and Herebeald, the earlier Swedish wars, and Dæghrefn, 2428–2508a; (26) Weohstan's slaying of Eanmund in the second Swedish wars, 2611–25a; (27–28) Hygelac's fall, and the battle at Ravenswood in the earlier Swedish war, 2910b–98.

8. For a full discussion, see chapter 11.

9. The emendation was first suggested by Max Rieger (1871, 414).

Chapter 11

Myth and History

by John D. Niles

Summary: Nineteenth-century interpretations of *Beowulf*, particularly in Germany, fell under the influence of the nature mythology that was then in vogue. More recently, some critics have related the poem to ancient Germanic or Indo-European myth and cult or to archetypes that are thought to be a universal feature of human consciousness. Alternatively, the poem has been used as a source of knowledge concerning history. The search for either myth or history in the poem, however, is attended by severe and perhaps insurmountable difficulties. More useful may be attempts to identify the poem as a "mythistory" that confirmed a set of values among the Anglo-Saxons by connecting their current world to a fabulous ancestral past.

Chronology

1833: John Mitchell Kemble, offering a historical preface to his edition of the poem, locates the Geats in Schleswig.

1837: Kemble corrects his preface to reflect the influence of Jakob Grimm; he identifies the first "Beowulf" who figures in the poem as "Beaw," the agricultural deity.

1849: Karl Müllenhoff (1849b), also inspired by Grimm, identifies the poem as a Germanic meteorological myth that became garbled into a hero tale on being transplanted to England.

1861: Daniel H. Haigh, in a fanciful study, discovers historical models for the action of *Beowulf* in fifth-century Northumbria.

1884: Pontus Fahlbeck argues that the poem's Geats are the Jutes of history; his thesis provokes debate for almost fifty years.

1889: Karl Müllenhoff restates his mythological theories: Grendel and his mother represent the North Sea in its spring floods; the dragon represents the sea driven by autumn storms.

1907: Henrik Schück, writing against Fahlbeck and others, argues that the poem's Geats are the Gautar (modern Götar) of southern Sweden.

1909: William W. Lawrence attacks various mythological interpretations of the poem.

1921: R. W. Chambers foregrounds the poem's historical elements and finds them based on fact, accepts the identification *Geatas* = *Gautar*, and speculates that the *Beowulf* story came to England via Geatish exiles in Angeln.

1925: Kemp Malone, building on Chambers's suggestion, surmises that Geatish exiles established a state in Jutland after their kingdom was overthrown by the Swedes.

1928: W. W. Lawrence, while repeating his antimythological arguments, builds on the poem's internal hints and allusions to develop a complex account of the poem's substratum of history.

1932: R. W. Chambers, in the second edition of his *Introduction*, comes down hard against the Jute theory, closing this debate for the time being.

1936: J. R. R. Tolkien, inaugurating an age of aesthetic criticism, argues against scholarship of a narrowly historical, archaeological, or philological kind.

1950: Friedrich Klaeber's third edition of the poem (1950a) confirms the Chambers/Lawrence consensus: mythological theories are of little value, but the poem probably contains much true history.

1951: Samuel F. Johnson initiates a wave of neomythological criticism by isolating aspects of Indo-European culture in the poem: a tribal coronation rite, rites of passage, and a totemic hero.

1959: Joseph Fontenrose identifies the poem as a variant of the ancient Apollo-Python combat myth.

1964: Carl Meigs analyzes the poem in terms made familiar by Frazer, Weston, and Campbell and sees in it "the mythical progress of a world hero."

1965: Kenneth Sisam argues against two firmly-entrenched notions: that the Geats are destroyed after Beowulf 's death and that Hrothulf betrays Hrothgar's faith and usurps the Danish throne.

1966: Paul Beekman Taylor, taking the hall Heorot as both a figure of the macrocosmos and a counterpart to the Asgard of Old Norse myth, finds that the poet writes at a point where Christian and pagan eschatology merge.

1967: Jane Acomb Leake, identifying the Geats as the legendary *Getae* rather than any historical tribe, argues that the poem presents a fanciful "geographical mythology."

1968: Jeffrey Helterman presents a mythic interpretation of the poem indebted to Jung and Eliade and argues that the tragedy of the poem arises as the hero passes from myth (in part 1) into history (in part 2).

1969: A. Margaret Arent, drawing on archaeological evidence, maintains that the hero's life and deeds reflect ancient archetypes and cult practices.

1969: Ursula Dronke finds that the poem is a euhemerized version of the Germanic myth of Ragnarok; the hero is a secularized counterpart to Thor/Thunor.

1969: Amy Page and Vincent H. Cassidy, seeing Beowulf as a man-god who must descend to the netherworld, pursue parallels with ancient Sumerian, Greek, Hebrew, and Christian myth.

1970: Terry A. Babb finds in the poem a myth of creation and dissolution, here turned to elegiac purposes.

1970: Janet H. Dow discovers in the poem an archetypal myth, laden with psychological significance, whereby a savior-hero confronts his shadow self and the Great Mother.

1972: Alvin A. Lee, pursuing archetypal criticism of the kind associated with Northrop Frye, analyzes the interplay of four myths in *Beowulf*: cosmogony, fratricide and crime, the heroic redeemer, and the return to chaos.

1972: Robert T. Farrell disputes the accepted idea that the Geats of history suffered tribal dissolution soon after the era described in *Beowulf*.

1977: John Miles Foley, basing his argument on Jung and Neumann, argues that the poem served as a psychohistory for the Anglo-Saxons: the hero represents the nascent ego, Grendel the Terrible Father, the monsters' mere a pool of chaos and the unconscious.

1979: Martin Puhvel finds the most likely source of many supernatural features of *Beowulf* in Celtic myth and folktale.

1980: Albert B. Lord identifies the poem's debt to two intersecting narrative patterns of Indo-European origin.

1980: Michael N. Nagler interprets the victory over Grendel's mother in terms of ancient cosmogonic myth, Old Testament myth, and timeless psychological struggles.

1982: Paul C. Bauschatz argues that the banqueting scenes in *Beowulf* recall primal myths of the Norns' nurturing functions.

1984: Helen Damico finds that Wealhtheow is a reflex of the Old Norse figure of the valkyrie.

1986: Lars Gahrn, reviving an old argument about the Geats and their destiny, declares the poem of no value as a source for history.

1986: Karl Schneider offers an atavistic reading of *Beowulf* as a pagan poem incorporating Germanic cosmogonic lore.

1986: Thomas D. Hill explores the Scyld Scefing episode as an aetiological myth that established the legitimacy of Scyld-descended kings in Denmark and speculates that it had a similar role in England.

1989: R. D. Fulk connects the figures of Scyld and Beow to the Old Norse myth of Bergelmir as told in *Vafþrúðnismál* and to Finno-Ugric agricultural myth and rite.

1989: Nicholas Howe finds that the poem makes "assimilated and allusive" use of the Anglo-Saxons' Myth of Migration through its evocations of the geography of their Continental homeland.

1993: Sam Newton tentatively identifies Wealhtheow and her son Hrothmund, a Danish fugitive, as legendary founders of the East Anglian line of kings.

