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Free Subjects: Kingship, Comitatus and Loyalty in Beowulf through the Lens of Louis Althusser's Theory of Ideology

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Abstract

The article deals with the concepts of kingship, *comitatus* and loyalty as depicted in the Old English poem *Beowulf* and how these concepts of the Anglo-Saxon era were changing in favour of Christian God. The article also shows how this change was not completed fully and suggests that the perceived instability is caused by incomplete subjection of the Anglo-Saxons to Christian conventions. That is where free subjectivity can be found and that is also the main thesis of the paper. The article first offers a short analysis of Louis Althusser's theory of ideology and proposes several reasons why and historical pieces of evidence that Althusser's theory is applicable for the medieval period. The article then analyses *Beowulf* and provides some historical information to explain the above mentioned concepts in the Anglo-Saxon era.

Key words: subjectivity, ideology, state apparatuses, practices, kingship, *comitatus*, loyalty, overlordship

Since its discovery, *Beowulf* has offered detailed insights into the culture, society and religion of the Anglo-Saxons in Britain. Apart from this, literary critics have dealt with the text of the poem itself. An important focus of research has been the date and place of composition, the composition itself, and the author and the audience¹ since these are not mentioned in the manuscript and we have not been certain of them until now. On the other hand, the presence of the biblical stories led scholars to further discussions of the religious context of the poem. Thus, the story of the Creation (lines 90–113), the allusion to the biblical story of Cain (lines 1261–1266), and to the Flood (lines 1687–1693) led scholars to the question whether the poem is of pagan nature or if it is Christian in thought.²

The main focus of this article is not to make another dichotomy of pagan and Christian features because in order to do this it is important to be certain about the

1 These areas of research have been a major concern of critics like Jacobs, Schrader, Dumville, Wright, Kiernan, Fulk, Newton, Niles and others since 1815 until present.

2 The critics like Klaeber, Chadwick, Donahue, Earl, Robinson, Schneider and others argue either for the pagan or Christian nature of *Beowulf*. Some of the critics, for example Brodeur and Bauschatz, see a fusion of ancient Germanic paganism and Christian culture in the poem.

author, date and provenance of the poem. Quite the opposite, the article aims to explore the area that seems not to have been explored satisfactorily within the *Beowulf*-criticism. The main focus is to analyse the coexistence of the values of Christian religion and the warrior society in the period of the Anglo-Saxon conversion to Christianity. The article deals with *Beowulf* as a written record of ongoing social changes and reads it through the lens of Louis Althusser's theory of ideology. Based on the mentioned theory and with the focus on the concept of state apparatuses as defined by Louis Althusser as well as on the medieval concepts of kingship, *comitatus* and loyalty as they can be read in *Beowulf* and other historical resources, the main thesis of the article is the statement that the instability of the human subject in the process of conversion makes the subject free indeed.

Louis Althusser distinguishes two meanings of the term subject. The first one represents "free subjectivity," the other meaning presumes that each individual is "a subjected being, who submits to a higher authority, and is therefore stripped of all freedom except that of freely accepting his submission" (Althusser 56). The latter Althusser's understanding of subjectivity corresponds with the concept of the original meaning of the term. Although Althusser's theory of ideology was based on the Marxist perception of society and on capitalist ideologies, his theory seems to be working within the medieval period as well, not only because of the corresponding dual perception of subjectivity, but also for the reasons stated below.

Althusser defines ideology as "the imaginary relation of [...] individuals to the real relations in which they live" (Althusser 39). In addition to this, Althusser argues for the material existence of ideology, but the material existence is of different modality from how we perceive the existence of concrete objects. The material existence of ideology depends on the fact that "an ideology always exists in an apparatus, and its practice, or practices" (Althusser 40). Ideology is then performed by subjects who internalize those practices as subjective.

Althusser also develops the Marxist idea of the State Apparatus which includes the Government, the Army, the Police, the Courts, and others, and calls these the *Repressive State Apparatuses* (RSAs). On the other hand, he adds what he calls the *Ideological State Apparatuses* (ISAs) which are numerous religious, educational and political organisations and the family. Althusser also claims that in the Middle Ages the Church "accumulated a number of functions which have today devolved on to several distinct ideological State apparatuses" and therefore it would become a "dominant Ideological State Apparatus" (Althusser 25).

