

The Cycle of Ageing and Death in *Beowulf*: The Education of the Comitatus Code*

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I. Introduction

Ageing, as Mike Hepworth defines, means “ageing into old age”; it occurs when “individuals attempt to make sense of later part of life” by interacting with “collective social beings” to produce “a symbolic construct”

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(Hepworth 2). To Hepworth, the ageing process is not a fixed, lineal life-course process but a dynamic process involving the three indistinct factors —“biological (body),” “psychological (self),” and “society (culture and social structure)” (Hepworth 2). It is through the use of symbols either verbal or visual images that each individual can undergo the symbolic interaction with the societal other, experience the varied ageing process, and attain the specifically cultural meanings given to his own body and self. Such an interactive process manipulated by a series of symbolic communication is the fulfillment of symbolic interactionism; it is thus personal and collective.

In terms of ageing and its dynamic relation with body, self, and society, literary gerontology also explores the old age and the process of growing old by carrying out “in-depth analysis of particular texts or writers” (Hepworth 4). When readers are reading the fictional ageing represented by symbols of words, there is, in a broader cultural sense, the interpersonal relationship between “the author, the text and the reader” (Hepworth 6). While discerning the symbolic texts, readers can perceive the diverse literary images depicted in the ageing stories and then understand human ageing better. Such an “emotional and intellectual interaction” conducted by the reader and the writer during the writing and reading processes is the “interplay between shared meanings” (Hepworth 6). Obviously, Hepworth attempts to use symbolic interactionism of sociology to frame his interdisciplinary theory of ageing approach to investigate literary texts from a modern reader’s perspective.

As a contemporary reader in an attempt to fully join the “interplay between shared meanings,” I choose the modern translation of the longest Old English poem, *Beowulf*, by the 1995 Nobel Prize Winner for Literature, Seamus Heaney (1939-2013), as a text of gerontology, for Heaney, as he admits in the introduction to his translation, deliberately uses the modern

English to translate the original text so as to reflect his “Irish nationalist background” and the education of a “Northern Irish Catholic school” (xxiii). Apparently, Heaney’s translation is the result of his momentary interaction with the text and the *Beowulf* poet. Silvia Geremia indicates that besides the poet’s “theoretical and cultural background,” Heaney’s innovative presence of “Hiberno-English words and some unexpected structural features such as the use of italics, notes and running titles” in his translation is to show “his personal notion of poetry and translation” (Geremia 57). For the defense of the poet against the Germanic philologists’ harsh criticism, Geremia highly acclaims Heaney’s *Beowulf* as “the result of a necessary interaction between translator and original text” (Geremia 57). No doubt Heaney’s fine literary effort enables contemporary readers to be more easily interactive with the textual *Beowulf* during the symbolic communication.

The textual *Beowulf* was originally written in Old English and its poet might live in the late seventh, eighth, ninth or tenth century, but its setting is in Nordic countries, Denmark, Finland and Sweden instead of Britain; it describes an ancient heroic society of Danes and Geats long before Anglo-Saxons came to England. Scholars like A. Kent Hieatt and Larry D. Benson agree that the socio-cultural values shown in *Beowulf* are Anglo-Saxon culture, the blend of pagan and Christian elements. Benson, nevertheless, argues that “the function of Wyrð,” “the emphasis on the comitatus,” and “the duty of revenge” related in the poem are not its “essential paganism” but the Christianized “secular values” (Benson 35). He indicates that the intense missionary activities in England from “the last years of the seventh century and extending throughout the eighth century” led Englishmen to hold their dominant Christian attitude to sympathize with or even admire “the Germanic pagans” (Benson 36). It might be under the influence of dominant theology that the *Beowulf* poet considered his audience,

reshaping the inherited Germanic paganism with the deepening “Christian meanings,” or that the prevalence of sympathetic or admiring attitude toward the Germanic pagans made the poet draw on “the contemporary information” about them and add “the pagan coloring” (Benson 46). Like Benson, Heiatt notes that the poet inspired by his contemporary Christian circumstances merged paganism and Christianity in the poem, but he underlines that there has not been a reachable consensus of opinion on the coexistence of the two contradictory elements. Yet, he suggests that Wyrð, an Anglo-Saxon concept of fate controlling human destiny and lives, might be in terms of how the ultimate “Godhead” controls “our lives inscrutably and arbitrarily” (Heiatt xxxvi). Likewise, Eric John thinks it is hard to “solve the riddle of the Christian and pagan elements in the poem” (John 63), but he suggests we might put the Christian theology aside for a while to mainly focus on paganism in *Beowulf*. To win more support of his proposal, he manifests the repeated patterns of killings of monsters, of the lord-retainer relationship of the political order, of constant feuds and loot, and of the use of swords during the fights in the text. Besides the citation of several pioneer research results done by the prominent scholars like J. R. R. Tolkien’s “Beowulf: the Monsters and the Critics” and Marie Hamilton’s *The Religious Principle in “Beowulf,”* John also cites Nora K. Chadwick’s findings in “The Heroic Age” to indicate that there are “only two extended passages” (John 55) in the distinct reference to the biblical allusions, such as Cain’s committing the first case of homicide, the Deluge and the Day of Judgment. Benson, Heiatt and John all agree there are pagan and Christian values coexistent in *Beowulf* but John strongly recommends that we have a close-up study of paganism shown in the feudal-like system of society where the lord and his retainers should follow the comitatus code to maintain the political order.

