ON THE CHARACTERIZATION OF BEOWULF

By Henry Bosley Woolf

The quarter of a century since Klaeber's admirable edition of *Beowulf* was first published has seen continued interest in and study of the greatest of Old English literary monuments. Editions and translations, investigation of the fabulous and the historical elements, further examination of the text and suggestions as to its interpretation, research on language, style, and versification—all these have made possible an increasingly clearer understanding of the poem. In this mass of scholarly endeavor a significant trend is discernible, the emphasis on *Beowulf* as a poem, a work of art. This particular tendency, moreover, has taken varied forms: the study of an individual word, rich in connotative meaning; of a group of names that superficially have little bearing on the artistic skill of the eighth-century poet; of the metrical facility of the author; of his masterful use of such a stylistic device as foreshadowing; of the dignity that pervades the characters and the atmosphere of his composition; of the poet's penetrating psychological gifts; of the structure and meaning of the poem.¹ And these are by no

¹ Examples of the types of studies that I have in mind are: Norman E. Eliason, "Wulffhild (Beowulf, l. 1358)," JEGP 34 (1935). 20-23; William Frank Bryan, "Epithetic Compound Folk-Names in Beowulf," Studies in English Philology . . . in Honor of Frederick Klaeber (Minneapolis, 1939), pp. 120-134; John Collins Pope, *The Rhythm of Beowulf* (New Haven, 1942); Adrien Bonjour, "The Use of Anticipation in Beowulf," RES 16 (1940). 290-299; James R. Hulbert, "Beowulf
means all the topics dealt with in recent years by Beowulf scholars who, in their study of the artistic qualities of the poem, have surely not come to the end of their labors.

One aspect of the poet’s artistry that has generally been passed over, and that to me seems increasingly effective with each rereading of the poem, is his skill in characterization, especially of Beowulf. And it is the purpose of this paper to examine the first part of the poem in order to discover what sides of the hero’s character are there revealed and what means the poet uses to achieve this characterization.3

After the introductory lines that summarize early Danish history, the poet proceeds to an account of the building of the great hall Heorot. This hall is, of course, symbolic of the power of the Danish kingdom, an outward sign of its lofty position in Scandinavia. Though the point should not be pressed too far, the emphasis on the superiority of Heorot to other halls (and so of the Danes to other nations) is an indirect means of characterizing Beowulf. Those to whose aid he comes, once the hall turns from a place of joy to a place of woe, had been the example par excellence of Scandinavian strength.

News of the evil wrought among the Danes by Grendel is carried across the seas, and Beowulf is thereupon introduced to the reader:

194 Pæt fram hām gefrægn  Higelæces þegn
    göd mid Géatum,  Grendes dæda;
    sē wæs moncynnes  mægenes strengest
    on þæm dæge  þysses lífes,
    æbelum ond ðacean.  Hêt him ūdlingan
    gödnæ gegyrwan;  cwæð, hê gūdcyning
    ofer swanrāde  sēcean wolde,
    mārne þeoden,  þā him wæs manna þearf.


2 There is some discussion of this topic in Levin L. Schöcking’s “Heldenstolz und Würde im Angelsächsischen mit einem Anhang: zur Charakterisierungstechnik im Beowulfpos,” Abhandlungen der Philologisch-historischen Klasse der sächsischen Akademie der Wissenschaften 42, 5 (Leipzig, 1933). Klaeber makes occasional comment on the characterization of Beowulf; see, for example, the remarks in his third edition of the poem (Boston, 1936), pp. 1, lviii, lxi, 136, 143.

3 I have confined myself to the first seven fits of the poem, stopping at line 498. In another paper I propose to continue this study by a detailed investigation of the role of Unferth, who first appears in the eighth fit of the poem.
In this passage of objective comment by the poet, the first point to be noted is that Beowulf is a strong man; indeed, the fact that his physical prowess is unsurpassed among living men is repeated, time and again, throughout the poem and is well enough illustrated in the three fights. Further, the poet makes clear that the Geat is ever ready to put his strength to good use: upon learning of the ravages of Grendel he resolves to journey to Denmark in aid of the Danish king, just as later on, when the need arises, he is willing to tackle Grendel’s dam and the dragon. Finally, and it logically follows what has already been stated by the poet, Beowulf is highly regarded by his countrymen, who encourage him to undertake this expedition; and in the later parts of the poem, where the champion is once again among his own people, the esteem in which they hold him is abundantly evident. Indeed, in these lines of direct characterization one sees a combination of the two civilizations that are blended in the hero (and in the poem): the Germanic warrior renowned for his physical strength and the Christian knight revered for his spirit of helpfulness.

