A Literary Journey through the Development of Mediaeval Thought

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By

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PREFACE

The following thought guide aspires to stimulate, provoke discussion, and if possible, generate more thorough work, by others, on a wide variety of questions whose salience has impressed itself at last on this slow to learn author. Those questions are of this sort: what is it like to live a major cultural transformation, like that which segues from the late antique world into the mediaeval—the kind of transition in which Augustine, Marcus Aurelius, Boethius or Cassiodorus are representative players?; what kind of imagination dominates mediaeval epic literatures—like *Beowulf, The Divine Comedy,* or the *Nibelungenlied*?; has it any relation to the imagination of the Romantics—say to Coleridge's notion, in *Biographia Literaria*, of a power which transforms and recreates daily experience?; is there an imagination distinctive to Greco-Roman literary work?; do the genres of mediaeval literature align with those of modern or ancient literature? Is there a species of tragedy in mediaeval work? What marks mediaeval historical writing? Where do we find humor in mediaeval literature? Is it similar to the humor of the modern period?

I said the variety of questions raised here was extensive, but forgot to mention that the answers to those questions can barely be scratched by the present author. A study guide is what the following text is, little more and perhaps much less. The author is both a classicist and a writer/poet; thus has two fingers in the pie of this study guide, but has only periodically aspired, during a long life, to see what holds the ancient and modern western worlds together. This historical binding period, needed before the Greco-Roman period could bear its full fruit, and the modern world absorb that fruit, seems to translate into the Middle Ages, though it was long before the residents of that transition period even named their temporal position.

TEXTS

1

BOETHIUS, (480-524 A.D.)

CONSOLATION OF PHILOSOPHY (524-525 A. D.)

The Historical Setting

Many cliches clog the inherited picture of mediaeval culture, literature, and art. Doubtless one reason for the simplified picture we have, of the Middle Ages, is that the period is dauntingly long, incorporates many cultures and languages, and makes the most sense when viewed as a bridge period, defined by the Classical and by the Modern, at its two ends. The more gangly the period, the more tempting it is to surround it with cliches.

The Downfall of Rome

At its nominal entry point, the Middle Ages—which at that point, quite naturally, had no conception of itself as a middle period, nor as a period at all—was simply what was growing out from disintegrating fragments of the Roman Empire, which for a century had been dissolving into loosely formed municipal communities and tracts of what were not long before coherent agricultural stretches, with their links to settled society still intact. The barbarians, who surrounded and now began to infiltrate the Roman world, were increasingly morphing into Romance citizens, and while they would need another millennium to establish significant new cultures of their own, these "proto-Romance" states, of the earliest modern period, were indeed finding their direction, as they left behind all but the historical traces of the ancient Roman world.

Man's Earliest Cultures

Traces of the Roman Empire were themselves, of course, tradition bearers from a far more distant past, which stretched from the Greek world back into the cultural genetics of the Mediterranean basin, and from there,

deepened into our profoundest cultural bloodstream, backward into the heritages of Indian, Egyptian, and East Asian cultures. Loose and in some senses useless as the thought processes are, which rely on this kind of human archeological thinking, our dignity of inquiry requires adventuring even farther than the Neolithic in our effort to simulate a one-presence with our earliest human kin. Back we go into a zone where fictions like Golding's *The Inheritors,* or scholarly studies like James Scott's *Against the Grain,* point their ways back into the imaginative one point of origins. Vardis Fisher's T*he Golden Rooms* places us squarely inside the Stone Age Cave World, lighting the first real fires of survival.

Boethius and the Post-Roman World

Be that as it may, there is an interiorly backward motion, within the mind existence of Boethius, which thrives concurrently with his highly influential move into the Middle Ages for which we are taking him, here, as prime initiator. Born as he was in Rome, a few years after the breakdown of the Roman Empire, and after its gradual replacement by elements of various non-Romanic tribes, "barbarians," who were "at the gates" of the city, Boethius was soon swept up into the governing apparatus of Theodoric, the King of the Ostrogoths, who with his tribe had entered Rome from the East.