Following Eric John’s suggestion and basing my findings on the repeated

pattern of interaction between Danish old King Hrothgar and young Beowulf and later between Geatish old King Beowulf and his young thane, Wiglaf, I intend to dig into Poet Heaney's *Beowulf* to find out what shared symbolic meanings are interplayed by Hrothgar, Beowulf, and Wiglaf especially when the former two old kings face their present calamities or senility, recall their past great deeds, imagine the near future after their death, and attempt to pass on their wisdom to the rising young heroes. Accordingly, to get a panoramic view of what "shared meanings" are conveyed by the aged Hrothgar and Beowulf in the conversations with the young heroes, this paper will, first of all, discuss how Hepworth applies George Herbert Mead's symbolic interactionism into his ageing theory and simultaneously compare this theoretical approach with that of other sociologists and gerontologists. Next, it will refer to what fundamental values of the socio-cultural situation in *Beowulf* are based on so as to grasp the symbols of words exchanged between the kings and the heroes. Afterwards, it will analyze how old Hrothgar interacts with young Beowulf, what wisdom he passes on to Beowulf, and how he perceives his body, self and society in terms of ageing, time, place and memories. Then it will investigate how old Beowulf interacts with young Wiglaf, what wisdom he passes on to this young warrior, and how he like Hrothgar perceives his body, self and society concerning ageing, time, place, and memories. This paper will eventually conclude whether there is any difference and sameness in ageing between Hrothgar and Beowulf. What I intend to do, in a word, is to observe closely what Hrothgar and Beowulf think and behave while personally interacting with the collective society.

To get a panoramic view of how Hrothgar and Beowulf symbolically interact with the societal other in the ageing process, we, first of all, need to know the fundamental terms and issues related to the symbolic interactionism and theories of gerontology.

II. The Ageing process: The Symbolic Interactionism

Symbolic interactionism, according to Mike Hepworth, highly values “the role of the imagination in the development of the concept of the self,” helping us sense our “individual selfhood”; it develops “from infancy through the human capacity to become aware of the way others see us” (Hepworth 6). Actually, Hepworth’s idea about our ability to be aware of how the other people perceive our “individual selfhood” originates from sociologist George Herbert Mead (1863-1931). Mead asserts that when we are physically in “various social and physical situations” in terms of “the process of social experience and behavior,” our “reflective intelligence” of self-conscious ability enables us to purposely conduct controllable “reflective behavior” (Mead 91). Such an awareness of “The taking or feeling of the attitude of the other” toward ourselves is “what constitutes self-consciousness” (Mead 171). It refers to “a recognition or appearance of a self as an object” (169) with reference to our thinking ability (mind) to take the role of the other individuals, the “generalized social attitudes” (Mead 260). It also refers to the “rise of self-consciousness,” which takes place when an individual socially communicates with the other people through the “conscious conversation of gestures,” all the individuals involved reciprocally modify and interpret the “meanings or significations” of the signs of their “social act” (Mead 69). Accordingly, Mead’s symbolic interactionism focuses on the symbolic communication that is achievable through the manipulated symbols of shared meanings and the interconnected relationships between body, mind, self, and society.

To Mead, the self is constituted by the interdependent “me” and “I” that “belong to the conversation of gestures” (Mead 182). When we are taking the gestures of the “generalized social attitudes,” “the immediate experience

of one's self" appears, which is termed the "me" whereas the "I" in contrast with the "me" appears in "our experience in memory" (Mead 196). The "me" is the objective public self, helping us emotionally respond to "the values" belonging to us "as a member of the community" (Mead 199). Conversely, the "I" is the subjective private self, enabling us to employ the "me," the "outer social world" taken within ourselves, so as to "carry on thought" (Mead 196). Accordingly, Mead's the "I," as Hepworth explicates, is "the subjective attitude of reflection itself," gazing on "both the subjective image of the self and its own responses"; it enables us to "think independently about external events and to experience the self reflexively as conversation" (Hepworth 33). While the inner conversation takes place in the process of symbolic interaction, the present "I," our inner self recalled from our memory, selects the "me." It is obvious that there are two sides of the self, constantly fluctuating between the present and the past.

From Mead's symbolic interactionism, Hepworth especially applies the two split reflexive-self of personality, the "I" in "our experience in memory" and the "me" in "the outer social world," into his ageing theory. He considers the self that Mead inspects is "not housed in the body but exists in relation to it," for "the self in the form of a social process" can potentially change throughout our life course; therefore, "the ageing of the body" cannot annihilate the self but it definitely "produces changes in the relationship between body and self" (Hepworth 34). Such a dynamic relationship between the body, the mind, and the self takes place when the individual tries to "maintain some continuity of identity by reaffirming the past (or 'old') self" that "she or he may be forgetting in relation to the immediate self ('new') expressed in the present" (Hepworth 34). On the interconnected relationship between the ageing body, the self, and society, Hepworth borrows D. Leder's term, the "dys-appearing body," to interpret further how we

become aware of the separate individuals by means of our reflexive self in the process of symbolic interaction with the others. Hepworth explicates that because of “the intrusion of the ‘dys-appearing body,’” we can get the sense of the separate existence of the body and the self; by manipulating symbols furthermore, we easily tend to “detach the self from the body,” “give the body meaning,” and have the self not only “be liberated from the body” but also “persist in a disembodied form” (Hepworth 48). Because of “the intrusion of the ‘dys-appearing body,’” we can construct a “looking-glass self” in relation to the “I” and the “me” and imagine how we appear to the others, “the outer social world.”

“The dys-appearing body” means when we are looking at “the external appearance of the ageing body,” “the internal, invisible body” intrudes into “our lives by making us conscious of its presence” (Hepworth 38). That is, through “the looking-glass self,” we, as Hepworth cites Bryan Turner’s findings of Norbert Elias’s ageing theory with reference to the “physical transformation” of the body and “memories of the past,” can perceive the change of our physical appearance by referring to “the remembered body in the past” (Hepworth 44). Elias’s theory is obviously focused on “the centrality of our bodies to experience” related to the time in the past and the present, a little different from that raised by Hillet Schwarts who, as Hepworth indicates, believes that “human beings have three bodies: the body in the past, the body in the present, and the body in the future” (Hepworth 44). As old Hrothgar and Beowulf not only recall their bodily experiences in the past but also imagine what their bodies will become in the future during their encounter with the young heroes, I prefer to use Schwarts’s ideas to investigate how the two old kings interact symbolically with the young warriors respectively.

