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Title: The Function of Joy in *Beowulf*

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[(essay date 1962) In the excerpt that follows, Durant defines three types or “levels” of joy in *Beowulf* and demonstrates how these levels work to unify the poem's structure, present its major plots, and support some of its themes.]

Critics rarely fail to remark the heavy aura of gloom surrounding *Beowulf*. To Klaeber, for example, the *Beowulf*-poet evidences an “especial fondness” for “feelings of grief and sadness.” [All citations to *Beowulf* are taken from Fr. Klaeber's third edition (Boston, 1950) of the poem.] Tolkien goes even so far as to style the poem an heroic-elegy. “In a sense,” he writes, “all its first 3136 lines are the prelude to a dirge.” Even the joy in *Beowulf* is largely looked upon as a foil for sorrow. Thus Adrien Bonjour observes that joyful settings often provide frameworks for anticipations of woe. Herbert Wright points up the dramatic contrasts of joy and sorrow. And Arthur Brodeur finds the joy in *Beowulf* to be a significant relief mechanism—a mechanism used to keep the reader fresh for the poem's periodic horrors. By no means, however, is the well-guarded gloom of *Beowulf* outraged by the suggestion that joy in this poem exists for its own sake. Out of a synthesis of the poem's many references to joy and rejoicing arises the suggestion that three fairly distinct levels of joy are apparent in *Beowulf*; and it is further demonstrable that the interactions of these levels serve variously (1) to define certain of the conflicts, (2) to strengthen the structural unity, (3) to delineate the major plots, (4) to support several of the themes, and (5) to clarify the heroic nature of the central figure.

At the outset it should be said that the levels of joy in *Beowulf* are but slightly discernible in verbal connotations. “Wyn(n),” the most frequent of the joy words, is used variously to express earthly joy (“worolde wynne,” 1080; “eorþan wynne,” 1730, 2727), convivial joy (“hearpan wynne,” 2107), and joy of might (“magenes wynnun,” 1716, 1887). Similarly diverse are the uses of “dream” and “gefea.” Since the selection of joy words seems largely to have been governed by the demands of alliteration or by the principles of variety (rather than by specialized connotations), the levels of joy are most easily discernible through contexts. And while expressions of joy are frequently formulaic, no one of them seems to be superfluous, to be psychologically unjustifiable, or to be significantly ill-suited to its context.

The most prominent level of joy in *Beowulf* might suitably be labeled “social joy.” Basically, this is the joy of participation in the *comitatus*, and it exalts virtually every aspect of the *comitatus* relationship. The joy of the *principes*, for instance, finds expression in Wealhtheow's exhortation to Hrothgar, “bruc þenden þu mote / manigra medo” (1177b-78a), and it is further reflected in Hrothgar's reference to the joys of rule, “on eþle eorþan wynne” (1730). Evidences of the joy of the *comites* are apparent in passages describing the revelry in Heorot and (more poignantly) in the joy experienced by the Geats upon seeing their prince return to them out of the mere (1626-28). Also contributing to social joy is the joy of the heroic *dom*. This, of course, is the joy of personal achievement, the pleasure to be derived from the prospect of fame and from the admirations of tokens of glory. Sigemund experiences this joy as he takes personal pleasure in the hoard he has won (893-895); and with similar satisfaction Beowulf, whose awareness of his own fame is indisputable, delights in the treasures which go with him from Denmark (1880-82a).

It is worth noting, I think, that social joy in *Beowulf* has little dependence upon devotion to God. Just as godly men (such as Beowulf and Hrothgar) suffer woe, so ungodly men (such as Unferth) participate in social joy. God, of course, is exalted in the singing of the scop (89-98); His power is the acknowledged source of greatness (1724-34), but He remains upon the periphery of social joy. And while His laws are certainly outraged by the behavior of a Heremod, Heremod's evils are predominantly social evils. His violation of the *comitatus* sends him alone from the joys of men (1714-15).