Boethius' Rapid Rise

(Boethius' rapid ascension into high governing positions—he was a senator, consul and *magister officiorum* by the age of thirty-three—derived from Theodoric's admiration for the young man, whose valuable knowledge of Greek and Latin, no longer taken for granted even among the intelligentsia, owed much to the young Boethius' intelligence and hard work. Under the umbrella protection of Theodoric, Boethius began translating extensively from Greek, writing with equal force about the works of Aristotle, and entering the Neoplatonic zones in which he was able to synthesize the contributions to world culture of ancient Greek thought and Christian theology. He was responsible for introducing the language and philosophy of the Greeks to a mediaeval Europe, which until the beginning of the Renaissance remained only haltingly familiar with even the language of Greek.

Boethius and the Christian World

While pursuing a vast number of projects in Greek translation and philosophical culture, Boethius was — as *magister officiorum*, master administrator of palace affairs — given particular responsibility for adjusting the interrelations between the Latin and the Eastern branches of the Christian Church, which was by this time seated in Constantinople, the present-day capital of Turkey, Istanbul. It was in the course of these long-to-be-unresolved negotiations that Boethius lost the favor of Theodoric, who had him imprisoned and then put to death — most cruelly — in 524. What Boethius had already achieved, not only in his masterwork *The Consolation of Philosophy,* but in his profuse treatises on music, mathematics, logic, Aristotelian "topics." was enough to render him of unparalleled influence over the entire Mediaeval period.

The Consolation of Philosophy

The Consolation of Philosophy (524-25) grew out of the suffering of Boethius, after he had become the object of Theodoric's hatred. Boethius had been accused of treachery, in the negotiations circling around the struggle between the Roman and the Eastern factions of Christianity. Theodoric imprisoned the suspect, and directed the (probably falsely) accused man to be jailed and ultimately executed. (The barbarous accounts of the murder, which were to involve strangling and then splitting the skull of the imprisoned genius, spoke for their time, in which the stakes of life and death were sharply jammed, and accusations from on high required little evidence.) The text before us was Boethius' effort to deal with the harshness of his imprisonment, and the dread of a nightmarish death ahead. That this saint put his faith in writing, rather than in the recourse of his Christian belief, has led to speculations about the depth of his religious vision; and yet we have to concede that whatever works, when the going is vicious, is welcome and justified.

The Noble Lady

Boethius' search for consolation leads him to construct a dramatic dialogue between himself and Philosophy, a Lady of Minervan dignity, who represents a universal wisdom. She is guised as a pagan goddess; she speaks with the abstract knowledgeability of the Wisdom of Solomon or the Word of God in St. John's Gospel. "There appeared standing over my head a woman's form whose eyes shone as with fire, and in power of insight

surpassed the eyes of men, whose color was full of light, whose strength was yet intact, though she was so full of years that none would ever think that she was subject to such age as ours. Her countenance was full of majesty." In his hour of need Boethius receives such a divine visit and is able thus to portray himself as the victimized, the complainer, the one who suffers from a divine injustice. It is in fact this last issue that opens and supports the entire frame of the text.

Philosophy and the Muses

As in the Book of Job, Boethius faces his suffering and dread by asking himself why a person of good intentions and honorable life should call down upon himself such a dreadful fate as his own. Philosophy appears to supply the answer. She flashes into anger as she sees that the Muses of poetry are gathering around her suppliant. We realize that she is herself proud of having survived the rough patches in life — the lower hem of her gown has been dirtied and smudged, she is a deeply experienced lady — and she will not coddle her suppliant with the fineries of poetic sophistication. She will force him — he recounts — to take his fate where he finds it, and not to pretty it up.