The dominant position of Christianity, as perceived by Althusser, could be seen in the development of *synodal witan* which "shows the close relationship between church and state, and the king's dependence on his advisors, both religious and secular, in decision-making" (Parker 26). The concept of *synodal witan* was developed by the connection of the terms *synod*, which was an assembly called by bishop, and *witan*, which was an assembly of the king, his wise men, counsellors and other important figures in political life. The interest of the Church in political matters of the country could be seen as an effort to influence the king, "because of their pivotal role in the control of their societies, and the protection and patronage they could provide" (Yorke 236). The

king as a representative of state power is able to change the RSAs so that they could assure “the political conditions for the action of the Ideological State Apparatuses” (Althusser 24). The traces of this process could be seen in the fact that the laws of Kentish and West Saxon kingdoms of the seventh and early eighth centuries increased “royal demands that people act as Christians, baptising their children, observing the Sabbath and making payments of church scot to support their minsters” (Yorke 238–9).

Althusser’s idea that the State apparatus may survive without being affected – “it may survive political events which affect the possession of State power” (Althusser 14) – could be proved by considering several changes recorded in historical sources. Christianity started to restructure some of the old institutions according to its new need. Bede recorded Pope Gregory’s letter to the Abbot Mellitus in which the Pope allowed the old pagan temples to be purified and used for Christian purposes since this way the people “ad loca quae consuevit, familiarius concurrat” [can gather at the places they are accustomed to] (Chaney). Other changes are clearly seen in Pope Gregory’s compromise on the matter of pagan cults when he allowed the use of the pagan temples. From this perspective, the conversion seems to be slow and unforced. In fact, “Bede often spoke of kings letting their people decide for themselves by listening to the new teaching” (Parker 22). Another practice that was kept, but whose meaning had been changed, was the sacrificing of animals, but “instead of killing cattle to sacrifice to devils, in future people were to be allowed to kill cattle on saints’ days to praise God” (Parker 20). The celebration of Christmas was ordained on the 25th of December which had been the beginning of the pagan year, connected with “*Modranecht* (the night of the mothers)” (Yorke 103). Another move was to “accept that pagan gods existed, but to assert that they were no more than deified heroes” (Chaney). The aforesaid pieces of historical evidence provide now yet another reason for Althusser’s theory to be used as a tool for grasping the thought-world of the Dark Ages.

As it has been already mentioned, Althusser defines the Church as a “dominant Ideological State Apparatus” in the Middle Ages (Althusser 25). From this perspective, Althusser seems to be suggesting that his theory aims to transcend capitalism, and engaging himself in the medieval period he admits that his theory aims to be relevant for every society. It could be argued again that this clearly allows exploring the social changes of the period from Althusserian perspective.

From numerous historical sources we know that the inhabitants of Anglo-Saxon Britain were divided into several kingdoms.³ Within a kingdom, the leading role was held by a warrior who is often referred to as a king or a lord. Such a king usually resided in a hall which represented a symbol of his “royal power” (Donoghue 30). In *Beowulf*, the hall is depicted as follows:

Đa ic wide gefrægn	weorc gebannan
manigre mægþe	geond þisne middangeard,
folcstede frætwan.	Him on fyrste gelomp,

3 The political arrangements of the Anglo-Saxon part of Britain changed from century to century according to many battles and the overlordship principle, but the kingdoms that managed to endure a longer period of time would include Mercia, Kent, Wessex, Northumbria or East Anglia.

ædre mid yldum,	þæt hit wearð ealgearo,
healærna mæst;	scop him Heort naman
se þe his wordes geweald	wide hæfde. ⁴

Donoghue also refers to the term *comitatus* which is a word first used by Roman historian Tacitus by which he defined the way Germanic people lived (Donoghue 16). It could be argued that the *comitatus* was not only the organization of the warrior society but that it was a relationship between the lord and his thanes. The hall was a place where the rituals took place but also where relations were lived among its dwellers and one of the most significant relations which could be found within the *comitatus* was loyalty.

