see the difference between Christian violence and Pagan violence. And there was a difference.

Christian warlords put a lot of emphasis on oaths. They forced pagan leaders to convert to Christianity, in order to ensure their loyalty. This was important, because the process of Christianization in Anglo-Saxon England was a top-down process (Paxton, 25); when a king converted, all of his subjects would follow. But for pagans, these oaths didn't mean much. They would convert to Christianity and relapse to their old religion out of necessity and this frustrated the Christians (Abels 85-86).

Even before the invasion of Vikings and their alien way of thinking and general disregard for Christianity, many Anglo-Saxons would return to Paganism after the death of their first converted king (Pluskowski 765) and it wasn't until 680 that all Anglo-Saxons were at least nominally Christian (Blair 9). The word "nominally" is important, because it shows that the pagan attitude was not something so easily uprooted and it couldn't be ignored; it had to be reconciled with Christianity.

This two-sided attitude towards violence is even evident in the writing of high-ranking Anglo-Saxon church officials such as Sedulius Scottus, Hincmar and Alcuin (Baker 31). These church officials, as spiritual as their duty might have been, were part of the nobility and the Anglo-Saxon (and, we might add, the Frankish) nobility 'had no intention of abandoning its culture, or seriously changing its way of life" (Wormald 57). So although violence is frowned upon in the context of Christianity, but in many cases, the aforementioned church officials seemed to be advocating it, albeit in a shrewd manner.

Sedulius, in his *De Retoribus Christianis* (On Christian rulers), written for Luthar II (d. 869), has listed seven most beautiful things in God's creation (Baker 25).

One of them was “peaceful king in the glory of his kingdom, when in the royal palace he bestows many benefits by displaying gifts and distributing grants” (Dyson 102-3). And later he says: “And the fruit of the peaceful mind is to show bounteous mercy, together also with clemency towards subjects and friends” (Dyson 104-5).

Sedulius’s idea of a “peaceful king” was Caesar Augustus, the Antonines, Constantine the Great, Theodosius I and II, Charlemagne and Louis the Pious. Not only these rulers were engaged in wars, but two of them were especially ruthless conquerors (Baker 25).

Also, we can see an example of the shrewdness mentioned in the strategic use of the words “subjects and friends”. Sedulius is implying that the king is allowed to deny mercy and clemency to anyone who isn’t considered to be his subject or friend and we know in the context of politics, how loose the meaning of the word “friend” is. If Sedulius had a truly Christian motive, he would have talked about the necessity of showing mercy and clemency to all of mankind.

Hincmar, a Frankish bishop and a personal advisor to Charles the Bald, offered a summary of Saint Augustine’s thinking about warfare in *De regis persona et regio ministerio* (On the King’s Character and the Royal Office). Saint Augustine is famously one of the progenitors of the Just War theory, which is concerned with the moral justifications that leaders should consider before starting a war. Hincmar deliberately chooses one of the most permissive arguments of Augustine in regards to warfare, while leaving out the more peaceful ones:

> To make war and expand the kingdom are called good things only by necessity, from Augustine’s book *De ciuitate dei*: ‘to make war and extend one’s dominion over conquered peoples seems a felicity to the bad but a necessity to the good. But since it would be worse for the

> unjust to rule the just, even that is, without inconsistency, called a felicity. But without a doubt it is a greater felicity to have a good neighbor at peace than to subjugate a bad neighbor at war. It is a bad wish to desire to have one whom you hate, or whom you fear, in such a position that he can be one whom you conquer (Migne 840).

As it is evident from this passage, Hincmar is mostly concerned with justifying war and violence and arguing that they are not displeasing to God. He doesn't make any effort to argue that they should not happen at all.

In Alcuin's letters, we see the most tired and yet, the most effective argument for warfare in the context of Christianity in medieval times: to wage war as a just effort to spread Christianity through conquest. The Crusades, The Reconquista and Christianization of colonial subjects are a few examples of how Christianity acted as a sort of religious arm for warfare and subjugation. However, he has less to say about wars of conquest against Christian populations (Baker 28). So in Alcuin, we see the same tendency to make a distinction between Christian and Pagan violence.

As we can see, the inclusion of Christian elements in *Beowulf*, a pagan tale, has strong roots in the general attitude of church officials in medieval times. These church officials were serving kings, rather than the people. So they had to have their interest in mind. The interest of any medieval king was to conquer and to avoid being conquered. Since the Beowulf poet was a churchman himself, he must have learned a thing or two from his colleagues.

The inclination towards personal challenges is another pagan tradition that is most evident in the digressional episode in which Unferth recalls Beowulf's swimming match with Breca:

> Are you the Beowulf who took on Breca

in a swimming match on the open sea,
risking the water just to prove that you could win?
It was sheer vanity made you venture out
on the main deep. And no matter who tried,
friend or foe, to deflect the pair of you,
neither would back down. (Lines 506-12)

The importance of challenges in Germanic societies is evident from the first line: Unferth knows about Beowulf through a challenge and Beowulf's tenacity to beat Breca and see through the challenge has made quite an impression on him. However, he goes on to describe his own version of how the challenge went on. According to him, Breca ultimately manages to beat Beowulf and Unferth uses Beowulf's defeat in this challenge to undermine his ability to face and defeat Grendel. Beowulf says in response:

Well, friend Unferth, you have had your say
about Breca and me. But it was mostly beer
that was doing the talking. The truth is this:
when the going was heavy in those high waves,
I was the strongest swimmer of all.
We'd been children together and we grew up
daring ourselves to outdo each other,
boasting and urging each other to risk
our lives on the sea. And so it turned out.
Each of us swam holding a sword,
a naked, hard-proofed blade for protection
against the whale-beasts. (Lines 530-41)

Beowulf goes on to say the reason Breca beat him in this challenge was because he was busy killing nine sea monsters that had terrorized the seas and afterwards, he questions the fighting skills of both Breca and Unferth:

> Now I cannot recall any fight you entered, Unferth,
> that bears comparison. I don't boast when I say
> that neither you nor Breca were ever much
> celebrated for swordsmanship
> or for facing danger on the field of battle. (Lines 582-6)

For Beowulf, the ability to fight and beat enemies is more important than beating a friend in a challenge, to a degree that he acts like Breca was the loser, because if their roles were reversed, he wouldn't stand a chance against the sea monsters.

There is a correlation here between the ritualization of violence and the importance of personal challenges in warrior societies. In both cases, the aim is to keep the members of society battle-ready in a restrained, but decisive manner. Also, the challenges were used as a way to neutralize tension among the members of the warrior society and prevent them from turning their naturally aggressive state against each other. Since Beowulf has already got war and battle figured out, he doesn't have any need for challenges.

Now, a question might arise: why Beowulf and Breca challenge each other by swimming in full armor and plates? What is the importance of the act of "swimming" in this context?

Swimming was an important skill among the Germanic peoples. According to Tacitus, "Batavians, a tribe of Germans, could swim across the Rhine with their arms and horses, without breaking the order of their squadron" (Wentersdorf 144). Pliny

notes that Germanic warriors were used to “swim the Rhine and the Danube, hindered neither by ice-floes in winter nor by floods in the spring (145).

The episode about Breca is meant to teach the Anglo-Saxon audience a simple lesson: the challenges that have such a deep root in their culture, such as swimming, are means to an end, not an end in themselves. And that end is to be prepared for battle. Beowulf had to lose to Breca, kill those sea monsters and boast about it to Unferth, in order to get this point across.

3.2 Comitatus

Comitatus (or druhtiz or war band), as described by Roman Historian Tacitus, was a code of honor and friendship between a king and his warrior (or retainer), maintaining that neither should abandon the other in the battlefield. The loyalty of the retainer was rewarded with booty.

After Beowulf’s battle with dragon, when he is on the verge of defeat, his war band abandon him out of the fear of the dragon. The only person who remains and helps his king is Wiglaf:

> No help or backing was to be had then
> from his high-born comrades; that hand-picked troop
> broke ranks and ran for their lives
> to the safety of the wood. But within one heart
> sorrow welled up: in a man of worth
> the claims of kinship cannot be denied.
> His name was Wiglaf, a son of Weohstan’s,
> a well-regarded Shylfing warrior
> related to Aelfhere. When he saw his lord

tormented by the heat of his scalding helmet,

he remembered the bountiful gifts bestowed on him,

how well he lived among the Waegmundings,

the freehold he inherited from his father before him (Lines 2596-608).

Wiglaf is a man of worth, and he remembers the bountiful gifts that Beowulf bestowed upon him, therefore he is compelled to help him. We see the dynamic of Comitatus most evidently in the relationship between Beowulf and Wiglaf, and this is why at the end of the poem, Wiglaf is chosen as his successor. The *Beowulf* poet is encouraging the audience to take Comitatus seriously.

However, there was something problematic about Comitatus: it put a lot of importance on the king, to a degree that if he changed his religion, all the members in his war band had to follow suit (Paxton 25). Of course, like in all power hierarchies, Anglo-Saxon kings had to reach a compromise with their underlings, lest they rebel against him out of dissatisfaction. In his *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, Bede recalls the story of King Edwin of Northumberia (d. 632-3), who had to marry Aethelbert's Christian daughter, Aethelburh. But Edwin said that he would only convert to Christianity if his warriors allow him. Edwin's chief priest, Coifi, gave his blessing for the conversion of his king, on the account that it was time to try something new, because the old gods had not provided any material gain for him and the kingdom (Sellar 117). After Edwin was killed in battle, the whole kingdom relapsed back to Paganism. So the absolute power bestowed upon a king was, to a degree, conditional.

In the midst of all these conversion and relapses, cultivating a true Christian faith seemed impossible, because Anglo-Saxons had to choose their spiritual beliefs based on what their king had forced upon them. For Anglo-Saxons, it was a choice between their god or their king.

Of course, this might not seem that big of a deal, if we look at the concept of religion from a materialistic secular point of view, but we should consider that religion (and culture in general) can serve its function in society only if it's taken seriously. This is why in major world religions like Islam, Christianity and Judaism, apostasy had (and in the case of Islam, still has) such a harsh punishment: death.

One could argue that the role of culture is to homogenize people, to create a set of presuppositions about ubiquitous human issues such as birth, marriage, death, etc., to reduce the number of disagreements and squabbles to a minimum, especially for people who live in close proximity of each other.

Yuval Noah Harari, in his book *Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind* argues that the reasons humans have dominated the planet is their unique ability to talk about things that don't exist (fiction) and convince each other to believe in them: "The truly unique feature of our language is not its ability to transmit information about men and lions. Rather, it's the ability to transmit information about things that do not exist at all" (Harari 27), like a mythic lion who is supposed to be guardian of a village. This ability appeared after what he refers to as "Cognitive Revolution" (1). From Harari's idea, we can conclude that the purpose of mythic stories is to harmonize people.

So in order to reconcile the pagan tradition of Comitatus (which required absolute devotion to the king) with the Christian tradition of faith (which required absolute devotion to God), Anglo-Saxons made the Christian God seem like an Anglo-Saxon king. We see traces of this similarity in *Beowulf*.

In the text of the poem, there are 25 different terms for king and kingship and they are divided into five semantic categories: prince, protector, guardian or keeper, war chief or army leader, chief of warriors (Phillies 102). As it is evident from these terms,

Anglo-Saxons looked up to “an authoritarian God-King who dwelt on high” and didn’t care for a saintly figure of personal salvation (103).

Not only the *Beowulf* poet makes kings look like the God, he also makes God look like a king. These are the terms he uses to refer to God: “ruler”, “provider”, “protector of heaven”, “protector” (the Old English word is “helm”, implying that he protects humans like a helmet) and “judge” (104). God is referred to as “father”, “king” or “lord”, “lord of life” and “holy” three times. He is referred to as “wise” four times and he is referred to as “almighty” fifteen times. “The conclusion to be drawn from all this terminology in the epic is that the concept of God in Anglo-Saxon is one of a powerful protector, guardian and sovereign leader” (105).

The image of God in *Beowulf* is much closer to the Old Testament, rather than New Testament. The spirit of Christ and the Holy Trinity is absent from His descriptions. So in a way, the treatment of God as an Anglo-Saxon king was an attempt to appropriate Comitatus and make it appear legitimate in the context of Christianity. The fact that *Beowulf* was written down by a monk in a monastery could have also been a contributing factor.

3.3 Idolization of Courage and Shaming of Cowardice

In the text of the poem, the word “courage” and its variations are repeated 13 times. Wiglaf is quoted saying:

> Every one of you
> with freeholds of land, our whole nation,
> will be dispossessed, once princes from beyond
> get tidings of how you turned and fled
> and disgraced yourselves. A warrior will sooner

die than live a life of shame. (Line 2886-91)

The idolization of courage and the shaming of cowardice are trademarks of any warrior society. The reason is obvious. Courage is useful in battle and cowardice isn't. However, when it comes to cementing courage as a cultural value, there are two challenges to consider: 1. Courage basically means having the ability to put your life in danger without fear, so the concept has to be embellished in order to seem attractive to the common man. The embellishment is achieved through the process of "hero-making".2. The idolization of courage and shaming of cowardice are somehow at odds with the Christian value of meekness. So they somehow have to be reconciled.

Before their conversion to Christianity and adoption of Latin alphabet, pagans used to preserve their myths and legends orally, or on rune stones. These myths and legends were usually the stories of warriors who did great deeds in battle.

The human desire for fame and recognition is easy to understand: we are faced with a world that is indifferent to our existence and death is just around the corner at any given time. The only proof we have that our existence, and the suffering that comes with it, mattered is the importance that other people give to our existence. In a civilized nation (at least up to 20th century), this fame and recognition was ensured only through writing. If a person did or said something that was worthy to be preserved in writing, then their name would live on; otherwise they would be forgotten. That was the incentive to do great things.

In a warrior culture such as the one Beowulf is raised in, the main outlet for achieving fame was to prove oneself in battle, because there was no need for intellectual activity. This is why Germanic and Scandinavian medieval epics were littered with the names of notable kings and warriors, sometimes to the detriment of the readability of the text, because Skalds (Scandinavian poets) took it upon themselves to preserve the

name and lineage of every warrior who did great deeds in a battle that took place in the past and whose name was passed down through the generations orally. By idolizing warlike achievements of the past, these societies were setting an example for their own members on what kind of behavior they should admire. As the *Beowulf* poet says, with an anthropological shrewdness that is surprising for someone in his time and place: "Behavior that's admired is the path to power among people everywhere". (Lines 24-25)

Icelandic sagas can be used to support this claim. The huge number of sagas produced by Icelanders, especially in comparison to the country's small population, has caused a lot of speculation on why Icelanders felt the need to preserve their national identity to such a degree.

Axel Kristinsson believes that productivity of Icelanders in terms of producing literature had something to do with the need and desire of new principalities to legitimize themselves. According to him, the goal of local Icelandic chieftains was "to create or enhance amongst his subjects or followers a feeling of solidarity and common identity by emphasizing their common history and legends" (Kristinsson 1-17).

