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The Talent of an Ideal-King and Two Important Concepts in *Beowulf*

Shota KIUCHI

1. Introduction

There are some poems which refer to talents required as an ideal-warrior. One of them is the epic *Beowulf*, which is the most magnificent work in Old English literature. This poem is concerned with the image of a heroic ideal and based on traditional and well-recognized concepts: *sapientia* and *fortitudo*. These elements are regarded as quite significant in the epic, although they received incidental attraction in *Beowulf*-studies until Kaske investigated them as its main theme in 1958. He put an emphasis on the two concepts and analyzed each of the characters in *Beowulf*. His research made it clear that *sapientia* and *fortitudo* were essential ideas in composing the poem. It has been one of the important and suggestive theses for us to study.

His argument is, however, confronted with a problem, as he himself admits. The story of *Beowulf* is divided into two parts: the first part focusing on fights with Grendel and his mother (1-2199) and the second one containing Beowulf's final battle with a dragon (2200-3182). One might agree that the leading character Beowulf is described as an ideal-warrior in Part 1, but it cannot be said that Beowulf in Part 2 is the same as in Part 1. The present study tackles this question and re-examines the image of Beowulf in Part 2 in terms of *sapientia* and *fortitudo*, including another concept *wyrd*, which Kaske does not take into consideration in his investigation.

2. Previous Research: Kaske (1958)

Kaske defines *sapientia* and *fortitudo* as the following literary motifs often shown in poems: *sapientia* is the complex-idea which includes various kinds of intellectual talents, such as “prudence,” “practical cleverness,” “skill in words and works,” “knowledge of the past,” “the ability to predict accurately,” “the ability to choose and direct one’s conduct rightly.” On the other hand, *fortitudo* means “physical might” or “courage.” These concepts appear in other traditional Germanic poems, one of which, *Hávamál* in *Edda*, particularly, refers to both of them (15).

He examines how the characters of *Beowulf* are described from the point of view of *sapientia* and *fortitudo*. Here we will only focus on Beowulf in Part 1 and 2.

Let us begin with the image of Beowulf in Part 1. Analyzing the *Beowulf*-epic based on *sapientia* and *fortitudo*, Kaske emphasizes five key allusions arranged symmetrically in it. The first allusion is as follows:

Hæfde þa gefælsod se þe ær feorran com,
snotor ond swyðferhð, sele Hroðgares (*Beo.* 825-826)
(He who came previously from afar, the wise and the brave, had cleansed the hall
of Hrothgar)

This part tells us that Beowulf gains a victory against Grendel, who suffers serious injuries and returns to his dwelling. Here, *snotor* implies *sapientia* and *swyðferhð* suggests *fortitudo*. Thus Kaske concludes that Beowulf, who defeats Grendel, has *sapientia* and *fortitudo* enough to obtain a splendid victory against the monster.

Similarly the following passage shows the symmetrical scene.

cen þec mid cræfte, ond þyssum cnýhtum wes
lara liðe. (*Beo.* 1219-1220a)
(Show yourself with strength, and be mild to these boys as regards instructions.)

The second is Wealhþeow’s admonition to Beowulf in the banquet which is held following

the defeat of Grendel. The first half refers to *fortitudo*, the second *sapientia*. From this sentence, it is evident that Beowulf possesses *fortitudo* and *sapientia*, so that he can lead young boys to become fully-trained warriors.

The two allusions above occur at the scenes of Beowulf's victory against Grendel and of the banquet celebrating it. There are three more symmetrical patterns. The first is Hroðgar's remark to Beowulf in the banquet (1705-1706), the second Hroðgar's similar opinion near the end of the festivities (1842b-1845a), the third the summary of the poet at the end of Part 1 (2180b-2183a). These symmetrical sentences showing *sapientia* and *fortitudo* of Beowulf, therefore, are overtly at the thematic climax of the battles against the two monsters and of each celebrating banquet following them. The poet ends the story of Part 1, saying again what a wonderful warrior he is. All in all, Beowulf in Part 1 is referred to as an ideal-warrior who possesses *sapientia* and *fortitudo*.

Kaske has argued from the five symmetrical allusions that Beowulf of Part 1 is an ideal-warrior. As with Part 1, he believes that Beowulf in Part 2 progresses from an ideal-warrior to an ideal-king possessing the two qualities, although at the same time he has a different set of responsibilities and goals. He gives the following examples as evidence to support his argument: 2327b-2332 (*sapientia*), 2335b-2336 (*fortitudo*), 2345ff. (*fortitudo*), 2716b (*sapientia*), 2736b-2743a (*sapientia*), 3169-3174a (*fortitudo*), 3180-3182 (*sapientia*).