1994: Seth Lerer sees in Grendel's glove a reflex of Indo-European rituals of repast and sacrifice and a link to the Eddic tale of Thor and his escape from Skrýmir's glove.

1994: James W. Earl, relating *Beowulf* to the period of the historical Conversion, finds that the poem mourns the loss of the heroic age by appropriating the mythic eschatology of the Germanic peoples and historicizing it through the story of the Geats' destruction.

1994: Gillian R. Overing and Marijane Osborn reflect on their attempt to retrace Beowulf 's sea journey to Denmark, thereby providing the poem with a concrete geographical locale.

Anyone delving into the annals of *Beowulf* scholarship will find examples of the mythic fallacy, or what Walter J. Ong has called "the myth of myth" (1962, 131–45). This is the conviction that primal stories underlie features of a literary text and give this text its chief significance and value. These master narratives, or myths, are believed to derive from a deeper or more elemental source than the text in question, whether this source is located in the remote past or the unchanging human psyche.

Myths in this sense are unlike allegories in that they are not normally encoded in texts by authorial design,[1] nor is their presence announced through transparent labels (such as Christian and Faithful meet Mr. Money-love while fleeing the City of Destruction). Scholars must infer their presence in a given literary work by probing its plot, patterns of imagery, and the like as well as through the study of names and their possible etymological meanings. To discover a myth in a text is a privileged scholarly enterprise that naturally lends that text added value, if not an almost magically therapeutic force, for myths are commonly thought to express enduring wisdom about the human condition. Texts come and go; myths are thought to be coherent and to have high truth value. Myths are therefore prized in and of themselves as well as being of heuristic use as keys that will unlock the secrets of literature. To put the matter another way, the typically modern condition of *amythia,* or a world stripped of its myths (to use a term favored by Loyal D. Rue [1989]), is a post-Nietzschean spiritual wasteland from which escape must be found if human culture is to survive.

While the quest for secret meaning in *Beowulf* has often gravitated toward myth, whether of a pagan or a Christian kind,[2] it has also turned to history. With no less energy than the myth seekers, scholars of a historicist orientation have scrutinized the text and ransacked external sources either to provide a real-life identity for the characters and tribes who figure in the poem or to locate features of its landscape and plot in the actual world. A historicist fallacy has thus arisen side by side with the mythic fallacy, whether in tandem with it or opposed. History, like myth, assumes a high truth value for those who believe in it. Just as some critics use the poem as a means of discovering a "myth to live by," others respond more vibrantly to the complex and tragic history that they believe to be secretly woven into *Beowulf* than they do to the plain story itself.

Beowulf begins with a genealogical prologue that sets the main action of the poem against the background of Danish dynastic history from the time of Scyld Scefing, the eponymous ancestor of the Scyldings, to that of Hrothgar, his great-grandson. Since Scyld is generally taken to be a mythical king while Hrothgar is thought to be historical, readers must soon confront a question posed by Claude Lévi-Strauss in the context of North American Tsimshian myths: "The problem is: where does mythology end and where does history start?" (1978, 38). The reader's desire to distinguish between two different modes of past time, the fabulous and the factual, runs headlong into the obstacle of the storyteller's blank refusal to admit

such distinctions. Such an impasse naturally spurs reflection as to how adequate the reader's categories are.

Lévi-Strauss's question has an obverse side—"Where does history end and where does mythology start?"—that is worth posing for its bearing on the poem's main plot. This plot takes us from the shadowy land of the hero's people, the "Geats," to Hrothgar's brightly lit Denmark, then back again to "Geatland," with stops at two fabulous locales, Grendel's mere and a firedrake's barrow. Again and again in the history of *Beowulf* criticism, scholars have tried to convert the more fabulous elements of this plot into the terms of a myth whereby a godlike savior or Everyman-like hero is pitted against adversaries suggestive of primeval chaos, death, or the unconscious. Alternatively, the poem's putatively historical elements have been taken as factual and, indeed, as amounting to a master narrative, myth-like in its functions,[3] that explains one or more features of either the Scandinavian or the Anglo-Saxon past.

Treading such slippery turf, and unsure that anyone among us has unmediated access to the truth about the past, some contemporary historians no longer claim that a firm distinction between myth and history either can or should be made. In his *Mythistory and Other Essays* (1986), William H. McNeill describes the task of the historian as a never-ending process of "historiographical myth making and myth breaking." At its best, in his optimistic view, the process of historiography results in "ever-evolving mythistories [that] become truer and more adequate to public life" (20).[4]

It was chiefly to combat the entrenched habits of naive historicist thinking that J. R. R. Tolkien went out of his way in 1936 to defend the narrative text of *Beowulf* ("the monsters," in his synecdoche) against the trivializing gestures of academic criticism ("the critics"). For Tolkien, the question of the historicity of the elements of *Beowulf* was a distraction from the text as an example of magnificent fiction. Tolkien initiated a revolution in *Beowulf* studies that continued strong through much of the century. Historicist claims about *Beowulf* have still been heard, but by being presented as facts, not interpretations, they have stayed outside the precincts of criticism. Only in the past ten or fifteen years, thanks in part to controversy concerning the date of the poem, have the biases of positivist historicism and literary aestheticism been challenged strongly enough for a fresh critical approach to *Beowulf* to emerge. This approach, which as yet has no name but is associated with the New Historicism,[5] focusses less on issues of historicity or literary value *per se* than on questions of how a given text serves as an agent of social ideology, a means of collective self-fashioning, and a participant in period-specific tensions and tropes.

My purpose in the main body of this chapter is to review selected examples of first mythic and then historicist criticism of *Beowulf,* having now briefly set them into a wider context. I will then briefly offer reasons for regarding the poem *as* a myth or, better, as an example of mythistory: that is, as a narrative that, by telling

about a formative period of the ancestral past, served the Anglo-Saxons as a charter for contemporary institutions of kingship and thaneship while also reinforcing a wide range of culturally-specific beliefs and values. Skepticism is my keyword here, however, and I will conclude by suggesting reasons to question some aspects of the argument that I myself have posed.

I. The Quest for Myth

The term *myth* means many things to many people. Notoriously, the word covers a range of meanings that extends from "sacred narrative" or "the highest form of truth" to "false idea" or "lie."[6] When used in a scholarly context, it is usually a neutral term denoting a story about gods, heroes, and the like, set in ancient times, viewed as true, and serving to explain important features of the natural world. Although the term appears often in *Beowulf* criticism, it is seldom defined. Although often used neutrally, sometimes it has been used in the approving sense that it carries in Jungian psychology; *myth* then refers to an archetypal story, akin to dream, that encodes a message relating to personal spiritual growth. Sometimes this positive connotation spills over to the former usage, as if it were by nature a good thing for a poem, novel, or play to have a mythic dimension, or as if one were showing something final about it when one demonstrates that it resembles a myth.

