

THE BOETHIAN ELEMENT  
IN BEOWULF

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter	Page
I. INTRODUCTION . . . . .	1
The Boethian Influence in the Middle Ages . . . . .	1
Boethius and the Old English Period . . . . .	2
II. A PARALLEL OF THE CONCEPTION OF <u>WYRD</u> IN <u>BEOWULF</u> WITH THE CONCEPTION OF <u>FORTUNA</u> IN BOETHIUS' <u>CONSOLATION OF</u> <u>PHILOSOPHY</u> . . . . .	10
III. A PARALLEL OF THE CONCEPTION OF PROVIDENCE IN BOETHIUS' <u>CONSOLATION</u> <u>OF PHILOSOPHY</u> WITH THE CONCEPTION OF THE CHRISTIAN GOD IN <u>BEOWULF</u> . . . . .	19
Providence in Hrothgar's Sermon . . . . .	20
Providence in the Events Surrounding Beowulf's Death . . . . .	22
IV. SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION . . . . .	29
A SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY . . . . .	31

## CHAPTER I

### BACKGROUND AND STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

#### The Boethian Influence in the Middle Ages

The extensive writings of Ancius Manlius Severinus Boethius, magister officiorum of the Roman Empire during the early years of the sixth century, were of great influence throughout the Middle Ages. It is generally conceded by those scholars who write about the Boethian genius that the death of Boethius brought the curtain down on the late Roman culture. It is certain that the works of this man, the last of the great Roman writers, represent one of the high points of Roman civilization.

The scholarly pursuits of Boethius included works on music, arithmetic, geometry, logic, astronomy, rhetoric, grammar, theology, mechanics, and philosophy. One or another of these works served as a text in each branch of the seven liberal arts of the medieval curriculum in the universities of Germany, France, England, Spain, the Lowlands, Italy, and others.

We are informed that the common instructor of Bede, Alcuin, Rabanus, Helperich, and others in arithmetic was Boethius. His authority in geometry was also recognized, and men such as Alcuin and Gerbert used this work.<sup>1</sup> The textbook De Arithmetica, introduced in 502, was used for a thousand years. De Musica was used in schools and universities even longer. Oxford University continued until the

eighteenth century to require it of its students.

Some scholars think that Boethius' greatest contribution was in the area of logic where he opened the works of Aristotle for the western world by translating them into Latin and teaching them--thus becoming known as one of the greatest teachers of the Middle Ages--and supplementing the translations with commentaries of his own. Other scholars feel that Boethius' last and most popular work, The Consolation of Philosophy, was his greatest and most influential work.

Boethius' influence over Middle English literature is well known. For example, Chaucer found Boethius' work important enough to make his own translation of The Consolation, the influence of which may be found throughout his work, and obvious references to the Boethian innovation of Fortune and her wheel may be found throughout other medieval as well as Renaissance literature. However, the Boethian influence over Old English literature is not so immediately evident.

#### Boethius and the Old English Period

Boethius' influence in late Anglo-Saxon times can be supported by the fact of Alfred's translating The Consolation of Philosophy. Deploring the decay of learning of his time, Alfred set about to "translate some books which are most needful for all men to know into the language which we can all understand."<sup>2</sup> That Alfred chose to translate it into Old English is an indication that its force was strongly felt in the latter part of the ninth century in England.

It was also one of the first pieces of literature to be translated into the native language of the French, Germans, Italians, and Spanish. Abbot Grimald (841-872) added to the cloister library of St. Gall from

his own collection works of Alcuin, Augustine, Rabanus, Maurus, Virgil, Vegetius, and others, but notably The Consolation. Notker Labeo (c. 950-1022), the German educator, translated The Consolation into German and compiled a textbook on rhetoric with excerpts from Boethius. "Walter of Speyer tells us that in the cathedral school of his own town in the tenth century the reading included the usual classics, Martianus Capella, and the Consolatio."<sup>3</sup>

Some scholars believe that the influence of The Consolation may have been felt before the ninth century. Stanley B. Greenfield says that "in Anglo-Saxon England it may have influenced the Beowulf and Wanderer poets, among others."<sup>4</sup> Since the Boethian influence affected Bede (673-735) in other areas, as we have already noted, The Consolation might well have been in his library also. Hamilton says that "The Consolation of Philosophy apparently was known to Bede... [and] to Alcuin."<sup>5</sup> This date would provide for even further possibility of the Boethian influence on the Beowulf poet.

### Similarities of Cultures

It may be, however, that the similarity which exists between attitudes expressed in Beowulf and The Consolation is nothing more than a result of corresponding cultural situations--a mixture of pagan and Christian elements. In the Rome of Boethius' time, Gothic power had taken over the throne, and in the England of A.D. 700-800, descendants of the Germanic invaders were ruling. Christianity had enjoyed a recognized status in the Roman Empire for approximately two hundred years by the time of Boethius (but, of course, a far less amount of time among the Ostrogoths). In Anglo-Saxon England, Christianity would

have enjoyed a period of time comparable to that of Boethius' day by the end of the eighth century, a likely date for the writing of Beowulf.