Of ageing, time and memories, Gerontologist W. Andrew Achenbaum terms “memories of the past,” “life reviews,” through which people, the

elders in particular, not only can trace their “relationships” with the others like “family members” and “colleagues” who have “shaped their identities” but also can “evaluate what they have accomplished so far” (Achenbaum 207). Paul R. Rassmussen also believes that “life reviews” help the elders examine their relationships with other people and then find an identity. He borrows psychologist Erik Erikson’s term, “integrity versus despair,” to describe the senior adults’ positive and negative “self-evaluations” of “how they have lived their lives up to the present” (Rassmussen 18). While facing the last stage of “developmental crisis” during their lifetime, the elders retrospect to their past lives with “a sense of completion and satisfaction,” which means “integrity,” a positive “retrospective assessment of life” (Rassmussen 18). When the elders look back their lives without a sense of “completion” and “intimacies,” they negatively assess their lives, which means “despair”(Rassmussen 18). Rassmussen stresses that if the older adults keep interconnecting with other people and “continuing to contribute to society,” they can “create and maintain a sense of integrity through their own perception of belongingness and significance” (Rassmussen 24).

Erikson’s idea about how the elders have a sense of “despair” in their “retrospective assessment of life” is similar to Erdman B. Palmore’s “authoritarian personality,” one of the three major sources of “ageism” (Palmore 34). The “authoritarian personality” is about the individual negative sense of the ageing whereas “ageism” is about the prejudiced and discriminated stereotypes against the elders. Besides the “authoritarian personality,” social and cultural influences are the other two major sources of ageism. To reduce “ageism,” Palmore lists two types of advantages of ageing: “those that primarily benefit society and those primarily benefit the older person” (Palmore 37). Sara Munson Deats and Largetta Tallent Lenker in the introduction to their edited book, *Ageing and Identity: A*

Humanities Perspective, also attempt to deconstruct those “stereotypic images of aging in our society” (Deats and Lenker 1). They do not think that physical deterioration is the only ageing phenomenon but that social and psychological factors must be also investigated. Following gerontologist George Maddox’s and psychologist Marion Perlmutter’s suggestions, Deats and Lenker have us thoroughly observe “the actual behavior and health of older people” and avoid the unnecessary and incorrect connection of any biological decline with negative emotions, for we had better recognize “the diversity of the aging process” that might bring older people “emotional growth” (Deats and Lenker 3-4). That is why Erikson balances and synthesizes the “two dialectical qualities,” the thesis of “Integrity” and the antithesis of “Despair,” and thus rekindles people’s interest in “the age-old association of wisdom with old age” (Deats and Lenker 7). Therefore, among Palmore’s listed ageing advantages beneficial to society do I especially highlight “greater wisdom,” “years of experience and the maturity that comes from experience” (Palmore 37), for I intend to scrutinize what wisdom old Hrothgar and Beowulf pass on to the rising young heroes in my latter parts of textual analysis.

Palmore like Hepworth demonstrates the interconnection between the ageing body, the psychological self, and the societal other; his cultural influence, in fact, overlap with Hepworth’s societal other as he lists “language” among the factors of cultural sources for “ageism” (Palmore 35), which is similar to Hepworth’s ideas about the “conversations” in the symbolic interaction between “younger and older people” (Hepworth 57). Hepworth assumes that “the language we use in conversations is influenced by specific situations” and “in turn influences individual perceptions” (Hepworth 57). People under “specific situations” choose words in their “intergenerational conversations” and thus develop their “age awareness” (Hepworth 57).

To undertake an interdisciplinary research, Gavin J. Andrews and David R. Philips in the introduction to their edited book, *Ageing and Place: Perspectives, Policy, Practice*, propose the term, “geographical gerontology,” to approach ageing by citing Robin Kearns and Gavin J. Andrews’s exploration of “geographies of ageing” (Andrews and Philips 2). Kearns and Andrews connect human ageing and health with the formation of the concept of “place” which is “richly constructed by social dynamics and by a complex symbolic and cultural construction” (Andrews and Philips 2). Both of them consider “the body, the home and institutions” are the three “ageing contexts” and thus apply a broad critical concept of “landscape of ageing” into the research of “human geography” (Andrews and Philips 2). Expressing the similar views on the concept of places of home and communities, Hepworth asserts the elders’ perception of the place can be either positive or negative, which is influenced by “distinctions of social class and status” (Hepworth 81). He thus also notes that the change of the body and the socio-cultural dynamics influence the older adults’ subjective identities of places. Hepworth’s idea about the place of private home, as Pia C. Kontos in “Multi-disciplinary Configurations in Gerontology” reinterprets, is “one of the strongest formative influences of place on identity” and “a prominent narrative turning point in stories of ageing” (Kontos 26-27). Overall, Hepworth like Andrews and Philips regards “the body, the home and institutions” as the “ageing contexts”; what he conducts is also an interdisciplinary research.

Similar to the “three ageing contexts,” “biographical objects,” as Hepworth defines, are “inanimate objects” linked to the older adults’ past lives, also symbolically supporting them for their “sense of personal continuity” over time and “changing circumstances” (Hepworth 73). J. Hoskins, as Kontos indicates, originates the term of “biographical objects,” defining it as symbolically “fictional representations of the complicity between identity

and the places where older individuals live,” so “biographical objects” can not only help the older adults shape their identities but also become “surrogate selves” (Kontos 27). Echoing Hoskins’ idea, K. Woodward, as Kontos analyzes further, says that “the elderly invest themselves in souvenirs of their pasts which serve as emblems of the present selves” (Kontos 27). Likewise, Hepworth asserts that the elders can extend “the self beyond the boundaries of the material body” by means of the symbolic connection with places and even “biographical objects” (Hepworth 73). What Hepworth clearly states is about how the “biographical objects” including places can become “surrogate selves.”

Hepworth’s ageing theory is basically developed from Mead’s symbolic interactionism and fused with human geography, socio-cultural psychology, and literary gerontology; to him, the self, the mind, the body, the societal other, the passage of time, memories of the past bodily experiences, places, and objects are the major issues for exploring the older adults’ ageing process and the dynamics of their interpersonal relationship with the self and society. While in the process of symbolic communication, the older adults under the varied specific situations use the symbolic signs, gestures, or words of shared meanings in their conversations and thus sense an awareness of the reflexive self and an identity.