It is to be agreed, of course, that in being “dreamum bedaled” (721), Grendel, like Cain, is bereft of joys both social and spiritual. On more than one occasion, however, we are given to know that Grendel is capable of his own sort of grim exultation. And his joy, “diabolic joy,” suggests the second of the broad levels of joy in *Beowulf*. When Grendel sees the Geats sleeping in Heorot, for example, his heart exults: “Þa his mod ahlog” (730). He experiences the very sensation Beowulf had imagined his having—the upshot of a happy diabolism: “he lust wigeð.” Beowulf had said, “swefeð ond snedep” (599b-600a). The fire-drake, too, experiences this grim joy. For while he is not a man-eater, a man-hater he certainly is; and he takes pleasure in this hatred, rejoicing in the imminence of his encounter with Beowulf: “hwaðre wiges gefeh, / bea(du) [we] weorces” (2298b-99a). It is against this attitude of happy belligerence that the third level of joy, “spiritual joy,” stands diametrically opposed.

Interestingly enough, the discernment of spiritual joy is not involved in vague references to the joys of heaven. So uniformly secular is the poet's vocabulary of joy that his one use of the phrase “heofones wynne” (1801) is simply a kenning for “sun.” All his references to joy, then, partake of a common secular vocabulary; all are identifiable with practical human experience. Thus, surely, the joy in his poem was to his audience (as it is to us) peculiarly meaningful and quite readily realizable. As I mean to illustrate, spiritual joy in *Beowulf* is perceived in terms of social joy.

Inasmuch as spiritual joy figures prominently in considerations of the poem's themes and in the character of its hero (matters discussed below), it is enough here to say that Beowulf alone participates in this joy. The attitudes in which it is discerned suggest themselves in his motivations to heroism: chiefly his readiness to serve and his respect for human brotherhood.

And these attitudes resolve themselves into joy when, lying mortally wounded, he reflects upon the conduct of his life and when he rejoices in the treasure-hoard he has won.

In *Beowulf*, then, there are three levels of joy: social joy, diabolic joy, and spiritual joy. At the outset it was suggested that the interaction of these levels serves variously (1) to define certain of the conflicts, (2) to strengthen the unity, (3) to delineate the major plots, (4) to support themes, and (5) to clarify the heroic nature of the central figure. Demonstration of the first two of these functions requires further analysis of diabolic joy.

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Adrien Bonjour seems quite conclusively to have answered T. M. Gang's contention that "the dragon is altogether a different sort of creature from the Grendel-tribe." Indeed, Bonjour has corralled quite an impressive list of parallels between the fire-drake and the two monsters from the mere. Like them, for example, the dragon is invulnerable to ordinary swords; he bears a latent grudge against mankind; he is a night-raider; he is a solitary fighter; he is a scourge of the people. And it should further be said that he is a participant in diabolic joy. Since, however, this participation allies him with Grendel only (and not with Grendel's dam) it is necessary that distinctions be drawn among the conflicts motivating Beowulf's three great encounters.

In the light of diabolic joy it becomes apparent that the malice which delights Grendel and the fire-drake is not shared by Grendel's dam. At no times does she rejoice in her opportunities for vengeance, nor does she demonstrate an unreasonable jealousy of social joy. She is uniformly sorrowful even as she acts upon a principle enunciated by Beowulf himself: "Selre bið agwham, / þat he his freond wrece, þonne he fela murne" (1384-85). Thus Beowulf's excursion to the mere is predicated on the same retributive policy that brings Grendel's dam to Heorot. Because of Beowulf's grand moral stature, there is justice in his victory; but since the combatants fight under equal causes, there is also justice in the severity of their strife.

A distinction, then, is to be made between Beowulf's conflict with Grendel's dam and his conflicts with Grendel and the fire-drake. It has been argued that the fire-drake suffers outrage and that the Beowulf-poet is somewhat sympathetic to him. But these attitudes are not really tenable. The poet obviously resents the dragon's seizure of a treasure-hoard for which he has no earthly use ("ne byð him wihte ðy sel," 2277b). Such hoards, says the poet, are joy-giving ("Hordwynne," 2270). They contribute to the functions of the *comitatus*, to social order, to social joy. In principle, then, the dragon's *raison d'être* is as objectionable as Grendel's. And when he renews his strife with mankind, he brings with him the same delight in the purposes of destruction that Grendel had brought. Beowulf seems himself to be aware of this parallel; for when he arms himself for combat against the dragon, he recalls his fight not with Grendel's dam but with Grendel, insisting that were he certain to make his vow good, he would now renounce his weapons, "swa ic gio wið Grendle dyde" (2521b).