The Roman Empire of the sixth century was a decadent empire resulting from ravagement by one barbaric people after another for a hundred years. Alaric and the Visigoths had sacked Rome in 410, and forty-five years later, the Vandals, led by Gaiseric, lay siege to the city for fourteen days. Only five years previous to the Vandals' attack, Attila and the Huns had subdued the city and demanded tribute. By late fifth century (493), the Ostrogoths had taken the Empire, and Theodoric was on the throne. All the old Western Empire, except Britain, Africa, and a part of Gaul were under the rule of Theodoric.

The Roman Empire flourished under Gothic rule because Theodoric wisely attempted to unify the country. He wanted to unite "the Teutonic vigor with the Roman civilization, to alloy the fierceness of the Gothic temperament with the social culture of Italy."<sup>6</sup> Roughly one-third of the countryside fell to the Ostrogoths for agricultural purposes, and the Romans seemed to be willing to accept those terms in exchange for protection, but underneath, there was always a discontent.

The Goths had been converted to Christianity even before the efforts of Ulfilas, who had translated the Bible (except for the Book of Kings) into their language. Certainly this kind of Christianity (that which is taught by cultural influence rather than by commissioned representatives of the church) is at best an assimilation of the newly acquired religion into the existing belief. The type of Christianity which developed among the Goths is called Arianism and differs significantly from the orthodox Christianity of Rome. However, historians generally agree that neither form of Christianity was vital with the populace but



rather a matter of tradition; therefore, coexistence was possible. One may suspect that Gospel Christianity suffered from the mating.

This fusion of pagan and Christian cultures affected Boethius, and it is reflected in his work just as his service to the emperor reflected the fusion of Roman and Gothic cultures. A similar fusion occurred in the England of the Beowulf poet's day where Augustine and his successors were Christianizing the Angles, Saxons, and Jutes, who had overrun the country.

The Germanic invaders had a religion, of course, but it was fiercely barbaric, characterized by superstition and fear. The superiority of Christianity had to be demonstrated to the people before they would accept it, or at least the old religion must be shown to be ineffective. The chief priest of the established religion in Northumbria, Coifi, is a case in point. Bede says that Coifi wearily confessed to the king that the old religion did not seem to be of much material use and that in his disillusionment, he is willing to try this new doctrine.<sup>7</sup>

The change to Christianity required years to effect and was clearly in transition during the writing of Beowulf in which both pagan and Christian themes are present. Brodeur, in describing the influence of the Age on the Beowulf poet, draws a description of the times from Beowulf itself: "warlike yet Christian; devout yet tolerant." Although the pagan spirit is discernible, he says, "the fashioning of ancient pagan stuff has been so complete that the extant poem is essentially a Christian epic." However, the reader is always aware that Beowulf is a Germanic warrior. "In the figure of Beowulf the heroic ideals of Germanic paganism and of Anglo-Saxon Christendom have been reconciled and fused, so that the hero exemplifies the best of both."<sup>8</sup> Surely

much of this is a reflection of the environment of the poet.

It seems likely that both Boethius and the Beowulf poet knew the Judeo-Christian tradition and the Christian patristic writing since their influence is interwoven in The Consolation and in Beowulf. Hamilton believes that the Beowulf poet's concept of "Caines cynne" is a reflection of Book 15 of Augustine's Civitas Dei, "by all odds the most popular section...in England...."<sup>9</sup> Others assure us that "nothing in The Consolation is inconsistent with patristic theology; indeed precedent for nearly every idea which Boethius proposes can be found in the work of St. Augustine."<sup>10</sup>

The discussion which has continued through the years questioning Boethius' Christian status shows an awareness of these conflicting cultures in his day, and no one can read Beowulf without being amused at the incongruity sometimes created by the interplay of cultures. For these reasons we must admit that the similarities of culture could account for whatever similarities exist between the two great works, The Consolation and Beowulf.

### The Consolation Genre

One other possibility for the similarities of attitudes expressed in The Consolation and Beowulf is the influence of the consolation genre, a type of literature, exemplified by The Wanderer and The Seafarer, in which a philosophy of life is developed which, deriving from despair, accepts things as they are. This philosophy grew out of the Christian belief that God is over all things and that nothing happens outside his will and purpose. It looks forward to a day, not necessarily in this world, when all will be well. Irwin Edman, explaining the consolation

genre, says, "Where fate seems unkind, where Providence seems to bless the wicked, where deserved happiness is snatched away, where violence triumphs over reason," only a conception of the universe "which adds up to a system of good, a system of God," will suffice to drive away despair.<sup>11</sup>

