

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

Code

陳瑞卿

Foreign Languages and Literatures

Humanities and Social Sciences

rosa@chu.edu.tw

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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).

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