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PREVIEW

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**Caldwell, Larry**

THE INDO-EUROPEAN CONTEXT OF "BEOWULF"

*The University of Nebraska - Lincoln*

PH.D. 1983

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PREVIEW

THE INDO-EUROPEAN CONTEXT OF BEOWULF

by

Larry Caldwell

A DISSERTATION

Presented to the Faculty of  
The Graduate College in the University of Nebraska  
In Partial Fulfillment of Requirements  
For the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Major: English

Under the Supervision of Professor Thomas Bestul

Lincoln, Nebraska

May, 1983

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**TITLE**

THE INDO-EUROPEAN CONTEXT

OF 'BEOWULF'

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PREVIEW

## INTRODUCTION

The first responsibility of the literary scholar is not only to recognize the multiplicity of forms, genres, motifs, topoi, and even cultures he is likely to encounter in his studies, but also to tolerate the corresponding multiplicity of perspectives, approaches, sensibilities, predilections, and even biases his colleagues will inevitably evince. A sense of the validity of individual critical exploration is best conveyed by the recent and rapid advent of "Critical Pluralism," a long overdue and obviously beneficial ecumenicalism among literary scholars. While it is true that critical "schools" are ephemeral, even as are sciences, social systems, or religions, it is also true that every mode of thought and interpretation has contributed something, at least, to general understanding; and while it is equally true that even a theory of periodic paradigmatic revolution constitutes in itself a paradigm, the purpose of study is to sift and test, to measure perception against categorization, and thus to derive models which work regularly and consistently until superceded.<sup>1</sup>

Generally in a pluralistic culture, and in the intellectual multiplicity such a culture will sustain, it is unbecoming to deny a "practitioner" the opportunity to test his or her model or paradigm; critical debate is useful only

if its opposing or alternate paradigms are allowed to co-exist, temporarily at least, for the purposes of comparing and evaluating respective validity with regard to breadth, depth, and duration of applicability. Even so, some literary-critical "models" participate in what we may call a "fundamental irreconcilability principle." This does not imply that they cannot co-exist, merely that they will probably never synthesize: they constitute differentiae. Neither does it imply that they cannot be subsumed within a larger category and become articulated as sub-systems within a greater paradigm: i.e., genus. What we broadly identify as "Mythological Criticism" may be said to form a genus or "greater paradigm," while within it two fundamentally irreconcilable sub-systems may be said to form differentiae, or in this context irreducible assumption-frames: on the one hand, the religious practitioners' a priori assumption that phenomena exhibit adherence to a plan or structure imposed from above by a transcendent Will; on the other, the socio-anthropological a priori assumption that phenomena are ordered by the individual or group mind and projected upward to an idyllic or perfected but imaginary transcendence. The one is consciously or unconsciously theistic (in the broad sense), while the other is consciously or unconsciously atheistic (or at least devoutly agnostic); the one takes as its purpose the discovery and elucidation of a Divine intent, and is properly, though not always honestly, theology, while the other seeks to discover and elucidate human in-

tent, and is properly, though not always honestly, psychology; the one is knowingly or unknowingly in the evangelical service of a "living" religion, while the other is knowingly or unknowingly in the (perhaps also evangelical) service of humanistic anthropocentrism.

Ideally it should matter to the myth-critic not at all which of these two assumptions and sets of purposes he may serve at a given moment in his studies. The vital quality is consistency: we should not critique The Pilgrim's Progress, for instance, as though Bunyan's, or even Calvin's, God really exists and rewards pious endeavor with factual salvation, if we intend simultaneously to critique Bunyan's romance, just as seriously, as though the human mind alone were the source of both God and salvation. Such a random shifting of perspective must be classed either as comedy or as schizophrenia; it is at best confusing and unproductive, at worst impossible.