So one of the main purposes of writing down these legends was to enhance the feeling of solidarity among people[2]. These legends were mostly about heroes, people who did something great in battle. Doing great things in battle requires courage. So courage became a virtue in Germanic societies through a chain of events that started with the need for solidarity, among the possible reasons.

Historian Gunnar Karlsson believes that Iceland's far away geographic location (and we might add, its lack of geopolitical significance) put it outside of the Church's

[2] This statement is in accordance with what was previously mentioned about Noah Harari's idea in relation to Cognitive Revolution.

realm of influence. So it was a breeding ground for what the Church and the kings under its influence would label as subversive literature (Gunnar 38). This is why the Icelandic writers of sagas could get away with writing purely pagan stories, but the Beowulf poet (and the Anglo-Saxon writers in general) could not, because they were directly under the influence of the Church and they were forced to add Christian elements to pagan stories, in order to make sure they would be preserved in Christian libraries. However, since the text of the poem survived in only one manuscript (and that manuscript was nearly destroyed in a fire in 1731), it's possible that the addition of Christian elements did not help that much (Orchard 12). *Beowulf* was obviously not popular enough to be copied many times. This lack of popularity could be due to its low quality in the eyes of Saxons, or it could be due to the fact that no monk saw any value in preserving a work so predominantly pagan.

In the New Testament, there are some passages in which the desire for fame, glory and earthly achievements are condemned:

> Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect. (Romans 12:2)
>
> Beware of practicing your righteousness before other people in order to be seen by them, for then you will have no reward from your Father who is in heaven. (Matthew 6:1-7)
>
> For they loved the glory that comes from man more than the glory that comes from God. (John 12:43)

So in order to reconcile these two opposing cultural elements, the Beowulf poet makes some attempts to connect glory, victory and fame with something that comes from God.

During the battle with Grendel's mother, right after the poet describes how Beowulf's armor deflects Grendel's mother's attack, it is mentioned that:

> Holy God decided the victory. (Line 1552-3)

Later, when Beowulf is describing this battle for the audience in Hereot, the poet says:

> In he came then, the thane's commander,
> the arch-warrior, to address Hrothgar:
> his courage was proven, his glory was secure. (Line 1644-6)

But a couple of lines later, Beowulf himself says:

> I barely survived the battle under water.
> It was hard-fought, a desperate affair
> that could have gone badly; if God had not helped me,
> the outcome would have been quick and fatal. (Line 1654-1658)

This attempt at cultural reconciliation is perhaps the laziest in the poem. The best way to describe it is with the idiomatic proverb "to eat a cake and have it too", but it's a good example of how urgent it was for the poet to Christianize everything that was remotely pagan.

3.4 Boasting

In pagan cultures, heroes are idolized. But there is a side effect to idolization of one extraordinary individual: the marginalization of everyone else. While the idolization of one extraordinary man by other people can be justified (for example, Christian saints

were idolized individuals), but the idolization of that man by himself might be a bit too unchristian and that's essentially what boasting is all about.

Christianity puts importance on the general community, rather than the individual. This famous saying by Jesus Christ says it all: "Blessed are the meek: for they shall inherit the earth" (Matthew 5:5).

Wulfstan, an Anglo-Saxon churchman has mentioned "premature exuberant happiness (i.e. overconfidence) alongside arrogance and enthusiasm for boasting as traits to avoid" (Gwara 94).

It is expected of a good Christian man that even if he is great, he should downplay his greatness and emphasize the group effort. Humbleness is considered to be a great virtue in Christianity. But Beowulf is anything but humble.

He "emphasizes that he does not need help when he does great deeds. He boasts that he single-handedly captured five enemies, and he implies that they were giants' kin. He boasts that he has single-handedly fought with sea monsters at night. He promises to work the same solo magic against Grendel" (Staver 40).

In his most spectacular attempt at boasting, which takes a practical form, he decides to abandon his weapons and armor, in order to fight the empty-handed monster as an equal. He says before the battle:

> I have heard moreover that the monster scorns
> in his reckless way to use weapons;
> therefore, to heighten Hygelac's fame
> and gladden his heart, I hereby renounce
> sword and the shelter of the broad shield,
> the heavy war-board: hand-to-hand
> is how it will be, a life-and-death

fight with the fiend (Lines 433-440).

Obviously, the Geats and Danes don't have a problem with boasting, as long as it's honest (Staver 40). However, to our modern sense, boasting might seem a bit odd; imagine a modern soldier boasting about his/her marksmanship skill before cracking down on terrorists; so there must have been something about the medieval pagan culture that made boasting seem so natural.

In the example above, Beowulf "literalizes his boasting speech by fighting with grips, by physically holding on to the monster, in the same way that he is attempting to hold his body to his words" (M. Kim 9). The desire for Beowulf to literalize his boasting can be explained in the context of medieval philosophy in regards to the function of language. Vivien Law has demonstrates how philosophers from late antiquity through the Middle Ages theorized language through the models of human identity (6). She argues: "We cannot think about language without making some assumptions about the nature of man. Usually implicit, as often as not unconscious, our picture of the human being rebounds upon our view of language, shaping it to conform to our mental image of its speakers" (Law 57).

Saint Augustine, in his book, *On Christian Doctrine*, has compared the sounds of language to the body of man and the meaning to his soul. This comparison was based on a model of human identity as a relationship of body and soul, which was largely dominant throughout the period (M. Kim 6). So the sound of Beowulf's boasts (which is expressed in the masculine language that is Old English) represents his strong body; the meaning behind those boasts represents his pagan soul.

However, as Sheila Murnaghan has observed in her analysis of boasting in Greek works of literature, boasting is also used as an excuse to resist death, because its function is to replace or at least delay physical combat (23-43). So although boasting is

a pagan tradition, but there is something serene about it. It makes battle seem like a game or a challenge, rather than the messy fatal affair that it is. As a matter of fact, one of the reasons Grendel seems so terrorizing is that he never speaks. The only thing scarier than a terrorizing boast is someone who is immune to its terror. This makes the violence he is capable of seem less ritualistic and more savage (Lapidge 373-403). "The terror he represents is clearly the terror of the speechless body, the terror of losing oneself to that body, of falling into it, being eaten by it" (M. Kim 8).

What we can conclude from all this is that although boasting before battle is essentially a pagan tradition and it's difficult to reconcile it with anything remotely Christian, but Beowulf's boasting seem less crude, in contrast to the alien silence of his monstrous enemies. In a way it is necessary to shout out against them, so as to make the "us versus them" mentality clearer. Also, by attributing Beowulf's success in battle to God, the Beowulf poet makes his boasting seem less narcissistic. The same lazy, but effective impulse was discussed in his attempt to idolize courage and shame cowardice. In both cases, the pagan element is reconciled, but barely.

3.5 Revenge Culture

Feuds were an important cultural tradition among Germanic people. Anytime a murder occurred, the members of the victim's family were obliged to take revenge upon the murderer's family. Family feuding must have been common among the early Anglo-Saxon settlers, due to the absence of a centralized power to moderate criminal activity, but due to its costly nature, it lead to the development of the wergild (literally "man money") system. "Every person in society had a monetary value based on status and importance; if a person was injured or killed, the guilty party would pay the victim (or his or her survivors) a certain amount based on the severity of the damage" (Paxton 13).

In the text of the poem, there are numerous mentions to feuds, like the feud between the Geats and the Swedes or Danes and Heathobards. Interestingly, the attack of Grendel and the Dragon are also described as feuds. Shortly after Grendel's attack to Hereot, it is mentioned that:

> Sad lays were sung about the beset king,
> the vicious raids and ravages of Grendel,
> his long and unrelenting feud,
> nothing but war; how he would never
> parley or make peace with any Dane (Lines 151-5).

And as David D. Day explains:

> Perhaps the clearest case in point that feuds are defined by their ongoing, retaliatory character is the conflict between the Dragon and the Geats. Significantly, neither the poet nor his characters describe the first attack of the dragon on the Geats specifically as a fæhð; it is wroht . . . geniwad (2287, "strife renewed"), wig (2316, "war"), and nearofages nið (2317, "cruel violence"); the dragon wishes to lige forgyldan the theft (2305, "repay with fire"). It is not until Beowulf makes the decision to retaliate that the poet calls it a feud per se (Day par 14).

The idea of vengeance and feuding is at odds with the Christian ideal of forgiveness. However, it is possible to find a common ground between the two when we consider Biblical stories and Semitic Bedouin cultures, especially considering the fact that Grendel is one of the descendants of Cain.

David Day mentions three characteristics of the Feud as described in *Beowulf*. We are concerned with the first two:

1. Feuds are defined by reciprocity--they describe an ongoing relationship of retaliatory violence between two groups.

2. Feuds define the relationship of the feuding parties as a sort of ideology; all further interchanges between the two groups--political and military--are defined in reference to the conventional reciprocity of the feud despite their obvious opportunistic features (Day par 8).

Feud, as a symbol for the reciprocity of violence, is reminiscent of the story of Cain and Abel. Cain is generally considered to be the originator of evil and violence. Cain's vindictive act regenerated throughout the history and caused all the evil that came afterwards. That's how a feud functions: once it starts, it goes on and on, one revenge causes another in return. The Beowulf poet points out the regenerating nature of evil by describing Cain's descendants:

For the killing of Abel
the Eternal Lord had exacted a price:
Cain got no good from committing that murder
because the Almighty made him anathema
and out of the curse of his exile there sprang
ogres and elves and evil phantoms
and the giants too who strove with God
time and again until He gave them their reward (Lines 107-114).

E.L. Peters has analyzed the feuds among the Bedouin people of Cyrenaica and came to the conclusion that "these hostilities are of a sort that cannot be terminated; feud is not a matter of a group indulging in hostilities here at one moment and there the next, but a sequence of hostilities which, as far as the contemporary Bedouin are concerned at least, know no beginning and are insoluble" (Peters 261).

Jacob Black-Michaud, in a separate study of the Bedouin cultures of Mediterranean and the Middle East, came to the conclusion that these feuds were not about vengeance at all. As a matter of fact, the feuds were part of larger feuding relationship, designed to keep the fighting alive. In these cultures, "a horse bought with blood money will be used to ride when 'bringing vengeance'" (Black-Michaud 12).

The Old Testament, and the stories included in it (especially in the *Book of Genesis*), are mostly an exploration of the early Semitic cultures. Isaac Asimov, in his *Asimov's Guide to the Bible*, which is annotation of the Bible from a historical secular perspective, argues that the story of Cain and Abel is the realization of the distant memory of the destruction of nomadic way of life by civilization. "Cain and Abel represent the farmer and the herdsman (or nomad) respectively. The early histories are written from the standpoint of the farmers, the settled city-men, and in them the nomads are viewed as barbaric raiders, ruthless and bloodthirsty" (Asimov 33-34).

However, since the farmers, or the civilized people, ultimately dominated herdsman, or the nomads, it is only fair that Cain should kill Abel. "The tale (briefly and obscurely told) of how Cain grew jealous of Abel and killed him may be, in part, a remnant of some nomadic lament over the all-encroaching tentacles of settled civilization" (34).

This analysis leads to an interesting reading of the poem: Grendel was doing to Heorot what civilization did to the nomadic way of life. Perhaps Grendel's relation to Cain explains the jealousy he feels for humans who inhabit Heorot and the reason behind his attack.

Although Grendel's attack might seem causeless at first, but in lines 99-107, it is mentioned that God is feuding with Grendel's clan. One of the purposes of feuds was to be able to raise conflict anytime necessary. That's one of the biggest differences

between a feud and an all-out war. War is messy and chaotic, but a feud is calculated and strategic. You raise it any time you need a conflict (Day par 24). Grendel's feud with God was a good enough excuse to attack Heorot.

Although it might be a stretch to associate Grendel with civilization itself, but just like civilization, Grendel is an alien all-encompassing force, threatening a way of life: paganism. The association with Germanic paganism and Semitic Bedouin culture is easier to make. The only difference is that this time, thanks to the pagan spirit of a warrior such as Beowulf, the grounded way of life doesn't give in to the superior alien force.

3.6 Decoration of Shield and Armor

Anglo-Saxons had special armor for protection. They engraved symbols and names on them for psychological effect. There are many mentions of armors and rings throughout the poem. After Grendel's defeat, Halfdane's son showers Beowulf with all kinds of gifts:

> Then Halfdane's son presented Beowulf
> with a gold standard as a victory gift,
> an embroidered banner; also breast-mail
> and a helmet; and a sword carried high,
> that was both precious object and token of honour.
> So Beowulf drank his drink, at ease;
> it was hardly a shame to be showered with such gifts
> in front of the hall-troops. (Lines 1119-26)

Putting such a high value on lifeless objects is one of the pagan aspects of the characters. Throughout *Beowulf*, a tension manifests itself between the pagan regard for

treasure as a symbol of personal valor and the Christian conception of treasure as a symbol of sinful greed.

The poem starts and ends with a funeral: that of Shield Sheafson and Beowulf. Both burials are predominantly pagan. Both characters are buried with a wealth of artefacts, and both are cremated. In the context of Christianity, earthly belongings should not have any bearing on the journey to afterlife. Also, cremation was strictly forbidden in medieval Europe. Not only because of the belief in the resurrection of the human body, but also because of its strong association with pre-Christian pagan societies. Cremation was such a big taboo that in 789, Charlemagne made it punishable by death (Bergman 13).

The most important source we have for understanding the role of artefacts in the world of *Beowulf* is the findings in Sutton Hoo excavation. In 1939, a huge burial site was discovered in Sutton Hoo near Suffolk which was the site for a ship-burial. The burial site contains “armor, bowls, spoons and dishes, and various other objects. But it contains no body; and this has deepened the mystery of whom it was meant to celebrate” (Brooke 52).

The discoveries made at Sutton Hoo also revolutionized the field of *Beowulf* scholarship, because many parallels were found between the descriptions of items in the poem and the real items found at the site, leading to new understandings regarding the accuracy of the poem. "By the late 1950s, *Beowulf* and Sutton Hoo were so inseparable that, in study after study, the appearance of one inevitably and automatically evoked the other. If *Beowulf* came on stage first, Sutton Hoo was swiftly brought in to illustrate how closely seventh-century reality resembled what the poet depicted; if Sutton Hoo performed first, *Beowulf* followed close behind to give voice to the former's dumb evidence" (Frank 59). The most important finding is perhaps the Sutton Hoo helmet.

The boar imagery of the helmet, its crest and visor, its gleaming white and jeweled are all mirrored in the text of the poem.

Sutton Hoo is so splendid that nothing in the Teutonic world can be compared to it, so it is natural to assume that it is the burial site of a notable figure, probably a king. His identity as a king is supported by the presence of a strange rack that has been identified as royal and a whetstone that has been identified as a primitive scepter (Brooke 53).

The absence of the corpse (also referred to as "the lost warrior) in the ship is interesting and it can lead to some speculations about the identity of the person who was buried.

The cultural tension between Christianity and paganism is most evident in Sutton Hoo ship burial. The spoons buried with the lost warrior are "inscribed with St. Paul's two names: Saul, before baptism, and Paul, as a Christian" (54). This means that either the lost warrior was a Christian or the people who mourned him were.