It would be, however, difficult to say that these instances are arranged symmetrically, compared with those in Part 1. None of them are the cases where the two concepts are placed side by side in a sentence or one is alluded to in a passage and the other in the next one. Moreover, he states that other examples are doubtful whether they imply both of them (Kaske 447). Although he argues that Part 2 is also governed by the ideas of *sapientia* and *fortitudo*, his examination of them is confronted with a perplexing task. Accordingly, Part 2 hardly seems to contain symmetrically-arranged instances of the two concepts. They are shown only in Part 1. For this reason, it is controversial that we can interpret Beowulf in Part 2 as a character who possesses *sapientia* and *fortitudo* in the same way as in Part 1.

Why are both of them described asymmetrically there? To solve this problem, we need to re-examine the description of Beowulf in Part 2. Here the most crucial is *wyrd*, which often occurs in Old English texts. The following discussion particularly focuses on a key relationship between *wyrd* and *fortitudo*.

3. *wyrd*: Master of Fate

OE. *wyrd* means ‘fate.’ Its cognates are OS. *wurd*, OHG. *wurt*, and ON. *Urðr*, the last of which is the pre-Christian personification of fate in Scandinavian literature and the master of it. In Old Norse texts, fate is expressed as a super-human being which has an influence upon the lives of people in some way.

According to Weber (1969), OE. *wyrd* is identified with L. *fatum*, developing its semantic range (53). This means that it comes to obtain a Christian meaning. In the pre-Christian period, *wyrd* was independent of gods, and as well as human beings, they were also under its influence. When Christianity was introduced in England and *wyrd* was related with *fatum*, fate was regarded as a Christian one, i.e., what was controlled by God or the part of God’s power. In this way, *wyrd* came to mean ‘Providence’ besides ‘fate.’ Then Christianity had a more powerful influence on *wyrd*, and it lost the original meaning ‘fate,’ denoting ‘event, happening.’ It was no longer accepted as a super-human agent. In short, a pre-Christian meaning and a Christian one were mixed in *wyrd*, and the word gradually had lost its concrete character.

As mentioned above, *wyrd* has the three meanings: ‘fate,’ ‘Providence,’ and ‘event, happening.’ This is connected with the question whether the word is pre-Christian or Christian, but we do not pay attention to it. Instead, *wyrd* is categorized into *nomen agentis* and *nomen actionis*, following Hirt (1932). This means that *wyrd* as ‘fate’ is *nomen agentis* and *wyrd* as ‘event, happening’ is *nomen actionis*. The former appears as a super-human agent which has the force of passing circumstances of life to human beings. On the other hand, the latter is defined as a circumstance of life or event. It no longer has any influence upon man. The present study only focuses on *wyrd* as *nomen agentis* and examines how it is connected with a human life.

4. *wyrd* as *nomen agentis*

The word *wyrd* as *nomen agentis* is often described in Old English elegies, the theme of which deals with the mutability of fate. In the texts, *wyrd*-fate brings an unpredictable hardship, against which human beings are powerless. Its mutability changes everything

on the earth, so that nothing can remain there. This is the power of *wyrd*-fate. This section analyzes its mutability, paying attention to two elegies: *The Wanderer* and *The Seafarer*.

Firstly, to understand the general theme of these poems helps our reading of the context in which *wyrd* stands. The theme is that *wyrd* governs the mutability of life of men, unpredictably giving rise to hardship, against which human beings possess no sufficient power. The following lines in *The Wanderer* refer to this.

Eall is earfoðlic eorþan rice,
onwendeð wyrdas gescheaft weoruld under heofonum.
Her bið feoh læne, her bið freond læne,
her bið mon læne, her bið mæg læne. (*Wan.* 106-109)

(In the earthly kingdom all is full of hardship. The ordained course of fates turns the world under the heavens. Here property is transitory, here a friend is transitory, here a man is transitory, here a kinsman is transitory.)

From these sentences, it is ostensible that *wyrd* has a cruel and gloomy force, and its mutability wastes everything in the world as time passes. For example, property, a friend, a man and kinsman disappear. Nothing can resist the inexorable power of *wyrd*.

In this way *wyrd* stands for mutability. Then how does it have a concrete influence on people? Following the same explanation about the transience of the world, *The Seafarer* describes more detailed effects of *wyrd* as an inexorable agent.

Simle þreora sum þinga gehwylce,
ær his tiddega to tweon weorþeð:
aðl oþþe ylðo oþþe ecghete
fægum fromweardum feorh oðþringeð. (*Sea.* 68-71)

(One of the three things always proves a matter of uncertainty in all circumstances before his final hour: disease or old-age or sword-hatred wrest life from a man doomed to die.)

