Beowulf Aspires to Conform to the Socio-Cultural Ideals of Heroism

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The figure of Beowulf from the epic poem desires to become characterized as the ultimate hero, as he is influenced by the Geatish and Danish socio-cultural ideals of heroism. The nobilities and societies depicted in the poem define the ideal hero as one who is always ready and eager to confront danger in battle. Beowulf spends his life setting demanding personal goals in an attempt to fulfill the expectations that society has of a hero. While boasting about his aspirations and past achievements, Beowulf emphasizes his strength and skills as being unmatchable. Beowulf also demonstrates ostentatious actions in combat, such as going beyond murder to mutilate the body of his enemy, to increase attention to his personal triumph. Although Beowulf is fundamentally fighting battles to defend people from harm, his words and actions imply that he is more interested in battling the enemy alone to magnify his status as a hero than he is in protecting his allies. Beowulf’s egotistical mind-set, disrespect for his fellow warriors, and his desire to fight alone demonstrates his failure to adhere to the nobleman’s code of honour, which requires all men to treat and depend on one another like brothers. Yet the Geatish and Danish nobilities and societies do not recognize these characteristics as failures, as Beowulf is continually praised for his heroic efforts. Therefore, the definition of a hero is flawed in the epic poem because it allows Beowulf to disregard the nobleman’s code of honour to attain heroic victory.

Introduction

The character of Beowulf displays numerous qualities that are associated with heroes through his words and actions in the epic poem. Beowulf is characterized as a man of superior strength and skill. The Geatish and Danish societies depicted in the poem support violent cultures for the purposes of maintaining law and order. An idealistic hero, according to the nobility and society, is one who is always primed and eager to take on any challenge. Moreover, a warrior who is victorious in battle is rewarded and praised by the nobility, while noblemen who fail are forgotten. Beowulf is influenced by the socio-cultural ideals of heroism and is controlled by his desire to conform to the
ultimate hero. He devotes his life to fulfilling the goals and expectations that he sets out for himself, as well as the expectations that society has of a hero. Additionally, Beowulf goes above and beyond his obligations as a nobleman to challenge himself and bring attention to his heroic qualities by exhibiting over-achieving actions in combat and boasting about his skills and triumphs. Beowulf is essentially fighting battles to defend people from harm. However, his words and actions imply that he is more interested in battling the enemy alone for the purpose of drawing attention to his personal victories and amplifying his reputation as a legendary hero, than he is in fighting to protect his allies. Yet fighting alone goes against the communitarian ideology that is part of the code of honour upheld by noblemen. Therefore, although Beowulf strives to be the perfect hero, he is failing to respect the code of honour that defines a warrior as a nobleman first before becoming a hero.

**Beowulf desires to fulfill the expectations of a hero to become famous**

Beowulf is completely caught up in society’s definition and expectations of a hero. He is introduced to readers as a leader who is already renowned throughout the lands, as he is known as a “gód mid Géatum, [...] se wæs moncynnes – mægenes strengest / on bæm dæge – bysses lifes / æbele ond éacen” [good man among the Geats [...] he was of mankind the strongest of might / in those days of this life, / noble and mighty](195-8). He is respected and called by many names that depict his heroic qualities. Some names are: “Him bá ellenróf” [The courageous one] (340), “wlanc Wedera léod” [proud prince of the Weders] (341), “Árás bá se ríca” [the mighty one] (399), “Nolde eorla hléo” [Protector of earls] (791), “feorh ealgian” [liege lord] (796), and “mæres béodnes” [famous captain] (797). Despite his already famous reputation, Beowulf is constantly trying to enhance his superior heroic status to gain more recognition, by creating goals for himself and doing deeds that are beyond society’s expectations of a hero. Without being asked or requested, he actively begins missions that will enable him to use his battle skills and strength to avenge an opponent for his allies. Beowulf sails from his Geatish nation with a fleet of soldiers to carry out the mission of killing the giant, Grendel who has
been causing destruction throughout Danish territory. Beowulf was not called to the rescue. Instead, he went searching for a quest. Before setting out on the quest he made a goal from himself, which he declares to King Hrothgar at the feast before the first battle with Grendel:

‘Ic bæt hogode, – bá ic on holm gestáh, […] bæt ic ánunga – éowra léoda / willan geworhte – obde on wæl crunge / féondgrápum fæst. – Ic gefremman sceal / eorlíc ellen.’ ['I resolved when I set out over the waves […] that I would entirely fulfill the wishes / of your people, or fall slain, / fast in the grip of my foe. I shall perform / a manly courage’]. (632, 634-7)

Beowulf uses the pronoun “I” four times in this quote, which stresses his own ambitions and his self-centred mind-set. In addition, Beowulf places the spotlight on himself, deemphasizing his comrades, who have traveled with him, and their efforts. Beowulf’s statement also expresses his complete desire for honour and fame, as he declares that he will either be successful or be sacrificed. There is no middle ground or gray area in Beowulf’s mind, as his words suggest that he thinks being an unrecognized nobleman constitutes failure.

Later in the poem before going to kill Grendel’s mother, Beowulf makes another statement that reveals his inflexible black and white disposition: “‘ic mé mid Hruntinge / dóm gewyrce – obde mec dead nimed’” ['with Hrunting I shall / win honour and fame, or death will take me!'] (1490-1). These statements demonstrate that credit and reputation are most important to Beowulf and confirm that he would rather die than become a failed warrior. In addition, Beowulf’s aggressive attitude reveals the competitive and violent nature of the warrior community depicted in the poem.