This begs the question: if the lost warrior was a Christian, or if his funeral had Christian attendees, then why his voyage through afterlife is a distinctively pagan one? This is a key question in understanding the seemingly careless mixture of pagan and Christian elements in *Beowulf*, from a historical perspective.

As Christopher Brooke explains:

> [The most probable explanation is] that the Church tolerated a survival of pagan practices for a space, and allowed a recently converted warrior to be buried in customary style. If the monument was to a pagan king with Christian friends, the likely candidate is Althelhere of East Anglia, who perished in the battle of Winwted in the north of England in 654, and whose body may have been swept away by a river in flood—which

> would explain the emptiness of his tomb. If he was a Christian king, the likely candidate was his brother Anna, a far more celebrated man, who died earlier in the year (54).

Perhaps one of the reasons why Anglo-Saxons were so comfortable mixing Christianity with paganism is that they didn't see much difference between the two (Paxton 24). For example, there is an Anglo-Saxon artefact called the Franks Casket (named after its 19th century owner Augustus Franks, not the Franks). The casket includes the depiction of stories from Christianity (the Adoration of the Magi), Roman mythology (Romulus and Remus) and Germanic legends (Wayland the Smith). On the surface, it would seem like an inexplicable paradox to depict the story of Christ's nativity and Wayland the Smith on the same casket, but "both are stories about lordship—Christ the good king and Weyland's master the terrible one. Perhaps the message is about which sort deserved obedience, a very Germanic ethic grafted onto Roman stock" (24).

The same notion can be applied to the reason behind the importance of weapons and armor in the poem. Weapons and armor were important in warrior pagan societies, because they were in a constant state of feud and warfare. There are many references to feuding families in Germanic legends. But the Beowulf poet, as a devout Christian, takes a different approach. *Beowulf* is a heroic poem and Beowulf is its greatest hero, but his main opponents are supernatural creatures: two monsters and a dragon; we hardly see any mention of him killing human opponents. So although weapons and armors are of great importance to the characters in the poem, but their importance lies on their function in destroying devils, not humans. In that way, *Beowulf* could be considered as a primitive Christian allegory (Brooke 56).

3.7 Mead-Halls

Mead-Halls were a place where Germanic warriors gathered in order to refresh after the battle and get drunk. The mead-hall was also the symbol of power for Germanic kings, a place where their most devout followers would gather and listen to legends and tales of glory from the past. Mead-Halls remained as a center for political power until the 13th century, when they were replaced by medieval banquet halls. This event was synonymous with the full Christianization of Scandinavian countries.

Between the years 1986-88, Tom Christensen, a Danish archeologist discovered a wood that belonged to a mead-hall built in 880. This hall was built on an older hall that was built in 680. Between the years 2004-05, he discovered a third hall north of the other two. This hall was built in the mid 6th century, which is the same time-frame of the events of *Beowulf*. All these halls were about 50 meters long (Christensen 1). Considering the historical accuracy of the poem and the details presented in it, a fact that has been proven by the Sutton Hoo excavations, we can consider these halls as a prototype for what Heorot what might have looked like.

There have also been several mead-halls discovered in England itself. One of the sites is located in Yeavering in Northumberland, which includes traces of a series of buildings, which are identified as wooden halls, just like Heorot. It is probable that most of these halls had the same fate as Heorot: they were burnt. Another site is located in Cheddar in Somerset. In this site, there were also a couple of mead-halls discovered. At their heart, there was a Saxon timber hall, which belonged to the 9th century or earlier (Brooke 57).

Heorot is the heart of *Beowulf*. The noise of festivity in the hall, and Grendel's annoyance by it is what sets the plot in motion. Heorot is big enough for eight horses to be fit inside it and it's decorated with gold all over. In a way, Heorot is the symbol of

human civilization and culture (Halverson 593). The importance of Heorot becomes more evident when we compare *Beowulf* to other epic poems. Epic poems are known for their vast scale. In an epic story, the fate of a whole nation, or even the whole world, hangs in balance. But in *Beowulf*, all that matters is the safety of Hereot, as if this single-room mead-hall is a nation or a world in itself.

In the poem, Heorot is described as a magnificent place:

They marched in step,
hurrying on till the timbered hall
rose before them, radiant with gold.
Nobody on earth knew of another
building like it. Majesty lodged there,
its light shone over many lands. (Lines 306-11)

But there is more to Heorot than materialistic beauty. Heorot is a school, an academia, a place where all the cultural values that are important for society are transmitted to the young warriors. We know about these values, because epic poems are usually used as tool for "transmission of culturally useful information" (Foley 133). Specifically, Anglo-Saxon poetry was used to convey "society's collective wisdom about itself" and "its established perception of both the environment it needed to control and its human resources for doing so" (Clemoes 68). In other words, the role of epic poetry in a warrior society is the same as the role of homilies in a Christian society: in both a preferable rule of conduct is determined for the members of society, and the cultural items that reinforce these rules of conduct are preserved.

All of the actions that take place in Heorot, all of the words exchanged there, have the same function. Alexander M. Bruce believes that the poem is supposed to serve an educational purpose for a group of Anglo-Saxons called the "geoguð", or the young

warriors. Like many of these warriors, Beowulf is an up-and-comer, who is strong (he has the strength of 30 men) and seeks fame, but he hasn't proven himself yet. This is why Unferth doubts him in the first place. In the course of the poem, through the actions of Beowulf, these young warriors learn "how to face their first battle, how to respond when separated from help, and how to act when confronted by death" (Bruce par 1).

There are a couple of mentions of young warriors, sitting among the older warriors in Heorot:

> The fortunes of war favoured Hrothgar.
> Friends and kinsmen flocked to his ranks,
> young followers, a force that grew
> to be a mighty army. (Lines 64-7)
> All were endangered; young and old
> were hunted down by that dark death-shadow. (Lines 159-60)
> She turned then to the bench where her boys sat,
> Hrethric and Hrothmund, with other nobles' sons,
> all the youth together; and that good man,
> Beowulf the Geat, sat between the brothers. (Lines 1187-90)

In the poem, there are certain digressive tales which are told to the audience present at Heorot. These tales are supposed to deliver a moral message to the characters in the poem, especially the young warriors mentioned, but in a Meta manner. They're also supposed to deliver a message to the audience who were listening to *Beowulf* in real-life Anglo-Saxon mead-halls.

Now the question is: is the moral message pagan or Christian? And the answer is: a mixture of both, and there's no problem with that. Levin L. Schücking has argued as early as 1929 that "the kingship ideal [is a] mixture of Germanic-heroic and Stoic-

Christian ideas" (Schücking 36). Karl Brunner later improved Schücking's idea and said that *Beowulf* is designed as a *Fürstenspiegel,* or "mirror of a prince," by focusing on the Christian elements. He considered the poem as a part of a movement of "religious and didactic literature" (Brunner 3). Finally, G.N. Garmonsway stated that:

> Taken as a whole, the story with its episodes and digressions does form a kind of eighth-century 'Mirror for Magistrates' . . . wherein those in authority might have seen pictured their obligations and responsibilities . . . and learned some useful lessons about current moral sanctions governing behavior in general, and heroic conduct in particular. (Garmonsway 139).

So although mead-halls were essentially a part of pagan culture and they were used to spread pagan values, but the Beowulf poet, through his own didactics, give a Christian flavor to this practice.

3.8 Anglo-Saxon Warrior Code

As it was mentioned in the previous section, *Beowulf* is regarded by some as essentially a pagan educational piece with a Christian flavor and one of the most important things it teaches to its audience is the Anglo-Saxon warrior code. According to Edward Irving: "The fundamental ethical code of the poem is unmistakably secular: it is the warrior code of the aristocracy, celebrating bravery, loyalty, and generosity, with the hero finding his only immortality in the long-lasting fame of great exploits carried out in this world. It is not fundamentally different from the code found in Homer's Iliad" (Irwing Jr. 124).

It is possible to trace all these qualities to the ancient Germanic god Odin (or Woden) who is often associated with wisdom, healing, death, royalty, the gallows,

knowledge, battle, sorcery, poetry, frenzy, and the runic alphabet. Many of the Germanic kings claimed descent from Odin, despite of their Christianity, but that's because at this stage, they thought of him as an ancient hero, rather than a god (124). According to Euhemerus, the ancient Greek mythographer, mythological tales were actually the result of the exaggeration of tales about real historical people, which led to their eventual apotheosis. So from a Euhemeristic point of view, they weren't wrong.

On the surface. The Germanic warrior code might seem at odds with Christian values. For example, among the Germanic people, material possession was a symbol of one's worth, but in Christianity, material possession is a sign of vanity. However, we shouldn't rush to judge this as a paradox exclusive to Anglo-Saxon pagans. We see the same tension in other early medieval epics, such as *The Song of Roland*, which was composed in a much stronger Christian environment than the one *Beowulf* was produced in.

> There the Frankish heroes cheerfully alternate mass with massacre, the supposedly noncombatant Archbishop Turpin stoutly cleaves pagan knights in twain, and Roland himself glories in his pride, only sporadically aware of any higher responsibility than to the heroic code involving himself, his fellows in the comitatus of the Twelve Peers, and the Emperor Charlemagne. If in some sense Roland is condemned for his reckless secular pride, he is also loved for it, or there would have been no point in composing the poem or celebrating its hero (124-5).

Due to the relative flexibility of Christianity (at least compared to Judaism and Islam), it is easy to associate many different Christian elements to cultures that seem to be at odds with it. Marie P. Hamilton argues that the Beowulf poet was influenced by Augustine's *City of God* to portray God's grace in pre-Christian Scandinavia, with the

poem showing "the Germanic tradition ennobled by the new theology, as by a light flashed backward into the heroic past" (Hamilton 309). So the display of the Anglo-Saxon warrior code is not only reconcilable with Christianity, it can strengthen it, because it shows that even in a distinctively pagan society, the grace of God and Christ could be felt and understood. This was actually a great propaganda piece for the Church, because it showed that there is hope for the Christianization of the Scandinavians, a part of Europe that had the largest number of pagan population in the time-frame *Beowulf* was composed in. If in the world of fiction, Christianity could be associated with their pagan way of life in a way that makes sense, then maybe the same thing could be done in real life too.

Charles J. Donahue has another explanation for the inclusion of a pagan warrior code in a Christian framework and that is the notion of "noble heathen" (Irving Jr. 128). Although this view is not widely accepted, but it basically points out the more liberal attitude that Irish monks had towards pagans, due to the fact that their own ancestors were pagans. This might explain their success in converting the northern English (Donahue 382). Larry D. Benson believes that the Anglo-Saxon missionaries who were sent to the mainland felt great sympathy and admiration for Franks and Frisians, who were still unconverted. The poem's positive attitude towards pagan spirit might have made sense, in that particular context (Benson 334).

Whatever the historical explanation may be, it is clear that the Beowulf poet does not see anything wrong with being a good warrior and being a good Christian. Christians have not been a stranger to war and bloodshed at any point in their history, but the flavor of warfare, and the reasoning behind it, is unmistakably pagan in *Beowulf*.

Perhaps this is one of the general issues of Christianity itself: the invitation to peace and meekness and non-violence in a period of history that violence was ultimately

inevitable. So every Christian culture had to reconcile war with their beliefs somehow. Saint Augustine proposed the “Just War Theory”, the crusades led to the idea of “Holy War”, medieval political maneuvers made forced conversions necessary. To be frank, the reasoning behind these violent act is an excuse at best and it’s not something Christ would approve, but they were a necessity and once necessities come into play, everything else is just wordplay. The same thing can be said in regard to the Beowulf poet and his attempt at reconciling paganism with Christianity.

Chapter Four:

Identifying the Christian Elements in the Text

Identifying the Christian Elements in the Text

The Almighty Judge
of good deeds and bad, the Lord God,
Head of the Heavens and High King of the World,
was unknown to them. Oh, cursed is he
who in time of trouble had to thrust his soul
into the fire's embrace, forfeiting help;
he has nowhere to turn. But blessed is he
who after death can approach the Lord
and find friendship in the Father's embrace. (Lines 180-88)

The aim of the fourth chapter is to identify the major Christian elements of the poem, explain the general history behind them and discuss how they relate to general idea of "cultural tension" and "cultural reconciliation". The Christian elements that are going to be discussed are as follows: associating Beowulf's courage and fame with God, Grendel's lineage, Wyrd vs. God's will, Fæge and Unfæge, Christianization of vengeance, Christian morality and disapproval of pagan traditions, the Christianization of treasures and earthly belongings.

4.1 Associating Beowulf's Courage and Fame with God

In the poem, many pagan qualities are attributed to God. Hrothgar states that Beowulf's killing of Grendel was achieved "through the power of the Lord". This statement ties Beowulf's prowess and fame back to God. In other words, Beowulf's heroic exploits are constantly framed in terms of God's role in them, as though Beowulf owes all of his

abilities to providence, thus reconciling a pagan concept with Christianity. Here are some other examples:

> He knew what they had tholed,
> the long times and troubles they'd come through
> without a leader; so the Lord of Life,
> the glorious Almighty, made this man renowned. (Lines 15-18)
> And the Geat placed complete trust
> in his strength of limb and the Lord's favor. (Lines 669-70)
> And may the Divine Lord
> in His wisdom grant the glory of victory
> to whichever side He sees fit. (Lines 685-7)

What the Beowulf poet does in these lines is actually a clever trick that can be termed as "deceptive association". Deceptive association is about combining two opposing traits, with the forced assumption that they are not opposing at all. For example, if a Muslim commander says to his troops "let's thank Allah for all the booze we have taken from the enemy", he's committing deceptive association. This trick is useful, because it's so lazy and the fallacy is so strong that the hearer realizes the speaker is not playing by logic's rules, so there would be no point in correcting him.

This deceptive association was par for the course in medieval history, because the classical pagan culture of Greece and Rome had too much influence on the development of Christianity to be ignored. Even if not for the sake of influence, the sheer cultural power of Classical culture would make anyone who undermined it to seem like a philistine and that was not the reputation that early Christians wanted to attain. Early Christian poets like Proba, Luxiorus and Pomponius rearranged verse of Virgil, Horace and Ovid in order to make them convey Christian meanings. The centos

of Proba, which were rewording of Virgil's verse, were used to teach Christianity along with Augustine's *On Christian Doctrine*. This might seem odd, to teach a doctrine with the words of someone who died before the doctrine came to existence. But that's the point: the reader should follow "the Christian level of the narrative while remaining aware of the source of the poetic language" (Bloom 3). In the same way that we see traces of Aeneas in the Christ that Proba depicts, we hear distant echoes of Thunor and Woden when the Beowulf poet refers to God, lord, almighty father or uses other such epithets. In these words, the Christian present is mingled with the darker pagan past.