This application of the consolation genre operates on an interpretative level rather than on that of a literal story level in Beowulf. It seems obvious that the poet is attempting to encourage men to think their way through their problems and to proceed on courage. R. E. Kaske points out that "statements of 'Christian' sapientia" were possibly available to the Beowulf poet through use of the Bible, patristic writing, and "De Consolatione of Boethius."<sup>12</sup>

Two eminent Old English scholars, among others, have acknowledged a Boethian element in Beowulf: Greenfield, already noted, Professor of English at the University of Oregon and chairman of the Bibliography Committee of the Old English Group of Modern Language Association, and Arthur Gilchrist Brodeur, Professor of English and Germanic Philology, Emeritus, at the University of California before his death. Brodeur states in The Art of Beowulf that "the [Beowulf] poet's conception of Wyrd is purely Boethian."<sup>13</sup> Howard R. Patch, whose scholarship is respected by both Greenfield and Brodeur, says that "Fate [in Boethius] is properly Wyrd for the Old English...."<sup>14</sup> Oxford English Dictionary makes the following entry in reference to wyrd:

The principle, power, or agency by which events are predetermined; fate, destiny. c. 888. AElfred Boeth. xxxix. Ƿ 5 Ac þæt þæt we wyrd lateð, baet bið Godes weorc þæt he alece daeg wyrcoð.

Beowulf 455 Gaeð a wyrd swa hio scel. Ibid. 477  
Hie wyrd forsweop on Grindles gryre.

Two overriding themes in The Consolation, Fortune and Providence, seem to parallel the characteristics given to Wyrd and to the Christian God in Beowulf. I propose to parallel these powers in the following chapters.

## CHAPTER II

### A PARALLEL OF THE CONCEPTION OF WYRD IN BEOWULF WITH THE CONCEPTION OF FORTUNA IN BOETHIUS' CONSOLATION OF PHILOSOPHY

For Alfred, who, so far as we have record, first translated Boethius' Consolation into Anglo-Saxon, the language of Beowulf, wyrd carried the Boethian concept of "fate." Marie Padgett Hamilton translates from the Sedgefield edition of King Alfred's Old English Version of Boethius: "This changing Fate which we call wyrd proceeds according to His design, just as He determines that it should be."<sup>1</sup> This Boethian fate was personified as Fortune and described and discussed throughout The Consolation as inscrutable, inevitable, perfidious change. Wyrd in Beowulf seems to have the same meaning.

The first use of wyrd in Beowulf comes in line 455, "Gæoð ā wyrd swā hīo scel!"<sup>2</sup> Beowulf, in preparation for his meeting with Grendel, is acknowledging the inevitability of wyrd: however the battle is destined, that is the way it will go. This sense of inevitability is for Boethius the property of Fortune:

You have put yourself in Fortune's power;  
now you must be content with the ways of your  
mistress. If you try to stop the force of her  
turning wheel, you are the most foolish man  
alive. If it should stop turning, it would cease  
to be Fortune's wheel.  
(Book II, prose 1)

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup>Howard R. Patch, The Tradition of Boethius (New York, 1935), pp. 36-37.

<sup>2</sup>From the Preface to Alfred's translation of Pope Gregory's Pastoral Care.

<sup>3</sup>Patch, p. 38.

<sup>4</sup>A Critical History of Old English Literature (New York, 1965), p. 34.

<sup>5</sup>Marie Padgett Hamilton, "The Religious Principle in Beowulf," An Anthology of Beowulf Criticism, ed. Lewis E. Nicholson (Notre Dame, Ind., 1963), p. 129.

<sup>6</sup>Henry Hart Milman, History of Latin Christianity (New York, 1903), I, p. 406.

<sup>7</sup>The Ecclesiastical History of the English Nation, ed. J. A. Giles (London, 1849), p. 95.

<sup>8</sup>Arthur Gilchrist Brodeur, The Art of Beowulf (Berkeley, 1959), p. 183.

<sup>9</sup>Hamilton, Anthology, p. 110.

<sup>10</sup>The Consolation of Philosophy, tr. Richard Green (Indianapolis, 1962), p. xv.

<sup>11</sup>The Consolation of Philosophy, (New York, 1943), p. xii.

<sup>12</sup>"Sapientia et Fortitudo as the Controlling Theme of Beowulf," An Anthology, p. 272.

<sup>13</sup>Berkeley, 1959, p. 218.

<sup>14</sup>Patch, p. 49.

Philosophy is reminding the imprisoned, discouraged Boethius of the nature and habits of Fortune in order that he might not be resentful but rather accepting of that which he is powerless to change.