Gwyn Jones argues that it was so important a binding force of warrior society that “without loyalty the social structure cannot hold” (Jones 43). In *Beowulf*, King Hrothgar claims that loyalty is the binding principle of his hall when he says: “Her is æghwylc eorl oþrum getrywe” (1228) [Here every earl is true to the other, gentle of disposition, and loyal to his lord]. Katherine O’Brien O’Keeffe claims that loyalty was a “touchstone” of the warrior society whose continuity was “ensured in the lord’s giving of treasure” (O’Brien O’Keeffe). The lord distributed valuable gifts by which he strengthened his own position and enhanced his reputation, and at the same time he enhanced the reputation of his thane and ensured the thane’s services for the future. In addition to that, John M. Hill claims that “gifts establish the bonds of loyalty between lord and retainers” (Hill). Their lord provided his retainers with gifts and they were expected to provide him with their military services. Gwyn Jones further explains the relation between the lord and his retainers when he claims that: “Gold, weapons, mead are the recurring symbols of gift and payment, hospitality unstinted and service unto death, the full committal of lord to man and man to lord” (Jones 45).

However, the principle of the *comitatus* which is found to be established on mutual loyalty of the king and his thanes begins to work on a different basis from that of lord-thane relation. The relationship after the conversion is further discussed in the following part of the article. Within this new relationship, the king’s responsibilities were linked with such concepts as “fertility of the soil, good weather and calm seas” and “the prosperity and good fortune of his people” (Yorke 237). It could be argued that these attributes, which surpass human abilities, could be guaranteed by the Christian God. The Christian God would reward those who obeyed him with prosperity, as well as punish those who disobeyed him. On the other hand, the deities of the Anglo-Saxons would act according to fate, an unchangeable order of things, and therefore prosperity or even good weather could not be influenced by the behaviour of the king and his

4 The Old English text quoted in this article is adapted from Friedrich Klaeber, *Beowulf and the Fight at Finnsburg*. 3rd ed. Lexington: Heath, 1950. Lines quoted here are 74–79. “I have heard that this labour of embellishing a place of the people was proclaimed far and wide to many nations throughout this earth. In due course, quickly in the sight of men, it came to pass that it was brought to final completion, the greatest of hall-buildings. He devised the name Heorot for it, he who far and wide exercised the authority of his world.” The translation used in this article is published in *Anglo-Saxon Poetry: Everyman’s Library*, 408–494.

subjects. To this extent, the Christian God could “offer both ideological and practical support” for the king, who could secure prosperity for the good conduct of his thanes (Yorke 241). Other duties of the king would be to provide protection for his people and to lead successful warfare which would guarantee him further service of his thanes. This duty is described in *Beowulf* as well when the poet states:

Ða wæs Hroðgare wiges weorðmynd, georne hyrdon, magodriht micel ⁵ . (64–67a)	heresped gyfen, þæt him his winemgas oðð þæt seo geogod geweox,
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However, Barbara Yorke argues that the “king not only won his battles, but generously rewarded those who had enabled him to do so” (Yorke 69). In order to satisfy the *comitatus*, the king had to reward his thanes according to their deeds. Arising from this duty, the king was often called a “ring-giver” which signifies the “distribution of gifts from a leader to his followers” (Donoghue 34). In *Beowulf*, King Hrothgar is several times found to be described as rewarding his thanes when the poet states: “He beot ne aleh, beagas dælde, / sinc æt symle” (80–81a) [He did not leave unfulfilled his vow: he shared out rings and jewels at the feasting].

The organisation of so-called military-based kingships was even more complex when considering the relations among the kings. Within these relations, the practice of overlordship was considered to be a significant one. The practice of overlordship involved one ruler’s recognition of “the superiority of another through payment of tribute and often, it would appear, through supplying military contingents to fight in the overlord’s army” (Yorke 61). The king who was the leader of the *comitatus* had the support of his thanes who were in fact the lords of their own warriors. This principle of loyalty worked within the relationships among the kings as well when an overlord was bound with another king through the principle of loyalty.