As a matter of fact, both Proba and the Beowulf poet are performing the same trick: in the same way the Beowulf poet attaches pagan qualities to the Christian God, Proba attaches pagan qualities to Christ. According to Christian specialists Elizabeth A. Clark and the Classicist Diane Hatch, Proba's goal was to "imbue the Christ with heroic virtues", just like Aeneas (36). She does this in three different ways: 1. she puts an emphasis on Jesus's physical beauty and praises his "magnificent and commanding presence", like that of Aeneas. 2. During his crucifixion, Jesus doesn't accept his fate meekly, but lashes out at his persecutors. This is an especially noticeable paradox, because Jesus's meekness in accepting his death is integral to the doctrine of Christianity, especially considering the fact that his knowledge of his resurrection and his place with God must have shown him that his crucifixion is a part of God's plan and there's no reason to rebel against it. His aggressiveness is an homage to Aeneas's vindictive slaying of Turnus in the end of *The Aeneid*. 3. Proba transfers prophecies about Rome's glorious future and makes them seem like Jesus's prophecies, thus reconciling paganism with Christianity (34-5).

This style of association is a part of a larger sociopolitical strategy called "Interpretatio Christiana". This phenomenon is defined as "the reception of a non-

Christian cultural element or historical fact with a view to adapting it to Christianity by means of appropriate interpretation" (Eberlein 1). Interpretatio Christiana was a clever strategy used to Christianize pagans and it was even officially sanctioned by Pope Gregory 1, in a letter to Mellitus, the first bishop of London in Saxon period. The contents of this letter is preserved in Bede's *Ecclesiastical History of the English People.*

> To his most beloved son, the Abbot Mellitus; Gregory, the servant of the servants of God. […] I have long been considering in my own mind concerning the matter of the English people; to wit, that the temples of the idols in that nation ought not to be destroyed; but let the idols that are in them be destroyed; let water be consecrated and sprinkled in the said temples, let altars be erected, and relics placed there. For if those temples are well built, it is requisite that they be converted from the worship of devils to the service of the true God; that the nation, seeing that their temples are not destroyed, may remove error from their hearts, and knowing and adoring the true God, may the more freely resort to the places to which they have been accustomed. […] For there is no doubt that it is impossible to cut off everything at once from their rude natures; because he who endeavors to ascend to the highest place rises by degrees or steps, and not by leaps. Thus the Lord made Himself known to the people of Israel in Egypt; and yet He allowed them the use, in His own worship, of the sacrifices which they were wont to offer to the Devil, commanding them in His sacrifice to kill animals, to the end that, with changed hearts, they might lay aside one part of the sacrifice, whilst they retained another; and although the animals were the same as those which

> they were wont to offer, they should offer them to the true God, and not to idols; and thus they would no longer be the same sacrifices (Sellar 66-7).

From this letter, we notice many instances of Interpretatio Christiana, like Christianization of sacred pagan sites and Christianization of pagan feasts, as an attempt to avoid destroying or removing them and alienating the local population. It is a well-known fact that many customs related to Christmas developed independently of Christ's birth and take root in pre-Christian pagan holidays that were celebrated around winter solstice. Interpretatio Christiana can also be extended to pre-Christian knowledge and lore. Many of the demons in Christianity are actually older pagan gods who became demons through cultural assimilation (Kieckhefer 58).

Now that it's clear that this sloppy mixture of Christianity and paganism was a conscious and sometimes sanctioned effort to spread Christianity, we have to consider the problem of the cognitive dissonance it must have caused.

According to Leon Festinger, in him seminal work *A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance*, human beings need internal consistency to function in the real world. When a person simultaneously believes in two or more contradictory beliefs, ideas or values, he experiences a mental discomfort that he or she tries to overcome. That is cognitive dissonance (1-2).

> Cognitive dissonance follows three steps:
>
> (a) Dissonance, defined as occurring when two elements of information (cognitions) are psychologically or logically inconsistent with each other, produces negative affect.

(b) The negative affect arising from dissonance evokes motivation to engage in strategies intended to reduce dissonance, that is, restore cognitive consistency.

(c) Dissonance reduction attenuates negative affect evoked by cognitive dissonance (Burris et al. 18).

Among the professionals, the first two assumptions are widely believed to be true and the third one is considered to be dubious at best.

When a person is faced with dissonance, they avoid situations and information that exacerbate it (Festinger 3). However, Gunnar Myrdal, in his study of the Negro problem in modern America, came to the conclusion that our need to reconcile opposing beliefs is actually the result of modern developments:

> A need will be felt by the person or group, whose inconsistencies in valuations are publicly· exposed, to find a means of reconciling the inconsistencies. [...] The feeling of need for logical consistency within the hierarchy of moral valuations […] is, in. its modern intensity, a rather new phenomenon. With less mobility, less intellectual communication, and less public discussion, there was in previous generations less exposure of one another's valuation conflicts (Myrdal 1029-30).

Since in the age of Anglo-Saxon England, due to low historical density, mobility, intellectual communication and public discussion were at their lowest, English people simply didn't feel the psychological need to reconcile Christianity and paganism as much as we feel the need to reconcile ideological opposites. We are living in an age in which every single thing a public figure says can be analyzed, dissected and proven right or wrong within minutes. The inconsistency of opinions of politicians throughout the years is revealed for all to see. So naturally, this has made our generation more

aware of inconsistences in our speech and thought and therefore, more prone to cognitive dissonance. Anglo-Saxons simply did not need to worry about any of this, because there was no one to point out the fallacies in their arguments or the contradictions in their world-view. Their life was too simple for these things to matter. Since the literate and intellectual people were mostly church-men, there was no need to scrutinize them either. They were already a part of the ruling hegemony and it was safe to assume everything they did was to help spread Christianity. These contradictions, or deceptive associations, became a matter of importance only after another cultural force arose alongside Christianity that could threat its monopoly on culture and that was Renaissance Humanism. We could not simply imagine the rise of a figure like Girolamo Savonarola or orders like the Spanish Inquisition in the heart of Anglo-Saxon England, because people, and their faith, were not sophisticated enough to require systematic correction. In order to experience cognitive dissonance, one has to truly believe in something deeply and from a psychological point of view. Anglo-Saxons did not. That's why Christianity and paganism can be mixed so carelessly in *Beowulf*, without raising any kind of complaint from the churchmen or the people.

4.2 Grendel's Lineage

Although Anglo-Saxons didn't feel the need to revolt against the paradox inherent in their culture, but this paradox was pointed out nonetheless, by no other than Alcuin, who in a letter to bishop Higbald of Lindisfarne, questioned the monks' fascination with Ingeld, the pagan hero: "'Quid enim Hinieldus cum Christo?' - What has Ingeld to do with Christ?" (Mitchell et al. 225)

It is evident from this comment that Interpretatio Christiana was tolerated by churchmen, but its inherent incongruence was not lost upon them. In this period,

Christianity and paganism had a co-dependent relationship; just as some Christian elements were being paganized (like the depiction of Abraham and Christ as powerful heroes), pagan elements were also being incorporated into Christianity. This phenomenon was introduced as Interpretatio Christiana.

In the case of *Beowulf*, Interpretatio Christiana is most evident in the character of Grendel, who is mentioned to be one of the descendants of Cain. Grendel is of Christian origin, but he "cannot be dissociated from the creatures of northern myth" (Tolkien 122).

There are two poems in Old English called *Genesis A* and *Genesis B* (together called the *Old English Genesis*). *Genesis A* is a rewrite of the first half of the *Book of Genesis*, up to Abraham's near sacrifice of Isaac in chapter 22. There are some parallels between Grendel and Cain, especially as he is described in *Genesis A*. In the introduction of Grendel, in the lines 99-107, it is mentioned that Cain's bloodline was tainted forever because of his sin of killing Abel. Before Grendel's attack on Heorot, when Beowulf is waiting for him among his sleeping comrades, he is described as "God-cursed" (Line 711) and "The bane of the race of men" (Line 712). These are the two major references that create a conceptual and cultural link between *Beowulf* and the *Old English Genesis* (Meehan 2).

The passage in which Cain kills his brother is one of the shining examples of "expansion of the biblical text using convention of Old English heroic verse" (3). In the Saint Jerome translation of the Bible, this incident is described in one long sentence, including a quote. In the Old English version, the part where Cain asks Abel to leave other human company is left out and there's only a description of how he kills his brother in the fields, away from their community (3). The subsequent part is the description of Cain's state of mind after the murder and his agitation over it: "That was

bitter to the man, heavy upon his heart. The man's breast surged with anger, lowered with hostility, fury over rivalry" (Genesis, Lines 979–982). Similarly, when Grendel kills Beowulf's companions, the description focuses on Grendel's state of mind. The fury that Cain feels at his brother is similar to the fury of Grendel at Heorot (In line 730, it is mentioned that "his glee was demonic"), especially because they're both inspired by jealousy.

There is another notable parallel between the *Old English Genesis* and *Beowulf*: "Middle-earth swallowed the death-gore, the man's blood" (Genesis, Lines 985–986). Grendel is described as a cannibal:

> He grabbed and mauled a man on his bench,
> bit into his bone-lappings, bolted down his blood
> and gorged on him in lumps, leaving the body
> utterly lifeless, eaten up
> hand and foot. (Lines 740-44)

"Both *Beowulf* and *Genesis* refer to blood, to hands, to the welling emotions of the killer" (Meehan 3). In *Genesis*, earth is described in a way as if it's a monster that has opened its mouth and Abel's blood is drained into it. But the *Old English Genesis* takes this suggestion one step further by using the verb "swallowed" in reference to earth (4).

Grendel is an outcast. He lives on the margins of society, but slaughters his victims in Heorot, which is a cultural center for the Danes. The *Old English Genesis* also re-orients "the relationship between social center and social margins in the depiction of Cain's killing of Abel" (4). In the bible, it is mentioned that Cain murders Abel in the fields, but in the *Old English Genesis*, this detail is omitted, so it is possible that Cain kills his brother within the community. God punishes Cain by sending him

into exile and curses him to be hated by his kinsmen. This detail about Cain is also mentioned in *Beowulf*. In the description of Grendel, it is also mentioned that he was a wanderer like Cain: "haunting the marches, marauding round the heath and the desolate fens" (Lines 103-4). As Meehan explains: "Grendel's identification with Cain in the text is more complex than the simple attribution of kinship; like Cain, Grendel is always a part of and simultaneously apart from Heorot's human community, seen to haunt the margins, condemned to listen to human song and laughter from outside the hall" (4).

There is another parallel between *Beowulf* and *Genesis* and that is the opposition between Beowulf and Grendel-kin and the opposition between Cain and Abraham. The opposition between the former is clear and explicit and between the latter, it is largely implied. Beowulf is obviously a product of a Christian environment, but the hero should be seen from a pre-Christian light. But in *Old English Genesis*, most of the genealogical and geographical information is omitted, in favor of a more direct, shorter link between Cain and Abraham (5). This implied opposition suggest that in the minds of the Anglo-Saxons, Cain and Abraham were linguistically or conceptually linked (5).

From all this parallelism, we can conclude that Grendel's lineage as one of the descendants of Cain is more than just a lazy attempt at Interpretatio Christiana. Grendel is a Cain-like figure who is supposed to represent everything that was wrong with Cain, and Beowulf, as a Christian hero, is set to serve as an instrument of God to put him in his place. *Old English Genesis* is also a valuable source that shows us how Anglo-Saxons perceived (or liked to perceive) stories from the Old Testament. In the world of Anglo-Saxons, Hebraic, Christian and Anglo-Saxon pagan traditions were fused into one cultural matrix and in this matrix, characters from different traditions (like Cain and Grendel/Hrothgar and Moses) were seen as proper forebears for Anglo-Saxons, Christian in practice and pagan in spirit.

4.3 Wyrd vs. God's Will

Perhaps the most complicated instance of cultural tension in the poem is the tension between Wyrd (the Anglo-Saxon concept for fate or personal destiny) and the will of God.

In Christianity, the faith of man in God and his grace is of utmost importance. Because God has laid out a plan for all creatures, a path that they will have to follow. We see a radical interpretation of predestination in Calvinism. According to Calvin, the path towards redemption or damnation is preordained for all creatures and there is no way to change it.

But unlike the will of god, which ordains the fate and fortune of all living creatures, wyrd works outside of the realm of God's influence. It is true that human intellect is not capable of perceiving God's plan, but wyrd goes beyond that; it rises above all deities (Lambdin 29).

Deceptive association is also used for God's will and wyrd in *Beowulf*. When Beowulf and Hrothgar are talking about the outcome of the fight with Grendel, this outcome is both attributed to God and wyrd. Beowulf says:

> Whichever one death fells
> must deem it a just judgment by God.
> If Grendel wins, it will be a gruesome day;
> he will glut himself on the Geats in the war-hall,
> swoop without fear on that flower of manhood
> as on others before. Then my face won't be there
> to be covered in death: he will carry me away
> as he goes to ground, gorged and bloodied;
> he will run gloating with my raw corpse

and feed on it alone, in a cruel frenzy,

fouling his moor-nest. No need then

to lament for long or lay out my body:

if the battle takes me, send back

this breast-webbing that Weland fashioned

and Hrethel gave me, to Lord Hygelac.

Fate goes ever as fate must. (Lines 440-55)

As it's evident, Beowulf starts his speech by talking about "judgment by God" and ends it by talking about how "fate goes ever as fate must". When it comes to invocation, God and wyrd are also mixed up. At one point, in reference to Grendel, Beowulf says:

Like a man outlawed

for wickedness, he must await

the mighty judgment of God in majesty. (Lines 977-79)

And near the end of the poem, the Beowulf poet says:

that final day was the first time

when Beowulf fought and fate denied him

glory in battle. (Lines 2573-75)

According to Staver, wyrd represents a sense of inevitability, but the decree of God has personified it somehow. The pagan warriors knew wyrd is a wild card and it could be either for or against them, but the Christian warrior could comfort himself by the thought of God controlling wyrd itself, hopefully in their favor (Staver 159).

The idea of God as a personification of wyrd is especially interesting, because "Wyrd has been interpreted as a pre-Christian Germanic concept or goddess of fate by some scholars. Other scholars deny a pagan signification of wyrd in Old English

literature, but assume that wyrd was a pagan deity in the pre-Christian period" (Frakes 15). So although wyrd seems like an abstract concept in *Beowulf*, the Christian God seems to have replaced the pagan face that it has lost in time.

Timmer, in his research on the development of wyrd as a concept in Anglo-Saxon society also reaches the same conclusion. Anglo-Saxons, before their conversion, were fatalistic people. But after their conversion, the belief in a "superhuman, blind and hostile" fate was more or less replaced by the belief in God's more merciful will. However, after the conversion, the word wyrd still remained in Anglo-Saxon vocabulary, and it's likely that it still retained some of its pre-Christian meaning. In fact, the presence of pagan elements in *Beowulf* is basic evidence provided to support this claim (Timmer 214).