This is not to say that a myth-critic may not write two essays on The Pilgrim's Progress, in the first of which he adopts a theistic perspective, and in the second an agnostic. Ideally he should have facility with both of the major differentiae in the genus "Mythological Criticism". Yet such a dual facility is rare: where Medieval Western literature is concerned, for example, we almost never encounter an "exegetical" (i.e., "theistic") critic who can claim in one essay that the father-son conflict of the "Hildebrandslied" represents the Fall of Man or the chas-

tising of arrogance, while claiming in another that Hildebrand and Hadubrand are Sohrab and Rustum transported to Germania; nor do we encounter any more frequently an "anthropological" (i.e., "atheistic" or "agnostic") critic who on one occasion seeks to convince us that Njal is a euhemerized Freyr, while claiming on another occasion that the old Icелander represents a Virtuous Pagan adhering to Natural Law. Such is the nature of irreconcilable differentiae within a genus: such is the polar functioning of two paradigms within a greater.

The myth-critic is obligated to recognize this principle, this structuring of thought and response, and to establish im voraus, as precisely as possible, the subsystem or lesser paradigm by which he intends to evaluate a work of literature. The paradigm I have chosen for the following analysis of Beowulf is distinctly socio-anthropological. My primary assumption is that phenomena are ordered by the individual or group mind and projected upward to an idyllic or perfected but imaginary transcendence; it is consciously agnostic, and equally consciously in the service of humanistic anthropocentrism.

It would be redundant here to trace the history of socio-anthropological myth-theories (or "paradigms"), since that has been done in detail by Stuart Chase, Jan De Vries, and many others.<sup>2</sup> Neither is it requisite that we survey "the mythological approach to literature" as it

developed in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries: that too has been accomplished in plentiful detail, and there are numerous collections which exposit, and provide examples of, applied theory.<sup>3</sup> The main purpose of this introduction is to offer a very brief explanation of Georges Dumézil's socio-anthropological paradigm for the study of Indo-European myth and society, the paradigm specifically adopted for my analysis of Beowulf.

Dumézil's career has been thoroughly surveyed by C. Scott Littleton in The New Comparative Mythology, now in its third edition.<sup>4</sup> This is an indispensable introduction to what has proved to be a very durable, productive, and constantly evolving scholarly endeavor. The value of Littleton's overview is not so much that he provides an "anthropological assessment," but that he makes possible for an English-speaking audience -- for the first significant time in this century -- the rescue of Indo-European studies from the "disrepute" into which they have twice fallen: once, at the turn of the century, due to the lack of restraint on the part of Max Müller and his followers of the "Naturistic-Solar" and "disease of language" school; and once again, and for obvious reasons, in the period 1933-1945.<sup>5</sup> Littleton has provided a precis of a unique approach to IE scholarship which allows the student to pursue the subject without the embarrassing associations of "Solar Mythology," or the horrifying ones of "Aryan" social programs. Hence a consensus has begun to emerge that IE studies



need not be encumbered by the baggage of past abuses.

When the first edition of The New Comparative Mythology appeared in 1966, none of Dumézil's work had been translated into English, although a German edition of Loki became available in 1959. Beginning in 1970, however, the parallel efforts of the University of Chicago and the University of California (Los Angeles and Santa Barbara) produced a series of translations (and one primary article in English, edited by Littleton) which have extended to the Anglo-American scholarly community a representative body of Dumézil's accomplishments.<sup>6</sup> This corpus, together with Littleton's precis, gives us a relatively complete grasp of Dumézil's structural-functional approach to the complex problems and issues of IE research.

Primarily, Dumézil has appropriated the "functional" view of mythology developed by Emile Durkheim, Marcel Mauss and others.<sup>7</sup> This posits that "the sacred things of any religion are symbols of the society that practices that religion."<sup>8</sup> Such symbols serve social "functions" insofar as they act as "'collective representations' of important social and cultural realities, and . . . give rise to categories of understanding."<sup>9</sup> "Collective representations" and "categories of understanding," it is argued, are essential to a group's conception of itself, so myth and ritual are devised to insure the survival both of the conception, usually heavily idealized, and of the group which has given rise to it. Pragmatically speaking, religion encourages and

sustains values whereby a society's stability is secured. The most important of these values is "the adequate integration of that society's various parts."<sup>10</sup>