This part shows three concrete forms of *wyrd* when it has an influence on men and property:

disease, old-age and sword-hatred. They inflict great hardship upon everything in the world, and at last they disappear, not resisting the mutability of *wyrd*. Thus, the general ideas which constitute the basic theme of *The Wanderer* and *The Seafarer* are reflections on the power of *wyrd* and the transience of life.

In addition, *The Wanderer* tells us a certain relationship between *wyrd* and *fortitudo*.

Ne mæg werig mod wyrde wiðstonðon,
ne se hreo hyge helpe gefremman. (*Wan.* 15-16)
(A weary mind (or courage) cannot resist fate, nor can the troubled mind afford help.)

Here OE. *mod* means ‘courage’ as well as ‘mind’ and it stands for *fortitudo*. These lines are interpreted as “an exhausted courage cannot resist the power of *wyrd*-fate.” In other words, if a man has a vigorous energy, or *fortitudo*, he can counter it.

Then the poem *Genesis*, which is not an elegy, shows this relationship from a different perspective.

Sceolde hine ylðo beniman ellendæda,
dreamas and drihtscipes, and him beon deað scyred. (*Gen.* 484-485)
(Old-age shall deprive him of courage-deeds, joys and lordship, and death is given to him.)

The sentence refers to old-age as what decreases *fortitudo*. It is, therefore, evident from these explanations that *fortitudo* is an indispensable ability for a man to resist *wyrd*, and at the same time old-age, one of the concrete forms of *wyrd*, deprives him of it. Smithers (1957) explains this relationship between *wyrd* and *fortitudo* and states that “the specifically Germanic heroic ethos” underlies both of them (73). It seems that the relationship is based on a Germanic code.

The theme of the elegies is about the mutability of *wyrd*-fate, and its concrete forms are expressed as disease, old-age, and sword-hatred. Old-age, in particular, is intimately connected with *fortitudo*, which is essential for a brave warrior. The next section turns to the

description of both concepts in *Beowulf*.

5. *wyrd* and *fortitudo* in *Beowulf*

In *Beowulf* there are twelve instances where *wyrd* occurs (455b, 477b, 572b, 734b, 1056b, 1205b, 1233b, 2420b, 2526b, 2574b, 2814b, 3030a). Of them *wyrd* as *nomen agentis* is shown in the lines 455b, 477b, 572b, 1056b, 1205b, 2526b, 2574b, 2814b. This study does not examine each of them, although some researchers, for example, Jente (1921), Timmer (1940/41), and Stanly (1964/65) do. Briefly speaking, *wyrd* is depicted through the whole poem as a super-human agent that becomes involved in a human life and often implies death.

As with Old English elegies, *wyrd* exerts an influence on human beings in *Beowulf*. The following lines point to this.

Hit on endestæf eft gelimpaþ
þæt se lichoma læne gedreoseð,
fæge gefealleþ; (*Beo.* 1753-1755a)

(It happens again in the end that the perishing body fails, falls doomed to death.)

OE. *fæge* also symbolizes the negative aspect of fate. This scene is the part of Hroðgar's sermon, which indicates the human body is doomed to death.

In addition, the concrete forms of the mutability of *wyrd* is said as follows:

Nu is þines mægnes blæd
ane hwile; eft sona bið
þæt þec adl oððe ecg eafopes getwæfed,
oððe fyres feng, oððe flodes wylm,
oððe gripe meces, oððe gares fliht,
oððe atoll yldo; (*Beo.* 1761b-1766a)

(Now the glory of your strength is for a while; it will be soon again that sickness or an edge deprives you of strength, or the grasp of fire, or the surging of flood, or the attack of a sword, or the flight of a spear, or a terrible old-age;)

OE. *mæghes* suggests *fortitudo* in the part. This is a comment similar to the lines given above from *The Seafarer*. Here, Hroðgar tells Beowulf that the prosperity of his power will not last long, and disease, an edge, and old-age eventually will deprive him of it. This also implies that Beowulf gradually loses his physical might and courage in the same way as other people. A similar implication is shown in 1885b-1887, where the poet anticipates the catastrophic end of the story that old-age robs Beowulf of *fortitudo*.

While old-age deprives a man of *fortitudo*, it is also said that it is indispensable for him to overcome *wyrd*.

swa he hyra ma wolde,
nefne him wlitig God wyrd forstode
ond ðæs mannes mod. (Beo. 1055b-1057a)

(as he would have wanted more of them, if the wise God and the courage of the man had not prevented the fate to him.)