III. The Symbols of Shared Meanings in the Textual World of *Beowulf*

The symbols of shared meanings in the textual world of *Beowulf* are the comitatus code that old Hrothgar and Beowulf manipulate to take symbolic interaction, for the warrior society where both Hrothgar and Beowulf live is based on “the relationship of lord and man” and where “the political

order” relies on “the lives of kings” (John 70). Following the heroic values, the king, a ring-giver, should bravely protect their retainers and reward them generously for their loyalty and victories on the battlefield. Accordingly, King Hrothgar’s Heorot is “his throne-room” where he can give generous “goods to young and old” (71-72). Heorot becomes the symbol of place where the king can show his generosity and where Hrothgar rewards Beowulf’s defeating Grendel “with a gold standard as a victory gift,/an embroidered banner; also breast-mail/and a helmet; and a sword carried high” (1020-22). As a Geatish king, old Beowulf cannot help but defend his own homeland and people after the fiery dragon devastates “his own home,” “the throne-room of the Geats” (2325-27). Conversely, when the king’s life is being threatened, the retainers should take immediate action to rescue their lord even though it might lead to their death.

That is why the moment Wiglaf sees old Beowulf in danger, he comes to “his kinsman’s aid” and displays “his inborn bravery and strength,” but “his fighting hand” gets “burned” (2696-98). Moreover, if there are any feuds between families or nations, both the lords and the retainers should annihilate the enemies for revenge or claim compensation for the man price. Hrothgar ever paid “a treasure-trove to the Wulfings” for healing the feud between the Wulfings and Beowulf’s father, Ecgtheow, who “killed Heatholaf,” “a Wulfing” (460-471). The Danish princess, Hildeburh, marries to the Frisian king, Finn, witnesses how her son and brother are killed by the Frisians; afterwards, the Danish warriors revenge for the feud by killing Finn and bearing the queen, “that lady home” (1157). Edward B. Irving underlines that the two murdering scenes “describe the passive sufferer Queen Hildeburh” and that the poet “uses her as a device to give expression to the catastrophic effect of feud-violence on bystanders and non-combatants” (Irving 25). Gillian R. Overing even notes that Hildeburh

like the other royal women in *Beowulf* is a peace-weaver, who is designated female focal point of a masculine system of exchange” (Overing 230). Of women’s passive role in politics and the violent constant feuds, Overing terms *Beowulf* an “overwhelmingly masculine poem” relating “male desire” for “the other” (Overing 220). By highlighting there are only five identified women’s names, Wealhtheow, Freawaru, Hygd, Hildeburh, and Modthryth, Overing stresses women’s marginalized political position in the patriarchal society whose order is maintained by the strong bond between the lord and the retainers, a man-to-man relationship.

A royal lady also domestically functions as a treasure dispenser and cup-passer, who rewards the warriors with bounty gifts, performs the role of the toastmaster, helps the king feast the warriors on wine at the celebrating banquet and politically maintains the order of patriarchy. Jane Chance indicates the “mead-sharing ritual and “the cup-passer herself” actually symbolize peace-weaving and peace” (Chance 254). Queen Wealhtheow, Hrothgar’s wife, treats Beowulf with wine at the victory banquet; she carries the cup to the young hero sitting between her own two sons, speaks “kind words” of “welcome” and generously gives him presents, especially “the most resplendent/ torque of gold” (1191-95). Likewise, Geatish Queen Hygd together with King Hygelac holds the banquet to welcome Beowulf and his followers home; she “moved about with the mead-jug in her hand,/taking care of the company, filling the cups/that warriors held out” (1981-83). She “behaved generously/and stinted nothing when she distribute/bounty to the Geats” (1929-31). Seemingly not silenced, Wealhtheow makes a public speech to remind Hrothgar to “bequeath kingdom and nation” to his “kith and kin” but not to “adopt” Beowulf “as a son” (1175-78). The effort she makes is for the interest of her two sons who will inherit Hrothgar’s throne and continue the rule of Danish patriarchal politics. She, in fact, does not speak directly

for her own sake; she is “obliged to speak herself through others” (Overing 243).

An unnamed woman lamenting the death of Beowulf at the hero’s funeral is another example, accounting for a woman’s fate decided by patriarchy:

A Geat woman too sang out in grief;
with hair bound up, she unburdened herself
of her worst fears, a wild litany
of nightmare and lament; her nation invaded,
enemies on the rampage, bodies in piles,
slavery and abasement. Heaven swallowed the smoke. (3150
-55)

The lamenting woman imagines that as long as the enemies know the Geatish patriarchal leader passes away, they will invade her nation soon and then claim many of her people’s lives. She thus fears the most that when the warring death toll rings, she might greatly become a slave, submitting herself to the enemies.

Grendel’ mother can also be seen as an anonymous woman even though she is an inhuman evil monster. She is termed a “monstrous hell-bride,” whose “onslaught was less/only by as much as an amazon warrior’s/strength is less than an armed man’s” (1259-1284). Attentively, her hellish den is compared as a “court” (1507), implying her negative royal womanhood that can be compared with Queen Modthryth, who punishes any “innocent” retainer for boldly looking her “in the face” with the “death by the sword” and, who fails to “wave peace” (1934-42). Overing even terms Modthryth “the most unwomanly, unqueenly female in the poem” (Overing 249). Obviously, both Modthryth and Grendel’s mother become the foils for Hygd, who has queenly “manners” and whose “mind was thoughtful” (1928).