It is now over a century and a half since Karl Müllenhoff (1849a, 1889), inspired by the nature mythology that was then in vogue, offered a meteorological interpretation of *Beowulf* that was in keeping with late Romantic ideas concerning the character of primitive literature. According to Müllenhoff, *Beowulf* was a symbolic drama whose action signified human beings' struggle for existence in a hostile physical environment over which they had little control. Nineteenth-century scholars looked for traces of primitive nature myths in *Beowulf* with results that varied with each investigator (for reviews of this scholarship, see Klaeber 1950a, 25, and Chambers 1959, 46–47). The appeal of Müllenhoff's approach to *Beowulf* was due partly to its invocation of a specific northern geography.

Müllenhoff found it essential that the main action of *Beowulf* takes place in the North Sea coastal zone in and around Jutland, the ancestral homeland of the Angles. Grendel, Grendel's mother, the dragon, and the Breca episode all represent personifications of the North Sea in its devastating storms and floods. Since there is a seasonal aspect to the strife of sea versus land, calm weather versus storm, the hero's death represents the demise of the sun in winter, while the winning of the dragon's hoard signifies that the resources of the whole vegetative kingdom have been secured for human benefit for another year. The whole story is thus a localized myth of the seasons. How did what was originally a legend featuring a local hero figure (*Localsage*) come to take on the characteristics of myth? Müllenhoff found the answer to this question in onomastics: the adventures that the poet ascribed to the Geatish warrior Beowulf were attached to him by mistake, for they once

properly pertained to the agricultural god *Beaw* or *Beow,* who is introduced into the poem under the erroneous name "Beowulf" (18 and 53). The Anglo-Saxon poem preserved a primitive myth in displaced and somewhat garbled form.

Müllenhoff's theories were the orthodoxy of their day. Nature myths were so arbitrarily defined that they could not well be refuted, only ignored. It was thus predictable that as new intellectual movements emerged during the early decades of the twentieth century, the mythographic impulse began to fall of its own weight to earth. Still relevant to *Beowulf* studies are the devastating criticisms that W. W. Lawrence leveled against Müllenhoff and other mythologists (1909; 1928, 129–60). As Lawrence saw, readings of *Beowulf* as a displaced nature myth left themselves open to charges of *a priori* methods and reductive thinking. Their main disadvantage was that they stifled inquiry. By chasing phantoms of the prehistoric imagination, such theories explained little about the particulars of the poet's account of the hero's specific conduct in Denmark and his homeland.

The waning of nature mythology did not mean the end of the mythological impulse in *Beowulf* criticism. Given that *Beowulf* is the only early Germanic epic on a secular theme to have survived virtually intact, and taking into account also its many marvelous features and its apparent indebtedness to an ancient folktale pattern (Panzer 1910), scholars inevitably have continued to search the poem for evidence bearing on early myths and cults. In addition, some critics have developed new models for the understanding of *Beowulf* based upon the search for psychological archetypes.

Some of the mythic connections that have recently been posited pertain specifically to Germanic terrain. The ravens that feed on the dead, for example, are thought to be reflexes of Odin's birds (Huntley 1981). The rites of drinking and cup bearing in Heorot have been likened to the nurturing of the tree Yggdrasil, one of the central activities of the Norns (Bauschatz 1982, 85–116). The Danish hero Hengest, featured in the scop's song of Finn and Hengest, has been linked, with his brother Horsa, to early Germanic and Indo-European myths of divine twins (Turville-Petre 1953–57; Joseph 1983). The Heathobard chief Froda has been found to be a displaced figure of the god Frey (Ebenauer 1976). The poet's allusion to the story of the arrival of Scyld as a helpless foundling has been linked, by a circuitous path, to tales of the Eddic giant Bergelmir and the Estonian agricultural deity Pekko (Fulk 1989; cf. Neckel 1910). According to Karl Schneider (1986), the whole poem is based on a putative Germanic creation myth about a Primary God, otherwise figured as a hermaphrodite giant named Hegil, who sacrificed himself for the sake of the cosmogony. Schneider's neopaganism runs the risk of burlesque in that he finds that "Cædmon's Hymn" too was composed in honor of Hegil, who is none other than the ithyphallic giant carved into the chalk hill at Cerne Abbas. Helen Damico (1984) has advanced complex etymological arguments to support the claim that Wealhtheow, Hrothgar's queen and a cupbearer in Heorot, has a vestigial relation to the valkyries of ancient Germanic belief. She arrives at a composite

speculative portrait whereby Wealhtheow is imagined as "a female of noble birth, southern in origin, who undergoes a period of enslavement" and who also has martial and priestly qualities (64–65). Any of the studies mentioned in this paragraph are open to the same criticism as Müllenhoff's: by ignoring the possibility that a pagan myth may adopt a different semiotic code when taken up by a Christian author (see Clunies Ross 1989, 8–9), they still tell us little about *Beowulf* as a literary creation. At best, such arguments can shed light on the complex matrix of myth and rite from which the poem developed.

Other connections between *Beowulf* and Old Norse myths known from the *Elder Edda* or Snorri Sturluson's *Prose Edda* have been argued from time to time, although never with definitive results, partly because of the difficulty of knowing if authors and audiences in Anglo-Saxon England were familiar with the Norse myths in question. The chief of these connections are the accidental slaying of Herebeald by Hæthcynn, a tragedy that has been likened to Baldr's death; the relation of the ending of the poem, with its images of impending desolation, to the Norse concept of Ragnarok; and the resemblance of Beowulf as dragon slayer to Thor, particularly with regard to that god's combat against the Midgard Serpent.

The Baldr connection, raised repeatedly in the critical literature (see Klaeber 1950a, xli n.5; also Nerman 1913a, 70–71; and Neckel 1920b, 141ff.), has a sound linguistic basis in that the second element in the name of Hrethel's son *Herebeald* is cognate with Old Norse *Baldr,* while the first element in the name of Herebeald's slayer *Hæðcyn* is cognate with Old Norse *Høðr,* Baldr's slayer. Herebeald and Baldr die in analogous ways—Herebeald is killed by an errant arrow, Baldr by being struck with a thrown dart—and each death inspires great grief and desolation. A vestigial connection to the myth is therefore plausible, yet the link remains delicate. The reason Baldr is grieved so intensely is that he is the fairest of all the gods, while nothing is said about Herebeald's appearance. All nature grieves for Baldr, while it is the aged Hrethel alone who suffers suicidal grief for Herebeald. The Norse myth is a fully elaborated story that features Loki's treachery and disguise, Baldr's lavish ship cremation, and Hermoð's arduous journey to Hel, three themes that have no analogues in the Herebeald episode from *Beowulf.* While the myth of Baldr may be echoed vestigially in the poem, it has been altered almost beyond recognition.