Boethius Buckles Up

With the following words she addresses Boethius, referring to the Muses: "Who has suffered these seducing mummers to approach this sick man?" Philosophy concedes that, if Boethius were just some nobody—"some uninitiated man as happens in the vulgar herd"—she herself would endure the pandering of the muses. But since her client—as Boethius puts it in reference to himself—"has been nourished in the lore of Eleatics and Academics"—it is best to leave him to the professionals, which Philosophy unquestioningly accepts as her own description. In the subsequent dialogue description, Boethius ascribes to Philosophy the understanding that he, Boethius, is in fact a free student of nature as well as a learned man. (She calls forth, from her mentee, the sense of what he is and has always been, since his birth, a man "free to the open heavens, to watch the light of the bright sun, to penetrate the deepest secrets of the natural world").

Philosophy Reproaches Boethius

It is at this point, after having praised the inner Boethius, that Philosophy calls out her "pupil" for being a pathetic baby, complacent and tearful. And

tearful indeed Boethius becomes, as he sees the accuracy of the prophetess' analysis. At this point, seeing Boethius' tears, Philosophy grows gentle, wipes his face, and dispels the darkness by reducing him to a healthy shame, that he, privileged and highly educated, should be reduced to self-pity. He recognizes Philosophy—which is taking on the meaning of *inborn wisdom*—as his first nurse, the companion of his childhood.

Philosophy Introduces Plato

Philosophy, having brought her pupil to a rest point, where he can absorb her wisdom, goes on to remind Boethius of the glory that Philosophy itself has brought upon the Greeks, and especially through the wonder of Plato's thinking.

Boethius Takes Stock of Himself

Regaining his own courage and sense of identity, Boethius goes on to reflect on the good he has done for others, serving often as a friend to the marginalized. While he still asks questions like "if God is, whence come evil things"? he is now fully prepared to reply that "if God is not, whence come good things," and to turn this simple formula into the proof he needs, to justify his own life.

The Platonic Horizon

To this self-discovery, Philosophy responds with a fitting opportunity to remind her eternal pupil that there is a Platonic oneness higher than all mortal behaviors, and to elicit from Boethius a prayer to the unity of the universe under God. (We take heed of the "Platonic" visions that hover over these consoling words to the suffering man, and see that the healing he needs will be part of that universal Platonic (or neo platonic) wisdom awaiting us, at the end of the present study guide, when we come upon the works of Ficino and Pico de la Mirandola, a millennium farther into the Christian experience.

Study Guide

Does Boethius feel remorse for his relations with the Emperor Theodoric? Does he feel that he has in any way been justly punished, and thrown in prison with a death sentence? Is there anything distinctly "Christian" about the way he meets his harsh punishment in prison?

What is the special significance of music for the early Christian Church? What kind of notational system did the Church use? It was, of course, inherited from Greek notation, but what did Boethius contribute to accommodating that Greek system to the uses of the early Church?

The *Consolation of Philosophy* was one of the most widely read, copied, and consulted texts of the Middle Ages. What was the chief argument of this text, and what drew so many learned readers to it? What did they understand by "philosophy"? Would you find understanding and solace in this text, if you were condemned to death? Would there be a religious sense to the term "philosophy" as you would understand it?

2

CASSIODORUS (485-585)
"'ON THE SOUL," "ON THE LIBERAL ARTS," "ON ORTHOGRAPHY"

The Setting

Flavius Magnus Aurelius Cassiodorus

Senator (his daily life name) was a Christian scholar, diplomat, and administrator working with the same government, that of Theodoric, for which his predecessor, Boethius, had worked. (In fact, it was on the death of Boethius that Cassiodorus inherited the high diplomatic position he would for most of his life occupy within the Ostrogoth Kingdom, arguably the most influential of the multiple "barbarian tribes" which were dismantling the Roman Empire.)

Family Background

Cassiodorus was of a distinguished lineage, several generations back. For at least three generations the ancestors of Cassiodorus had served as stalwart protectors of both the declining Roman and the nascent Ostrogothic Kingdom. They had contributed to stemming the competing "barbarian" incursions, as well as to manning the new bureaucracy of the Gothic Empire.

