Comitatus and its Heroes

Heroes have dominated stories since the tradition of stories began. Hercules personified the perfect Greek Hero and as one of their requirements for a good hero, died horrifically. Odin, Thor and Loki all fatefully perished according to Norse belief yet dominate the cinemas even to this day. Currently Hollywood is filled with heroes such as Superman, Spiderman, Batman, and all those that make up The Avengers. Each character betters the world around them and personifies a certain human trait that makes them extraordinary. Each believes in the system and fights the ‘bad guy’ who is more often than not a destructive human being. In a sense, these heroes fight for their comitatus (government), they fight for good. A few examples found in literature exemplify this theory. Beowulf, with the strength of thirty men in one arm; Judith, a virtuous woman caught red handed; Lanval, a lover lost in the land of fairy; and Sir Gawain, an extraordinarily brave knight, each have their role to play. These heroes have specific characteristics that aid them in solidifying their comitatus. Through their actions, their corrupted government may be redeemed. The analysis of each story leads to an understanding as to what these characteristics have to do with comitatus and how that directly translates into its redemption.

Background - Definition of the Comitatus. The idea of a comitatus, or even the word, may seem unfamiliar. A definition given by “The Greenhaven Encyclopedia of the Middle Ages” states: Comitatus is a Latin term for a band of warriors who lived under the rule of an elected leader, an organization and way of life that characterized the Germanic peoples…The leader of the comitatus earned his position and his authority not through inheritance but through valorous military deeds, which all his followers were expected to emulate.
Furthermore, in “The Craven Comitatus” it states, “undoubtedly the relations of the war-leader to his comitatus is one of the most important themes in Old English Literature” (Markland, 341). The King stands as the head of this government and the knights fight for his honor in exchange for food, shelter, and a share of the riches. However, if the integrity of the comitatus is not maintained it is likely to crumble. This may happen in one of two ways. If the King does not maintain his honor towards his men then the entire infrastructure is liable to collapse. He is required to trust his men completely, and they him. Generally the king maintains his good character and the comitatus holds strong. If a knight does not maintain his honor he is subject to banishment, which completely strips him of his comitatus. In that era of time an exiled man was distrusted by other groups and often hunted down for sport. If he managed to live he would spend the rest of his days alone. More often than not these wanderers simply didn’t survive very long.

Beowulf the Brave

The perfect example of a comitatus, if not ideal, lies within the tale of Beowulf. Many are familiar with the battle between Beowulf and Grendel, followed by the vengeance-driven battle with Grendel’s Mother. In order to discuss the ethics involved in this story a few things must be covered first. A king by the name of Hrothgar stands as the leader of the local comitatus. His position was given through birth but he also has earned it through bravery and prowess. At one point in the past Ecgtheow, Beowulf’s father, owed wergild (man-price) for killing Heatholaf who was a Wulfing. A full-fledged definition of wergild in “The North Analogy of English Literature” states, “In Germanic law, wergild was the payment of a sum of money in reparation for a criminal act.” That is, if a man kills another then he must pay the murdered man’s family a certain sum of money. If he does not then he is subject to death by the hands of the unpaid
family. Hrothgar paid this wergild for Ecgtheow to which he pledged oaths of allegiance to this lords rule; therefore, Beowulf owes partial allegiance to this comitatus. (“Beowulf”, 459-472)

_Corruption of comitatus_. When Grendel attacks Heorot, Hrothgar’s mead hall, and kills thirty men in just one night, he does not act honorably toward the king of that land. His debt of wergild only goes up from there. He attacks until no man is willing to spend even a single night in the mead hall, a place meant for sanctuary from their battle weary lives. Its white halls are stained with the blood of Hrothgar’s vassals (men). After the first attack Hrothgar, “sat stricken and helpless, humiliated by the loss of his guard” (“Beowulf”, 130-131). The death of his men makes him look weak, powerless to stop this creature from coming into what was considered the safest place. The mead hall was a place of refuge where the men came to eat, drink and be merry. Now, it was a standing testament that none of the knights were strong enough to drive Grendel out. Lines 150-158 speak of the tale being know all over the world, that “sad lays were sung about the beset king” and that there was no sign of stopping Grendel’s ravages. Specifically lines 154-158 lament, “how [Grendel] would never parley or make peace with any Dane nor stop his death-dealing nor pay the [wergild]. No counselor could ever expect fair reparation from those rabid hands.” And because Grendel hadn’t paid wergild, and had no intention of paying it, his continued existence shoved into Hrothgar’s face that his comitatus wasn’t strong enough.