Grendel came to the hall of Hroðgar and desired to eat more of his retainers, but God and Beowulf's *fortitudo* prevented the monster from doing it. The lines 572b-573, too, describes that *fortitudo* withstands the inexorable fate of *wyrd*. Thus it is evident that *fortitudo* is thought of as an essential ability to fight with *wyrd*.

These sentences indicate that *wyrd* has a negative power and even the brave warrior Beowulf is under its control, so that it deprives him of *fortitudo* as time passes. On the other hand, he needs to maintain *fortitudo* enough to resist it. These are all shown in Part 1. Then how Beowulf is depicted in Part 2? Confirming his status and circumstances, we will reconsider his *sapientia* and *fortitudo* there.

6 The Talent of an Ideal-King

The story of Part 1 ends after Beowulf gains a victory against Grendel and his mother, and a celebrating banquet is held for him. Then, fifty years later, Part 2 begins. Unsurprisingly Beowulf grows older as much as time goes on. One of the epithets expressing him as

an old king is *gamol*. The word means ‘old’ and appears in 2421a, 2793a, 2817a, and 3095a. Another for him is *ealdhlaford* ‘an old lord’ (2778b).

Beowulf as such a king approaches step by step to his death as he gets older. By way of illustration, the following statement in Part 2 suggests the coming of his death.

ðær he þy fyrste forman dogore
wealdan moste, swa him wyrd ne gesceaf
hreð æt hilde. (*Beo.* 2573-2575a)

(there this time he had to fight the first day when fate did not ordain for him triumph in battle.)

In this sentence *wyrd* appears, implying that Beowulf dies against a dragon. Another sentence showing *wyrd*’s suggestion of his death is in 2420ff. The negative anticipation of the poet is also in 2341b-2343a and 2586b-2600a. Hence, these illustrations express that Beowulf in Part 2 becomes older and advances towards his death, under the control of *wyrd*. To cut it short, old-age deprives him of *fortitudo*. Compared with Beowulf in Part 1, he loses his *fortitudo*, and it is likely that he does not have a vital energy enough to overcome *wyrd*-fate. From the sequence of events in the whole story, he experiences the golden age of *fortitudo* at the fights of Grendel and his mother in Part 1, resisting an inexorable fate. For this reason, he has obtained a glorious victory against them. Beowulf in Part 2, however, is subject to the ageing influence of *wyrd*. This implies that he no longer holds the same *fortitudo* as in his younger days. Thus, he is doomed to death when he fights with a dragon because he cannot overcome the challenge of *wyrd*. In this case, it can be said that *fortitudo* is unproportionately connected with old-age.

In contrast, *sapientia* is proportionately related to old-age. This is illustrated in the lines 64-65a of *The Wanderer*: *Forþon ne mæg wearþan wis / wer ær he age / wintra dæl in woruldrice* (Therefore, a man cannot be wise before he possesses the portion of the winters in the realm of the world). Furthermore, OE. *frod*, one of the terms indicating Beowulf of Part 2, means ‘old and wise.’ These explanations make it clear that both of them are closely connected, so that the amount of *sapientia* increases more and more as time passes.

Kaske demonstrates Hroðgar as “a model of kingly *sapientia* no longer supported

by *fortitudo*” (431). This is actually shown in 2111-2114. In addition, Schücking(1929) writes the most significant talent as a king in *Beowulf* is *sapientia*. Thus, it can be interpreted that Beowulf in Part 2 possesses a fully-developed *sapientia* required as an ideal-king, not confirmed by *fortitudo* as a warrior as with Hroðgar in Part 1.

7. Conclusion

Kaske reads Beowulf of both Part 1 and 2 as the character of *sapientia* and *fortitudo*. Although Beowulf in Part 1 is referred to as an ideal-warrior possessing the two qualities enough to conquer the monsters, it is most likely that Beowulf in Part 2 develops to the ideal-king who has more of *sapientia* than in his younger age, no longer supported by *fortitudo* due to the influence of *wyrd*. For this reason, *sapientia* and *fortitudo* are symmetrically arranged in Part 1, they are asymmetrically in Part 2. Kaske points to that Hroðgar’s lack of *fortitudo* as a king invites the coming of Grendel (456). The cause of provoking the appearance of a dragon, however, is indirectly mentioned in his research (452). Considering Beowulf as such a king, we can read that chaos-monsters present themselves when *sapientia* and *fortitudo* of the leader of a land are not balanced. The present study does not emphasize that the tragic end that Beowulf is defeated by a dragon owing to the loss of his *fortitudo* is the central theme of Part 2. Germanic people desired to obtain an earthly glory in battle, not taking their lives into consideration. Beowulf starts to weaken in terms of his *fortitudo*, and nevertheless his brave attitude towards a vicious and monstrous creature for honor and triumph would impress people who hear the epic.

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