Cassiodorus' Career Path

From the age of twenty Cassiodorus began to work for the Ostrogothic court, where his colleagues were rapidly impressed by his organizational skills and particularly by his writing style, which, though to our ears rather pompous and overly courtly, was of a tenor greatly valued in Theodoric's court. (One can only imagine the rare language blends generated within the formerly Roman provinces, in which Silver Latin was being mated with the

Germanic structures of Gothic.) By the end of his courtly career, Cassiodorus had risen to a position equivalent to that of Prime Minister of the Ostrogothic Kingdom.

Advancing into the Power Structure

The ultimate ambitions of Cassiodorus were already apparent in his early career, when he collaborated with the Pope (Agapetus I) to build a library of Greek and Latin texts which were intended for use in a Christian school which Cassiodorus hoped to have founded in Rome. (It was Cassiodorus' trademark that wherever he went, in working as a Christian for the Goths, he was on the lookout for ways to fuse Christian spirituality with scholarship, with what we might today call research projects.) This papal project failed, but it proved to be a significant milestone in the efforts of Cassiodorus' entire life project of devoting books and literate culture to the preservation of the classical past. The last decades of his life were to be spent in Constantinople, where he buried himself in the reading of Christian and classical texts, and greatly deepened his sense of the meanings of Christianity. This deepening involved grasping the intractable issue of Eastern versus Western Christianity, the perplexing relationships between Goths and Romans, and the relation between Orthodox worshippers and their Arian leaders.

The Writings of Cassiodorus

Like his predecessor Boethius, Cassiodorus was a voluminous writer, compiler, and scholar. We have from his pen a vast library of official correspondence—written by Cassiodorus as part of his service to Emperor Theodoric.

Cassiodorus has left us a history of the Goths, which survives only in the abridgment by Jordanes, a sixth century Gothic historian, who tightened up Cassiodorus' multi-volume *History of the Goths.* There is a major text, *Training in Divine and Secular Literature*, written between 543-555, which outlines the features of the trivium and quadrivium educational system, which was to dominate educational training throughout the Middle Ages. (It was to become a capstone for the pedagogical practice of that monastery known as Vivarium, which Cassiodorus established and directed in the last years of his life. This monastery was developed in close physical and spiritual proximity to the monastery which Benedict of Nursia was just in the process of founding in southern Italy.) In that pedagogical work

Cassiodorus was at pains to undertake at Vivarium, he worked to prepare his students for a highly trained reading of the Bible, including both the reading of Christian historians, Flavius Josephus and the Latin fathers of the Church, and any number of Church based scholars from the early Christian period. Cassiodorus wrote a treatise on the soul, its virtues and vices — one of his few texts concerned with theology. There was also a text version of the Bible as well as a detailed commentary on the Psalms.

Other Works

These latter works were written during the extensive period when Cassiodorus was living in Constantinople, and had leisure time for scholarship and reflection. So was a late work, *De Orthografia*, a compilation of the studies of eight distinguished grammarians of Latin, containing their aids to correct spelling and handwriting — which were of great importance in a world dependent on eye and hand to preserve written thought. Finally, Cassiodorus busied himself in Constantinople with the writing of an oversized, and loosely structured *Historia Tripartita,* largely borrowed from the ecclesiastical histories of three contemporary historians — Theodoret, Sozomen, and Socrates—and reproduced carelessly and with many errors of spelling and fact; to which we might add that the work in question became one of the most used 'world histories' throughout the Middle Ages. In a pre-printing age where endless hand copying did the culture work, errors were an unceasing hazard, as were the mistakes of understanding which followed on those errors.