The sea-voyage over, the Geats upon reaching foreign shores

Thus the poet goes beyond his earlier characterization and makes known the positively religious side of Beowulf, who, as the action of the poem unfolds, is portrayed as a man possessing various Christian virtues. Indeed, the moving lines with which the poem concludes may be looked upon as the logical outgrowth of what has been earlier revealed of the spiritual side of the Geatish champion, from the time of the prayer of thanksgiving for a safe voyage on through the three fights.

The watchful coast-guard of the Danes, seeing the strangers

4 Klaeber, ed. cit., p. li, perhaps overstates this point when he comments: "The poet has raised him to the rank of a singularly spotless hero, a ‘defending, protecting, redeeming being,’ a truly ideal character. We might even feel inclined to recognize features of the Christian Savior in the destroyer of hellish fiends, the warrior brave and gentle, blameless in thought and deed, the king that dies for his people."
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land, rides to them and, having inquired as to their identity and commented on the openess of their entry onto foreign soil, remarks of their leader:

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\[ \text{Næfre ic māran geseah eorla ofer eorðan, } \text{ðonne is ēower sum, secg on searwum; } \text{nis þæt seldguma, wæpnum geweorðad, } \text{næfne him wīte lēoge,} \]

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ænlic ansýn.

Thus far the poet has characterized Beowulf indirectly by stressing the greatness of the Danes, and directly by referring to his physical strength, his spirit of helpfulness, and his reputation among his countrymen. He has also suggested Beowulf’s religious nature by mentioning the prayer of thanks for a safe journey. Here he adds to what has gone before by revealing the impression that the Geat makes on the coast-guard. This man knows neither his nationality nor his name; in fact, he is uncertain as to whether these strangers come as friends or foes. Yet little more than a glance convinces him, unless looks deceive, that Beowulf is no ordinary hall-man. And the Geat’s brief and direct reply to his questioner in which he makes known his race, the names of his king and his father, and the purpose of his visit, so satisfies the coast-guard that he sets a watch over the Geatish ship and guides the warriors to within sight of Heorot.

Having reached the hall and having laid aside their weapons, the Geats are further questioned by the official herald, Wulfgar, whose remarks on the appearance of the visitors emphasize the characterization already achieved through the coast-guard’s comments:

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\[ \text{Ne seah ic elþeodige þus manige men mōdiglicran.} \]

\[ \text{Wēn’ ic þæt gē for wlenco, nalles for wræcsīðum,} \]

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\[ \text{ac for hīgeþrymmum } \text{Hrōdgār sōhton.} \]

After Beowulf’s short and pointed reply, in which he identifies himself\(^5\) and courteously requests audience with the king, Wulfgar enters Heorot and informs Hrothgar of the arrival of the Geats, the name of their leader, and his request to speak

\(^5\) This is the first occurrence of Beowulf’s name in the poem. Schücking, op. cit., pp. 28-30. In commenting on this point shows that the late naming of characters is by no means peculiar to the Beowulf poet.
with him. He concludes with these remarks, which make still clearer the effect that the appearance of the visitors—Beowulf in particular—has on him:

366 nō dū him wearne getēoh
dīnra gegnewīda,  glǣdman Hrōðgār!
Hū on wiġgetāwum  wyrǣ þinceād
eorla geæhtlan;  hūru se aldor dēah,
370 sē þæm heaðorincum  hider wīsade.

It may be observed that while the coast-guard and the herald play much the same role in contributing to the characterization of Beowulf, the poet varies the means by which this is done. The former declares in Beowulf’s presence that the leader of the sea-voyagers is, so far as appearances go, without a peer, and that he is then convinced of the Geat’s good faith by his words; the latter comments to the Geats on the impressiveness of their bearing—he has no doubts from the first—and then he pleads with Hrothgar to receive these men, whose leader is singled out for particular mention.

In replying to Wulfgar, Hrothgar declares that he knew Beowulf as a boy, refers to his parents, and goes on to speak of his strength and to surmise the reason for his visit to the Danish court:

377 Ðonne sægdon þæt  sælþende,  
þā de gifscættas  Gēata fyredon
þyder tō þance,  þæt hē þritiges
manna mægencræft  on his mundgripe
heāþorōf hæbbe.  Hine hālig God
for árstafum  ûs onsende,
tō West-Denum,  þæs ic wēn hæbbe,
384 wid Grendles gryre.