The second use of wyrd in Beowulf is found in lines 477-478:

hie wyrd forsweop  
on Grendles gryre.<sup>3</sup>

Here Hrothgar is bemoaning the loss of his "warrior-band" whom Grendel has killed. However, for him the loss of his men is something more than a monster's deed; it is Wyrd using Grendel to perform his work of death, Wyrd's ultimate perfidy. While Boethius does not labor the point of death's being Fortune's ultimate perfidy, he does acknowledge that death is the result of Fortune's withdrawing the last of her favor: "The last day of a man's life is a kind of death to such a fortune as he still has" (Book II, prose 3). He further talks of death as every man's fate: "One thing is certain, . . . nothing that is born can last"<sup>4</sup>; and, "This ordered change . . . snatches away and buries all that was born, hiding it in final death."<sup>5</sup>

The third entry of wyrd in Beowulf is found in lines 572-573:

Wyrd oft nered  
unfaegne eorl, þonne his ellen dēah!<sup>6</sup>

This other, interesting side of Fate is almost comic: the thought of an undoomed man being saved by Wyrd. Beowulf, describing his fight with the sea monsters during his overnight swim, apparently conceived of Wyrd as the determiner of all events, good or bad; so by his courage he had earned the good will of Fate. Boethius also conceived of Fate or Fortune as the dispenser of the sometimes-good. He had acted courageously in the past and earned the office he held because Fortune "smiled" on him. His present unhappiness, Philosophy points out, is

a result of his thinking that so long as he continues to act courageously he will suffer no reverses: "every sudden change of fortune brings with it a certain disquiet in the soul; and this is what has caused you to lose your peace of mind" (Book II, prose 1). Beowulf will likewise discover when he fights the dragon that even though his actions are filled with courage, Fortune has changed toward him.

The fourth entry of wyrd is found in lines 734-736 of Beowulf:

Ne waes þaet wyrd þā gēn,  
þaet hē mā mōste manna cynnes  
ðicgean ofer þā niht.<sup>7</sup>

Grendel is on his nightly raid of Heorot. He greedily bursts into the great Hall and devours his first victim. What he does not know is that his first victim is also his last: Wyrd had changed toward him as it had for Boethius and would for Beowulf. Change is so basic to the nature of Wyrd that the Beowulf poet felt no need to elaborate on this characteristic but merely to list the fact that Wyrd no longer will permit the feast. Certainly change is characteristic of Boethius' Fortune also. There is hardly a mention of Fortune without this companion word, change. The figure of Fortune's wheel is the symbol of change for Boethius. "This is the way she amuses herself; this is the way she shows her power," he says in Book II, poem 1.

The fifth entry of wyrd, lines 1055-1057, concerns Wyrd's subjection to God:

swā hē hyra mā wolde,  
nefne him wītig God wyrd forstode  
ond þaes mannes mōd.<sup>8</sup>

This parenthetical explanation comes while the poet is telling about Hrothgar's rewarding Beowulf and his brave men following the death of Grendel. Hrothgar has just commanded that gold be paid for the Geat



who was Grendel's victim that last night when the poet breaks in to explain that it was only because God and Beowulf's courage withstood Wyrd that Grendel did not kill more. This aside has proved interesting to Beowulf scholars. Kennedy notes that in Beowulf, "God and Wyrd are brought into juxtaposition in such a manner as to imply control of Fate by the superior power of Christian divinity."<sup>9</sup> Hamilton concludes that "'fate' as subordinate to the Divine will is ... the only theory that would be consistent with the poet's frequent reference to God's protecting care of the Geats and Danes and his control of their fortunes."<sup>10</sup>

For Boethius, Fortune is subject to Providence (that which Chapter Three seeks to equate with the Christian God in Beowulf); therefore, whatever vagary Fortune is engaged in, she does so only by the permission --however passive--of Providence. Boethius writes in Book IV, prose 6, "that everything which is subject to Fate is also subject to Providence, and that Fate itself is also subject to Providence."

The sixth entry of wyrd in Beowulf is in lines 1205-1207:

hyne wyrd fornam  
 syþðan hē for wlenco wēan āhsode,  
 fāehðe tō Frȳsum,<sup>11</sup>

This quotation comes as a part of the Beowulf poet's digression concerning Hygelac's fatal clash with the Frisians. As has already been noted, Wyrd had the power to destroy a man; in fact Wyrd was the destroyer of men always, and whether Hygelac died here or at another place was only a matter of time and convenience for Wyrd. Perhaps what is more important here since we have already discussed the finality of Wyrd's power is the word pride. One is reminded of the adage "Pride goes before a fall"; it is true in Beowulf. Hrothgar warns in his sermon that while pride grows, the murderer creeps closer.

Boethius does not use the word pride in his discourse, but he quite often speaks about it in other terms. Pride is that belief in a man which, growing as he succeeds, credits good fortune to his own power. This certainly Boethius warned against. Book III, prose passages 3-7, discusses each of the begetters of pride (riches, honors, power, fame, and pleasure) and identifies them as gifts of Fortune.