Since the order of warrior society is maintained by patriarchy, the

“court” of Grendel’s mother is a place symbolizing illegitimate disorder and Grendel and Grendel’s mother become the outlaws dwelling “down into fearful waters,/ the cold depths” (1260-61). Their dark “court” under the mere is an obvious contrast to bright Heorot, a symbol of the place full of warmth and order, where Hrothgar’s “utterance was law” (79). Afflicted by “the din of the loud banquet/every day in the hall,/the harp being struck/and the clear song of a skilled poet,” Grendel prowls “through the dark” to devastate Heorot and to seize and kill “the Ring-Danes” (87-116). As an outcast obviously jealous of the laughter and joy in Heorot, Grendel murders the Danish retainers, showing his “hall-watcher’s hate” (142). Called a “hall-thane” by the frightened Danes, Grendel, as Irving indicates in his “The Text of Fate,” empties and rules Heorot for twelve years but his “authority in Heorot has limits” (Irving 178), for he is “kept from approaching” the “treasure-seat” (168-69). Grendel’s limited authority also symbolizes his illegitimate political power.

As the textual world of *Beowulf* is a warrior society, “the symbols of shared meanings” that the poet uses are related to the warriors, their weapons, physical violence and bloody feuds. That is why in some respects evil water-monster Grendel, as Irving indicates, should pay for the man price due to his fitting “the usual patterns of human society and behavior” (Irving 180). Grendel thus “died in battle” and “paid with his life”; as a woman warrior, his mother takes up “the feud,” killing Aeschere, Hrothgar’s counselor, to “avenge her kinsman’s death” (1333-40). Marijane Osborn observes that the poet deliberately introduces Grendel with “the creative song and the Cain passage” for his Christian audience, relates the attack of Grendel and his mother on Heorot as “the Great Feud, the cosmic battle between good and evil,” and sees Grendel as “the Adversary of Mankind” (Osborn 116). Nevertheless, Osborn stresses that the Danes threatened by the monsters “have no notion of this cosmic setting” but

have “a sense of myth and the idea of reversal”; what they merely know is that “Grendel is openly feuding against Hrothgar and that he will not abide by their legal codes” (Osborn 116). Besides bloody feuds, a verbal fighting also conveys physical violence. Carol J. Clover points out that flyting originates from the North mythology, consisting of “an exchange of verbal provocations between hostile speakers in a predictable setting”(Clover 128). By citing Walter J. Ong’s defining the flyting as the “enthusiastic description of physical violence,” Irving terms “the flyting or wit-combat between Beowulf and Unferth” (Irving 1989: 23) as words of violence.

Though Unferth is a warrior, he is not brave enough to “face the turmoil of a fight under water” to kill Grendel’s mother; after he unsuccessfully attacks Beowulf with hostile words, he lends the hero his Hrunting, “a rare and ancient sword,” which “had never failed/the hand of anyone who hefted it in battle” and which is “not the first time/it had been called to perform heroic feats” (1458-63). Like Hrunting, Beowulf’s Naegling is an “ancient iron-grey sword” (2681). Both precious ancient swords fail to help Beowulf kill monsters in an emergency. Only the “huge and heavy” sword, “an ancient heirloom/from the days of the giants” found in Grendel’s mother’s lair, does help “the Shieldings hero” cut “bit deep into her neck-bone” (1559-66). Obviously, the textual world in *Beowulf* is a pagan warrior society where everything is related to its warriors and what the heroes do, so “the symbols of shared meanings” of the textual words are primarily concerned with the values of the warriors.

The pagan warriors in *Beowulf* tend to hold the melancholy views, while facing the unknown fate (wyrd), the “external forces” beyond “human control” like “death, old age, or attack by evil creatures” (Irving 1991:192). Bertha S. Phillpotts explicates there are three reasons for this tendency: “an inborn trait of the Anglo-Saxons,” “the clash between the pagan philosophy of life and the new doctrine,” and “the thought of Fame”

(Phillpotts 11). The purpose of young Beowulf's coming to Demark is to help the Danes annihilate Grendel and then to get fame, "the one certain and enduring reward of the morally and physically valiant" (Phillpotts 11). Nevertheless, Beowulf is simultaneously uncertain of his "life-and-death" fate in his "single combat" with the monster; it is just as what the hero says, "Fates goes ever as fate must" (426-55). Clearly, Beowulf represents a truly heroic warrior, for he values his fame better than his own life no matter what a dangerous situation is; even when he turns old, he still bravely takes the risky mission to fight with the dragon as ever so as to get the lasting glory of fame.

Actually, in his early youth long before his coming to Denmark in the swimming contest with Breca, Beowulf, as Dr. Dongill Lee indicates in "A Study on Geogoð in Old English Poetry: Beowulf 535-538," has shown "his early heroic disposition" rather than "a sign of immaturity or rashness" (Lee 28). By investigating how "cniht" (a boy) and "geogoð" (a youth) are used in Old English Poetry in terms of "mental and physical capability," Lee interprets that the stages of "cniht" and "geogoð" overlap with each other, for "in early Germanic society young man matured early" (121-22). Lee thus stresses that Beowulf's early maturity leads to his loss of the contest but displays "his generous kindness to his friend" (Lee 122). Beowulf's later encounter with old Hrothgar develops such maturity in his early youth further.

The great valor Beowulf shows is the values of the symbolic behavior of the comitatus code that the young hero learns from old Hrothgar through the process of their reciprocally social interaction. In the following section, we will find out how the symbolic interaction takes place in the intergenerational conversations between ageing Hrothgar and young Beowulf and how this symbolic communication influences each other.

IV. Old Hrothgar's Symbolic Interaction with Young Beowulf

Before Beowulf comes to the Danish court, Grendel keeps attacking Heorot Hall and distressing old King Hrothgar:

the God-cursed brute was creating havoc:
greedy and grim, he grabbed thirty men
from their resting places and rushed to his lair,
.....

Then as dawn brightened and the day broke
Grendel's powers of destruction were plain:
their wassail was over, they wept to heaven
and mourned under morning. Their mighty prince,
the storied leader, sat stricken and helpless,
humiliated by the loss of his guard,
bewildered and stunned, staring aghast
at the demon's trail, in deep distress.
He was numb with grief, but got no respite
for one night later merciless Grendel
struck again with more gruesome murders.
.....
So Grendel ruled in defiance of right,
one against all, until the greatest house
in the world stood empty, a deserted wallstead. (121-146)

Through the looking-glass self, Hrothgar identifies himself as the lord by taking the "generalized social attitudes" of his Danish followers. He like his men grieves over the death of their men, but he is too helpless physically and mentally to take the role of the "mighty" warrior to fight against

Grendel. The great Heorot Hall, which surrogates his ageing deteriorate body, is struck time after time and eventually “deserted.”