In helping to define conflicts, diabolic joy also strengthens the unity of *Beowulf*. It does this by pointing up an A B A structure in the sequence of the three great encounters—a structure which, to the modern mind at least, effects a unity far stronger than does the A A B structure implied in Gang's argument or the A A A structure implied in Bonjour's.

The two major plots in *Beowulf* involve (1) the heroic actions of the central figure, and (2) the destinies of the peoples to whom his energies are dedicated. By examining the joy relative to these two large plot strains, it becomes apparent that delineation of plots is significantly supported by the interplay of social joy and spiritual joy.

It is frequently remarked that the first half of the poem is predominantly cheerful. Its tone befits, as Professor Malone suggests, a period of youth. In the midst of this cheer, however, there is always the menacing anticipation of sorrow—a sorrow which (according to many critics) permeates the second half. “In Part II,” writes Brodeur, “there is no present weal to afford contrast with impending woe; instead, the unrelieved darkness of the theme contrasts bleakly with the recollected splendor and glory of Part I.” Indeed, there is discernible in the poem a gradual shading-out of joy. The burst of exultation which accompanies Beowulf's first “beot” (his announced determination to destroy Grendel) is sustained in the glorious celebration of his victory. But the second return from the mere is as sober and stately as is the first one jubilant; and the feast celebrating the destruction of Grendel's dam is significantly less joyous (at least in duration) than is the celebration accompanying Grendel's own demise. After Beowulf's return to Geatland, joy almost “has to be divined” (to use H. G. Wright's phrase). And while happy times are recalled in the hero's account of his experience, these joys, alas, are purely reflective. I think, however, that Brodeur is only partially right in saying that in Part II “the unrelieved darkness of the theme contrasts bleakly with the recollected splendor and glory of Part I.” For it should be noted that the contrast he points applies only to social joy and that it involves the secondary plot: that treating the destinies of the peoples to whom Beowulf's energies are dedicated. Spiritual joy at last arises in rapid counterpoint. This joy is applicable solely to the primary plot; and it continues to flourish, even while social joy fades.

The fading of social joy in *Beowulf* is, of course, rich in thematic values. Most significantly, it provides a grim parable for social man, pointing up the necessity of human interdependence. The blood-greedy Heremod (1719), the drunken spearsman at the court of the Heathobards (2042), the man driven by need to molest the dragon (2223)—all these men violate their responsibility to social order; thus social joy dies. Also exemplified in the fading of social joy is the validity of Wiglaf's observation:

Oft sceall eorl monig anes willan

wraac adreogan, swa us geworden is.

(377-78)

This observation illustrates, of course, the guiltless man's liability to sorrow. It enlarges upon the total theme of social joy by suggesting that while one is never free from the menaces of human frailty, one can minimize the frequencies of sorrow by scrupulous observation of social decorum and by uncompromising respect for social order. It should further be noted that the death of social joy provides a striking contrast for the spiritual joy which at the close of the poem is very much alive. Through spiritual joy, themes are further articulated; further insight into the character of the central figure is gained.

Before encountering the fire-drake, Beowulf, who is not characteristically sorrowful (“swa him geþywe ne was,” 2332b), experiences a long moment of deep depression. He reproaches himself for having somehow offended God (2329-31a). He sadly anticipates his own death (2419-24). He identifies himself with the sorrowful history of the Geats, recalling the tragedies of Herebeald and Hathcyn, lamenting the miseries of Hrethel (2426-2509). Thus sadly, but with heroic determination and with full awareness of his social duties (his “eorlscype,” 2535), he faces the dragon. At last, however, the sickness of heart which accompanies him to battle stands in dramatic contrast to the joy he experiences as he lies mortally wounded. In a long speech (2724-43a), he there reviews the successes of his rule, affirming that he has guarded his own people well, that he has sought no treacherous quarrels, nor sworn many an oath unjustly. And although he is sick unto death, he now has joy: “Ic þas ealles mag / feorhbennum seoc gefean habban” (2739b-40).