Furthermore, Grendel was a part of Satan’s comitatus. When describing Grendel the text found in “The Norton Anthology of English Literature” states, “…he had dwelt for a time in misery among the banished monsters, Cain’s clan, whom the Creator had outlawed and condemned as outcasts” (104-107). Again in line 169 the poem says, “he was the Lord’s outcast” (169). The shame of losing men not only to a vicious monster, but to a creature from a
clan like unto the devils, is boundless. This coupled with the wergild owed to Hrothgar and his people brings Beowulf to the scene in order to regain honor both for himself and the comitatus. 

Redeeming characteristic. “Then news of Grendel, hard to ignore, reached me at home: sailors brought stories of the plight you suffer in this legendary hall… (‘Beowulf’, 409-412)” yet regardless of the threat Beowulf came. He knew that Grendel was unmatched among men yet he traveled across the sea to battle the creature. That amount of bravery wasn’t seen among Hrothgar’s men, at least those still living. However, he goes one step further. To bring more honor to the local leader he will stay in the mead hall and declares he will fight without sword or shield, “hand-to-hand is how it will be, a life-and-death fight with the fiend” (438-440). What more can prove to the entire gathering of people that Beowulf goes beyond the call of knighthood to the personification of bravery?

When the time for battle comes, Beowulf grabs Grendel’s arm and doesn’t let go. He holds on with all of his might knowing full well that a single swipe from the creature’s terrible claws would kill him. They wrestle and soon Grendel is fighting for his life knowing that Beowulf’s strength is beyond his own. Finally Beowulf rips Grendel’s entire arm off and the creature runs off, injured, into the night. No blame was placed on the king for being unable to protect his own people. Beowulf had rid the land of Grendel and all glory was given to him. This crumbling comitatus was saved by the brave warrior and order returned to the land for a time.

Judith the Faithful

Theodore Ziolkowski wrote “Re-visions, Fictionalizations, and Postfigurations: the Myth of Judith in the Twentieth Century” in which he details the events leading up to the tale of Judith. To understand the tale completely a quick recap follows:
Nebuchadnezzar wishes to conquer the known world, spreading his armies west to the sea and down into Egypt. His general, Holofernes succeeds in that goal with the aid of one hundred and twenty thousand foot soldiers plus twelve thousand mounted archers. Along the way to the sea Holofernes required that all worship Nebuchadnezzar and destroyed any other Gods. Ziolkowski says, “Holofernes is perplexed to learn that the Israelites, rather than surrendering as other peoples have done, are preparing for war” (Caedmon, 312). The Israelites refuse to abandon their god. The general lays siege to the city by cutting off all water supplies. Just as they begin to lose heart and beg their leaders to give into Holofernes and his army, their God sends them Judith. Here stands a woman whose only resources are her “unfailing courage, her wits, and her faith in God” (Reidhead, 110). In this instance God is the head of the Israelite comitatus and Judith a knight equal in status to that of Beowulf, although not in stature. By remaining a virtuous woman she is claiming her devotion to her Lord and paying tribute to his glory. Some say that her husband had died in some manner in the cause of the war so Holofernes, the general of the other army, owes her wergild but that conjecture goes no further than a scholarly interpretation of the poem. Sadly, the first part of the poem is lost, requiring the reading to begin in the middle of the story.

*Corruption of the comitatus.* As previously discussed, Holofernes is the general of Nebuchadnezzar’s army. His prowess in battle and the fact that he had conquered so many people testifies to his authority over his men. Though Nebuchadnezzar is technically the leader of this comitatus, Holofernes rules over these men making him a vicarious king in their minds. They listen to him, follow his orders and receive food, shelter, and riches in return; practically the very definition of a comitatus. The text itself refers to Holofernes when it states, “…they came to the powerful lord and proceeded to the leader of people” (Caedmon, 11-12). So for the
sake of this essay Holofernes stands as the head of this comitatus. Upon meeting the man a reader expects to see an upright character, a man worthy of his men’s trust, a man similar to Hrothgar. First impressions change quickly when he demands the holy woman, Judith, be taken to his chambers. Within this section two things point towards a corrupted comitatus and the true Holofernes is revealed.