Termed as an evil warrior, Grendel wages “his long and unrelenting feud,” occupying the mead-hall at night; for “twelve winters,” he “would never/parley or make peace with any Dane/nor stop his death-dealing nor pay the death-price,” making “the lord of the Shieldings” suffer under “his load of sorrow” (147-56). The monster’s fate does not turn downside till young Beowulf comes to aid the Danish king.

Identifying his public role of being the Danish lord, who is, nevertheless, aware of his ageing fragility, Hrothgar happily learns of Beowulf’s visiting purpose from his herald, Wulfgar, and immediately approves the hero’s arrival:

This is my hope; and for his heroism
I will recompense him with a rich treasure.
Go immediately, bid him and the Geats
he has in attendance to assemble and enter. (384-87)

Having not seen Beowulf but heard from sailors about his “strength of thirty/in the grip of each hand,” Hrothgar announces publicly that he will reward the hero “with a rich treasure” for “his heroism.” Afterwards the old ring-giver continues performing his generous role by giving Beowulf handsome gifts for the heroic deeds.

Right after old Hrothgar interacts with young Beowulf, he has his “life reviews,” experiencing his “memories of the past” and the “dys-appearing body”; the time in the past and the present thus keeps shifting. He positively recalls how he has ever helped Beowulf’s father appease the feud with the Wulfings, but negatively looks back how he is unable to stop Grendel’s dwindling his “faithful retainers” (488). After Beowulf’s victory, that he walks “in majesty from the women’s quarters” to the mead-hall to

see the trophy, "Grendel's talon" (921-26), symbolizes his ageing body as weak as the females'. He feels incompetent and despaired again on gazing at the "talon": "I suffered a long / harrowing by Grendel... / Not long since, it seemed I would never / be granted the slighted solace or relief/from any of my burdens... (928-33). Acting out of gratitude in the intergenerational conversations, Hrothgar adopts the hero in his "heart as a dear son" (946). The Danish king seems to reclaim his patriarchal lordship but according to the poet's foretelling the unknown fate, the temporarily refurbished Heorot surrogates his deteriorating body, which will soon be like the other "earth-dwellers," sleeping "on its deathbed" (1003-07).

Hrothgar's ageing body and personal negative emotions are clearly shown at the moment when he "heard the news: his highest placed adviser, / his dearest companion, was dead and gone" (1308-09). Termed a "grey-haired warrior," "the old lord" looks "heart sore and weary" (1306-07). He laments Aeschere's loss of life, the man price for Grendel's death. Incompetent to take revenge on Grendel's mother, Hrothgar urgently summons Beowulf to avenge Aeschere's death for him. In the symbolic interaction with the rising young hero, he momentarily reviews his man to man relationship with the counselor. To him, Aeschere is his "soul-mate," "true mentor," and "right-hand man when the ranks clashed"; all the people considers him "a wise man and a friend" (1326-29).

"The intrusion of the 'dys-appearing body'" into Hrothgar takes place again after he publicly accepts Beowulf's trophy, the hilt of the ancient giants got from Grendel's mother's lair, at the celebrating feast. He highly acclaim Beowulf's achievements, but speaks as an ageing wise king, eagerly teaching the rising hero his "greater wisdom" concerning the values of comitatus code: "A protector of his people, pledged to uphold / truth and justice and to respect tradition, / ...Beowulf, my friend, / your fame has gone far and wide, / ...So I stand firm by the promise of / friendship / we

exchanged before” (1700-07). Having foreseen Beowulf will always be his “people’s mainstay” and his “warriors’ helping hand” in the near future, he advises him to follow the strict comitatus code of conduct but not to behave like Heremod, who “killed his own comrades” and who became “a pariah king,” cutting “himself off from his own kind” (1708-15). By instructing Beowulf on the values of the warrior society, he actually reviews and evaluates his past life and thus experiences the split selfhood of “I” and “me”:

Just so I ruled the Ring-Danes’ country
for fifty years, defended them in wartime
with spear and sword against constant assaults
by many tribes: I came to believe
my enemies had faded from the face of the earth.
from bliss to grief. Grendel struck
after lying in wait. He laid waste to the land
and from that moment my mind was in dread
of his depredations...(1769-78)

In retrospect, Hrothgar momentarily feels “a sense of completion and satisfaction” by evaluating how dutifully and bravely he protected the Danish people from the enemies’ devastation on the battlefield for five decades. Clearly, he senses “integrity” by positively assessing the “me,” the “generalized other” of being a competent king; whereas looking inward to see Grendel’s destructive power, he has lived in dread of the monster’s plunder, senses “despair” and thus negatively assesses his “I.”

By taking his personal ageing life experience as an example, Hrothgar tries to teach Beowulf how a truly warrior should also understand the lesson of human fragile life well, for no matter how many glorious victories he has won, the unknown misfortunate fate will fall on him

unexpectedly:

O flower of warriors, beware of that trap.
Choose, dear Beowulf, the better part,
eternal rewards. Do not give way to pride.
For a brief while your strength is in bloom
but it fades quickly; and soon there will follow
illness or the sword to lay you low,
or a sudden fire or surge of water
or jabbing blade or javelin from the air
or repellent age. Your piercing eye
will dim and darken; and death will arrive,
dear warrior, to sweep you away. (1758-68)

With words of wisdom, Hrothgar teaches Beowulf the importance of pursuing the everlasting fame because of human short, fragile life and of any possibility of sudden death. While reminding the hero that he might be ageing and die someday as time goes by, Hrothgar is apparently conscious of his own ageing body and imagines his eventual death. The imagination of his future death is intensified most in the specific situation where he parts from Beowulf. Restraining from his deep affection for Beowulf, the “good and grey-haired” king kisses and embraces the hero in sudden rolling-down tears, for he has a sense of foreboding that they will not “meet each other/face to face” (1870-76).