Entry number seven of wyrd in Beowulf follows the celebration of the death of Grendel. The men, wine-filled, have lain down to sleep, but

geosceaft grimme,<sup>12</sup> Wyrd ne cūþon,  
(1233-1234)

The grim decree is that Wyrd will have her way; she cannot be defeated by men alone. She had taken the lives of men before, and she would continue to do so. The Beowulf poet says this in anticipation of the coming of Grendel's mother, who will bring destruction again to Heorot. Boethius likewise warns that Fortune will have her way: "You are wrong if you think that Fortune has changed toward you. This is her nature, the way she always behaves. She is changeable, and so in her relations with you she has merely done what she always does" (Book II, prose 1).

The eighth mention of wyrd is found in the events surrounding Beowulf's death. Lines 2420-2423 read:

wyrd ungemete nēah,  
sē ðone gomelan grētan sceolde,  
sēcean sǣwle hord, sundur gedǣlan  
līf wið līce.<sup>13</sup>

Beowulf's end came just as Hrothgar said it might. In life he had received riches, power, honor, and fame, but the time came when he must relinquish them to another, and Wyrd was at work in it all. Age

is not the problem; it is but the complication which makes it possible for Wyrd to execute the reversal on Beowulf. For Boethius, it was not age but powerful enemies who made it possible for Fortune to turn the wheel. Fate seeks any opportunity to turn the wheel. The most likely ones Hrothgar listed in his Sermon: disease, sword, fire's clutch, rage of flood, falchion's gripe, arrow's flight, dire age, and twinkling of eyes. (1761-1768). Both Boethius and Beowulf had "got more from her than any private citizen ever received," but "one thing is certain, fixed by eternal law: nothing that is born can last."<sup>14</sup> And now this eternal law made it possible for Wyrd to turn the wheel on Beowulf.

As Beowulf makes his last speech before going to fight the dragon, wyrd is mentioned for the ninth time:

weorðan aet wealle,      ac unc [furður] sceal  
 Metod manna gehwaes.      swā unc wyrd geteōð,<sup>15</sup>  
 (2525-2527)

If Fate operates by necessity, what good would running do? Beowulf seems to be saying. His former great strength was a gift from Wyrd, and now in spite of his lack of it, he is still the same man, win or lose. As Beowulf engaged in battle with the dragon, the poet tells us in entry number ten:

hreo aet hilde.<sup>16</sup>      swā him wyrd ne gescrāf  
 (2574-2575)

Fickle fortune! Monstrous fortune! Those were the words of Boethius. "...What is fickle Fortune but a promise of future distress." "I am well acquainted with the many deceptions of that monster, Fortune."<sup>17</sup>

The last use of wyrd in Beowulf is in lines 2814-2815:

ealle wyrd forswēop  
 mīne māgas to metodsceaftē.<sup>18</sup>

Beowulf is using his final breath to give the charge to his brave kinsman, Wiglaf, the last of the family, that he use his golden necklace, gold-covered helmet, rings, and mail shirt well. Such was all he had remaining, and that he must part with also. The words of Hrothgar spoken almost in prophecy had come to pass; Fortune had turned the wheel and Beowulf was on the bottom--dead!

There are other words in Beowulf which carry the meaning of fate. Faege, an adjective meaning "doomed" or "fated to die," is found in lines 846, 1241, 1755, 2141, and 2975. Inflectional forms may be found in lines 1527, 1568, 2077, and 3025. Metod, a masculine a-stem noun, meaning "fate" in the sense of "mete" or "measure," but also used as a descriptive label for God, is found in lines 110, 706, 967, 979, 1057, 1611, and 2527. Inflectional forms may be found in lines 169, 180, 670, and 1778. Two compound forms of metod are also used: ealdmetod, meaning "fate from the beginning" or "creator from of old," found in line 945; and metodsceaft, meaning "destiny" or "that which is decreed by fate," found in lines 1077, 1180, and 2815. Gesceaphwil, a feminine o-stem noun meaning "fated" or "destined hour," appears in its dative form in line twenty-six. Geosceaft, a feminine i-stem noun meaning "destiny" or "what has been decreed of old," is found in its accusative form in line 1234. Gescipe, a neuter noun meaning "what is destined," is found in line 2570.

Other words may carry the implication of fate (such as sculan, meaning "shall," "should," "must," "have to," "be going to"), but it is finally the feminine i-stem noun, wyrd, which has traditionally paralleled most clearly the goddess Fortune.

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup>Hamilton, Anthology, p. 126.

<sup>2</sup>"Wyrd goes as it must." (The translations from the Old English are the author's; the Old English text of Beowulf was taken from the edition by Fr. Klaeber, Boston, 1950).

<sup>3</sup>"Wyrd has swept them away into Grendel's horror."

<sup>4</sup>Green, p. 27

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., p. 97.

<sup>6</sup>"Wyrd often saves an doomed man when his deeds are good."

<sup>7</sup>It was by no means destined that he be allowed to partake of more of mankind after that night.

<sup>8</sup>He would have slain more had not wise God and this man's courage defended against Wyrd.

<sup>9</sup>Kennedy, p. 88.

<sup>10</sup>Hamilton, Anthology, p. 129.