There are several pieces of historical information about the complex practice of overlordship. One of them is Æthelwath’s formation of an alliance with King Wulfhere of Mercia in which Æthelwath was made overlord of Wight, which Wulfhere had just conquered in a battle, in exchange for accepting Wulfhere’s authority over himself (*HE* iv. 13). Bede seems to be claiming here that the overlordship could be gained in battle as well. Again, the lord who gained the treasure in battle rewarded his retainers, but on the level of kings, these rewarding gifts were more than arm-bands since a whole kingdom could become such a gift.

The principle of overlordship was significant for the process of conversion to Christianity in many cases as well. Yorke states that “Æthelbert used his position as overlord to introduce missionaries to the East Saxons and East Angles” (Yorke 122). In this case, Christian missionary duty cooperated well within the Anglo-Saxon

5 “To Hrothgar next, military success was granted, and esteem of his worth in war, so that his friends and kinsmen readily obeyed him, until his troop of young men grew into a great retinue of warriors.”

principle of overlordship. Christianity does not seem to be intruding; rather, it seems to infiltrate into Anglo-Saxon society without as many difficulties as would have been expected. Barbara Yorke argues that in the period of the conversion “Christianity could be compatible with key elements of the ethos of a warrior society” (Yorke 238). Mary A. Parker goes as far as to argue that “missionaries worked within the general organization of society; they followed the invariable practice of approaching the ruler first and taking advantage of the *comitatus* principle” (Parker 14). Parker suggests that missionaries took advantage of the *comitatus* principle in order to allow their teaching to spread throughout the country. One of the ways of taking advantage of the *comitatus* is seen in the fact that “the popes sent desirable gifts [...] to the Anglo-Saxon courts where their missionaries were received” (Yorke 126). Bede recorded such a gift which was given to King Edwin and his wife: eastern robes, silver mirror and ivory comb (*HE* III. 2–3). The gift-giving seems to have created the bonds between the kings and the popes on the same principle of loyalty as the bonds were created within the *comitatus*.

Having been in contact with Christianity, the Anglo-Saxons encountered a new concept of monotheistic religion. Parker argues that “one of the main changes in a move to Christianity is belief in one god” (Parker 16). The concept of monotheistic religion embraces the idea of power being concentrated in a single entity. This differs from Germanic pagan religion, in which power was divided among many deities with their own special competences. The names of these deities “survive in Tuesday (Tiwesdaeg), Wednesday (Wodneddaeg), Thursday (Thunresdaeg), and Friday (Frigedaeg)” (Parker 17). On the other hand, there was no name for the Christian God. When God introduced himself to Moses, he said “I am that I am” and “This is my name forever.”⁶

The idea of an unnamed god became crucial in the process of conversion since it established the use of Old English word *dryhten* to address the Christian God. The word *dryhten* was firstly used as a “word for a ‘lord’ of a warband, such as Beowulf” and yet later started to be used “to translate the biblical ‘Lord’ that is Christ or God himself” (Yorke 238). Within the poem *Beowulf*, God is described as “halig Dryhte” (686) [the holy Lord] and Beowulf is called “Geata dryhte” (1484) [the lord of the Geats]. Surely, the poet of *Beowulf* sees the Christian God within the constraint of the previous meaning of the word *dryhten* when he calls God by names like “Drihten God” [the Lord God] and “heofena Helm” [the Protector of the heavens] as well as “Wuldres Waldend” [the Ruler of glory/the King of the world] (181–183). To this extent, the Anglo-Saxons created a concept of a “royal” God who was “at war with an evil force of trolls and demons” (Irving Jr. 186).

Since the Christian God gained a position similar to that of the king in the Anglo-Saxon society, it could be argued that God’s position was guaranteed by loyalty: the Anglo-Saxon people became part of their Christian God’s *comitatus*. The king was either rewarded or punished according to his behaviour and his respect for loyalty.

6 The text used in this article is adapted from *The NET Bible: New English Translation*. Ed. W. Hall Harris. Richardson, TX: Biblical Studies Press, 2007. The passage quoted here is from Exod 3.14–15.