Some readers of *Beowulf* have followed Tolkien (1936) in linking the last part of the poem, with its warnings of impending warfare and tribal dissolution, to the Norse concept of the end of the world in a final combat of gods and men against the hostile hosts of monsters. Since one cannot be sure that the myth of Ragnarok was known to the Anglo-Saxons, those who pursue these traces must postulate that the myth as told in *Vǫluspá* is early and pan-Germanic in origin rather than being a late development influenced by Christian concepts of apocalypse. Ursula Dronke (1969), accepting *Vǫluspá* as early, argues that the *Beowulf* poet's account of the building of Heorot is based on pagan creation myth; she finds in both sources the

theme of a menaced creation faced by approaching destruction. Paul Beekman Taylor (1966) argues that the poet develops a three-fold parallel between Heorot, the whole created earth (as in the Christian myth of Genesis), and Asgard (as in the cosmogonic myth related in *Vǫluspá*). Pagan and Christian myths thus reinforce one another. The connection between *Beowulf* and Norse myth remains impressionistic, however, for the ending of *Beowulf* falls short of apocalypticism. The funeral of a beloved leader, one who sacrificed his life to defend his people, is attended by expressions of grief that spring in part from fears of worse days to come. In other words, things are as they should be, dramatically speaking. One would not have wanted the Geats to rejoice at this moment. The muted ending of *Beowulf* confirms the note of pessimism that permeates this philosophical poem throughout, lending the dragon episode in particular a melancholy air. To look beyond this pessimism for echoes of pagan myths is to shift into an associative realm where Wagnerian strains prevail.

Ever since N. F. S. Grundvig praised *Beowulf* as "a heroic poem of Thor" (1820, l), critics have wanted to see the hero of the poem as a displaced figure of the great warrior god of Norse mythology. Both Dronke and Taylor point out parallels between Beowulf as dragon slayer and Thor as slayer of the Midgard Serpent, a connection that was urged by Müllenhoff (1889, 4) despite its inherent incongruities on the side of both the dignified hero and his scaly, apparently nonaquatic opponent. Freshening up the Thor connection and turning it to new ends, Seth Lerer (1994) has recently argued that in the passage telling of Grendel's marvelous dragon-skin glove, the *Beowulf* poet trades on his audience's familiarity with the Eddic tale of Thor's escape from the giant Skrýmir's glove, at the same time as he presents an unconscious reflex of an ancient pattern of ritualistic dismemberment. Counting against conscious allusion is the same problem already cited: claims about literary debts run up against the difficulty of knowing whether the Eddic myths were known to the Anglo-Saxons. As for a connection to ancient rites, such arguments remain impressionistic in the absence of evidence concerning what such rites were and who practiced them, when and where.

Given the origins of *Beowulf* in the Isle of Britain, it is natural that the Celtic realm too, with its rich array of myths, should be searched for parallels to the story. The search has met with only partial success. In a book that draws on a set of previously published articles, Martin Puhvel (1979) postulates Celtic origins for such features of *Beowulf* as the unusual might of Grendel's mother, the hero's marvelous swimming prowess, the "sword of light" that the hero wields against the demoness, and the subsequent melting of that giant blade. Although the parallels are fairly close and their sum total impressive, they remain somewhat disjointed, for there is no one myth or even one coherent body of myth to which the poem can be related. Puhvel deals in isolated motifs only, and these can surface in folk literature of all description.

Going beyond Germanic and Celtic mythology to a deeper European past, some scholars (like Lerer, discussed above) have found evidence linking *Beowulf* to myths or rites that are believed to be embedded either in the Indo-European tradition or in a more capacious ancient context. Studies by Joseph Fontenrose, Albert B. Lord, and Alvin A. Lee are cases in point.[7]

In his *Python: A Study of Delphic Myth and Its Origins* (1959), Fontenrose casts his comparative net widely enough to catch both Beowulf and Thor in it as Germanic manifestations of a basic and far-flung story pattern celebrating the victory of a divine or semidivine hero figure over a dragon or chaos demon who guards a life-giving spot. Only a loose fit can be found between the local contours of *Beowulf* and the general pattern that Fontenrose isolates, however. Working in a similar mode, Lord (1980) has made the more cautious claim that *Beowulf* includes vestigial elements of two narrative patterns that play a major role in various ancient epics. These are a pattern of the hero's "withdrawal, devastation, and return," including the death of a surrogate figure, and a hero's escape from a male monster and thwarting of a female monster who wishes to keep him in an otherworld locale. Lord's arguments have the attraction of accounting for features of the text that might otherwise go unexplained, like the necessity of Hondscio's or Æschere's death. Although his line of investigation is intriguing, his comparisons are based on too small a body of evidence to be compelling. In a recent article (1993), Lee has revived a type of mythological criticism that is associated with Northrop Frye and that Lee developed in his earlier *The Guest-Hall of Eden* (1972). Lee sees the poet as drawing obliquely on Christian myths of Creation and Doomsday to create an image of Heorot as *imago mundi,* brilliant but destined to fall. If the dominant myths here—"the myth of a hero destroying monsters that attack by night from beyond the light-filled human centre" and "the myth of the death of the hero and the return to chaos" (1993, 202)—have features in common with Christian doctrine, Lee still sees no symbolism at work in *Beowulf* but rather a merging of mythic conceptions in a poem that came to life in a no-man's land stretching between pagan and Christian belief.

One claim about *Beowulf* that has surfaced persistently during the second half of the twentieth century is that the poem is indebted to ancient rites of passage or, alternatively, an ancient hero pattern, whose ultimate source is a set of archetypes in the unconscious mind. The controlling ideas of this neomythological school first surfaced in a note published by S. F. Johnson (1951); they have been argued subsequently, with variations, by a small parade of critics, including Carl Meigs (1964: Hrothgar is a sacral king, Beowulf a healing quester, Wiglaf a re-emergent savior), Jeffrey Helterman (1968: Grendel is the hero's shadow self, while Wealhtheow and Grendel's mother represent two aspects of the Great Mother), Terry A. Babb (1970: the poem is a combat myth telling of creation and dissolution), Janet Dow (1970: the poem mirrors initiation rites, symbolic of psychological processes, so as to reaffirm man's place in the cosmic rhythm of all nature), A.

Margaret Arent (1969: the poet secularizes ancient mythic motifs and cult practices that are based on universal patterns buried in the human psyche), Amy Page and Vincent H. Cassidy (1969: the poet tells of a man-god who is sacrificed for the universal good), John Miles Foley (1977: Hrothgar and Grendel represent two opposing aspects of the Good/Terrible Father, while the hero represents the ego involved in a deadly Oedipal struggle), and Michael N. Nagler (1980: the poem embodies a hero-quest archetype portraying the victory of a savior over the forces of chaos). In a similar vein but with impressively detailed anthropological support, Stephen O. Glosecki (1989) has gathered evidence linking *Beowulf* to accounts of shamanic initiation. For Glosecki (1989, 152–210), *Beowulf* includes reflexes of many ancient initiatory elements: the hero as "healer" and "apprentice shaman," Grendel as a "disease spirit," the hero's byrnie as symbol of his link to "a mythic father initiator," and the descent through Grendel's mere as entry to "a dangerous dreamtime."