With his years of experiences, wise and aged Hrothgar in his symbolic interaction with Beowulf observes keenly that he is “strong in body and mature in mind,/impressive in speech,” so he firmly believes that Beowulf is always and will be a loyal thane to both his Geatish leader and his descendants and even that someday he will be acclaimed as “their king and defender” (1844-51). Hrothgar thus teaches Beowulf the values of comitatus code by relating his “bodily experiences in the past, the body in

the present, and the body in the future.” Having learned the comitatus code from old Hrothgar in their intergenerational conversations, young Beowulf behaves as an enthusiastically loyal thane, promising to help the old lord fight against any attackers in the future so as to “merit” his fatherly “affections” (1824). Back to his homeland, young Beowulf does follow the comitatus code, keeping loyal to his lord, Hygelac and later his heir, Heardred. He becomes the Geatish ring-giver after Heardred’s death and rules “the wide kingdom” well for “fifty winters” (2207-09).

V. Old Beowulf’s Symbolic Interaction with Young Wiglaf

Being a competent ruler, Beowulf, as old Hrothgar imagines and foresees, is mature enough to be a wise “warden of the land” till a sleeping fire-dragon guarding an underground hoard is awakened by a thief, wreaking havoc everywhere even his own home. Therefore, before his symbolic interaction with young Wiglaf, ageing Beowulf suffers deeply and his inner “I” is “in turmoil, unaccustomed anxiety and gloom” (2331-32). In terms of “me,” he dutifully identifies and takes the role of “the warrior’s protector” expected by the Geatish “generalized social attitudes,” planning to plot “his revenge” (2336-37).

Nevertheless, having not encountered the dragon face-to-face nor sensed its danger yet, Beowulf, at first, reviews his past life, takes pride in his prowess as ever, experiences his “dys-appearing body” and momentarily forgets his ageing body in the present:

Yet the prince of the rings was too proud
to line up with a large army

against the sky-plague. He had scant regard
for the dragon as a threat,
of its courage or strength, for he had kept going
at dangerous times and in tight corners
often in the past, after he had purge
Hrothgar's hall, triumphed in Heorot
in the fight with Grendel. He outgrappled the monster
and his evil kin. (2345-2353)

While looking back his heroic deeds of adventures in his youth, Beowulf senses "integrity" and perceives his own "belongingness and significance." He positively evaluates his past achievements, believing that he is competent enough to kill the dragon without "a large army." He also recalls how he, a loyal retainer, provides support for Heardred after Hygelac's death, how he ascends "the throne," becoming "a good king" (2389-90), and how he settles the feud between the Geats and the Swedens. In a word, he extends his self "beyond the boundaries of the material body."

Beowulf's sensing "integrity" of his past self is merely a brief moment, for before he takes revenge on the dragon, he is aware of his present ageing body and imagines "his death" in the very near future:

The veteran king sat down on the cliff-top.
He wished good luck to the Geats who had shared
his hearth and his gold. He was sad at heart,
unsettled yet ready, sensing his death.
His fate hovered near, unknowable but certain:
it would soon claim his coffered soul,
part life from limb. Before long
the prince's spirit would spin free from his body. (2417-24)

Old Beowulf imagines his body in the future, the definite separation of

his body and mind after death. Through the interaction with his people and the looking-glass self, he senses the “dys-appearing body,” identifies his public role “me,” and wishes his people good luck, but the thoughts of immediately approaching fate and death run through his mind, saddening him, the “I,” deeply.

Beowulf constantly experiences his dys-appearing body by reviewing and reaffirming his remembered past life; he formally makes his last boastful speech in his symbolic interaction with his people but he is simultaneously aware of his physical deterioration at that very moment before his fight with the dragon:

...I risked my life
often when I was young. Now I am old,
but as king of the people I shall pursue this fight
for the glory of winning, if the evil one will only
abandon his earth-fort and face me in the open. (2511-15)

Conscious of his body in the past and the present, Beowulf shortly recalls the risky adventures in his youth, but his present “I” knows well that he has to take the protective role again to beat the dragon and win the permanent glory regardless of his ageing body. Attempting to bravely “win the gold” hoarded in the barrow for his people, he considers himself the only warrior that can “measure his strength against the monster” to “prove his worth” (2534-35). Though he is aware of his old age, he mentally trusts in “his own strength entirely” (2540). He positively thinks he can still benefit his society by exercising his military prowess and thus can make his risky act socially significant.

It is in the second round of fighting with the dragon that Beowulf starts his symbolic interaction with the rising hero, Wiglaf, whose helping hand embodies the shared meaning of the comitatus code between them. While

Beowulf's own valuable ancient sword, Naegling, fails him in the first round, all his "high-born comrades" except Wiglaf break ranks, running "for their lives" (2597-98). As Wiglaf takes the role of being the "hand-picked troop," well remembering "the bountiful gifts bestowed on him" (2597-2606), he rebukes the other warriors severely for their cowardly deed and then rushes to assist his lord. In the third round of the dragon's attack do old Beowulf and young Wiglaf, "that pair of kinsman, partners in nobility," successfully kill "the foe" (2707-08). Their mutual cooperation, the outcome of their symbolic interaction, leads to the success.

The price for Beowulf's success in killing the fiery dragon is his own life and he is wise enough to know he will die soon after discovering the enemy's "deadly poison suppurating inside him" (2714), so he shortly reviews and reaffirms his past life, "the remembered body in the past," for the last time in his conversations with Wiglaf. He recalls again that he is such a blameless, competent king that he can protect his people well without any intimation:

...For fifty years
I ruled this nation. No king
of any neighbouring clan would dare
face me with troops, none had the power
to intimate me...(2732-36)

Facing the last stage of "developing crisis" during his lifetime, Beowulf constantly identifies his ring-giver role, so his last wish is to see the hoard closely that he wins for his people but that costs his life. His desire to carry out the last wish embodies the symbolic act of being a generous veteran king, who self-evaluates positively his contribution to society despite his physical deterioration and even the approaching death.