Up to this point the poet has given no definite indication of the extent of Beowulf’s fame. True, he has made clear that his own countrymen hold him in high esteem, but there has been nothing to suggest that his reputation has spread across the seas, that he is more than a local hero. And Wulfgar, to whom he makes known his name, shows no sign of ever having heard of him. It is Hrothgar, then, that the poet selects as his medium for revealing Beowulf’s international reputation—a thoroughly appropriate choice since the king is naturally better informed than any of his retainers. At the same time, the
Geat’s strength is again emphasized (the earlier general remark on his superiority to all mortals being varied here by the precise information that he is the equal of thirty men), and the suggestion that Beowulf has been sent by God to aid the Danes is not unrelated to what has already been said about his spirit of helpfulness.

After further talk and ceremony—it goes without saying that Beowulf is at home in courtly circles—the Geat stands before the old king and makes the longest speech found thus far in the poem. In it there is a statement of the deeds done by Beowulf in his youth, a reference to the encouragement given him by his own people in the undertaking of his present venture, an offer to meet Grendel in equal combat, an expression of reliance on God as the judge of the fight, a request of Hrothgar if the monster wins. Here, surely, is a wealth of self-characterization. The tone of boasting apparent in the first words of the speech is, of course, not peculiar to the Geatish warrior, though it reappears more than once later in the poem; indeed, it is characteristic of many another ancient hero to whom, therefore, Beowulf is akin. The allusion to the attitude of the Geats towards this expedition is a restatement of what the poet himself has earlier set forth, but now there are facts to explain the attitude. The killing of giants and the slaying of water-monsters justify his countrymen’s belief in Beowulf and, at the same time, prepare the way for his encounters with other foes, each one more formidable than the last. The proposed mode of fighting, moreover, revealed in Beowulf’s resolution to lay aside shield and sword and rely on main strength—his opponent uses no weapons—suggests a sense of fairness that reflects the Christian side of the hero, already depicted. However, there is the likelihood that Beowulf has great confidence in his own might, that he prefers hand-to-hand combat. After all, he would hardly have set out for Denmark unless he considered victory over Grendel possible, and his words to the coast-guard, in which the purpose of his visit is made known, reflect this same self-confidence. In brief, his plan of battle as he here explains it to Hrothgar suggests at least two aspects of Beowulf’s character. The Geat’s religious nature is further evident in his acceptance of God as the judge of the fight, and his role as the dutiful retainer is apparent in his request that
his war-gear be sent to Hygelac if Grendel is as victorious as he has been these past dozen years. Indeed, like the first passage of direct characterization in the poem, Beowulf's speech is a remarkable blending of the two cultures—Germanic and Christian—out of which the man and the poem are made.

Hrothgar's reply begins thus:

457 For [g]ewyr[r]htum þū, wine min Bēowulf,
458 ond for ārstaðum ūsic sōhest.

There is no general agreement among Beowulf scholars as to the reading of these two lines because of the unsatisfactory state of the inherited text. Klaeber follows the emendation of Trautmann, gewyrhtum ("deeds done"), takes the word to denote cause, and considers it as a reference to Hrothgar's earlier kindness to Ecgtheow. He is probably right in the first two of these points, but I am inclined to believe that gewyrhtum refers to Beowulf's earlier exploits, just recounted to the king, without which there would have been little reason for Beowulf's leaving his homeland and seeking battle in Denmark. And the parallel word in the next line, ārstaðum ("kindness"), refers to Beowulf's general spirit of helpfulness, which the poet has already stressed. In brief, as I read it, Hrothgar's speech begins with a statement that Beowulf has sought the Danes because he is eminently qualified by past exploits to attempt the overthrow of Grendel and because he is by disposition inclined to help those in distress. And then the aged king lapses into a train of reminiscences of past relationships between Ecgtheow and himself, and of the havoc wrought more recently by Grendel.

Though the main action of the poem is hardly underway, Beowulf has been rather fully characterized. In the fights with Grendel and his dam, in the deadly battle with the dragon, and in the other parts of the poem, Beowulf is revealed as the sort of character that one would expect after this skilful intro-

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6 Ed. cit., p. 145.

7 As Klaeber points out, ed. cit., p. lviii, the poet does not describe Beowulf's outward appearance. In fact, he does not give a physical description of any of the characters in the poem. The reason for this is that he was interested in other things. A parallel is to be found in his description of nature, as discussed by James R. Hulbert, "A Note on the Psychology of the Beowulf Poet," Studies in English Philology . . . in Honor of Frederick Klaeber (Minneapolis, 1929), pp. 189-195.
duction. The material here presented is, of course, as familiar as hands and feet to all students of the poem; and the devices by which the poet achieves his characterization are well enough known to all readers of literature, for they are the stock-in-trade of many a writer of narrative. Yet it seems worth noting that through his effective use of the various direct and indirect methods of characterization here pointed out, the author of *Beowulf* reveals another aspect of the artistic skill which he lavished upon his poem.

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