This principle can be read in *Beowulf* when the Danes, in their precarious situation, decided to worship pagan gods once again:

Hwilum hie geheton	æt hægtrafum
wigweorþunga,	wordum bædon,
þæt him gastbona	geoce gefremede
wið þeodþreaum.	Swylc wæs þeaw hyra,
hæþenra hyht. ⁷	
(175–179a)	

As the concept of subjection is inevitably a part of Christian ideology, the relations within the *comitatus* must have undergone several paradigm shifts. When the king becomes the subject, his thanes become the subjects as well. They become subjected to God and by those means also to their king. This subjection to the king is justified by Christian interpretations of “kingship as a divinely ordained office” and emphasises the fact that “a king’s subjects had a religious duty to respect the king and obey his commands” (Yorke 238). Now, the king is not seen as a demigod but, through this shift in the *comitatus* relations, God becomes the king. This certainly puts the earthly king in a new position, in which he is not bound with his thanes by the principle of loyalty but by the means of subjection. Now, the king loses his status as a demigod and becomes “an ordinary mortal,” but his kingship and the subjection of his thanes are guaranteed by another even greater deity. This deity rewards and punishes people according to their deeds and therefore the king, losing his divine nature, gains the status of a divinely ordained king who could secure prosperity by controlling his subjects’ behaviour (subjectivity) in order to win God’s favour.

However, King Hrothgar’s office cannot be classified with certainty either as divinely ordained, or as established on the principle of *comitatus*. There are some passages that validate his position on the principle of loyalty such as those discussed above. He is often referred to as a “ring-giver” and shares the treasures gained in battles with those who helped him to gain them. As has already been stated, he is depicted as a king in a relationship of mutual loyalty with his thanes. On the other hand, there are some passages that indicate his possible position as a God’s deputy. The *Beowulf*-poet suggests that Hrothgar’s office had been divinely ordained when he states: “Þa wæs Hroðgare heresped gyfen” (64) [To Hrothgar next, military success was granted]. Although Hrothgar’s kingship is seen as one that has been achieved through his military success and subsequent “treasure-giving,” which creates the bonds of loyalty between him and his thanes, the *Beowulf*-poet seems to be suggesting here that the means by which Hrothgar establishes his loyalty, that is, the military success, have been granted or given to the king. From this perspective, Hrothgar’s office could be perceived as one that has been achieved by God’s will to grant him successful warfare. More evidence of the divinely ordained kingship could be found in the lines

7 “On the occasions they offered homage to idols at pagan shrines and prayed aloud that the slayer of souls might afford them help against their collective sufferings. Such, the optimism of heathens, had become their practice.”

where Grendel is described as “Caines cynne” (107) [the stock of Cain]. Hrothgar as the ruler of the *comitatus* is obliged to protect his people and at the same time, as the God’s elected king, is obliged to fight evil. Parker argues that “the idea of warfare for Christ must have been appealing to Anglo-Saxon kings because it provided a new justification of their secular desires for increased power and influence” (Parker 15). Hrothgar is then found to be trying to increase, or at least retain, his power and bonds of loyalty, and at the same time he is depicted as the one who had to protect his people and himself from evil.

The question of Hrothgar’s kingship is certainly a very ambiguous one since it is difficult to argue either for the divine origin of his office or for his office having been established on the *comitatus* principle. Nevertheless, the *Beowulf*-poet must be praised for his depiction of the ongoing changes in the king’s position connected with the Anglo-Saxon conversion to Christianity. The position of the king is not yet established by the means of Christian ideology but neither is it seen as the early medieval one which arises from the *comitatus*. The relations lived in the *comitatus* are seen to be changing since its members are gradually becoming the subjects of God and their king. This instability of the meaning of kingship is caused by the incomplete subjection of the Anglo-Saxons to Christian conventions, which brings us back to the introductory part of this article. The instability of the human subject in the process of conversion makes the subject free indeed, and allows him to choose the ideology to which he will be subjected. Nevertheless, the acceptance of God into the *comitatus* seems to be a necessary condition for Christianity to spread.

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