In fact, what Beowulf concerns most is his permanent fame which can

live on even after his death; it is also how he imagines his body in the future. Before departing this life, Beowulf has Wiglaf command his own “troop to construct a barrow” on a coastal “headland” after his “pyre had cooled” so that the future generations including his people and sailors can “ship across the wide and shrouded waters,” look at “Beowulf’s Barrow” (2802-08), and remember his great deeds. This would-be built barrow will, in other words, become a place, surrogating Beowulf’s self after death, which goes “beyond the boundaries of the material body”; it also symbolizes his whole lifelong commitment to the *comitatus* code and achievements.

While imagining his body in the future, dying Beowulf keeps interacting symbolically with Wiglaf and educating the young hero to follow the *comitatus* code. He has the young hero inspect and bring some treasure back to him, so he can see “the treasure” and easily let go his “life and lordship” that he has “long maintained” (2750-51). Wiglaf thus examines the hoard and brings back some treasure for Beowulf; he waits on the old lord until the last breath. Their mutual interaction conveys the symbolic meanings of comradeship between the lord and the retainer; it is through the intergenerational conversations that old Beowulf also passes on the wisdom of lordship to the young hero.

As a wise old king who has no son, Beowulf firmly believes that Wiglaf is the only competent warrior that can become his heir, so he seizes the seconds before his death, conducting the symbolic ritual to crown “the young thane,” who is thus endowed with the unfastened “collar of gold from his neck” (2810-11). This rite not only symbolizes how legally Wiglaf inherits the patriarchal lordship title from Beowulf, who, to a certain degree, conveys the fatherly image but also accounts for how the young thane transforms his retainer position into that of kinship, a new identity after his acceptance of the education of *comitatus* code from the veteran

king in their intergenerational conversations.

Beowulf's last words reveal his profound wisdom, for he foresees Wiglaf will be the only truly hero among his people after his death:

You are the last of us, the only one left
of the Waegmundings. Fate swept us away,
sent my whole brave high-born clan
to their final doom. Now I must follow him. (2813-16)

Beowulf highly praises Wiglaf's heroism, yet he wisely knows well that no matter how brave a warrior was and has been, he cannot avoid the doomed fate of death. While undergoing the last moment of interaction with the young thane, he reaffirms the bravery of his public "me" and feels a sense of belongingness and "integrity," but his private "I" simultaneously senses "despair" while he imagines the immediate death will let him join all of his clan, those courageous deceased warriors. With his symbolic act and words, Beowulf thus teaches Wiglaf the values of the comitatus code plus the unavoidable fate of death that a truly warrior must learn and follow.

VI. Conclusion

The common bodily experiences that Hrothgar and Beowulf have are the process of their ageing and death through which they undergo the symbolic interactions with the rising young heroes in times of their crisis after their enemies devastate their surrogating self like the mead-hall and the home and through which they teach the young thanes the values of comitatus code. In retrospect, they both sense their "dys-appearing body" and positively evaluate their bodily experiences in the past in terms of the

“generalized social attitudes,” but they, to a certain degree, feel despaired of their present ageing bodies and thus foresee their future death. Meanwhile, by discerning the remembered body in the past, they symbolically act like a father, also teaching the rising heroes their years of “greater wisdom.” Nevertheless, there is a big difference in ageing between Hrothgar and Beowulf. The old Danish king seems so physically weak that he feels totally helpless to avenge Grendel and Grendel’s mother for the feud, so he needs to rely on young Beowulf to take the revenge. As to old Beowulf, he is still proud of his prowess regardless of his physical deterioration, so he takes brave action to fight against the dragon even though he needs young Wiglaf’s urgent assistance to fulfill his final achievement.

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Abstract

The Cycle of Ageing and Death in *Beowulf*: The Education of the Comitatus Code

Jui-Ching Chen

The Germanic code of the comitatus is the heroic values of the societal system, existent in Scandinavian countries in the fifth and sixth centuries and concerned with the loyal bond between a king and his warriors. This comitatus code is the core values in the first English epic, *Beowulf*, which was composed between the late seventh and tenth centuries. It is through the interpersonal relationship and conversations with the title hero, Beowulf, who bravely kills Grendel and Grendel's mother for the Danes, that the old Danish king, Hrothgar, perceives his ageing self and body, looks back his glorious past, teaches the young protagonist the importance of the symbolic values of the comitatus, and foresees not only his own unavoidable fate, death, but also the hero's prospective future of being the Geatish leader. Afterwards, Beowulf rules the Geats for five decades, becoming an old king, who is like Hrothgar aware of his ageing, having an ominous feeling of the subsequent encounter with the fiery dragon which devastates his compatriots' dwellings and even his own home. While interacting with his people, Beowulf recalls his victoriously brave deeds in his heyday and even recollects how loyal he is to Hygelac by following the comitatus code. While sensing approaching death, through conversations Beowulf also teaches Wiglaf, the only retainer aiding him in the fight against the dragon, the values of the comitatus spirit. Before death, he gives Wiglaf his golden collar, the symbol of his kingship, and predicts that

this young thane will be the last kin of the Waegmundings. In terms of the repeated pattern of ageing and death happening to Hrothgar and Beowulf and of the education of the comitatus code, this paper uses the approach of symbolic interactionism that Mike Hepworth develops from George Herbert Mead's and other sociologists' in his *Stories of Ageing*. It aims to investigate how Hrothgar and Beowulf observe the symbols of the comitatus code, undergoing a dynamic ageing process of "interaction between the body, self and society" (Hepworth 1). Overall, it explores how biologically, culturally, and psychologically both the old kings sense their ageing and death in "simultaneously a collective human condition and an individualized subjective experience" (Hepworth 1).

Key Words: epic, ageing, death, fate, comitatus, symbolic interactionism
서사시, 노년화, 죽음, 운명, 상징적 상호작용

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