Hamilton believes that the Beowulf poet might have regarded fate as a subordinate to God's will. That would explain the frequent references to the protection of the Geats and Danes and the control of their fortune by God (Hamilton 326). After Beowulf defeats Grendel's mother, the Beowulf poet writes: "Holy God decided the victory" (Lines 1553-4) or when Beowulf goes to Heorot to protect the Danes from Grendel, he is described as a God-send to these people:

> The King of Glory
> (as people learned) had posted a lookout
> who was a match for Grendel, a guard against monsters,
> special protection to the Danish prince. (Lines 665-69)

Hamilton's question can actually be related to one of the most controversial questions about God and fate (especially in its Calvinistic sense): if God has determined everything from the start, then why do anything at all? In the context of the poem, if

God is the force that grants victory to Beowulf, then what glory or fame is there to achieve? What kind of hero Beowulf is? After all, he's just an instrument of God.

C.S. Lewis, in his book *Miracles,* gives an explanation about the purpose of prayer that is revealing:

> The event [in question] has already been decided—in a sense it was decided "before all worlds." But one of the things taken into account in deciding it, and therefore one of the things that really cause it to happen, may be this very prayer that we are now offering. . . . My free act [of prayer] contributes to the cosmic shape. That contribution is made in eternity or "before all worlds"; but my consciousness of contributing reaches me at a particular point in the time-series (Lewis 179).

In order to understand Lewis's point more deeply, it is necessary to make a distinction between fatalism and determinism. Fatalists believe that our choices don't matter and they don't affect our future. Determinism means that God has determined every incident that takes place in the world, but that means He has also determined all the instruments required for these things to happen. According to this view, God had determined that Grendel should die, but all the incidents that lead to his death (including Beowulf's bodily moves) had also been determined. Calvinistic determinism is a clever argument, because it doesn't' enforce existential pressure of unlimited freedom on people, but it doesn't discourage them from taking charge of their life either, because that would also be a part of God's plan.

So wyrd, or fate, as it's implemented in *Beowulf,* is nothing more than Calvinistic determinism in disguise. In his fight with the dragon, "fate denied him glory in battle", because it was God's determination for him to die and nothing, including his superhuman strength, could change that.

In the combination of wyrd and God's will, we see an instance of religious syncretism. Syncretism means the incorporation and blending of two or more religious systems, to create a new bigger religious system. Syncretism is different from cultural assimilation, because the latter refers to the Church's ability to "incorporate into herself all that is true, good, and beautiful in the world" (Gilson 13). So the adaption of the ideas of Plato and Aristotle by Saint Augustine and Thomas Aquinas was an example of cultural assimilation, while the combination of pagan and Christian elements in *Beowulf* is an example of Syncretism. Perhaps it's for this reason that syncretism has a negative connotation to it, because it's founded on compromise.

Susanne Weil has an interesting take on this issue. She believes that the Beowulf poet is not trying to reconcile wyrd with God's will, but he is trying to convince the reader that they should move beyond external forces that are supposed to determine their future and only rely on themselves. Radical individualism is a fairly modern concept and the fact that *Beowulf* could be interpreted as an advocator of it speaks volumes of its depth.

Weil's main tool for argument is the presence of what she calls "hand-words". As she explains:

> The unusual preponderance of words meaning "hand" (hereafter "hand-words") in *Beowulf* supports my contention that the individual was the primary shaper of his fate in Anglo-Saxon poetry. Folm, mund, and hond are not commonly used in Old English (compared with words meaning "battle," "warrior," or "sword," etc.), and yet they appear sixty-five times in the 3,182 lines of *Beowulf* (a sizeable number of their 435 appearances in what remains of the canon). Forty- seven of those appearances, a full two-thirds, occur in clusters during episodes in which Beowulf's life or

> reputation hangs in the balance, either in episodes of actual combat such as the above example (in which Beowulf trusts in his "strong handgrip") or in the scenes of his political testing at the hands of Hrothgar, Unferth, or Hygelac. I believe that these hand-words constitute an oral formula little remarked but crucial, for Beowulf, through the "strength of thirty" in his hands, transforms himself from the son of an outcast to a great hero and king in a culture where ancestry determined one's role in society. If Beowulf did not "shape his fate," no character in Anglo-Saxon legend ever did (Weil 97).

Humans control the world by reaching, grasping and manipulating things by their hands, so it is safe to assume that by including so many hand-words in the poem, the Beowulf poet is encouraging Anglo-Saxons to take things in their own hands and value their individuality.

Before the battle with Grendel, Beowulf not only discards his weapons to fight a fair fight, but he also says this prayer:

> And may the Divine Lord
> in His wisdom grant the glory of victory
> to whichever side He sees fit (Lines 685-87)[3].

Beowulf is not asking God for a favor. He's asking him to grant victory to whoever is the worthiest. He wants nothing but a confirmation of his own value (Weil 99).

Another aspect of Beowulf that puts emphasis on his individualism is his family background. Beowulf's father, was an outcast who was only redeemed when Hrothgar

[3] The hand-word is not retained in Heaney's translation. The literal translation is "on whichever hand, holy Lord, sees good to him, will assign victory!"

redeemed him with wergild. Unferth also tries to undermine Beowulf by mentioning his unsuccessful swimming competition with Breca. In other words, Beowulf is just a distant cousin to Hygelac and lacks any remarkable reputation; and he lives in a world in which the destiny of a man is determined by his ancestry and reputation. So the fact that Beowulf managed to become a renowned warrior and a king in such a world functions as "a walking metaphor for the power of one's own will and courage to shape one's fate" (101). In some ways, Beowulf seems like a modern Randian hero, rather than an unsophisticated medieval warrior.

The issue of wyrd vs God's will vs individual will is a philosophical one, rather than pragmatic. Most Anglo-Saxons knew that they are responsible for their own actions and if they were slain in battle, it wouldn't make much difference whether God ordained it or fate. But still, this philosophical approach wouldn't have been accepted, if it didn't make sense to them on some level. As Stanley Greenfield has pointed out, there is no trace of cultural inferiority/superiority in *Beowulf*. It is written in the celebratory style of *fin-de-siecle* epic (Greenfield 105). Since Anglo-Saxons were influenced by Boethian Christianity (whose work was translated by none other than Alfred the Great), they could empathize with the idea that "one held the responsibility, and, in the form of reputation, the credit, for one's acts, no matter who or what controlled the universe" (Weil 104). So the tension between wyrd and God's will is reconciled by presenting a hero who doesn't worry about either of them and tries to makes his way in the world by his own prowess and wisdom. For a man like Beowulf, God, wyrd, the absence of either or the presence of both does not make a difference, for he is a self-made man and for that reason, he was a great role-model for a warrior society.

4.4 Fæge and Unfæge

One of the offshoots of the tension between God's will and wyrd is the concept of fated death, which is represented in old English by fæge (fated to die) and unfæge (not fated to die). In the poem, there are several mentions to fate, as the force that determines the exact time and place of death. For example, in his description of the swimming match with Breca, Beowulf says: "Often, for undaunted courage, fate spares the man it has not already marked" (Lines 572-73). Later in the poem, before Grendel's mother attacks Heorot, it is mentioned that "one man lay down to his rest, already marked for death" (Lines 1240-41). It is revealed that man in question was Æschere, Hrothgar's most trusted advisor. They find his decapitated head in front of Heorot's gate. Finally, when we are told of the slave who had robbed the dragon and escaped, the poet comments: "So may a man not marked by fate easily escape exile and woe by the grace of God" (Lines 2291-93).

In the examples above, we see instances of fæge and unfæge. They are a sign of how serious and inevitable a force fate seemed to Anglo-Saxons. Beowulf's quote shows that if fate has decided that someone should die, once the wheels are in motion, there's really nothing that can stop it and courage can only help a man if he is not destined to die. The quote about Æschere emphasizes the inevitability of death for someone who is fæge. In the passage about the robber, it is implied that only a person who is not marked by fate can take advantage of God's grace (Fate is put above God's will) and "a man requires the favor of fate as well as the favor of God if he is to survive misfortune" (Tietjen 164). What is of interest to us here is the role of God in the determination of who is fæge and unfæge.

We learn in the poem that "Beowulf has both kept in mind the inevitability of death at the hands of fate and made proper use of the honors granted him by God"

(165). But simply honoring God's gifts is not enough to save one from pre-ordained death. Before the battle with the dragon, Beowulf senses that he's about to die:

> He was sad at heart,
> unsettled yet ready, sensing his death.
> His fate hovered near, unknowable but certain:
> it would soon claim his coffered soul,
> part life from limb. Before long
> the prince's spirit would spin free from his body. (Lines 2419-24)

At this point, Beowulf is fæge and he can sense it. At first glance, it might seem the idea of fæge is against the idea of God as an omnipotent being who controls everything in the universe, because it operates outside of His realm of influence. But it's actually one of those rare cases where a pagan concept is not only in line with the Christian doctrine, but strengthens it.

In the Old Testament, there are many mentions of God directly killing certain humans. The people of Sodom and Gomorrah and all of the people in the world outside of Noah's ark are the most famous examples. There are also cases where God directly causes the death of certain individuals, like Uzzah (2 Samuel 6:7).

Back in the days of the Old Testament, God operated directly in many supernatural and miraculous events and had a specific goal in mind. But after the crucifixion of Christ, His degree of direct interference was lessened. As it's mentioned in the Bible:

> Charity never faileth: but whether there be prophecies, they shall fail; whether there be tongues, they shall cease; whether there be knowledge, it shall vanish away. For we know in part, and we prophesy in part. But

> when that which is perfect is come, then that which is in part shall be done away. (1 Corinthians 13:8-10)

This line is usually interpreted as the announcement that God simply doesn't operate as he did before. After the crucifixion, the death of human beings is just a part of a natural process. Even in the pre-crucifixion days, we could only say God caused someone's death if it is specifically mentioned in the Bible that it was He who took them away. In both Genesis 2:17 and Romans 5:12 it is mentioned that the reason behind the existence of death is the original sin. So although God generated death, but He does not control it, even though He can.

So when the Beowulf poet talks about people who are fated to die, he's not undermining God's will or power, because God simply doesn't interfere in the death of people like Beowulf. As it's mentioned in the Bible: "If these men die the common death of all men, or if they be visited after the visitation of all men; *then* the LORD hath not sent me" (Numbers 16:29). The word "common" in the verse is revealing, because it signifies the fact that God does interfere in the death of common people and the presence of a force (even the pagan idea of fate) that might determine someone's death is not against Christian doctrine.

As extraordinary as Beowulf might seem as a hero, from a Christian perspective, he's a common man and the Christian God has no reason to involve himself in His death or success, at least not more than any other person. Beowulf might come off as haughty and arrogant in his boasts, but the treatment of his death is the ultimate proof that he's, after all, a mortal man, same as others. In a truly Christian fashion, he is humbled in the end.

4.5 Christianization of Vengeance

Out of all the pagan elements in the text, perhaps revenge is the most difficult to Christianize. Because the Bible is very clear about how abhorrent revenge is and there are many verses in which forgiveness is presented as the highest of virtues. The most famous verse against taking vengeance is: "ye have heard that it hath been said, an eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth. But I say unto you, that ye resist not evil: but whosoever shall smite thee on thy right cheek, turn to him the other also" (Matthew 5:38-39).

Christianity is not completely against the idea of vengeance. As a matter of fact, the reason that forgiveness and meekness are idolized in Christianity is the harshness with which God deals with sinners and wrongdoers. As it is mentioned:

> Recompense to no man evil for evil. Provide things honest in the sight of all men. If it be possible, as much as lieth in you, live peaceably with all men. Dearly beloved, avenge not yourselves, but rather give place unto wrath: for it is written, vengeance is mine; I will repay, saith the Lord. Therefore if thine enemy hunger, feed him; if he thirst, give him drink: for in so doing thou shalt heap coals of fire on his head. Be not overcome of evil, but overcome evil with good. (Romans 12:17-21)

The basic idea is that Christians should forgive their enemies and let God deal with them in the afterlife. This belief is obviously a big obstacle for a warrior society such as Anglo-Saxon England, because blood-feuds and taking vengeance for murdered kin was ingrained deeply in their culture and Christianity simply did not have any acceptable alternatives for it to satisfy them.

Even the usual attempts at cultural reconciliation by the Beowulf poet is absent in the case of vengeance. Beowulf says to Hrothgar: "Wise sir, do not grieve. It is

always better to avenge dear ones than to indulge in mourning" (Lines 1284-85). After Beowulf's monologue about the importance of revenge and glory (both distinctively pagan concepts), we see another instance of deceptive association. The poet describes: "With that the old lord sprang to his feet and praised God for Beowulf's pledge" (Lines 1397-98). Although there is no word against vengeance in the poem, it is important to consider the context in which this vengeance takes place: against monsters. Beowulf does not have any notable human foes and even if we consider rival tribes as foes, they are not vilified. In this particular case, it is the plot of the poem that prevents pagan interpretations of the text.

However, vengeance, as a cultural element, was ingrained so deeply in the hearts of pagans that its combination with Christianity was forceful, rather than deceptive. The story of King Edwin's conversion to Christianity, as recounted in *Ecclesiastical History of the English People,* is a living manifestation of the cultural tension present in *Beowulf.*

Edwin was brought up as a pagan, but he was set to marry Ethelbert's daughter, who was a Christian woman. Ethelbert was reluctant to marry off his daughter to a pagan, but Edwin ensured him that he would keep an open mind about Christianity and he would allow Christian Bishop Paulinus to preach in his realm.

On the night when his wife gave birth to their first child, an assassin was sent to kill him, but he narrowly escaped. According to Bede, Edwin thanked his own gods, but Paulinus told him that it was thanks to his prayers to the Christian God that the queen had a safe delivery. After this exchange, Edwin promises to Paulinus that if he manages to take revenge on the West Saxon king who had sent the assassin, he would give up his own gods and convert to Christianity. He won a notable a victory and when he returned to Northumberia, he converted to Christianity (Brooke 96-97). It's doubtful that the

irony of converting to Christianity as the result of a successful vengeful act should be lost upon anyone, but Bede ultimately portrays Edwin as the ideal Christian king, who ruled over a peaceful kingdom in the last years of his kingship. This was a compromise that worked in the end. Sometimes pagans had to makes sure that the Christian God is on their side to believe in Him, and that was only achieved if they sensed his support for a pagan endeavor like vengeance.

For Anglo-Saxons, taking vengeance was not a barbaric desire for violence, but a mean to preserve family dignity. War bands were technically a sort of extended family and anyone who did not have any affiliations was left to the wolves, figuratively speaking.

In the *Old English Genesis*, the poet also puts an emphasis on family ties. "It was the fact that it was his own son that Abraham drove out into the desert that seems to have struck [the poet] most about the story of Ishmael, as the poet repeats the family connection twice, a stress not seen in the biblical original" (Barnett 7). The obsession of Anglo-Saxons with familial wrong-doings might also explain the strange choice of a monster's mother, who is eager to take vengeance for her son's death, as the second villain of the story. Grendel's mother doesn't need a name, because the emphasis on her familial bond with Grendel explains the passion and motivation behind her actions. For Anglo-Saxons, the desire for vengeance for the death of a family member was immediately recognizable.