In addition to these brief comments on Cassiodorus' writings, we need to mention the special attention he, like his predecessor Boethius, paid to the development of musical notation, and more broadly his contributions to the place of music in the development of the early church. He was well trained in the Greek system of musical notation, the only procedure in use, and in his applications of musical performance, to monastic work, he proved himself to be, along with Boethius (discussed above) the most influential exponent of musical art between antiquity and the later Middle Ages. Accordingly, Cassiodorus figures as the most essential source available for the discussion of Church psalm and chanting in the formative period of Christianity in the West. He is also a source of information on many of the earliest instruments essential to Church rituals: shawm, bagpipe, organ, and pan pipe.

The Tumult of the Time

Life could not remain placid for long, in the climate of contentious ideas, which embraced Cassiodorus. The heat of the Gothic-Byzantine Wars in Italy (535) eventually obliged him to return to his family estates in Calabria, near the town of Catanzaro. (He expresses with great bitterness his sense that his diplomatic and ministerial career, on behalf of the order offered by Gothic rule, was in the end of no avail.) Retirement was simply a recognition of the turmoil of open country throughout the eastern Mediterranean. Once more in Calabria, he set up a monastery, at Vivarium, and filled it with monks and books — from his own private library — before returning for a final visit to Constantinople. By the establishment of this monastery Cassiodorus was fulfilling a lifetime dream, to sustain the tradition of classical culture right through into its 'new' cultural world of early Christianity. The very formation of this vision, in the crumbling conditions of sixth century Italy, had to demonstrate a beautiful counter cultural awareness of the world and of the historical passage of cultures.

Cassiodorus in History

The historical place of Cassiodorus, is locked into the breadth of vision by which he committed himself to that Vivarium monastery into which he invested so much of his live energy, not to mention his abundant personal donations to the library with which he outfitted his religious retreat.

The choice Cassiodorus had to make, in stocking his library from his own personal collection, was how to reconcile classical learning with Christian doctrine, a feat in the accomplishing of which he was obliged to convince himself and his ecclesiastical overseers that the understanding of Greek and Roman classics was the firmest path to the learning process and into the antecedents of the Christian faith. We have noted, however, that Cassiodorus' concern with pedagogy was an independent disciplinary concern of his, and that his innovations in that regard were among his enduring contributions to the mediaeval mind. For Cassiodorus was a pedagogue as well as a Christian devotee.

Hand Work and Brain Work

The care Cassiodorus devoted, to the pedagogical skills of his monks, extended beyond the details of orthography, and of correct Latin usage — he doubled down on the importance of Latin grammar, which was shaky

with many of the monks, involving retraining in the case system of Latin, the use of punctuation, and clarity of handwriting. To students of writing — you and me — who were brought up in the era of the printing press, the immense effort of carrying through a whole cultural transformation with your hands was to recognize — it is something we easily forget — that writing is foremost a manual act, performed by those wonderfully flexible appendages in which our arms terminate. It seems a piquant footnote to this point that in the Vivarium monastery those who proved slow at learning were given tasks in the fields, where in ploughing they were enabled simply to invest another use for the above-mentioned appendages.

Study Guide

Do Boethius and Cassiodorus seem to you deeply influenced by the new cult of Christianity? By their time the Christian Church had grown to maturity: in the Council of Nicaea the fundamental outlines of Christian belief had been laid down, the Church was expanding throughout western Europe, and the new cities and proto- cultures, which had been developing from Ireland to Constantinople, were sprouting churches and church communities. Are these symptoms of interior change? Would the individuals who were generating this change be living out lives that were accordingly different from those that characterized lives in pre-Christian classical times? The work of Peter Brown, on the hinge period between classical antiquity and the early Middle Ages, is a rich launching point for identifying the growing traits of a new period of world history. You might add, into your consideration of our own period, your thoughts about the present historical moment. We communicate quickly and too often, these days, on quasi apocalyptic matters. Do you think we are at the end of a cultural era, or at the beginning of a new one?