<sup>11</sup>Wyrd destroyed him when he, for pride, asked for misery, hostility with the Frisians.

<sup>12</sup>They did not know Wyrd, the terrible decree of old.

<sup>13</sup>Wyrd, exceedingly near, therefore should greet this ancient one to seek his life hord to separate life from body.

<sup>14</sup>Green, pp. 26-27.

<sup>15</sup>"But it must happen to us at the wall as Wyrd, the ruler of every man, grants."

<sup>16</sup>Wyrd did not appoint glory in battle for him.

<sup>17</sup>Green, pp. 21-22.

<sup>18</sup>"Wyrd has swept away all my kinsmen to death."

### CHAPTER III

#### A PARALLEL OF THE CONCEPTION OF PROVIDENCE IN BOETHIUS' CONSOLATION OF PHILOSOPHY WITH THE CONCEPTION OF THE CHRISTIAN GOD IN BEOWULF

Providence, Boethius' name for Divine knowledge or Divine mind, is that perfect conception which when actuated in a historical event becomes, by reason of physical imperfections, Fate. This Providence is not only prior to Fate in existence but also superior to it. Boethius says in Book IV, prose 6, that "everything which is subject to Fate is also subject to Providence." For the Beowulf poet this Divine knowledge or Divine mind called God, Waldende, Metod, etc., is superior to Fate (Wyrd) also. The poet says in lines 478-479:

God ēaþe maeg,  
þone dolsceaðan      dāeda getwāefan! <sup>1</sup>

Further, the Beowulf poet shows that God not only may but does intervene in behalf of mankind in his struggle with Fate from time to time:

swā hē hyra ma wolde,  
nefne him wītig God      wyrd forstode  
ond ðaes mannes mōd. <sup>2</sup>  
(1055-1057)

Boethius is also convinced that Fate may be overruled. He states further in Book IV, prose 6: "Some things, however, which are subject to Providence are above the force of Fate and ungoverned by it."

There are numerous passages in Beowulf which correspond to

this Boethian concept of the superiority of Providence to Fate, but it is impossible to deal with them all here. Therefore, he will limit further discussion of the subject to representative passages contained in Hrothgar's Sermon and in the events surrounding the death of Beowulf as he draws a parallel between Providence as conceived in The Conso-  
lation and the Christian God as revealed in Beowulf.

### Providence in Hrothgar's Sermon

For Hrothgar, mihtig God is one who grants wisdom, wealth, and greatness. Or rather, as Hrothgar restates, God allows (laeted<sup>x</sup>) wisdom, wealth, and greatness. From the Boethian point of view, this concession fits neatly into the idea of Fate's being allowed by Providence to perform her vagaries, since all things, including Fate, are subject to Providence. Perhaps even Hrothgar's descriptive words and phrases of this God are revealing: mihtig God and ealra geweald. Mihtig, which has come across into modern English as mighty, comes from a root word which is, hypothetically, magan, meaning "can" or "be able." Ealra is the genitive form of the adjective eall, meaning "all," and geweald is an accusative form meaning "power" or "control." Therefore, these two descriptions, able and all-powerful, create the same impression: Hrothgar's God rules all creation. This, of course, is Boethius' Providence. In Book II, prose 6, we read that "Providence... governs all things."

Hrothgar first mentions God in his Sermon in lines 1716-1718:

ðēah þe hine mihtig God maegenes wynnun,  
eafepum stēpte, ofer ealle men  
forð gefremede.<sup>3</sup>

In the sense of Providence, God has bestowed power, energy, and



advancement for the creature's good. They are not, in themselves, bad. Boethian Providence as the creator of all things is discussed in Book IV, prose 6, of The Consolation:

The generation of all things, and the whole course of mutable natures and of whatever is in any way subject to change, take their causes, order, and forms from the unchanging mind of God. This divine mind established the manifold rules by which all things are governed while it remained in the secure castle of its own simplicity. When this government is regarded as belonging to the purity of the divine mind, it is called Providence, . . .

In Boethian terms, Hrothgar may have reference to the "generating" God, Providence, when he speaks of bestowing. This is likewise the case in lines 1724-1727:

Wundor is tō secganne,  
 hū mihtig God manna cynne  
 þurh sīdne sefan snyttru bryttað  
 eard ond eorlscipe; hē āh ealra geweald.<sup>4</sup>

Hrothgar talks again about God in lines 1751-1752:

wuldres Waldend,      þaes þe him āer God sealde,  
 weorðmynda dāel.<sup>5</sup>

It is not clear what Hrothgar means by āer (before). Thorpe translates the first half-line above "...because God to him before has given" (3507), but this is still vague. Raffel thinks Hrothgar means that God has given the ringbearer "future glory" at his birth.<sup>6</sup> This foreknowledge is clearly within the nature of Providence as conceived by Boethius already discussed in Chapter One.