First cause of corruption: First and foremost is the fact that Holofernes intends to rape Judith. Countless lines within the poem praise her for her virtue and faithfulness to God and still Holofernes seems eager to violate her. This is a woman of “elfin beauty” (14), the “wise” (40) and “illustrious maiden” (43) whom Lord would “defend...against the greatest terror” (5), and he intends to violate her? Not a smart move. The characteristics being shown in this section, intoxication and desire for a woman, correlates very closely to what is to be expected of a comitatus (the mead was specifically spoken of in Beowulf (1013-1014 & 2014-2015)). So this alone does not constitute a corrupted comitatus. If he had been drunk and unaware of his actions the blame could still be placed on his shoulders but not as severely as they were because of cognitive intent. Lines 57 through 59 speak directly of this, “Then the notorious one, that lord of cities, [upon hearing the maiden was taken to his chambers] became happy in his mind: he intended to violate the bright woman with defilement and with sin” (Caedmon). Circumstances were not on his side. That he chose a woman belonging to the Lord’s comitatus dictated his end was near.

Second Cause of Corruption: The most crucial sign of this withering governmental structure reveals itself in lines 46-54. It states:

There was a beautiful

all-golden fly-net that the commander
had hung around the bed, so that the wicked one,
the lord of warriors, could look through
on each of those sons of men who came in there,
but not one of the race of mankind could look
on him, unless, brave man, he commanded one
of his very iniquitous men to come
nearer to him for secret consultation…

This net, having the same abilities as a one-sided mirror, reveals a lack of trust in his own men.
In the vulnerability of sleep he trusts no one but himself. Not only does he lead a corrupt
comitatus but he stands as the reason for its withering state. This, along with his evil decision of
raping the God-fearing woman spells disaster for this rotten leader.

**Redeeming Characteristic:** Judith’s faith in her God leads her to the opportunity to kill
Holofernes. The evil comitatus was destined to perish. She was led to this moment and with
courage she cuts the general’s head clean off his shoulders. Faithful to the end, she has
essentially stopped the war in its tracks and saved her people justifying her act of barbarism in
service to her comitatus. However violent this moment may be she does it to save an entire
people from pain, just as Beowulf saved an entire people from the wrath of Grendel. Both Judith
and Beowulf fight for good by destroying the head of the oppressive enemy. After cutting off
Holofernes head she returns to her people. They are safe, the army of Nebuchadnezzar scatters
and the Israelites are saved from destruction. The Lord, the head of his comitatus, saved his
people by relying on the fortitude and faith of his knight. Judith stood tall through the entire
ordeal, a true warrior of her time.

Lanval the Devoted
The tales of the court of King Arthur have stood the test of time because the king is smart enough to maintain a balanced court. However, every king stumbles and Arthur’s stumbling block was Lanval. The main character is described as being set apart from Arthur’s court. Lines 36 through 38 state, “a strange man, without friends, is very sad in another land, when he doesn’t know where to look for help.” Laval was a foreigner without someone to turn to; he doesn’t truly belong to this comitatus. But the court of King Arthur was not destined to fall at the hands of Lanval. It would remain as a righteous court for a time. This unsettlement in the kingdom caused by Lanval must have been dealt with. The characteristics he displays while trying to maintain his comitatus’ honor is in the end what redeems himself from fault.

Arthur throws a feast and as a proper host gives out countless gifts to his lords and vassals. “[Arthur] gave out many rich gifts: to counts and barons…he distributed wives and lands, to all but one who had served him. That was Lanval; Arthur forgot him.” Patrick John Ireland writes in his essay “The Narrative Unity of the ‘Lanval’ of Marie de France” that Arthur “Slights the chivalric code in failing as a lord to do justice to [Lanval]”. Ireland believes this slight to be Arthur’s error (133). If Arthur had paid Lanval more attention as a loyal vassal then he might not have run off with the beautiful fairy queen – as this description most fully illustrates this enchanted woman. Not long after this celebration, upon meeting his lady, he quickly exclaims, “I shall abandon everyone” (Marie de France, 128). He is able to so easily throw away his loyalty to Arthur because he received almost nothing in exchange for his services. Coincidentally, after pledging his allegiance to the fairy she showers gifts upon him. “Afterward, she gave him a gift: he would never again want anything, he would receive as he desired” (135-137); exactly what the ruler of a comitatus should do. Exactly what Arthur should
have done. She gifts all of this in exchange for his silence. If he speaks of their meeting or her existence then he will never see her again.

Furthermore, “In pledging himself to the court of love, he unknowingly surrenders his chivalric allegiance to King Arthur” (Ireland, 135). But a man cannot maintain such a falsehood for long. He didn’t speak with Arthur about switching allegiances yet Lanval remains in the land of the mortals. He has placed himself outside of any strong comitatus. Lanval wanders between loyalties to the king of his mortal life and the love of fantasy. This leads him to trouble.