A "functional" theory of religion and myth presumes, then, that the structure of a society determines the structure of its religion; and that the "various parts" -- the classes, professions, or some other ranking of persons -- will be mirrored with fair exactitude in the "ideal society" which is composed of transcendent beings rather than men. The various parts become "categories of understanding" by which one comprehends and interprets the physical as well as metaphysical world(s). Dumézil's utilization of this thesis takes "functions" (fonctions) as both the practical efficacy or area of operation of each of the various parts, and as the basic designation for the parts themselves.<sup>11</sup> In other words, if a society is composed of classes, professions, or some other ranking of persons, then each class etc. not only has a function, it is a function. Indo-European myth and society, Dumézil has discovered, reveals itself consistently to be composed of three such functions, which constitute a hierarchy of classes and responsibilities. The first is broadly labelled "sovereignty" and includes both kingship and priesthood; its responsibilities thus include the dispensation of justice and "the maintenance of magico-religious . . . order." The second is "force", which concerns itself with the protection of the group through physical-military strength. The third,

and also the most complex, is "nourishment"; its responsibilities include fecundity, abundance, production, artisanship, and wealth in the general sense.<sup>12</sup>

These classes are the major social and "ideological" structure of the Indo-Europeans. Comparative data, the basis for such conclusions, indicate that the separate socio-linguistic groups which proceeded from the hypothetical IE "Urvolk" retained a tripartite ideology well into historical times. Dumezil's painstaking labor since at least 1930 has been to make clear, where possible, the extent to which each of the IE daughter cultures evinces a tripartite ideology of king/priest-warrior-producer. He and his followers have explicated in turn the mythological and social documents of the Indo-Iranians, the Greeks, the Romans, the Celts, and the Germans, and have found them in many cases to reveal a profound consistency of tripartition. In Aryan India, the metaphysical first function is occupied by two figures, Mitra and Varuna; the second by the lone Indra; and the third, again, by two figures, the Asvins, the "divine twins", together with a goddess. This structure of dual sovereign, solitary warrior, and twin or feminine "nourishers" has come to be recognized as a basic pattern replicating itself in many other IE cultures. Early Roman society, for instance, offers the metaphysical formulae Jupiter-Dius Fidius, dual first function; Mars, the lone second function deity; and Quirinus-Ops, the dual third function deities, possibly complemented by another female

deity, prototype of "Venus". Germanic mythology, as recorded in the Scandinavian materials, yields the dual first function Othinn-Tyrr; the solitary second function Thor; and the dual third function Njörth-Freyr, complemented by the feminine deity Freyja.<sup>13</sup>

The reappearance of this system in cultures remote from one another in time or space argues for its derivation from "Proto-Indo-European" society; this argument is analogous to, and indeed dependent upon, the previously well established and now almost universally accepted "genetic" philology whereby most of the languages of Europe, together with those of India, Persia, the Hittites, and several others, are revealed to be closely related and to have undergone periodic, systematic mutation. The language group revealed as "Indo-European," "Indo-Germanisch," or "Indo-Hittite," must have sprung from a common source, which has been reconstructed in hypothetical form by comparative IE linguists. It is argued that if there was in fact a primitive IE "Volk" from whom all IE-speakers inherited their dialects, there must also have been an ideology imbedded in the language, which would likewise have undergone systematic mutation while yet retaining the basic features which identify it as IE.<sup>14</sup>

Dumezil and his followers seek to explicate this ideology wherever and in whatever form it may be found. In addition to the tripartite structure of physical and metaphysical society, the Dumezilian school has been able to

isolate certain features of the respective "functions" and their relationships with one another. Most importantly for my purposes, they have discovered that the structures as they appear in sacred literature often transpose themselves into epic and saga, i.e., into largely secular fiction;<sup>15</sup> that the first and second functions often conflict, that is, the king/priest and the warrior are not always compatible;<sup>16</sup> that heroic, and especially second function deeds frequently involve strife with tri-functional opponents, or involve three sequential "functional" actions;<sup>17</sup> and of immediate importance to Beowulf, which since the 1930's has come to be seen as an entirely "Christian" work: that Christianity itself may very well have adopted, in the west, primary IE features.<sup>18</sup>