Hrothgar's last mention of God is found in lines 1778-1779:

ēcean Dryhtne.<sup>7</sup>      þaes sig Metode þanc,

Metode, sometimes translated Fate, is here translated God, Providence, or Creator, since it is followed by the phrase ēcean dryhtne, eternal Lord. Tolkien tells us that "Metod is in Old English the word that is

most nearly allied to 'fate,' although employed as a synonym of god."<sup>8</sup> However, "there remains always the main mass of the workings of Providence (Metod)," he says, "which are inscrutable, and for practical purposes dealt with as 'fate' or 'luck.'" The reader will recall that one condition which separates Fate and Providence is this very condition of eternity, namely, that Fate has its existence in time whereas Providence has its existence in eternity by which it possesses foreknowledge of all things.

### Providence in the Events Surrounding

#### Beowulf's Death

The events surrounding Beowulf's death are more concerned with Fate than Providence and understandably so since death is an event in time. Tolkien thinks the difference between Hrothgar's and Beowulf's references to God in number and meaning are significant otherwise also:

Hrothgar is consistently portrayed as a wise and noble monotheist modelled largely it has been suggested in the text on the Old Testament patriarchs and kings; he refers all things to the favor of God, and never omits explicit thanks for mercies. Beowulf refers sparingly to God, except as the arbiter of critical events, and then principally as Metod, in which the idea of God approaches nearest to the old Fate. We have in Beowulf's language little differentiation of God and Fate.<sup>9</sup>

Nevertheless, the Beowulf poet keeps his reader aware that even death is subject to God.

In Beowulf's mind, the fight with the dragon has come about because of his own failure to perform God's will which has kindled the anger of the eccean dryhtne. The poet is deep into the story of the bat-

tle before God is again mentioned. At the point where Beowulf is overcome and Wiglaf is encouraging his fellow-soldiers to come to the rescue, Wiglaf says "God wat..." (2650), "God knows..."--by virtue of the eternal now of Providence, God knows. Of course it is possible that Wiglaf had already told God how he felt about Beowulf, that he would rather give his own body to be burned than to see his lord aflame and to do nothing:

God wāt on mec,  
 þaet mē is micle lēofre, þaet mīnne līchaman  
 mid mīnne goldgyfan glēd faeðmie.<sup>10</sup>  
 (2650-2652)

But it is more likely that Wiglaf was giving spontaneous witness to his loyalty, of which, he asserted, God already knew because he knew all things without being told.

The Beowulf poet speaks most often of God's giving or restraining gifts to men in the closing fits of his poem, XXXV-XLIII. It is established early in the poem that God is the giver of life:

him þaes Līffrēa,  
 wuldres Wealdend.<sup>11</sup>  
 (16-17)

In lines 2727-2728, life has expired for Beowulf, the gift is restrained:

dōgorgerīmes.<sup>12</sup>    ðā waes eall sceacen

In line 13, "geong in geardum, þone God sende,"<sup>13</sup> we are told that God sends "young ones," so in lines 2730-2731,

þāer mē gifeðe swā  
 āenig yrfeweard    aefter wurde,<sup>14</sup>

we know that God has restrained that gift from Beowulf also. Among the gifts God grants him are:

life in heaven,

sceolde [ofer] willan wīc eardian  
 elles hwergen; <sup>15</sup>  
 (2589-2590)

victories,

hwaeðre him God ūðe,  
 sigora Waldend, þaet hē hyne sylfne gewraec  
 āna mid ecge, þā him waes elnes þearf; <sup>16</sup>  
 (2874-2876)

(although it was not to be victory by the sword for Beowulf,

Him þaet gifeðe ne waes,  
 þaet him irenna ecge mihton  
 helpan aet hilde; <sup>17</sup>  
 (2682-2684)

and treasures,

Ic ðāra fraetwa Frēan ealles ðanc,  
 Wuldurcyninge wordum secge,  
 ēcum Dryhtne, þe ic hēr on starie. <sup>18</sup>  
 (2794-2796)

One may see God as the giver of treasures even better in the following quotation:

þonne waes þaet yrfe ēacencraeftig,  
 iūmonna gold galdre bewunden,  
 oaet ðām hringsele hrīnan ne mōste  
 gumena aēnig, nefne God sylfa,  
 sigora Sōðcyning sealde þām ðe hē wolde  
 --hē is manna gehyld-- hord openian,  
 efne swā hwylcum manna, swā him gemet ðūhte. <sup>19</sup>  
 (3051-3057)

Gift-giving is well within the power of Providence as conceived by Boethius. He tells us in Book IV, prose 6, that "Providence gives a mixture of prosperity and adversity according to the disposition of ... souls."