After the Christianization of Anglo-Saxons, there were some efforts made to reduce blood-feuding and revenge-seeking. One of them was the idea of inter-marriage among the feuding clans and using women as "peace-weavers". This solution did not work often, because it only brought two resentful families closer and caused more

friction among them. The story of Hildeburh, as recounted in the poem, is an example of this failure.

Kings like Alfred the Great and Edmund I tried to underscore blood-feuds by decreeing certain laws that only put the blame on the criminal and not his whole family and kin. But these laws were not very effective and Anglo-Saxons carried on feuding. The tenacity of this cultural element in the history of Anglo-Saxon England, despite of Christianity, explains its shameless presence in the poem. The Beowulf poet did not even feel the need to reconcile vengeance with Christianity in a tangible way, because this was one pagan tradition that newly converted Christians could not do away with.

4.6 Christian Morality and Disapproval of Pagan Traditions

The presence of pagan sensibility and morality in the poem (the idolization of courage, fame, treasure, etc.) was discussed at length in the previous chapter. It is safe to assume the code of conduct presented in the poem is dominantly pagan, but there are certain obviously Christian moral codes presented here and there. As Hanning argues: "the Beowulf poet is attempting in his epic to recapture the virtues of the heroic age while putting it in perspective as a time when men were ignorant of God's purposes" (Hanning 143).

There are certain digressive passages in *Beowulf* that qualify as wisdom literature, "a now unfamiliar and unpopular type of literary activity whose dimensions and importance modern readers are only beginning to explore" (Hansen 54). Hrothgar's long sermon is one of these passages. As it was mentioned, epic poems are a vehicle for the preservation of important cultural elements, and moral codes of conduct are a part of culture. So in Hrotgar's sermon, we see many moral lessons that are either pagan or Christian. Of course, this assumption has been questioned by Hansen, who proposed

that perhaps the inclusion of well-known saying from the dead or the dying heroic world, was done in order to "evoke that world most fully and appropriately, to set his retrospective epic in its proper ethical and stylistic frame" (59), but he recognizes whatever the intention might have been, these well-known sayings and the power behind them was respected among the people.

In the sermon, Hrothgar adopts the role of a father figure who schools Beowulf on the ways of life. It is thanks to his age, his long memory and his experience as a wise and just ruler that he has the authority to adopt this role (62), all admirable qualities for Anglo-Saxons.

In the beginning, Hrothgar contrasts Beowulf with king Heremod. This comparison makes evident that although Anglo-Saxons were a warrior society, but violence for the sake of violence was not acceptable to them. He says in regards to Heremod:

> He vented his rage on men he caroused with,
> killed his own comrades, a pariah king
> who cut himself off from his own kind,
> even though Almighty God had made him
> eminent and powerful and marked him from the start
> for a happy life. (Lines 1713-18)

Hrothgar goes on to make a point about the transient nature of mortal life and earthly belongings and in the end, he says:

> Finally the end arrives
> when the body he was lent collapses and falls
> prey to its death; ancestral possessions
> and the goods he hoarded are inherited by another

who lets them go with a liberal hand. (Lines 1753-57)

Hrothgar's sermon is surprisingly gloomy and despondent, especially considering that it's being uttered after a joyous occasion: Grendel's defeat. But this sermon is actually an attempt by the Beowulf poet at subversion and containment, one of the most famous new-historicist concepts developed by Stephen Greenblatt.

According to Louis Montrose, these terms are used to describe the "capacity of the dominant order to generate subversion so as to use it to its own ends" (Montrose 8). In this case, the subversion is the inclusion of pagan elements in the text, which until Hrothgar's Sermon, have been very noticeable. Up to this point, *Beowulf* was about a strong battle-ready Germanic warrior who fought and defeated a monster in the most pagan fashion. Up to this point, the poet was pandering to the potential readers/listeners of the poem, who at the time of the composition, still retained their pagan warlike spirit. But the side-effect to this pandering was the subversion of the Christian sensibility among Anglo-Saxons, a religion that was still new and fragile and prone to relapse.

Hrothgar's sermon is an attempt to contain this subversion and prevent the narrative from straying too far from its (necessary) Christian path. At one point, Hrothgar says to Beowulf:

Choose, dear Beowulf, the better part,
eternal rewards. Do not give way to pride.
For a brief while your strength is in bloom
but it fades quickly. (Lines 1759-62)

Beowulf's pride and desire for earthly glory was the main motivation for defending Heorot from Grendel, but since Beowulf's motivations are not considered to be values in Christianity, Hrothgar's advice is meant to neutralize any subversion they might have caused. Hrothgar is the Christian antithesis to Beowulf's pagan spirit.

Considering the poem's tragic ending, perhaps Hrothgar's sermon is more than just containment and it's meant to foreshadow Beowulf's defeat, due to his obsession with the dragon's treasure. Perhaps Beowulf suffered because he didn't heed Hrothgar's advice; he didn't choose eternal rewards.

The pagan elements are abundant throughout the text, but there is one instance in which paganism is condemned in clear terms: the part where Danes sacrifice to heathen gods in an attempt to escape Grendel's constant harassment:

> Sometimes at pagan shrines they vowed
> offerings to idols, swore oaths
> that the killer of souls might come to their aid
> and save the people. That was their way,
> their heathenish hope; deep in their hearts
> they remembered hell. The Almighty Judge
> of good deeds and bad, the Lord God,
> Head of the Heavens and High King of the World,
> was unknown to them. Oh, cursed is he
> who in time of trouble has to thrust his soul
> in the fire's embrace, forfeiting help;
> he has nowhere to turn. But blessed is he
> who after death can approach the Lord
> and find friendship in the Father's embrace. (Lines 175-88)

The phrase "heathenish hope" is of special interest, because in Christian eyes, there is no hope for heathens, but the Beowulf poet "often seems to sanctify his heathen references and this, the most explicit reference to heathen practice in the entire poem, is no exception" (Orchard 152).

F.A. Blackburn, who was of the opinion that the Christian elements in the text are not genuine and the result of later addition by a different poet, cites this passage as one of the proofs for his argument (Blackburn 220). The Beowulf poet mentions that the sentence "Head of the Heavens and High King of the World was unknown to them" is in contradiction with Hrothgar's reference to the Christian God prior to this incident. Also, when Wealtheow, Hrothgar's wife, greets Beowulf, she thanks God for fulfilling her wish for a hero who can overcome the monster. The references to God is not limited to royalty. The coast-guard who guides Beowulf to Heorot makes this pious wish on their departure: "May the Almighty Father keep you and in His kindness" (Lines 316-17). It is obvious that this passage was added, perhaps as a parallel to the story of the relapse of the Israelites and the worship of pagan idols by them in the Old Testament, to emphasize on the wickedness of pagan traditions and to distance the poem from any possible pro-pagan interpretations.

There is a scholarly debate going on about who these devil worshipping Danes are. They could be either a small pagan minority among the Danes, a Christian majority who relapsed temporarily or the Danes in general. Since the Beowulf poet is conscious of history, it is possible that his comment about the wickedness of idolatry was indeed a reference to the pre-Christian Danes, rather than the Danes who might have relapsed in the story. Although this might seem unfair, but The Bible makes it clear that salvation is only possible through Christ: "Jesus saith unto him, I am the way, the truth, and the life: no man cometh unto the Father, but by me" (John 14:6).

However, since during Beowulf's composition, Christianity still not had a strong foothold in the hearts of the people, Christian authorities did not have the privilege to be so strict. Church leaders such as Bede and Bontiface believed that pagan could be virtuous, following the natural law and without the knowledge of God, which was

necessary for eternal salvation. So the presentation of characters such as Horthgar as both pagan and virtuous would not have been contradictory (Wentersdorf 95). As it was mentioned before, in the time of Beowulf's composition, many Anglo-Saxons were constantly converting to Christianity and relapsing to paganism. The inclusion of this episode in the poem could be a cautionary tale to these people, to show them the futility of such endeavor (96). This theory seems plausible, because there are many texts from this period in which idolatry and paganism are condemned.

In the *poenitentilate* of Theodore, archbishop of Canterbury (668-90), there is a section titled "On the Worship of idols". In this section, Theodore determines that the people who worship idols or make sacrifices to them should do penance and the period for this penance depends on the seriousness of the offense (100).

Later, these sanctions were briefly reflected in civil codes such as the Laws of Wihtraed (695-6). In this civil code, it is stated that if a freeman worships heathen gods without his wife's knowledge, he should forfeit all of his possessions and pay a fixed portion of his wergild (100).

In the year 747, a synod that consisted of the prelates of the southern province issued canons emphasizing *inter alia* the need to suppress heathenism more than ever. In the canon, each bishop is requested to preach about the evils of pagan observances that is the activities of diviners and soothsayers, auguries, auspices, the use of amulets, incantations, etc. (101).

Egbert, archbishop of York, also took measures to suppress paganism and in his *poentitentiale*, in the section titled "concerning Auguries or Divinations", listed paganism as one of the several capital offences (101).

The theory that the Danes who relapse to paganism are a minority and Hrotghar is the representative of a true Christian is worth consideration, especially because there was a real-life scenario similar to it in Anglo-Saxon history.

In the year 664, a disastrous plague struck England and killed many people. At this time, Swithelm has been recently succeeded by Sighere and Sebbi as co-rulers of the East Saxons. When the kingdom was suffering, Sighere, together with his part of the nation, apostatized. They restored the ruined pagan temples and worshipped the image of heathen gods, hoping that these gods save them from the plague. On the other hand, Sebbi and his followers remained true to Christianity, just like Hrothgar and his own Danes. Ultimately, a wise bishop named Jaruman was sent to the relapsed East-Saxons to convert them back to Christianity. But Sighere died and Sebbi, the faithful Christian, became the sole ruler of East Anglia (114).

Hrothgar is the equivalent of Sebbi. Although faced with hardship (Grendel's attack), he doesn't lose faith and doesn't seek help from idols. In the end, they are both rewarded with earthly and eternal victory. The relapsed Danes are the representative of Sighere and his followers. They lose faith in the face of hardship and they are damned in the end.

One of the biggest challenges Christians face is retaining their belief in God and His good will in the face of hardship and suffering. This short episode is meant to bring that point home. Judging by the historical example, this conundrum was something Anglo-Saxons were quite familiar with.

4.7 Treasure: Symbol of Personal Valor or Sinful Greed?

Anglo-Saxons, as a society were obsessed with material things. This materialism manifests itself in the poem, most prominently, as Beowulf's desire for gold and treasure.

When it comes to the interpretation of this obsession, critics are divided: some question Beowulf's motives and accuse him of avarice. Some "grapple with the dubious nature of the dragon's hoard and offer a variety of explanations for its curse, plundering and reburial" (Marshall 1).

Heaney, in the introduction to his translation, addresses this issue. In the story of Sigemund, who was a dragon-slayer long before Beowulf's time, gold is described as a high-value item. This makes sense, because Sigemund, unlike Beowulf, lived in a world that was undoubtedly and purely pagan. But by the end of the poem, the value of gold suffers because of the "Christian vision" that develops throughout the poem. It is still not a full-blown symbol of worldly corruption, but its value has been put into question. As Hrothgar's sermon indicates, gold, like earthly glory, is transient, passing from hand to hand, "its changed status is registered as a symptom of the changed world" (Heaney XVIII).

Margaret Goldsmith also believes that treasure and the desire for it is a vehicle for delivering a Christian message. When Beowulf was young, he did not covet Grendel's gold, but when he's an old king, he gives his life away for the dragon's hoard. "He is spiritually unguarded because of his pride" (Goldsmith 84). He ultimately sacrifices his soul and the life of the Geats, because of his love for treasure.

Critics like Heaney and Goldsmith, among many others, are justified to think of treasure in a negative light, considering the Christian context of the poem, and the passages written by Church figures such as Saint Gregory and Saint Bontiface, who

both censure earthly wealth (Marshall 3), but Joseph Marshall, in his article *Goldgyfan or Goldwlance: A Christian Apology for Beowulf and Treasure* makes a case for the treasure, not as a remnant of paganism, but as a tool for Beowulf to practice Christian virtues.

The function of treasure in society is important. In the poem, there is no mention of Beowulf hoarding or guarding the treasure. On the contrary, his generosity as a gift-giver is emphasized multiple times by his epithets: goldgyfan (gold-giver) in line 2652; goldmine (gold friend) in lines 2419 and 2584; wilgeofa (will-giver) in line 2900; and sincgyfan (treasure-giver) in line 2311 (5). It seems that Beowulf, like Hrothgar and Hygelac, is a beneficent lord who is eager to find treasure, so as to dispense it among his worthy retainers, especially considering the recent destruction of his realm by the dragon.

Beowulf's generosity, humility and concern for his people is further proved by his instructions to Wiglaf before his death:

> Then the king in his great-heartedness unclasped
> the collar of gold from his neck and gave it
> to the young thane, telling him to use
> it and the warshirt and the gilded helmet well. (Lines 2809-12)

Beowulf not only doesn't ask to be buried with treasure, he gives away what he carried at the moment to Wiglaf. He dies as a treasure-giver. But his followers decide to bury him with armor and treasure anyways, as is tradition. The poet then says "as he requested", but it's not clear who this "he" refers to, because Beowulf certainly didn't request such a funeral. It could be Wiglaf.

> The Beowulf poet describes the funeral in an ominous tone:
> And they buried torques in the barrow,

and jewels and a trove of such things as trespassing men

had once dared to drag from the hoard.

They let the ground keep that ancestral treasure,

gold under gravel, gone to earth,

as useless to men now as it ever was. (Lines 3163-68)

As Marshall says: "In the last twenty lines of the poem, the poet solidifies the connection between buried treasure and lack of prosperity" (Marshall 22).

There is also a general misunderstanding about the attitude of the Church and the Bible towards money and earthy belongings. Many Christian figures such as Saint Ambrose (ca. 340-97), John Chrysotom (ca. 349-407) and of course Saint Augustine have emphasized the fact that money is not bad in itself, but it depends on how it is used. Chrysotom, in his sermon on Luke 16, which includes the parable of the rich man and Lazarus, emphasizes that the etymology of *chremata*, the Greek word for money, is *chresometha* (to use); implying that we should be using money, not to be used by it (8). There are also verses in the Bible that indicate wealth, in itself, is not bad, as long as it's not hoarded. For example: "Lose thy money for thy brother and thy friend, and let it not rust under a stone to be lost" (Ecclesiasticus 29:10).

The only characters who hoard treasure in the poem are the monsters.

Anglo-Saxons saw God as a gift-giver, same as their kings. Gregory the Great wrote a homily on one of the parables of the Bible titled "parable of talents". Gregory was one of the major figures of Christianity in the Anglo-Saxon world, because not only many of his homilies were extant in manuscript form, but they were also adapted as poems. One of these poems, inspired by his homily is *The Gifts of Men.* This is the translation:

> Many are the new gifts visible on earth that soul-endowed (men) carry in knowledge, as here the God of hosts, the Lord strong in might, deals (and) gives (his) special-gifts to men, (and) sends (them) far and wide by his own power so that everyone living among the people may receive his share (12).