All these studies, even Foley's and Glosecki's, could be called essentially Jungian in inspiration, whatever other factors they may stir into the soup (a dash of Freud, a large chunk of Eliade, a shake of Joseph Campbell, an old chestnut deriving from James Frazer or Jessie Weston). The appeal of Jungian approaches to literature is their apparent ability to explain so much that is important; their drawback is their reductive and totalizing method. For Jungians, a story is taken to be an expression of certain archetypes lodged deep in the human psyche. The meaning of the story is revealed when these archetypes and their relations are named. Since archetypes are prelogical, they cannot be explained rationally but surface only in symbolic form in myths, dreams, fairy tales, and the like. There is no need to prove their existence; it is enough to know that individuals have access to them through the work of interpreters. Thus we arrive at the role of the literary critic as analyst. The reader of literature, like the hero, is involved in an initiatory journey that arrives, to no one's surprise, at the desired end of spiritual satisfaction.

This is essentially the method that Helterman, Babb, and Dow employ and that the other critics cited above implicitly rely on. Grendel is taken to be Beowulf's shadow self. The physical combat between these two fearsome opponents is taken to represent an inner struggle between two opposed psychic principles, one of which is associated with our moral being, the other with those dark impulses that civilized people normally suppress (Freud's ego or superego and id, respectively, whether or not these terms are invoked). To approach *Beowulf* in this manner is to read its action as a psychomachia whereby fearsome antisocial impulses threaten to overwhelm consciousness but are ultimately overcome and integrated into an expanded self. Foley (1977) takes this argument and converts it to communal history: the integration in question was a cultural one for the Anglo-Saxons as a people.

There remains a question as to whether such studies as these, with their broad and familiar categories of opposition, tell us much that is specific about either the

contours of this literary text or the mental world of the people who made it. Any approach to *Beowulf* that reduces a long, involuted narrative action into a single pattern of initiation or a single clash of demiurges is missing too much. If a reading has nothing to say about a variety of matters that were of importance to the poet, to judge from the number of lines he devotes to them—the logic of the feud, for example, or the protocol of gift giving, or issues of dynastic succession, or the demands of leader-thane loyalty, or problems that are inherent in the institutions of exogamy, fosterage, or wergild—then again, it is missing too much. Perhaps the most important question relating to any Jungian approach to *Beowulf* is not "Is it a true account of the poem?" but "Is it a complete enough account of the poem's particulars to satisfy our desire for period-specific, socially-grounded understanding?"

In the end, the neomythological school that was active during the period from 1950 to 1990—roughly the period of the Cold War, as it happens—cannot be refuted. Like the nineteenth-century school of nature myth to which it at times adverts, it can only fall to ground of its own weight at such time as it ceases to offer answers to the kinds of questions that critics are increasingly inclined to ask.

II. The Quest for History

Beowulf has always been taken as a poem that includes history. Few people, however, have paused to contemplate what history means when filtered through a literary work of this character. Most of the debates about historicity that have dominated prior scholarship are posed in terms foreign to the conceptual world of the Anglo-Saxons. When historians ask chronological questions from oral tradition, as David P. Henige has remarked in his *The Chronology of Oral Tradition: Quest for a Chimera* (1974, 1), they are usually seeking information that those sources were never designed to provide. Even when historians turn from chronology to genealogy and try to ascertain basic facts about a person's ethnic identity, no agreement from their sources may be forthcoming, for the legalistic distinction between "historical fact" and "useful and commonly accepted idea about the past" may be a foreign one except to certain technicians of the written word.

During the period that followed the modern discovery of *Beowulf,* critics were chiefly interested in appropriating the poem so as to magnify one or another nation of Europe through what the poet had to say about the early history of the Germanic peoples. Scholars thus posed such questions as "Where was Heorot located, and when and how was it destroyed?" "Who are the *Geatas*?" "Who are Hygelac, Ongentheow, Onela, and the other kings who are prominently named in the poem?" and "When were the *Geatas* wiped out by the Swedes?" Among the debates that ensued, none was fiercer than the one concerning the tribal identification of the *Geatas*: Are they Jutes? Are they Goths? Are they the tribe known in Old Norse as Gautar and in modern Swedish as Götar? Neither the Geatish Question, as it might be called given its former prominence, nor any other debate concerning history

admitted the possibility that modern concepts of time, space, and historical truth may not apply to a poem of this character.

There is a delightful quaintness about the nationalistic biases that inspired some of the Old Historicism of that time. Who today, for example, would call *Beowulf* a German heroic poem that happens to have been preserved in an Anglo-Saxon copy, as H. Leo did in 1839? Or who would venture the confident assertions that Daniel H. Haigh makes in his 1861 study *The Anglo-Saxon Sagas: An Examination of Their Value as Aids to History?* Here we learn that the action of *Beowulf* was localized in northern England. The hall Heorot (or *Hart*) really once stood at *Hartlepool,* near Durham. The Scylding kings lived here, hard by the coast of Northumberland, while Ingeld held a principality in York. As for Grendel, he was no monster. That was the poet's hyperbole. He was a man, an outcast who ranged freely in the wastes of that region.

Local boosterism of this kind is easy to dismiss. But to what extent do historicist fallacies still govern the current understanding of *Beowulf?*

Chiefly because no historical prototype can be found for the poem's hero, great excitement attended the discovery that the name of the hero's uncle—Hygelac, king of the Geats—corresponds phonologically to the Chochilaicus, king of the Danes, who figures in the chronicle of Gregory of Tours and in the anonymous *Liber Historiae Francorum.* A network of events known only from *Beowulf* is thus set into an absolute chronology ranging from the accession of Healfdene ("445," according to Klaeber, 1950a) to the death of Hrothulf ("545").

It is worth stressing that no date is part of the fabric of the poem itself. In the poem, the past is the past. The narrative action takes place "in geardagum" (in days of old), not in the kind of history that is the creation of annalists and chroniclers. And yet Klaeber is so driven by a sense of chronological exactitude that he even invents a character who is found necessary on temporal grounds. This is Hygelac's "first wife," whom Klaeber introduces into Geatish history because of his belief that the wife that the poet does attribute to Hygelac, Hygd, must have been too young to have been the mother of the princess who was given in marriage to Eofor as a reward for Eofor's killing of Ongentheow (1950a, xxxviii). If one sets out to subtract mythological ghosts like Beaw from the text of *Beowulf,* one would also be advised to subtract historical ghosts such as this bride.

Just as Klaeber encourages a chronological fallacy, calibrating the *Beowulf* poet's past so as to impose the rhythms of a metronome on it, he contributes to a cartographic fallacy as well. Every advanced student of *Beowulf* is familiar with the map entitled "The Geography of *Beowulf*" that Klaeber includes as part of the front matter of his edition (1950a, viii). Nowhere in the poem are spatial relations spelled out with anything resembling the specificity of this map, with its gridwork of Greenwich-meridian latitude and longitude, its exact charting of the coastlines of Scandinavia and Germany, its location of Heorot on the isle of Zealand, and its prominent labeling of the homeland of the *Geatas/Gautar* in what is now southern

Sweden. Nowhere does the *Beowulf* poet tell us where either Heorot or the land of the Geats is located. He speaks of both Danes and Geats as inhabiting lands that border on the sea but omits telling us what lands or what sea or seas he is thinking of: the North Sea, the Kattegat, and the Baltic, we assume, but these are our names, not his. Nor does the poet say whether the Geats lived north, south, east, or west of the Danes. One geographical detail he does provide has caused discomfort among critics, for again and again he states that a body of water separates the Geats from the Swedes, who must seek them out "ofer sæ" (across the sea), "ofer sæ side" (across the wide sea), "ofer heafo" (across the open sea), or "ofer wid wæter" (across the wide waters). These statements are awkward if the Geats are taken to be the Gautar. The poet's claim about a sea voyage must then either be taken as a reference to inland seas—not a very convincing explanation either philologically or nautically—or treated as a mistake. A less arbitrary response is to take the Geats as one of a number of tribes who figure in what Leake (1966) has called the "geographical mythology" of *Beowulf*.