After some time the inevitable moment comes for Lanval to slip up. The comitatus of Arthur and the fairy queen up until this moment remained intact but Lanval soon reveals himself as the poisoned root threatening to kill the entire structure by sowing seeds of discord in the castle. Queen Guinevere snidely remarks that Lanval must prefer men over women to which he replies, “I love and I am loved by one who should have the prize over all the women I know” (Marie de France, 293-295). Guinevere is offended and demands retribution. Lanval’s honor and his life are forfeit unless he produces the creature that made him stray from brotherhood in the first place. But by mentioning her, though only mentioned as a way to maintain honor, he has broken his ties with his newly forged comitatus.

*Redeeming Characteristics:* Lanval’s devotion to both Arthur’s court and that of his fairy Queen is in the end his salvation. Ireland says, “His willingness to subject to the courts rule without complaint shows the bravery lying within quiet Lanval. His loyalty, in the end, remains true to both King and Fairy Queen. It is only because of this that the Fairy Queen comes to pardon her treasonous subject.” So the fairy queen gathers to her the mortal wanderer and takes him away from Arthur’s court. Arthur may also have realized that Lanval was causing trouble in court and let him leave with the fairy without argument. A king knows how to keep his men in line and
Lanval’s departure ensured the courts happiness. Laval’s devotion saved himself; the Fairy Queen’s forgiveness and Arthur’s understanding saved their respective comitatus from failure.

The Honorable Sir Gawain

Very near the beginning of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* the comitatus has fallen on hard times. They go through the motions of having a solid government yet the second the visiting Green Knight proposes a challenge none of the men volunteer. This game provides the volunteer one stroke of an ax. The only penalty is that the Green Knight will return the same stroke to the volunteer in one years’ time. No one rises to the challenge to which the Green Knight insults the cowardly knights, “…the bodies on these benches are just bum-fluffed bairns. If I’d ridden to your castle rigged out for a ruck these lightweight men wouldn’t last a minute” (“Sir Gawain…, 280-282). What a disgrace to all the knights and most of all to Arthur himself. This stranger judges the men to be nothing more than infants, easy to slaughter if only it were not New Year’s Eve. This slap to the face must be answered for any honor to be regained. “So who has the gall? The gumption? The guts? Who’ll spring from his seat and snatch this weapon?” (291-292) the Green Knight asks. The insults have gone too far and when no one speaks up Arthur takes it upon himself to play the game. This, in many ways, is worse for the knights than the physical endangerment of losing the game. First he insults the men, then Arthur, and finally undermines the comitatus completely. The king is supposed to support his brave men, not be a human shield for them.

*Redeeming Characteristics:* Gawain unrolls this mess in an eloquent speech:

> For I find it unfitting, as my fellow knights would, when a deed of such daring is dangled before us that you take on this trial – tempted as you are –
when brave, bold men are seated on these benches

…[those] never beaten…in the field of battle” (348-353)

He never points out the cowardice of the men but their strengths. He takes the challenge while in essence ‘denying’ Arthur the joy of playing the game. Sir Gawain has honor to spare as he saves all the knights from shame and glorifies his King by swinging the ax. In fact, in the essay “Sir Gawain and the Green Knight” his elaborate speech is considered not a sign of weakness but simply part of the game of courtliness. This was proof of his qualifications as the “ideal Arthurian knight” which is then proved by his decapitating the adversary with a single blow.

(110) Then Gawain comes across the greatest test of his young life, to knowingly ride to his own death. After nearly a year has passed he travels to the green chapel, after spending some time with the Bertilaks. Even then he restrains the lusty Lady Bertilak maintaining his virtue, his Christian honor.

Like a lamb to the slaughter Gawain courageously rides to his death refusing to run from what his honor dictates must be done. He embraces his fate just as Beowulf embraced his upcoming battle, just as Judith embraced barbarism for her God, just as Lanval devoutly defended his comitatus. By not backing down from his promise to the Green Knight Gawain restores honor for himself and his lord, Arthur. He proves once and for all that Arthur’s men keep their word and are courageous, honorable knights willing to face death for their lord.

Conclusion

Through these many tales the characteristics of a strong comitatus become clear as well as the attributes necessary to redeem a fallen comitatus. Beowulf shows raw bravery in fighting Grendel, Judith faith in her God, Laval devotion to his leaders, and Gawain honorable even in the face of death. Each story uplifts the reader and shows them the attributes associated with a
strong comitatus. This same reason explains why these poems continue in circulation today. These everlasting lessons teach readers just the sort of attributes to strive for in order to better themselves and all those around them. Bravery, faith, devotion and honor are magnificent attributes, ones worth reaching for.

Reference:


The *Gawain* poet. “Sir Gawain and the Green Knight.” Reidhead 186-238.