3

BEOWULF 600-900
(CONJECTURAL)

The mystery of *Beowulf* is wrapped up in the obscurity of the dates of its composition. Boethius and Cassiodorus, for example, were scholars, diplomats and administrators within a well-recognized hierarchy — the retainers and employees of the Ostrogothic Kingdom. They were easy to locate inside history. We can date their lives and works with no problem. The author of the Old English epic *Beowulf*, which runs to 3182 alliterative lines, in West Saxon Old English, offers us a complex mixture of ancient tales, contemporary (to him) history, folklore, and imagination. Quite possibly the poem has its origins in oral traditional poetry, to which the accretions of three centuries, plus multiple actions of 'writing it down,' have further obscured the question of authorship. The accordingly wide range of dates, for the creation of this unique poetry, seems to be an unavoidable bow to history.

General Character of the Epic

The central tale of the epic does little to explain itself—its historical setting, the value system it displays—and barrels forward from one powerful (and often violent) scene to the next. Parallels from other cultures are the only footsteps by which to measure the text before us. We feel sure that the Scandinavian and North German culture worlds provide a fixed cultural back drop to *Beowulf*. The *Niebelungenlied* (for example) provides a Beowulf-like darkness of setting, with similar vast but shadowy movements, often violent, which pass across it. We find in that Germanic epic the same blend of pagan tales with Christianity, which we find in *Beowulf.* Not only, then, must we grasp at literary straws, when trying to ascribe a time and place to *Beowulf*, but we must go as far afield as Homer and Virgil in our efforts to place and relate to this Anglo-Saxon epic.

For all this dating and authorship obscurity, we know that *Beowulf* is concerned with geopolitical struggles among certain dominant Scandinavian clans throughout the sixth century, while the poem is building on references to the many connections between England and Scandinavia at the time. Archaeological evidence from Denmark has gone far to suggest the world of vast burial sites and halls, both of which are prominent features of the *Beowulf* world. Rich but misty is that world.

The Tale Itself

Hrothgar King of the Danes is in trouble; His great hall, Heorot, is being harassed by the monster named Grendel. (Stop for a moment! Ask yourself what kind of mindset creates an initial picture of this sort. Is the work a fancy? A monster thriller pulled out of the imagination of the author? A buried Christian discourse on evil and virtue?) The young hero, Beowulf, comes to Hrothgar's aid, slaying Grendel with his bare hands. Then he kills Grendel's mother, with a sword which he has found in her lair. In both these interventions Beowulf acts as a virtuous knight in armor, expelling dark forces.

Later in his life Beowulf becomes King of the Geats, a Scandinavian tribe, and finds that his kingdom is besieged by a dragon. Discovering that some of his treasure has been stolen from his own burial mound, he attacks the dragon and kills him, as he had killed Grendel and his mother, but is himself mortally wounded. He is cremated, and a burial mound is erected in his honor. He joins the army of heroic kings.

Grendel's Mother

Funerals bookend the epic, the first the funeral of the Scyld, the second the funeral of Beowulf himself. The fighting between Beowulf and Grendel, Grendel's mother, and the dragon who appears destructively later (fifty years later) in the epic, is fierce and bloody. Beowulf tears Grendel's arm off, brutally wounding him and sending him in flight into the mountains, where he dies. Beowulf puts on display "the whole of Grendel's shoulder and arm, his awesome grasp."

Grendel's mother is aroused to fury, by this desecration of her son, and while Beowulf himself is absent, in another lodging, she attacks Hrothgar's Hall, where the murder of Grendel had originally taken place, she violently kills the most loyal retainer of Hrothgar, then races back to her lacustrine

cave. (The uncanny décor of the poem is not explained or justified — it is just the lived world of the poem. Beowulf and Hrothgar pursue her — no stopping, no pausing, no "taking time to reflect" — as Beowulf plunges into the depths of the Grendel Lake, fending off assaults from sea monsters as he goes. (The "depth psychology" of this pursuit is nightmarish, ravaging the purposeful, reestablishing this primal epic at the core of the epic imagination.) Finally arriving at Grendel's mother's lair, Beowulf spots a sword on the wall, correctly assumes that it is of monster-slaying potency, and dispatches the monster mother's head. As he departs from the scene of carnage, Beowulf comes on the corpse of Grendel, which he decapitates, returning to the surface and to a grateful Hrothgar, who welcomes back the hero. Accepting the fruits of Beowulf's courage, Hrothgar treats the hero to a didactic speech, in which he reminds him not to give way to pride, or to forget those who have helped him along his way. We wonder in vain whether there is a touch of humor in the odd placement of this moral harangue.