Historicist fallacies concerning *Beowulf* are hard to kill. Hrothulf's supposed treachery comes first to mind. Lawrence (1928, 73–79) offers the following summary of the story of Hrothulf as the central element of a tale that might be called "The Fall of the House of Hrothgar." To paraphrase his theory:

> The immediate danger confronting the Danes is the incursions of the demon Grendel. But the king faces troubles more serious than this. His sovereignty, won by disregarding the legitimate successor, Heoroweard, is challenged by his scheming nephew Hrothulf, aided, it would appear, by his treacherous counsellor Unferth. Hrothulf usurps the throne, but he is not to go unpunished. The rightful heir to the throne, Heoroweard, wins the crown by slaying Hrothulf in his own hall.

Here we have the elements of a fiction, constructed from scattered sources, that has been repeated so often that it has come to take on the semblance of fact. Lawrence is idiosyncratic in believing that Hrothgar assumed the throne unfairly and that Heoroweard eventually avenged this insult by killing Hrothulf. His speculations about Hrothulf's schemes and crimes, however, have become firmly entrenched in the critical literature (see, e.g., Malone 1927, 269; Hoops 1932b, 153; Klaeber 1950a, xxxii; Chambers 1959, 25–29; Brodeur 1959, 153–57; Bonjour 1965, 30–31).

Although Kenneth Sisam attempted to exorcise the ghost of Hrothulf's treachery (1965, 80–82), the notion of Hrothulf's blood guilt and usurpation has remained unaffected by the *Beowulf* poet's failure to provide information about such crimes. Nor does any other source mention Hrothulf's guilt; it is entirely a product of critical extrapolation from a few lines of text (1013–19, 1163–65) that can just as well be taken to refer to something completely other than Hrothulf's supposed usurpation. An outsider to the realm of *Beowulf* criticism might here

suspect an example of the ironic fallacy—the idea that two literary meanings are better than one, especially if one of them is sardonic.

A second historicist notion that has become entrenched in the critical literature is the idea that the ending of *Beowulf* refers to the literal annihilation of the Geats, who are the Gautar of southern Sweden (an identification that is essential to this view). In a classic example of the tragic fallacy—the notion that tragedy is the highest form of literature, especially when it is based on *hamartia,* or the fatal flaw of a high-ranking person[8]—Beowulf's death is taken to be the prelude to the extinction of the Geats as a people, and this supposed catastrophe is then blamed on the rash judgment of Beowulf himself. The hero's fatal flaw is his "understandable, almost inevitable pride" (Leyerle 1965, 89; cf. Goldsmith 1960, 1963, 1964, 1970; and Huppé 1984, 40). Entranced by the lure of high tragedy, and giving literal value to dire prophecies made by several speakers near the end of the poem, scholars too numerous to mention have taken these prophecies as relating to history and have dated the actual destruction of the Geats to one or another period before the poem was composed. Lawrence (1928, 85–106), elaborating on the theory, speculates that the defeat of the Geats, whose leaders at that time were Heardred and Wiglaf (!), spurred the development of legends concerning a fictive savior named Beowulf and hence led to the creation of our epic. This is guesswork run riot. As both Sisam (1965, 51–59) and Robert Farrell (1972, 28–43) have noted, critics have spun out such theories in the absence of historical evidence either that the Gautar disappeared at any time during the first millenium or that their eventual absorption into "greater Sweden" was the result of wars of conquest. The modern equation of the *Geatas* with the Gautar rests almost exclusively on the phonological correspondence of these names, together with some *Götterdämmerung*-style thinking.[9]

In a similarly speculative mood, some critics have succumbed to the temptation to extrapolate from the poet's narrative and wonder what happened in history after the narrative of *Beowulf* leaves off. Where did the wretched Geats go, once driven in exile from their homeland? Chambers (1959, 400), repeating a hypothesis raised by F. Rönning (1883) and varied by Malone (1925) and Girvan (1935, 80), suggests that a group of Geatish exiles crossed the sea to Angeln, there to sing nostalgic lays about the great days of the Geatish kingdom; the Angles then migrated to Britain with these stories in tow, hence the existence of our *Beowulf* as an epic poem incorporating what is believed to be reliable Geatish history. Thomas Hill has recently helped keep such imaginings alive (1986, 46–47). While Geatish refugees have no place in James Earl's thinking, Earl bases a theory of the poem and its deep motivating psychology on three aligned ideas, each one of which is open to question (1991; 1994, 46–47, passim). These ideas are that the historical Geats suffered annihilation long before the poem was composed, that the fall of the Geats is symbolic of the death of civilization, and that the death of civilization (as in *Vǫluspá*) was a controlling myth for the Anglo-Saxons. Earlier I raised the

problem of using the Norse concept of Ragnarok to explicate features of *Beowulf.* Going one step further than other critics, Earl weds northern apocalypticism to a historicist fallacy concerning the Geats and their destruction. The result, though eloquently argued, seems to mirror more closely the Freudian anxieties of the nuclear era than the orthodox Christian doctrines of the world that produced *Beowulf.*

Chasing a related will-o'-the-wisp, some critics ask: "What happened to the wretched Danes who went into exile once Hrothulf had done his dirty work?" In his recent *The Origins of Beowulf and the Pre-Viking Kingdom of East Anglia,* Sam Newton looks into the connections between Wealhtheow, her son Hrothmund, and their tribe the Helmings or Wulfings, on the one hand, and Anglo-Saxon kings of the East Anglian royal line, on the other. He finds that the East Anglians cultivated a foundation legend—now lost, like so much else—that told of their descent from Wealhtheow's line of Scylding kings (1993, 77–132). This guess leads to a special theory of the poem's composition: it was produced in East Anglia (Sutton Hoo country) during the first half of the eighth century (1993, 133–45). Meditations of this kind thus move seamlessly from supposed dark hints of treachery in *Beowulf,* to a master narrative about history, to a theory of the poem's genesis, with all that such theories imply.

Arguments like these could not well be advanced without the aid of maps. As cartographers are aware, however, no map is neutral; each one encodes a way of looking at the world. By defining one group's boundaries and relations to other groups, maps can be a valued means of naturalizing that group's sense of identity (and, sometimes, its hegemonic ambitions or pride of place).

