

That doom abided but  
in time it would come

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It is indeed immediately evident to the reader (or listener) of *Beowulf*, that the poem is heavily laden with themes of fate and destiny. I would even go as far as saying that it is partly the weight that these themes lend that gives *Beowulf* its rich and beautiful quality.

These themes are present throughout the text, for instance the creation of Heorot comes with the prophecy of its doom, with " its gables wide and high and awaiting / a barbarous burning" (lines 82-3). We are also given the cause for such a fate, namely blood feud between in-laws. The inevitable doom associated with blood feuds, and its associated fratricide, is also present at the end of the text with the wild prediction of the war and destruction of the Geat nation at the Shylfing's hands. It is also interesting to note here that the poem is book ended by funerals, death being the inevitable conclusion of fate, and also with prophecy, particularly effective for a contemporary audience knowledgeable of the outcomes of such prognostications.

However, it is in the episode of *Beowulf*'s fight against the dragon that we see the most signposted manifestation of fate:

He was sad at heart,

Unsettled yet ready, sensing his death.

His fate hovered near, unknowable but certain (2419-2421)

From the offset, we are told that *Beowulf* will die in this final battle, with the effect of altering our perception of the final fight; we see it as tragic and heroic, this warrior king fighting despite sensing his fate near at hand. This gives the weight to the dragon fight, gives it its grim, poetic beauty. Here

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fate is expressed as a sense of foreboding, external to any value judgement. This would have a concept familiar to the Germanic tradition of *wyrd*, or doom.

However, if this is to be considered as evidence of the Anglo-Saxon concept of doom, then in the poem we are also able to see the Christian equivalent, which can perhaps be better referred to as divine providence. In this interpretation of destiny, there is an integral component of judgement, whereby destiny is set out by God. This approach to destiny can be seen at numerous points, for example " a comfort sent / by God to that nation" (13-4). Here we can clearly see the influence of Christian beliefs in the narrative voice of the poet. The evidence of divine intervention can be found elsewhere in *Beowulf*, for example in his fight against Grendel's mother:

It was easy for the Lord,

the Ruler of Heaven, to redress the balance

once Beowulf got back on his feet. (1554-6)

This has the effect of showing that all outcomes are ultimately attributable to God, here reinforcing the positive characterisation of Beowulf by essentially saying that God is in support of him.

The poet was here faced with a challenge when intertwining the themes of Christian providence and pagan *wyrd*, namely how do you tell an essentially pagan story of a warrior hero while staying true to a contrasting theological belief?

In reply, we can identify several features of the Beowulf poem that allow a satisfactory reconciliation of these apparently antithetical themes. The first is an identification of Beowulf and the other Germanic pagan heroes with God through their opposition to evil. An exemplification of this is that Grendel is intimately associated with sin and hell, for example in the description of him as " a fiend out of hell" (100) and the passage:

he had dwelt for a time

in misery among the banished monsters,

Cain's clan, whom the Creator had outlawed

and condemned as outcasts. (104-7)

Therefore, if Beowulf represents the purging factor that destroys the evil of Grendel and his mother, then by implication he is identified as an agent of God, an important point as it demonstrates that he is under the influence of providence whilst still subject to his doom.

In a number of ways the heroic characters are distanced from the paganism that they historically must hold, in particular they adhere to characteristically Christian formulas of worship. An example of this is " They thanked God / for that easy crossing on a calm sea" (227-8), which is instantly recognisable as an un-pagan thanksgiving to the providence of a single God. Indeed, throughout Beowulf there are signs that these pagans worshiped a monotheistic precursor to Christianity, rather than the polytheistic idol

worship that would be extremely difficult to excuse from a Christian viewpoint.

Thomas D. Hill points out that this would allow an approach similar to later humanists, such as Dante who placed such figures as Aristotle, Cato and Rifeo (all pagan) variously in hell, limbo or heaven. This in turn has the effect of allowing the providence theme to sit alongside that of doom because the distancing of the heroic characters from paganism conversely allows their more believable association with God's fate.

To further this effect, there is a selective assimilation of Christian sources into the poem. This is exemplified by the numerous references to the Old Testament, in particular to the race of Giants - e. g. " and the giants too who strove with God" (113) - and to the original sin and banishment of Cain for the murder of Abel (105-114). This enables a listener from a Germanic culture to more readily accept the Christian overtones, as the Old Testament is notably closer to their own in its values than the New Testament, as well as the characters to be portrayed as what Hill refers to as " Noachites", a people possessing the intrinsic monotheism of Noah but before the " revealed knowledge of God ... granted to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, a tradition culminated by the revelation of Law to Moses".

Thus, although at one point the poem does iterate that they were damned as pagans because " The Almighty Judge / of good deeds and bad, the Lord God, /... was unknown to them" (180-3) (which is possibly explained as an interpolation), it enables the poet to suggest that these pagan heroes could,

in fact, be fated for salvation by God and in death go to heaven, such as Hrethel who " chose God's light" (2469).

Thus, we can see how the poet of Beowulf reconciles these two divergent themes of fate and destiny, on one hand doom and on the other providence. In this respect the poem therefore also represents a much larger scale co-assimilation and synthesis of the Germanic and Christian traditions. The resulting fine balance struck by the poet between them is highly interesting from a literary viewpoint and also gives the poem an intense and rich atmosphere.

Conclusion:

Thus we can see how the poet reconciles these two different strands of fate, on one hand doom and on the other providence. In this respect the poem therefore also represents the co-assimilation of the Germanic and Christian traditions.