In a society that gift-giving is seen as a virtue, it is no surprise that God is seen as a great gift giver. Since Humans are not imbued with God's grace, it is only natural that the only gift they can give should be material, such as gold. That explains Beowulf's excitement for acquiring gold throughout the poem.

In conclusion, we can say that unlike what many critics assume, patristic writings and the Bible are not against treasure itself, but against hoarding it and seeing it as an end in itself. The three ideal lords, treasure givers such as Beowulf, Hrothgar and Hyglac are an example of Christians who know how to use treasure well and the four anti-lords, Grendel, the dragon, the last survivor and the Geats, hoard treasure. In the case of treasure, cultural tension is reconciled through showcasing a virtue (generosity) and a vice (avarice) that can stem from one thing.

Chapter Five:

Cultural Tension and Cultural Reconciliation

Cultural Tension and Cultural Reconciliation

The more we claim to discriminate between cultures and customs as good and bad, the more completely do we identify ourselves with those we would condemn. By refusing to consider as human those who seem to us to be the most "savage" or "barbarous" of their representatives, we merely adopt one of their own characteristic attitudes. The barbarian is, first and foremost, the man who believes in barbarism.

Race et histoire - Claude Lévi-Strauss,

The aim of the fifth chapter is to explain what is cultural tension and cultural reconciliation, using all the instances of tension and reconciliation found in *Beowulf* as an example. After clarifying why the distinction between myth and history is not always clear, the idea of defanging paganism in *Beowulf* is paralleled with defanging of Christianity in the Renaissance. In the second part, the instances of cultural tension and cultural reconciliation are identified in other epic poems: *The Aeneid, Shahname, Layamon's Brut* and Renaissance epics and the role of epic poetry as a reconciler between opposing cultural elements in society is established.

5.1 Introducing Cultural Tension and Cultural Reconciliation

So far, we have discussed *Beowulf*'s various Christian and pagan elements and explained how the Beowulf poet tries to reconcile these opposing cultural elements. Now it's time to develop the promised cultural theory based on these findings.

In the introduction, culture was defined as a web of significance spun around humans by the forces in charge, namely the archetypal figures of the chieftain and the shaman, as a way to homogenize people, through the illusion of "meaning".

In the context of *Beowulf*, the archetypal figures of the chieftain and the shaman are Anglo-Saxon kings and Catholic bishops, because they were the only elements in society who had the power to enforce ideas on people. Since bishops, at least the important ones, were essentially a part of the court and a servant to the ruling king, they had to preach the values that wouldn't be against the interest of their kings and this is why in *Beowulf*, we see war idolized alongside Christian virtues.. The people themselves didn't have any choice on how to live their life. They had to uphold whatever tradition or norm that was enforced on them and learn to enjoy it. In other words, culture is not a collective human activity; it's a covert dictatorship that is enforced on the majority by the ruling minority, under the guise of significance and meaning, in order to homogenize them.

This is why Clifford Geertz called human beings "cultural artifacts":

> Our ideas, our values, our acts, even our emotions, are, like our nervous system itself, cultural products—products manufactured, indeed, out of tendencies, capacities, and dispositions with which we were born, but manufactured nonetheless. Chartres is made of stone and glass. But it is not just stone and glass; it is a cathedral, and not only a cathedral, but a particular cathedral built at a particular time by certain members of a particular society. To understand what it means, to perceive it for what it is, you need to know rather more than the generic properties of stone and glass and rather more than what is common to all cathedrals. You need to understand also—and, in my opinion, most critically—the specific concepts of the relations among God, man, and architecture that, since they have governed its creation, it consequently embodies. It is no

> different with men: they, too, every last one of them, are cultural artifacts (50-51).

Let's consider Caedmon, the first English poet whose name is known to us, as an example of a cultural artifact. He was an illiterate cow-herder, but his name is preserved in history, because he composed a short hymn in praise of God the creator, using words that, allegedly, he had not known.

More important than that, his name was preserved thanks to Venerable Bede, who dedicated a chapter in *Ecclesiastical History of the English People* to him. Caedmon is significant, not because he is a talented poet who is expressing his feelings and individuality, but because his story helps upholding the newly established Christian doctrine of the Church. Not only it implies that Christianity has deep roots in the heart of the laymen, but it also portrays the supernatural claims of Christianity as true. In other words, Caedmon's name is preserved in history not because he was necessarily an excellent poet, but because he was deemed useful by a Christian bishop. Maybe the greatest love poem in the world could have been composed by an Anglo-Saxon mind, but we would never know, because love and lovers were not useful for Anglo-Saxon kings and bishops, so love was never preached as a worthy cultural value. This validity of this notion is quite evident from the way Bede introduces Caedmon:

> There was in the monastery of this abbess a certain brother, marked in a special manner by the grace of God, for he was wont to make songs of piety and religion, so that whatever was expounded to him out of Scripture, he turned ere long into verse expressive of much sweetness and penitence, in English, which was his native language. By his songs the minds of many were often fired with contempt of the world, and desire of the heavenly life. Others of the English nation after him

> attempted to compose religious poems, but none could equal him, for he did not learn the art of poetry from men, neither was he taught by man, but by God's grace he received the free gift of song, for which reason he never could compose any trivial or vain poem, but only those which concern religion it behooved his religious tongue to utter. For having lived in the secular habit till he was well advanced in years, he had never learned anything of versifying; and for this reason sometimes at a banquet, when it was agreed to make merry by singing in turn, if he saw the harp come towards him, he would rise up from table and go out and return home (Sellar 278-9).

According to Bede, Caedmon matters because: 1. his talents were given to him by God 2. He sang about piety and religion 3. His songs made men hate the material world and desire for heaven 4. He was a secular person who found Christ later in his life and accepted him wholeheartedly. Caedmon and his hymn are preserved in history, because Bede thought his story would be helpful for strengthening the roots of Christianity in a society which has been through many half-hearted conversion and relapses back to paganism recently, a society in which pagan spirit is still pretty much alive. It doesn't matter whether Caedmon or the story about him was real or fictional. As a cultural artifact, he has served his purpose.

The idea that history and myth are both supposed to serve the dominant hegemony in the exact same way deserves more consideration. In the preface to *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, Bede, in his address to king Ceolwulf, clarifies his intentions for writing the book:

> I formerly, at your request, most readily sent to you the *Ecclesiastical History of the English Nation*, which I had lately published, for you to

> read and judge; and I now send it again to be transcribed, and more fully studied at your leisure. And I rejoice greatly at the sincerity and zeal, with which you not only diligently give ear to hear the words of Holy Scripture, but also industriously take care to become acquainted with the actions and sayings of former men of renown, especially of our own nation. For if history relates good things of good men, the attentive hearer is excited to imitate that which is good; or if it recounts evil things of wicked persons, none the less the conscientious and devout hearer or reader, shunning that which is hurtful and wrong, is the more earnestly fired to perform those things which he knows to be good, and worthy of the service of God (1).

According to this passage, Bede's intention for writing a historical book was introducing all the good and bad figures from the past, so people can learn from them and aspire to their goodness and avoid their evil; as if history is a fable or a homily. Seems rather simplistic, but in a way, that's what history really is. Historical figures are not that different from mythological figures; this is why the boundary between them is not always clear. They are both supposed to indoctrinate people; they are used as a tool to attract people to a certain cultural norm or distract them from another. If a historical figure cannot be used for this purpose, he's doomed to oblivion or irrelevancy.

In a way, this is what the Beowulf poet also realized. He had heard there was a Danish king named Hrothgar in the past. To him, Hrothgar was just a name, among many other. But by turning him into a pious Christian figure in the poem, he made this meaningless name useful. He turned him into a tool for propaganda.

Human history is filled to the brim with the names of kings, conquerors, administrators and such. Many of these names are locked inside the pages of historical

documents that barely anyone reads or remembers, because they simply do not serve any purpose for the dominant culture or emerging cultures. If the dominant hegemony cannot find a cultural element that gives it legitimacy from history, it will find it in myths and legends. A real historical figure such as Alexander serves the same purpose for Macedonia that a legendary figure such as Arthur serves for England. A legendary (or semi-legendary) figure such as Arthur is far more useful and important for the English than a real historical figure such as Tytila of East Anglia, who is basically just a name in royal genealogies. A historical figure is only useful if it can be used for cultural, social or political purpose. Whether it's real or mythical does not matter, as long as there is cultural force behind it.

There are certain periods in history where a nation is torn between two different cultural spheres and it doesn't feel comfortable with either of them. This state usually happens because a new cultural tradition has forced itself on the old establishment, either through military conquest (which functions through brute force) or cultural domination (which functions through peer pressure). In the case of Anglo-Saxon England, it was the latter. Anglo-Saxon kings felt the urge to convert, in order to be more connected to the Christian mainland Europe. Of course the persuasive attempts of missionaries from Rome and Ireland cannot be ignored. Ultimately, due to strong bonds of kinship, their retainers and subjects also had to convert.

When different cultures merge with one another, cultural tension happens. The dominant culture probably endorses only one of these cultural spheres, but it knows that it can't do away with the other one, because it has strong roots in the hearts of the people. So these opposing cultural spheres have to be reconciled with each other somehow.

In the beginning of chapter four, we talked about how the Beowulf poet uses "deceptive association" to make something pagan (like vengeance) seem Christian (thanking God for a successful act of vengeance). Deceptive association is the combination of two opposing traits, with the forced assumption that they are not opposing at all. This simple trick is part of a larger strategy, which could be called "defanging culture".

To defang a culture is to deprive it of its ideological power through internal domestication, to turn it into a dormant, harmless residual element in society that is respected and appreciated, but not taken seriously, like a priest in a town full of agnostics. If people are not willing to kill or get killed for a culture, it means that culture has been defanged (or it never had any fangs in the first place), for better or worse.

In *Beowulf*, Germanic paganism, as a cultural power, is being defanged through its association with Christianity. The Beowulf poet is implying to the pagan-minded population that they should praise God once their pagan values are realized. He is presenting a German hero as a Christian role-model to them. Although this combination must have caused a bit of cognitive dissonance for the Anglo-Saxons, but it served its purpose: it strengthened the weak Christianity and weakened the strong paganism in the hearts of Anglo-Saxon people. Due to the exclusivist uncompromising nature of Abrahamic religions, the tolerance for pagan elements in society decreased as time went on. So it is no surprise that in 797, Alcuin asked Higbald of Lindensfarne: "What has Ingeld to do with Christ?" (Mitchel et. Al 225). This question is a precursor to the harsh punishments for endorsing anything remotely pagan in the late middle-ages, when the footholds of Christianity in society was strong. The Churchmen in power knew too well how they could have lost this strong foothold.

5.2 Identifying Cultural Tension and Cultural Reconciliation in Other Epics

So far, we have discussed how the Beowulf poet reconciles opposing cultural elements (paganism and Christianity) in the Anglo-Saxon culture by combining them in a shrewdly forceful manner, and defanging paganism in the process. In order to understand this process better, it is necessary to identify the same process in other epic poems, from other cultures. The epics chosen for this purpose are *The Aeneid*, *Shahname, Layamon's Brut* and the Renaissance epics.

In the case of *Shahname* and *Layamon's Brut*, we have a case of formalistic combination and in the case of *The Aeneid* and the Renaissance epics, a thematic one. Each case will be discussed separately.

It is a well-known fact that Ferdowsi's intention for composing *Shahname* (apart from making money and achieving fame) was to preserve the Iranian national identity, which was tarnished after the Arab conquest in the 7th century. By the time Ferdowsi started composing Shahname, Iran's language, alphabet and national religion had changed, so there was no point writing Shahname in middle Persian, stick to middle Persian prosody or write overtly Zarathustraian literature.

Shahname is written with Arabic alphabet, in Arabic prosody and it begins with the invocation of God[4] and paying respect to the Islamic prophet. It is evident that Ferdowis has accepted the cultural heritage of the Arab conquest, but he's using this heritage to promote pre-Islamic Persian culture. It is through Shahname that the tarnished Iranian culture makes peace with the Arabic cultural heritage.

The historical context of *Layamon's Brut*'s composition is also similar to Shahname. It was composed in a period after the conquest of the English by a foreign force that brought its own distinct cultural heritage to the island. This poem chronicles

[4] He could be either Allah or Ahura Mazda

the history of England and all the kings who ruled over the island, all the way back to Brutus of Troy himself, and it is based on Wace's *Brut*, *an* Anglo-Norman source, which was in turn based on Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia Regum Britanniae*, a Latin source.

Both *Shahname* and *Layamon's Brut* try to establish national identity for a conquered nation, with the formalistic material bestowed upon them by the conquerors. By doing so, they defang the ideological power that the culture of the conquerors had on them, because their culture is now used to preserve what they wanted to weaken, or even eradicate.

Of course, one might argue that they didn't have a choice; they had to use the material out of necessity and that is true to an extent, but it is important to remember both of these poets had a strong tendency towards linguistic purism. Shahname is 50000 verses long, but there are less than 1000 Arabic words in them. *Layamon's Brut* is 16000 lines long, but there are only 150 words with Anglo-Norman roots in them. If Ferdowsi and Layamon didn't have nationalistic tendencies in mind, they wouldn't be so keen on linguistic purism.

The thematic combination in *The Aeneid* and the Renaissance epics has the same function as the formalistic combination; the only difference is that the emphasis of the combination is on the content of the poem, rather than its structure.

Rome had a complicated relations with Greece. By the time Virgil was writing *The Aeneid*, Greece was only a small province in the vast Roman Empire, but Rome's culture was only an extension of Greece. Romans felt so overshadowed by the cultural legacy of Greece that Horace, a Roman himself, was compelled to say in his epistles: "Conquered Greece took captive her savage conqueror and brought her arts into rustic Latium" (Epistle 1, lines 156-57).

The composition of *The Aeneid* was an attempt to gain some cultural credit for Rome. On his deathbed, Virgil asked the poem to be burnt, because he believed it to be incomplete, but Augustus himself intervened and did not allow this to happen, because a national epic poem that traced the history of Rome back to the Trojan war was exactly what the newly established Roman Empire needed to legitimize itself. In many ways, Aeneas can be paralleled with August himself, with the former as the founder of Rome and the latter as the re-founder.

By using the cultural material that mattered to the Greeks, Virgil is somehow attesting to their cultural superiority, but he's also implying that now it's Rome's turn to carry the torch of this rich cultural tradition. Greece is old news.

In the previous sub-chapter, we talked about how the Beowulf poet defangs paganism to pave the way for the domination of Christianity. Ironically, during the Renaissance, Christianity itself was defanged in the same way.

All the major Renaissance epics have one thing in common: they mix Judeo-Christian and Greco-Roman mythology, as if they are part of the same tradition.

In Dante's *Inferno,* Cerberus, the Greco-Roman guardian to the underworld guards the gates to the circle of gluttony in the Christian hell. This is just one example among many other.

