

Beowulf Reflections

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Beowulf remains a haunting echo from out of a past both pagan and Christian. Many critics have attempted to separate the Christian from the pagan within *Beowulf*. None have succeeded. What they desire necessitates a butchery of the poem itself. This poem is neither fundamentally pagan, nor fundamentally Christian; it is fundamentally both. Beowulf is neither a Christian hero, as Sir Gawain or Roland are, nor is he a pagan hero, as Sigemund is. Beowulf does not compartmentalize his culture and his religion. In him they exist side-by-side, even at times interweaving in inextricable ways that render impossible the dissections contrived by critics. Moreover, these elements do not strive against one another, as might be expected. In many ways they harmonize and work towards the same end. This end towards which they propel humanity is immortality. In Christian tradition it is sought by means of following God in all things; in pagan tradition it is sought by means of honour and renown. As Beowulf has shown, a person may follow God with honour, attaining immortality through salvation, but also being granted immortality within the cultural memory. Through honour he becomes a beacon to future generations. His actions echo down through the ages, speaking not only of how to live a noble life, but also of how to live a life informed by divine grace. Such a man is a hero. Such a man transcends the narrow lines drawn around those ideals which are pagan and those which are Christian, achieving something which, being common to both, rises higher than either—this is human excellence. Not singly an excellence which is spiritual, nor merely an excellence which is temporal; rather one which, like man himself, stands tall with a foot placed firmly within each world. Such a man looks back to honour his ancestor's traditions with as much sincerity as he looks forward to prepare his soul's salvation. Such a man is Beowulf.