In the analysis of Beowulf which follows, I apply Dumézil's paradigm in three specific ways: first of all, I survey as briefly as possible the history and development of Christianity with regard to a) its transmission from a non-IE culture to exclusively IE recipients; b) specific IE features exhibited by Christianity between c. 300 and 600; and c) IE features exhibited by Anglo-Saxon Christianity between the time of the mission of Augustine and the eleventh century. Second, I shall demonstrate that the structure of Beowulf is tripartite in the IE sense. Third, I shall suggest that the central socio-ethical conflict in the poem resides in the traditional instability or incompatibility of the IE first and second functions. In the course

of my analysis I take the liberty of referring to the IE functions in capital letters, in order to distinguish them from other uses of the word function where that may occur.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>See Thomas S. Kuhn, The Structure of Scientific Revolutions, International Encyclopedia of Unified Science, Vol. 2, No. 2, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970), pp. 1-34, 92-110, 189-91. I am grateful to Thomas Bestul for suggesting the value of the lessons provided in this work. I should point out, however, that Kuhn's thesis is tendentious insofar as it is a tacit application of general relativity to epistemology.

<sup>2</sup>Stuart Chase, Quest for Myth (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1949). Jan De Vries, Perspectives in the History of Religions, trans. Kees W. Bolle (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977). William A. Lessa and Evon Z. Vogt, ed., Reader In Comparative Religion: An Anthropological Approach, 2nd ed. (New York: Harper and Row, 1965). Anthony F.C. Wallace, Religion: An Anthropological View (New York: Random House, 1966). Burton Feldman and Robert D. Richardson, ed., The Rise of Modern Mythology: 1680-1860 (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1972). Michael Hill, A Sociology of Religion (New York: Basic Books, 1973).

<sup>3</sup>Thomas A. Sebeok, ed., Myth: A Symposium (Philadelphia: American Folklore Society, 1955). Northrop Frye, "Archetypal Criticism: Theory of Myths," in Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957), pp. 131-239. Bernice Slote, ed., Myth and Symbol: Critical Approaches and Applications (Lincoln, Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 1963). John B. Vickery, ed., Myth and Literature: Contemporary Theory and Practice (Lincoln, Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 1966). Henry A. Murray, ed., Myth and Mythmaking (1960; rpt. Boston: Beacon Press, 1968). John B. Vickery, The Literary Impact of the Golden Bough (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973). For specific concentration on Medieval materials, see Francis Lee Utley, "Folklore, Myth, and Ritual," in Critical Approaches to Medieval Literature, Selected Papers From the English Institute, 1958-1959, ed. Dorothy Bethurum (New York: Columbia University Press, 1960), pp. 83-109; and Edgar Polome, ed., Old Norse Literature and Mythology: A Symposium (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1969).

<sup>4</sup>The New Comparative Mythology: An Anthropological Assessment of the Theories of Georges Dumézil, 3rd ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982).

<sup>5</sup>Littleton, p. 35.

<sup>6</sup>The corpus in English as of this writing (Feb., 1983) is listed in the General Bibliography.

<sup>7</sup>Littleton, pp. 38-40. The French sociological school is succinctly surveyed by Terry Nichols Clark, Prophets and Patrons: The French University and the Emergence of the Social Sciences (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1973), esp. pp. 95-195.

<sup>8</sup>Hill, A Sociology of Religion, p. 38.

<sup>9</sup>Littleton, p. 39. See also Emile Durkheim, The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life, trans. Joseph Ward Swain (n.d.; rpt. New York: Collier, 1961), pp. 462-96.

<sup>10</sup>Wallace, Religion, p. 25.

<sup>11</sup>Littleton, pp. 5-6.

<sup>12</sup>Littleton, pp. 4-5

<sup>13</sup>Littleton, pp. 4-15

<sup>14</sup>Littleton, pp. 226-30. As Littleton notes, the primary groundwork establishing the language-ideology correspondence was done by Edward Sapir and B.L. Whorf.

<sup>15</sup>Littleton, pp. 156-61. Georges Dumézil, From Myth to Fiction: The Saga of Hadingus, trans. Derek Coltman (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1973).

<sup>16</sup>Littleton, pp. 122-23, 223-24. Dumézil, The Destiny of the Warrior, trans. Alf Hiltebeitel (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970), pp. 43-44.

<sup>17</sup>Destiny of the Warrior, pp. 11, 159, 74-75, 96-104, 82-95.

<sup>18</sup>Littleton, p. 231 and n.