There are other references to God in those closing fits which are in reference to his unmistakable knowledge,

forðām mē witan ne ðearf Waldend fīra  
 morðorbealo māga; <sup>20</sup>  
 (2741-2742)

immutable will,

him wiht ne spēow.  
 Ne meahte hē on eorðan, ðeah hē uðe wēl,  
 on ðām frumgāre feorh gehealdan,  
 nē ðaes Wealdendes wiht oncirran;  
 wolde dōm Godes dāedum rāedan  
 gumena gehwylcum, swā hē nū gēn dēð, 21  
 (2854-2859)

and omnipotence, and eternal care,

Sīe sīo bāer gearo,  
 aēdre geaefned, þonne wē ut cymen,  
 ond þonne geferian frēan ūserne,  
 lēofne mannan þāer hē longe sceal  
 on ðaes Waldendes wāere gepolian. 22  
 (3105-3109)

These passages clearly correspond to the Boethian Providence. The doctrine of God's Immutable will is involved in the Boethian doctrine of necessity. Boethius says that "God sees as present those future things which result from free will." And, he continues, "these things are necessary if viewed from the standpoint of divine knowledge..."

(Book V, prose 6). If one prefers to think of the immutable will of God as that divine government which rules the universe, then let him follow Boethius' argument in Book III, prose 12, in which Philosophy concludes, "Then it is the supreme good which rules all things firmly and disposes all sweetly."

The omniscience and omnipotence of Providence are, of course, the eternal knowledge and the government of all things which have already been discussed.

Both Boethius and the Beowulf poet hold the orthodox Christian view of death as that entry of the soul into life eternal. This is the thrust of that last quotation from Beowulf. Boethius says in Book II, prose 4 and prose 7 respectively, "...Human souls are in no way mortal"; and "...The soul, in full awareness of its virtue, is freed from

its earthly prison and goes to heaven...." Thus is man ever in the keeping of Divine knowledge or Providence which governs all things.

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup>God may easily hinder the mad ravager's [Wyrd's] deeds.

<sup>2</sup>He [Grendel] would have killed more if wise God and the man's courage had not withstood Wyrd.

<sup>3</sup>However, mighty God with delightful powers and might exalted him over all men.

<sup>4</sup>It is wonderful to say how mighty God through his great heart dispenses to mankind wisdom, land, and high rank. He has all power.

<sup>5</sup>Therefore, God, Ruler of heaven, has given to him before a great deal of glory.

<sup>6</sup>Beowulf, tr. Burton Raffel (New York, 1963),

<sup>7</sup>Therefore, thanks be to God, eternal Lord.

<sup>8</sup>J. R. R. Tolkien, "Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics," Anthology, p. 97n.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid.

<sup>10</sup>God knows that I would rather that fire embrace my body with my gold-giver.

<sup>11</sup>...to him therefore the Lord of Life, Ruler of heaven...

<sup>12</sup>Then was all [his] number of days departed.

<sup>13</sup>...a young one in the home whom God sent...

<sup>14</sup>...if there be granted me any heir afterward...

<sup>15</sup>Over his will he must inhabit an abode elsewhere.

<sup>16</sup>Yet God, Ruler of victories, granted him that he might avenge himself with the sword when he was in need of courage.

<sup>17</sup>It was not given him than an iron edge might help him in battle.

<sup>18</sup>I with words say thanks to the Lord of all, Ruler King, eternal Lord, for treasures that I gaze hereon.

<sup>19</sup>Then was that exceedingly great inheritance of the gold of men of old with incantation betwisted so that the ring-hall might not be touched by any man unless God himself, the true King of victories, should to whomever he would--he is man's protector--open the treasures, to whatever man appeared fitting to Him.

<sup>20</sup>Therefore the Lord of men need not know me as an evil murderer of kinsmen.

<sup>21</sup>He in no way succeeded. He was not able, however well he wished, to keep life in this leader on earth, nor in any way change the Lord. God's doom would govern the deeds of men as it still does.

<sup>22</sup>Let the bier be made ready quickly when we come out, and then bear our Lord, beloved man, to where he long shall endure in the Powerful One's protection.



## CHAPTER IV

### SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

Beowulf scholars agree that there is a possibility that Boethius' Consolation of Philosophy did influence the writer of Beowulf. While there is yet no proof of such influence, there is an element of correspondence between the two works which elicits speculation. The correspondence between Fortuna and Wyrd and between Providence and the Christian God are two such elements.

The strong influence the Consolation of Philosophy had over the Middle Ages is clearly seen from Alfred's time on, but some scholars assert that this influence may be discovered as early as Bede's time (673-735) when some of his other works were well known. This would allow for the influence of The Consolation very near the earliest possible date for the writing of Beowulf (650).

However, either of two other possibilities may account for the Boethian element in Beowulf. A parallel of cultures may be credited with producing the parallel of philosophical concepts, or the consolation genre, which was so much a part of the Middle Ages, may have been responsible.

The most one can be sure of at this point is that there is an element of correspondence between the two works and that the former work may have influenced the writer of the latter. Little more than this can be said until such time as further study or discovery provides

more proof that the Beowulf poet was indeed a student of Boethius' Consolation of Philosophy.

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VITA

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