Gillian R. Overing and Marijane Osborn's recent *Landscape of Desire* (1994) is a case in point. Here the authors report on a sailing expedition they undertook from Sweden to Denmark in an effort to retrace Beowulf 's route from his homeland to Hrothgar's court. Any attempt to map the spatial itinerary of a character from ancient legend—an Agamemnon, an Odysseus, a Beowulf—itself runs the risk of taking on some of the qualities of myth. Since Overing and Osborn have no doubt that "the *Beowulf* poet had a sound sense of the history and material culture of the period of his poem" as well as sound nautical knowledge, they are able to project into space a definite homeland for the Geats, who are revealed to be a subgroup of the Gautar dwelling along the coast of western Sweden in what is now the province of Bohuslän. The authors' desire is focused so exclusively on medieval Scandinavia that there is no place for Britain on their maps. Their geographical conclusions are made poignant by the tragic fallacy that plays over nearly all historicist readings of the poem. The Geats suffered tribal dissolution, and Geatish exiles—here, sorrowing women—carried the story of this tragedy abroad, perhaps to the very headlands visited by the authors. This is a book self-consciously, artfully, full of daydreams and salt spray. Even if it cannot place its readers a yardarm closer to

Hronesness, it can at least provide temporary vicarious respite from the dry winds of amythia.

In sum, those who turn to *Beowulf* in search of hard knowledge about the past may be asking it to provide more information than it can yield. A more productive question to ask is: "What use does the poet make of the elements of an imagined past?" This is the question that Bonjour raises again and again in *The Digressions in Beowulf* (1950), a book that remains valuable precisely because the author analyzes the poem's episodes and digessions as examples of narrative art rather than trying to use them to uncover facts about history. The same is true of Stanley Greenfield's nuanced discussion of the poet's use of Geatish history to establish epic breadth and a tragic mood in part 2 of the poem (1963a). Paradoxically, studies of the historical elements in *Beowulf* are likely to be most productive when they are willing to let history go.

III. The Poem as Myth and as Recalcitrant Text

The landscape of myth criticism is littered with the bones of dead theories. Wherever one looks in this lunar dreamscape, one stumbles across elements of the unreal: weather gods, Terrible Fathers, chaos demons, rites of passage, ritual dismemberments, shamanic dream travel, phallic swords, uroboric wombs, and the like. A dim light suffuses everything with an eerie glow. The aura of the holy is enhanced by reeking altars dedicated to Jung, Frazer, or other High Gods of modern mythography. The ground is otherwise bare. What a relief to return to that other land of heart's desire, the landscape of history! This ground at least seems brightly lit, with reassuringly familiar contours. But look: what monstrous people inhabit it! Wherever one turns, one finds cutthroats, schemers, backstabbers. Intrigue leads to usurpation, usurpation to vengeance, vengeance to disaster, murder, annihilation. It is a land where nothing seems to happen but treachery and death. Still, at the core of all these mythic or historical accretions, the poem remains what it has always been: a grand, magnificently ornamented account of heroism and devotion, of proud acts and of loss that strikes to the heart.

How are we to read *Beowulf,* then, if the search for its historical contents seems only another manifestation of the search for its underlying myths?

One response to this question may be to reconceive of *Beowulf* as a poem that did work in its time as both a product and an agent of complex cultural transformations. What is of primary interest from this perspective is not the *historicity* of its narrative, in the sense of its capacity to yield hard information about the past, but rather its *mythicity,* in the sense in which that term has been introduced.

It is not wild speculation to suppose that the discourse of heroic poetry, as a special instance of what Robert W. Hanning has called "heroic history" (1974), subsumed some of the functions of myth for the Anglo-Saxons. Myths, in the neutral sense of sacred narratives about the actions of gods and heroes *in illo tempore,* are commonly understood to have the function of "chartering" a society's

institutions while validating certain culturally specific attitudes and beliefs.[10] They can do cultural work in their own time and place by projecting current ideology back into the past and associating it with founding figures. In a manner similar to myth, a heroic poem like *Beowulf* may have provided Anglo-Saxons with a model for current institutions of kingship and thaneship, a means of validating power relations among Saxons, Mercians, Danes, and other groups, and a justification for a wide range of attitudes and values about such matters as kinship obligations, the need for generosity on the part of kings and loyalty on the part of thanes, the dangers of greed and unchecked violence, and the sacredness of one's word. As should go without saying, myths can also establish emphatic differences between the present world and the more primitive world of the past. The setting of *Beowulf*—Denmark and adjoining regions of Northern Europe during the Heroic Age of the Germanic peoples—lent itself well to the mythopoeic impulse, for this was regarded as the point of origin for the English people, the pagan Egypt for their Christian Canaan.

As I have stressed, this remote setting was a country of the mind. In defiance of modern chronology, its various legendary inhabitants—Hrothgar, Hygelac, Ongentheow, Ingeld, and the rest—rubbed shoulders with one another regardless of when they "really" lived according to latter-day reckoning. *Beowulf* creates its own history, chronology, and geography that are operative only within the confines of the poem and that cannot be related directly to anything outside it. No one can navigate this country using the latitude and longitude of Greenwich meridian space, for, as Nicholas Howe has remarked, the poet thinks of Germania "less as a region to be mapped than as one to be evoked" (1989, 143). The lands of the Danes, the Geats, the Swedes, and the other tribes that are mentioned in the poem are nowhere set into clear relation to one another. Routinely, these tribes are separated from one another by a sea, and the coastlines along which they live have headlands. *Sea* is a trope that indicates distance, not just water. *Headlands* denotes a political border or threshold, not just a range of promontories. Those utterly conventional geographical details are the only ones the poet chooses to give.

Ancient Germania as it figures in *Beowulf* was a vague *then*, not a *now*, a capacious *there,* not a *here*. Its inhabitants were people of extraordinary size, strength, and courage who were *those legendary ones,* not *us*; and yet from those people we have derived much of our character, or so the origin myth affirms. The Germania of *Beowulf* has what Robert Kaske has called a "strangely Old Testament tone" (1958, 273), as if it were a northern counterpart to the biblical past of Moses and Abraham (see also Tolkien 1936, 28; Wieland 1988). The ancient Continental homeland of the English was a site where huge and unruly forces clashed under the watchful eye of God. The kings and heroes of this realm were not just more wealthy, more courageous, more generous, or more ferocious than the people of subsequent generations; several of them were literally gigantic, as Hygelac was reputed to be and as the young Beowulf seems to impress the Danish coastguard as

being (247b–49a). By invoking this imagined realm of the past, the Anglo-Saxons saw themselves reflected as if in a convex mirror, far larger than life. As Howe has suggested, through *Beowulf*—and, surely, through other poems like it that did not happen to survive—they were able to give flesh to one of their cherished ideas, that there once existed an Old Dispensation of the Germanic peoples before their migration to Britain and their conversion to the Gospel of Christ had transformed the terms of their existence.