In *The Lusiads,* Portuguese national epic, the Classical gods have a very prominent role in the story, with Venus being a patron of Vasco de Gama, the main character. But the main character is a Christian, with Christian morality and values. In the beginning of canto VII, the narrator actually condemns some other European nations for not living up to Christian ideals.

Paradise Lost, like *The Divine Comedy*, is also full of allusions to Greco-Roman mythology, even though they are both religious works in nature. Some of these allusions happen right in the midst of a religious statement:

> Sing, Heavenly Muse, that, on the secret top
> Of Oreb, or of Sinai, didst inspire
> That shepherd who first taught the chosen seed
> In the beginning how the heavens and earth
> Rose out of Chaos. (Lines 6-10)

To invoke the Greek muses to inspire a song about Moses is an example of deceptive association meant to reconcile a long-standing cultural tension. The humanists of Renaissance (who Milton was influenced by) were torn between the Classical culture of the past and fidelity to their Christian religion. This rich culture simply could not be ignored on the grounds that it was pagan, but still, that doesn't' change the fact that it was pagan. You would never expect a staunch Catholic bishop or Protestant priest to allude to Greek gods in such a manner. So this begs the question: considering how exclusivist a religion Christianity is, why poets like Dante, Camões or Milton did this?

It is exactly through this association with Classical culture that Christianity was gradually defanged during the Renaissance. During the middle-ages, Christianity was such a strong ideological power that barely any other ideology could survive alongside it. The reason for that was that Christianity was taken extremely seriously.

If one were to badger Milton for invoking the Greek muses in a Christian epic, the answer one would receive would ultimately be something along the lines of: "why do you take it so seriously? It's just a poem. It's an aesthetic/narrative choice." This explanation (and similar explanations) indicate that a culture has been defanged, because as we have discussed in the introduction, in reference to Harari's theory, culture

only matters if people give significance to it. Otherwise, it would be worthless and pointless in itself. When Portuguese people saw that their national hero is supported by Greco-Roman gods, the extremity of their standards for what is heresy would decrease greatly, and the Church would lose its control on people in turn.

From these findings, it can be concluded that the function of epic poetry can be much more than to establish a national identity for the people of a nation. Since epic poetry is used to preserve the important cultural elements in a society, the epic poet can also include elements from an opposing, and yet popular or worthy culture that exists in the fringes of society and is not fully endorsed by the dominant culture, in order to reconcile the tension that these two competing culture might cause. However, the downside of this strategy is that the dominant culture will lose some of its power and relevance and it will not be taken seriously as before.

Chapter Six:

Conclusion

Conclusion

This thesis has been the brainchild of two different areas of interest: *Beowulf* and new-historicism. *Beowulf*'s depth as a literary work and the Beowulf poet's deep perception about society and culture are fascinating and say much about the culture of Anglo-Saxon England. *Beowulf* is a work of literature produced in a society that was torn between two radically different cultural spheres: paganism and Christianity. This sense of cultural uneasiness provided an opportunity to analyze the power struggle between these two cultures in the heart and soul of the narrative and characterization of the poem. Ultimately, cultural tension is an issue related to power; it shows the struggle of two different interest that are trying to dictate how society should behave. Since new-historicism is also concerned with the manifestations of power dynamics in literary/non-literary texts, it seemed to be the correct approach for achieving this end.

New-historicism, as an analytical approach, is highly dependent on the relations between the texts created in a particular time and place in history. So the greatest obstacle against a new-historical analysis of *Beowulf* was the fact that its exact date of composition is unclear and the speculations regarding this matter cover a 300 years gap. This issue was resolved in chapter two by introducing the concept of "historical density". Some societies go through rapid changes in a short period (like 21st century US) and some societies remain pretty much unchanged throughout a whole millennia (like Australian aboriginals before being exposed to Europeans). If we consider historical density as a spectrum, Anglo-Saxon England, after full conversion to Christianity in 686 and before the Norman Conquest in 1066, was definitely on the lower spectrum. The tension between Christianity and paganism remained constant throughout this period. Even when it was slowly being neutralized, it was renewed again after the invasion of the Great Heathen Army in the 9th century and the arrival and

settlement of pagan Vikings in the country, who made the process of conversion necessary again.

As it was mentioned, the theoretical perspective in this thesis is new-historical and the style of new-historical analysis is similar to the style that Stephen Greenblatt adopts in *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare.* Admittedly, the writer of this thesis did not have access to the more obscure Anglo-Saxon documents and a full-blown new-historical research is too great an undertaking for the limited scope of an MA thesis, but thankfully, due to the popularity of the juxtaposition of pagan/Christian elements in the poem as a scholarly endeavor, the articles by many scholars who have published on the subject, from 19th to 21st century, provided a most useful substitute for what would have been a long and arduous research process.

The Beowulf poet had a keen sense of history and many of his references to past kings and events are well-documented. These references help us to determine the setting (time and place) of the poem. The Beowulf poet was also a knowledgeable man and scholars have noticed allusion and analogues to all the literary traditions that were available to him at the time, including the Germanic, Judeo-Christian, Classical and even the Irish tradition. Hopefully, the discussion of all things historical about *Beowulf* in Chapter two helped to prepare the reader for the new-historical analysis to come in chapter three and four.

The aim of the chapter three and chapter four was to provide a detailed reliable historical background for the cultural theory that was developed in chapter five. In chapter three, the cultural elements in the poem that are explicitly pagan were identified and it was explained how the poet tries to reconcile them with Christian values and ideals. However, these two chapters are also a nuanced analysis of what paganism and Christianity truly stand for, because the boundary between the two is not always clear.

The text of the poem and the passages of the Bible are a great source for a deeper understanding of both of these concepts. For example, one of the most fundamental issues in Christianity is the issue of predestination: does God know when does a person die? Are some people born to be evil? If so, then are they really to blame for their evil? Do they really deserve to burn in hell for eternity? The Beowulf poet makes sense of these concerns thanks to a pagan concept called wyrd. In chapter four, it was concluded that the juxtaposition of wyrd and God's will is not only not paradoxical, but it actually helps to make sense of a complicated question regarding Christianity. It's even in accordance to what the Bible has to say about fate and the will of God. But ultimately, *Beowulf* is a poem that is way ahead of its time, because it ultimately idolizes Randian individualism and relying only on one's strength, will and intelligence, without paying heed to cosmic forces, whether they exist or not. *Beowulf* is such a multi-layered poem that it could even be interpreted that Beowulf's materialistic desire for treasure is Christian virtue. All these instances of cultural reconciliation are done in a shrewd manner and many of the arguments used throughout the thesis depend on the usage of certain Old English words in a certain context. *Beowulf* welcomes thorough detailed analysis. It is worth to mention identifying the differences between paganism and Christianity is also relevant to today's world, because there are some movements (especially among Scandinavians) that demand Europeans to abandon Christianity and return to their pagan roots and Germanic gods. If such a relapse were to happen, it would be interesting to estimate what would change and what would remain the same.

All the instances of cultural tension and cultural reconciliation that were explained throughout the thesis lead towards a cultural theory that was explained in detail in chapter five. Sometimes, when there are opposing cultural elements in a society, epic poets combine them together, make a bigger whole in the form of an epic

poem and reconcile these cultural elements, thus maintaining the order of society. We saw the development of this process in detail in *Beowulf*. But this process was also briefly illustrated in other epic poems such as *The Aeneid, Shahname, Layamon's Brut* and the Renaissance epics. More than that, it was argued that sometimes, in the process of cultural reconciliation, one of the two opposing cultural spheres gets defanged; meaning that it loses its ideological sting due to its association with another culture. The strategy that the Beowulf poet uses to achieve this end was termed "deceptive association", but cultural defanging can take many shapes and forms. For example, parody, satire and beautification are some strategies for defanging culture. To make fun of Christ, to satirize his life's story or to turn him into an object of beauty and appreciation (like in Renaissance works of art) are all conscious or unconscious attempts to make Christianity seem less important or urgent. These are all instances of cultural defanging.

In fact, the idea of cultural defanging can have a much wider application. As it was argued, the value of a culture depends on the significance people give to it. Some cultures are so significant to some people that they are willing to kill or die for them (i.e. Nazism, Communism, etc.). These cultures can be dangerous, but instead of outright hostility and opposition, a more peaceful way of neutralizing them would be defang them, by the strategies mentioned. The focus of this thesis was limited to epic poems, but the same strategy can be identified and explained in movies, novels, videos games and other popular mediums of mass culture.

During the course of this research, it was proved that in epic poems, opposing cultural elements in society are reconciled through both thematic and formalistic means, and through this act of cultural reconciliation, one of these opposing cultural spheres gets defanged and loses its ideological power and relevance.

Suggestions for Further Research

The concept of defanging can be analyzed in different mediums (cinema, video game, music video, etc.) and in different forms (parody, satire, beautification, etc.) in order to be understood better. The practical aspect of defanging is also worth consideration. There are many ideological powers in the world that are used for wrong and instead of outright opposition, which leads to a state of war, we can develop methods on how to peacefully (and manipulatively) neutralize these ideologies and turn them docile.

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چکیده

اشعار حماسی برای خوانش تاریخ‌گرایی نوین ایده‌آل هستند، چون نقششان را به‌عنوان فاش‌کننده‌ی بازی‌های قدرت در جامعه آشکارا پذیرفته‌اند، در حدی که حتی نیازی نیست به معنای پشت جملاتشان دقت کرد. حماسه‌سرا خودش با افتخار عناصر فرهنگی، شخصیت‌های تاریخی و هنجارهایی را که فرهنگ غالب خواهان گسترششان است، به خواننده تقدیم می‌کند. در این پایان‌نامه، با استفاده از ترجمه‌ی شِیمِس هینی، شعر حماسی *بیوولف* از دید تاریخ‌گرایی نوین مورد بررسی قرار گرفته است. تمرکز اصلی این بررسی روی به کار گرفته شدن عناصر فرهنگی پاگان و مسیحی در کنار یکدیگر است. در *بیوولف* بسیاری از هنجارهای فرهنگی آنلگوساکسون، پاگان و ژرمانیک نمود پیدا کرده‌اند. به‌عنوان نمونه می‌توان به کمیتاتوس، رجزخوانی پیش از نبرد و مسلک اخلاقی جنگجویان ژرمانیک و پاگان اشاره کرد. با این وجود، *بیوولف* اساساً مروج ارزش‌های مسیحی است. بنابراین مشخص است که *بیوولف* قصه‌ای پاگان بوده که شاعری مسیحی آن را از نو تعریف کرده است. تنش بین این دو عنصر فرهنگی متضاد در تنش‌های پاگان و مسیحی‌ای نمود پیدا کرده که شاعر سعی در آشتی دادن با یکدیگر دارد. از میانشان می‌توان به این موارد اشاره کرد: ویرد (معادل ژرمانیک تقدیر یا سرنوشت) در برابر رحمانیت خدای مسیحیت، حضور هیولاهای اسطوره‌ای در دنیایی مسیحی، اهمیت داشتن انتقام در بطن مذهبی که از انتقام و کینه‌توزی بیزار است، اهمیت فرهنگی گنج و طلا در بطن مذهبی که دارایی‌های مادی را خفیف و نالازم می‌شمارد، ارزش پاگان برخورداری از زور بازو برای فایق آمدن بر چالش‌ها در برابر فیض خدا به‌عنوان لازمه‌ای برای فایق آمدن بر پلیدی و... این تنش‌ها صرفاً محدود به *بیوولف* نیست. تعداد زیادی

شعر حماسی از زمینه‌های فرهنگی متفاوت (مثل انه‌اید، شاهنامه و حماسه‌های دوره‌ی رنسانس) نیز سعی دارند عناصر فرهنگی متضاد در جامعه‌هایشان را از طریق قرار دادنشان کنار یکدیگر، با هم آشتی دهند. در این این پایان‌نامه، با استفاده از شیوه‌ی تاریخ‌گرایی نوین که استیون گرین‌بلت آن را بنیان نهاده، عناصر فرهنگی متضاد در *بیوولف* (و تعدادی شعر حماسی دیگر) شناسایی خواهد شد و نحوه‌ی آشتی دادن عناصر فرهنگی متضاد از طریق محتوای موضوعی و فرمی شرح داده خواهد شد.

واژگان کلیدی: مسیحیت، پاگانیسم، فرهنگ جنگجویان، انگلستان دوره‌ی آنگلوساکسون، شعر حماسی، تنش فرهنگی، آشتی فرهنگی

باسمه تعالی

گواهی دفاع از پایان نامه کارشناسی ارشد

نام پردیس/دانشکده: زبان ها و ادبیات خارجی گروه آموزشی: زبان و ادبیات انگلیسی

هیات داوران پایان نامه کارشناسی ارشد آقای فربد آذسن در رشته: زبان وادبیات انگلیسی

با عنوان:

Reconciliation of Paganism and Christianity in Beowulf:

The Role of Epic Poetry as a Reconciler of Opposing Cultural Elements a New-Historicist Reading

آشتی پاگانیسم و مسیحیت در بیولف: نقش اشعار حماسی در آشتی دادن عناصر فرهنگی متضاد قرائتی بر پایه تاریخ گرایی نوین

را در تاریخ : ۹۸/۰۲/۰۳

با نمره به عدد به حروف

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مشخصات هیات داوران	نام و نام خانوادگی	مرتبه دانشگاهی	دانشگاه یا موسسه	امضاء
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۴-داور داخلی	دکتر محمدحسین رمضان کیایی	استادیار	تهران	
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تذکر : این برگ پس از تکمیل توسط هیات داوران در نخستین صفحه پایان نامه درج می گردد.

دانشگاه تهران
دانشکده زبان‌ها و ادبیات خارجه

آشتی پاگانسیم و مسیحیت در بیولف: نقش اشعار حماسی در آشتی دادن عناصر فرهنگی متضاد قرائتی بر پایه‌ی تاریخ‌گرایی نوین

نگارش
فربد آذسن

استاد راهنما
دکتر مریم سلطان بیاد

استاد مشاور
دکتر حامد حبیب زاده

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اردیبهشت ۱۳۹۸

بسمه تعالی

دانشکده زبان‌ها و ادبیات خارجی

معاونت علمی

تعهدنامه اصالت اثر

اینجانب ***فرید آذین*** متعهد می شوم که مطالب مندرج در این ***پایان نامه*** حاصل کار پژوهشی اینجانب است و به دستاوردهای پژوهشی دیگران که در این پژوهش از آنها استفاده شده است، مطابق مقررات ارجاع و در فهرست منابع و مآخذ ذکر گردیده است. این ***پایان نامه*** قبلاً برای احراز هیچ مدرک هم سطح یا بالاتر ارائه نشده است. در صورت اثبات تخلف (در هر زمان) مدرک تحصیلی صادر شده توسط دانشگاه از اعتبار ساقط خواهد شد.

کلیه حقوق مادی و معنوی این اثر متعلق **به دانشکده زبان ها و ادبیات خارجی دانشگاه تهران** می باشد.

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امضاء:

تاریخ: ۱۳۹۸/۰۲/۰۳


بسم الله الرحمن الرحيم