It was earlier suggested that this expression of joy resolves itself out of attitudes which throughout the poem are reflected in Beowulf's behavior: his readiness to serve (“heold min tela,” 2737b) and his respect for human brotherhood (“me witan ne ðearf Walden fira / morðorbealo maga.” 2741-42a). It is appropriate, of course, that brotherhood be quite strongly emphasized in this speech, for the brotherhood motif (an important thematic strain) here has its culmination.

Beowulf's contribution to this motif is reflected in many of the poem's episodes: it is apparent, certainly, in the altercation with Unferth (where disrespect for brotherhood is summarily condemned, 587); it is apparent in the Cain-spirit embodied in Beowulf's great adversaries. And it is especially apparent in the spirit with which Beowulf presents his newly won treasure to Hygelac. He tenders his gifts with pleasure, taking joy in the strong bond of kinship which binds him to his king. “Gen in eall at ðe / lissa gelong,” he says to Hygelac (2149b-50a). And so characteristic of Beowulf is the warm spirit of brotherhood reflected in these words that the poet pauses to comment on its significance to his life (2177-83a), causing it, at last, to be a source of joy to the dying hero.

Beowulf's life of service (the second of the virtues culminating in his final joy) finds keen expression not only in his long reflection upon the conduct of his life (2732-43, summarized above) but also in his eagerness to see the gold he has won in overcoming the fire-drake (2747-51). Wiglaf views this gold rejoicing in victory (“sigehreðig,” 2756), and for a moment one recalls the joys of the victorious Sigemund. Beowulf, of course, evidences none of the energetic exultations Wiglaf enjoys, but he finds comfort in the hoard; and the comfort thus taken has given rise to perplexities.

Miss Bertha Phillpotts, for example, finds this episode contradictory to the Christ-image Klaeber has seen in Beowulf: “Would it not be too strange an irony,” she writes [in *Essays and Studies*, 1913], “if the author had such a prototype in his mind, to make the dying hero exult in the dragon's gold, and insist on seeing it as he lies dying—gold which is buried with him, 'as unprofitable to men as it had been before'?” There is irony, of course, in the fact that Beowulf must lay down his life for a worthless heap of treasures. After his death, the hoard comes . . . to

symbolize “the joys now to pass for ever from the Geats.” But Beowulf does not participate in this grand irony. His joy in the gold is a joy which derives from the principles of service, not from a lust for riches:

Ic ðara fratwa Frean ealles ðanc,  
Wuldurcyninge wordum secge,  
ecum Dryhtne, þe ic her on starie,  
þas þe ic moste minum leodum  
ar swyltdage swylc gestrynan.

(2794-98)

The Sigemund episode, an obvious parallel to Beowulf's fight with the fire-drake, helps to define the peculiar comfort taken by Beowulf in the treasure-hoard. The poet is careful to tell us that the treasures won by Sigemund were his to enjoy at his own discretion: “he beahhordes brucan moste / selfes dome” (894-895a). Sigemund's joy, then, is social joy. His gold will provide him with physical comfort and prestige. It is pertinent to the practical interdependences of men. Beowulf, however, is at the end of his life. He can look for no physical comfort, but he can find spiritual comfort in the universal principles of brotherhood and service.

Professor Malone has observed [in “Beowulf,” *English Studies*, XXIX (1948)] that Beowulf is really a virtuous pagan. “He is made as Christ-like as the setting permits, but all his virtues can be explained quite naturally as growing out of the heroic ideals of conduct traditional among the English as among the other Germanic peoples.” Thus it is that considered as isolated sources of pleasure, the joys Beowulf evidences at the close of his life are social joys: brotherhood, service, delight in winning and giving gold. But the imminence of his death removes these joys from the realm of social function. It abstracts them into universal principles—the principles upon which Beowulf's heroic nature is in large part based and through which he gains his “soðfastra dom” (2820). Spiritual joy, then, is perceived in terms of social joy. And it enlarges upon the themes of social joy by suggesting that while a customary observation of the principles of service and brotherhood may contribute to an impermanent temporal joy, devotion to the ideals of these principles gives rise to a joy not subject to the irresponsibilities of men or to the menaces of Fate.

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