As one can see, the response I am suggesting to the question "How shall we approach *Beowulf* ?" invokes yet another master narrative: the story of how the English became English, in the full sense of that term. There are dangers in this approach as well. To add another item to a list of fallacies that now includes the mythic, the historicist, the chronological, the cartographic, the ironic, and the tragic, this critical impulse could be called the nationalist fallacy. Those critics who flirt with it tend to assume that the idea of nationhood (or, at least, a generalized sense of nationalistic pride and identity) was as important to the inhabitants of medieval Europe as it is to most people today. Motivating such research is the central faith that *Beowulf* derives from a time and place when what historian Benedict Anderson (1983) has called an "imagined community" was under construction, so that the poem must have some relation to a story that has England as hero. Perhaps the idea of nationhood was important to high-ranking persons living in the poet's day. Perhaps it was not. Most people of that time, even if they lived in the tenth century, may often have felt more passionate about local issues and loyalties than about national ones.

The nationalist impulse in *Beowulf* criticism springs from the conviction that encoded in the narrative of *Beowulf* is a set of allusions to well-known figures from the English past (Niles 1993a, 98–101): Hengest, the founding father, particularly of the kings of Kent; Offa the Great, contemporary of Charlemagne and ruler of a powerfully united Mercia; his grandson Wiglaf, the last king of an independent Mercia before that kingdom became absorbed by the kings of Wessex; Wealhtheow, the queen whose family seems somehow wrought up in East Anglian traditions; the Geats themselves as one of the three founding tribes of England, according to the West Saxon translator of Bede. It should go without saying that every one of these allusions must be inferred. The poet never mentions England directly. Even if these inferences are justified, the wish to find them so should be seen as one manifestation of a current scholarly desire for a *Beowulf* that relates to the period of nation building that followed, step by step, once King Alfred had gained moderate success in his wars against the Danes.

We are left with a curiously recalcitrant text. Despite all efforts to unlock its meaning, it has remained equally resistant to mythomania and historicist ferreting. Perhaps in no other area of *Beowulf* studies is the truth clearer that literary meaning, as defined by the critics, is a product of literary theory rather than of literature itself. Understandably, few critics of *Beowulf* have been willing to take it at its face value,

as an epically elaborated account of how a certain warrior named Beowulf, nephew of the king of the Geats, ventures to Denmark to free that kingdom from the depredations of two cannibalistic giants, then meets his death in combat against a dragon after having ruled in his homeland for fifty years. That, plus a great deal of lore and legend about the Germanic past, is what the poem is about: not solar heroes, not Ragnarok, not initiation rites, not the passion of Christ, not the struggles of the human psyche, not any of the other subjects discussed in this chapter. If we insist on discovering hidden meaning in *Beowulf,* we may be forgiven for wishing to anchor our appreciation for that poem in a master narrative that seems to us worthwhile. Anyone, after all, may at times feel an undeniable urge to swim in that ocean of stories, that bath of primal narrative elements, out of which this particular work emerged when a gifted poet gave it firm shape. We will spin out such theories, all the same, at the risk of having them seem quaint to future eyes.

Notes

1. There are many exceptions to this generalization, especially in the modern period with the appearance of such works as Eliot's *The Waste Land* and Joyce's *Ulysses*.

2. The role of Christian myth or allegory in the poem will not be my concern here, as that topic is treated by Alvin A. Lee in chapter 12 ("Symbolism and Allegory").

3. Compare Lévi-Strauss (1978, 42–43): "I am not far from believing that, in our own societies, history has replaced mythology and fulfils the same function."

4. McNeill chooses not to address a contrary, equally plausible view: that the process of historiography can result in ever more firmly-entrenched errors, as long as those errors are adequate to public life.

5. A brief orientation to work of this character is provided by the anthologies edited by Veeser (1989, 1994).

6. For a set of essays illustrating chiefly anthropological approaches to myth, see Dundes (1984); for literary uses, see Ruthven (1976) and the essays included in Vickery (1966); for approaches from the perspective of sociology and oral history, see Samuel and Thompson (1990). This last book plays a variant on the title of a well-known book by Joseph Campbell (1972), the foremost contemporary practitioner of Jungian approaches to myth. Lewis (1976, 121) has stated succinctly why one word, *myth*, can carry such a wide range of meaning: "Myths proclaim great truths by telling great lies!"

7. I shall leave aside David Bynum's study *The Daemon in the Wood* (1978), for Bynum's interpretation of the "two trees" of *Beowulf* (analogous to the two trees in the Garden of Eden) hinges on a philological error: *wudu* in lines 1364 and 1416 means "woods," not "a tree."

8. Here I am using the phrase *tragic fallacy* in a manner that is deliberately somewhat tangential to that of Joseph Wood Krutch in an essay of that title (1970). For him, the term denotes the false ascription of the name *tragedy* to mundane modern dramas of a melancholy nature. His own essay exemplifies the term as I am using it, to denote critics' quasi-religious veneration for Aristotelian models of tragedy as the highest form of literary art.

9. There is one other reason to accept that equation, however: the fact that Bǫðvarr Bjarki, the counterpart to Beowulf in the analogous part of the Old Norse *Hrólfs saga kraka*, is identified as one of the Gautar. For discussion, see Chambers (1959, 54-61).

10. Functionalist accounts of myth are associated above all with Bronislaw Malinowski (e.g., 1926, 1932, 1935). Malinowski has been criticized, however, for minimizing the extent to which myth can adapt in response to social pressures.

Chapter 12

Symbolism and Allegory

by Alvin A. Lee

Summary: Although a consensus has emerged that *Beowulf* is not an allegory in a formal, structural way, there is wide recognition that it is strongly thematic and that it shows allegorical tendencies. Over the last six decades, vigorous and often controversial attempts have been made by numerous scholars to interpret the poem by reference either to ancient/medieval or to modern/postmodern structures of ideas and events. Such commentary or allegoresis divides into three broad, typical forms that are focused, respectively, on the poem and concepts, the poem and history, and the poem and consciousness.

Chronology

1815: Grímur J. Thorkelin thinks the few Christian references in *Beowulf* were intrusions by King Alfred, as part of an English appropriation of a Danish poem composed by a Danish bard (1815b).

1817: N. F. S. Grundtvig interprets Grendel as the evil in time and the dragon as the evil in nature. In 1861, he says that the dragon symbolizes Roman domination of the Danes.

1875: Ludvig Schrøder, following Grundtvig, says that Grendel represents the lethargy that destroys a civilization; the dragon symbolizes the violence at the center of Germanic society that makes inevitable its destruction.

1934: Arthur E. Du Bois sees the dragon as a symbol of discord and Beowulf as succumbing to pride, sloth, and avarice.

1936: J. R. R. Tolkien thinks *Beowulf* is firmly located in the physical world and composed in the language of myth and symbol, not of allegorical homily, as it deals with the great temporal tragedy of man's life on earth.

1946: Marie Padgett Hamilton provides the first important Christian doctrinal allegoresiś of the poem.

1951: Morton W. Bloomfield sees conscious use of personified abstraction in Unferth (*Discordia*) and in Beowulf (the *rex justus*).

1951: Charles J. Donahue sees in *Beowulf* Augustine's two cities; he sees also (from Irish tradition) a third city of natural goodness for those like Beowulf outside the Christian scheme.