Fifty Years Later

A slave steals a precious cup from the lair of a dragon, and when the creature realizes what has happened, he surges out of his lair, destroying everything he can find. He lives on the same vitriol as had Grendel's mother. Beowulf goes out to meet him, and to protect the land, but in mortal combat is slain by the dragon. Beowulf is cremated. His ashes are deposited in a royal tomb, visible from the sea. He is a potent landmark for seafaring mortals.

And Scattered Throughout

The artistry of the poem thrives on the handling of time. The "fifty years later" words, with which we switch to the dragon narrative, jolt our understanding of Beowulf's durability, and freshen our astonishment at both his power and his availability. That is not the only way in which temporal layering thickens the poem. Beowulf's feats are highlighted — as in his swimming across the sea from Frisia, carrying thirty suits of armor — as are interspersed lays and tales of the Geatish people, or the discussions between Beowulf and the monster Unferth about the latter's sword, and its propriety as a weapon against Grendel's mother. All of these aspects enrich the sense of time in which the poem transpires. Within the background of enrichment tread the exploits of Beowulf himself, hardly sketched as a personality, and yet, in his intentional murkiness, he is furiously faithful to tasks and fearless before the worst of struggles.

The survival of the poem of Beowulf and its path into the Middle Ages

Obscurity and questions envelop the epic of *Beowulf*. Was the poem originally oral, and then preserved by transformation into writing? If so, at what time did that take place? Or was the epic basically a written text, put to pen and paper at some point in a recent oral career? Was the work orally maintained at an early mediaeval period, like the year 600, which would mean the genesis of the work overlaps with the period of Boethius and Cassiodorus, scholars of the written word, even of the subtleties of translation, and thoughtful interpreters of the Christian textual tradition? Precision on that set of dating queries is still beyond us.

The Aura of the Complexity of the Middle Ages

What we can pin down, as we analyze this epic, is the beginning of our grasp of the complexity of the Middle Ages. Other ages – for instance, the millennium between Augustine and Pico della Mirandola, the classical period, and perhaps even the "modern" period – display kinds of coherence unknown in the Middle Ages. Ancient Greek culture of the fifth century B.C., for instance, was culturally coherent, comprising the gradual coalescing of Hellenic ethnic groups (Ionians, Dorians, Aetolians) into a single cultural tone. A single set of values was gradually appearing, even among communal groups as antagonistic as the Athenians and their rival cultural communities—like the Melians. Even in its vastness, Rome was a relatively coherent concept, for a millennium embracing most of western Europe with a single language, and a governmental structure which carried appendices of cultural values unbroken until the crumbling of the Empire in the fifth century with it.

With the piecemeal disintegration of the Roman Empire begins a millennium in which Western Europe fragments into the pre-national units which grew from the amalgam of Empire itself, and from its many tributary tribe-states. An enormous but still incoherent gathering of tribes and cultures yeasted out around the Capital of Christendom, Constantinople, as well as around the larger groups composing what would gradually become the nations of Western Europe. Within those groups, however, diversity was the name of the game. From the darker Scandinavian epics, to the courtly poetries of the proto-Romance region, to the ecclesiastical and historical writings of the Anglo-Saxons and Irish, there was immense variation of tone and purpose. It is hardly to be wondered, then, that by opening with two

learned bureaucrat scholar-writers, and following them with a mysterious epic, which may well date from the same time, we are readying ourselves for a network of historical surprises which will not easily settle into an undisturbed picture.

Study Guide

What is the meaning of the monsters, swimming snakes, and dragon that populate this epic? Are they forces of evil, 'symbols' of the dark side of the created world? Does Beowulf represent their inverse, the purity of the world in action? Or is that to attribute too much philosophical importance to Beowulf? Would we be wiser to compare him with a Homeric hero like Odysseus, who though a trickster is nonetheless intent on solving the problems of evil (the suitors), getting back home, and collaborating with his son to drive out the forces of evil (the suitors)?

Has Beowulf Elements of a Miracle Man About Him?

Does the epic *of Beowulf* spring from a literary imagination? Would that be the imagination of Germanic epic poetry, roughly contemporaneous with *Beowulf*? Does the hero transform the world by the way he passes through it? Do we, in fact, feel that there is an author for this epic? Has the poem the trademarks of a personal set of attitudes, or is this work more nearly a tale? Is there a moral in this tale?

4

THE DREAM OF THE ROOD 700-775 (CONJECTURAL)

Dating and Authorship

Dating difficulties surround most of the major works of Mediaeval literature. Records were often lost, damaged, or misinterpreted, and above that there was the difficulty of determining where and by whom major writings were created. In the present instance, there are only limited landmarks to guide us to the authorship or date of the poem called *The Dream of the Rood.* We know that the text is preserved in the Vercelli Book, a 10th century archival compilation, existing in Italy, and from other evidence we surmise that the text may date from the eighth century. An instance may indicate how fortuitous is the "other evidence" concerning the possible eighth century dating of the poem. The Ruthwell Cross, an eighteen-foot-tall obelisk-cross, decorated with foliage and runes, tells a collage of stories from the Bible, and preserves parts of *The Dream of the Rood.*

The Poem

The Dream of the Rood (pole; cross) is a dense religious poem, 156 lines of alliterative verse, in which the narrator recounts a dream that came to him in the middle of the night:

Listen! I will speak of the sweetest dream,
What came to me in the middle of the night,
When speech-hearers slept in their rest.
It seemed to me that I saw a most wondrous tree,
Raised on high, round wound with light,
The brightest of beams.

(Translation throughout by Roy Liuzza)

From this point on we are in the hands of a hyper-sensitive observer, who at once observes the tree glistening with jewels, as brilliant to behold as the creation itself, and sees that these gallows are for no felon, but is circled round with the blessings of the holy angels. From the outset of this dream, we are fixated on a wooden cross of great splendor and meaning, and though the drift of the language is fully Christian, the implications of the articulate and glistening tree are as pagan-archaic as a maypole.

From this initial vision point the narrator reflects on his own sinfulness, and the contrast it makes with the brilliance of the tree. It is at this point that the complexity of the poem kicks in:

Beneath that gold I began to see an ancient wretched struggle, when it first began to bleed on the right side.

Is the wood itself the creator?

I saw that eager beacon change garments and colors,

The poet risks ascribing to the tree two traits, soaked with blood and "bedeckt with treasure."

The introductory feast of attention is complete. We would have no trouble thinking of the poem ahead of us as pagan and Christian interwoven. To a degree this conclusion would fit the read of Beowulf, in himself a king of secular salvations, a slayer of evil forces, and a sacrificial victim, while at the same time a bare-knuckled warrior from Geatland.

At this point the wood of the tree begins to speak, transformed now into a historicizing tree reflecting on its original felling, at the forest's edge, and recognizing again God's plan to make it, me the tree, the carrier of the exhausted bleeding body who mounted me. I dared not, the tree continues, dare to bend down or slacken my straightness; I knew what I was responsible for carrying. One with the man he is carrying, and bloody with the blood of that man, he endured, mocked, with his bloody burden. He continues to address us, ruminating on the events of the tomb, and eventually on the adulation of the tree, himself, for all his scars and blood, the tree, partly the man who died there, part beneficence itself, sees itself as a salvation- conferring force. Surrounded by the Savior and the tree he died upon; mankind has nothing more to fear. The narrator exits triumphantly