**Beowulf boasts about previous accomplishments and his future endeavors**

Beowulf makes many lengthy speeches in the poem, highlighting his past victories as well as boasting with confidence about the battles that he is about to begin. At the initial feast before fighting Grendel, Beowulf describes his past triumphs in great detail. He expresses his self-confidence by assuring
the nobility that he will have no problem killing the giant. He compares his future fight with Grendel to the past battles that he has won, at which time he took on a larger number of enemies:

bær ic fife geband, / ydbe eotena cyn – ond on ydum slóg / niceras nihtes, – nearobearfe dréah, […] forgrand gramum; – ond nú wid Grendel sceal / wid bám áglæcan – ána gehégan / ding wid byres. ['I captured five, / slew a tribe of giants and on the salt waves / fought sea-monsters by night, survived the tight spot […] and crushed those grim foes; and now with Grendel / that monstrous beast, I shall by myself / have a word or two with that giant. ']

Beowulf is “fond of talking” and speaks in a polite manner, despite his boasting statements, claims Linda Georgianna, author of an article titled, “King Hrethel’s Sorrow and the Limits of Heroic Action in Beowulf” (829-30). Actions usually take priority over words in heroic texts, yet such is not the case in Beowulf (Georgianna 830). Most of the speeches, however, are focused solely on past action or the daring battles that Beowulf is about to embark upon (Georgianna 830). In comparison, Henry Bosley Woolf states in his article, “On the Characterization of Beowulf”, that the boasting words found throughout Beowulf’s speeches are not unusual coming from a Geatish warrior (90). This is because many ancestral heroes would have spoken in the same manner (Woolf 90). Therefore, one could argue that this particular statement by Beowulf, regarding his upcoming fight with Grendel, is not all that bold considering that it is a traditional characteristic of a Geatish warrior to boast about his achievements. However, when questioned during his speeches at the feast by the skeptical Unferth, Beowulf goes overboard when describing another one of his previous successful battles by making statements to try and prove that he is the most heroic warrior on earth:

ʻBæt ic merestrengo – máran áhte / earfebo on ybum – donne ænig óber man. / Wit bæt gecwædon – cnihtwesende / ond gebétedon – […] aldrum néddon – ond bæt gæfndon swá. […] bá wiit on sund reôn […] fíf nihta fyrst […] bæt ic mid sweorde ofslóh /
niceras nigene. – Nó ic on miht gefrægn / under heofones hwealf – heardran feohtan / ne on égstréamum – earmran mannó, / hwæbere ic fára feng – féore gedígde […] Nó ic with fram bé / swylcra searonída – secgan hyrde […] ne gehwæber incer / swá déorlíce – dæd gefremede.’ ‘[‘I had greater strength on the sea, / more ordeals on the waves than any other man. / When we were just boys, we too agreed / and boasted […] we would risk our lives, and we did just that […] we swam in the sea […] for five nights […] I was able to kill / nine of the sea-monsters. I have never heard / of a harder night-battle under heaven’s vault, / nor a more wretched man on the water’s scream; / yet I escaped alive from the clutches of my enemies […] I have never heard a word / about any such contest concerning you […] nor you either / done a deed so bold and daring.’] (533-44, 574-85)

This brash statement made by Beowulf is conceited and condescending towards all of the other warriors who are present and is especially disrespectful toward Unferth. Beowulf is placing himself on a pedestal above all of the other warriors, by stating that he has had greater ordeals on the sea [“than any other man”]. Furthermore, he is devaluing the battles that others have fought by stating that he has [“never heard of a harder night-battle”] than the battle that he fought in the sea. Lastly, Beowulf points an arrogant finger at Unferth by stating that he has [“never heard a word / about any such contest concerning you […] nor you either / done a deed so bold and daring”]. This last statement has no other purpose except to humiliate Unferth and make him look bad, while promoting Beowulf’s own heroic standing. Thus, Beowulf takes the low road, by attempting to take down a fellow soldier for the purpose of making his own achievements seem all the more thrilling. One would not expect a hero of such status to come down upon another nobleman during a feast, especially considering their alliance and the code of honour that requires all noblemen to treat their comrades as brothers.

**Beowulf also boasts about his physical abilities**

In accordance to boasting about his past achievements in battle, Beowulf also emphasizes his physical strength and fortitude as qualities that
are unmatchable by any other man on earth. He is known throughout the lands for his physical strength: “bæt hé brítiges / manna mægenræft – on his mundgripe / heaboróf haebbe” [He has thirty / men’s strength, strong in battle, in his handgrip] (379-81). The powerful physical abilities of Beowulf are repeatedly described by himself and the narrator and are specifically emphasized during the three battles (Woolf 87). In his initial speech to the nobility, Beowulf declares with certainty that his might is equal to that of a giant and for this reason he will fight Grendel without the use of weaponry:

Gespræc bá se góda – gylpwora sum / Béowulf Géata – ær hé on bed stige: / ‘Nó ic mé an herewæsmun – hnágran talige / gúbgeweorca – bonne Grendel hine, / forban ic hine sweorde – swebban nelle’ [The good man, Beowulf the Geat, / spoke a few boasting words before he lay down: ‘I consider myself no poorer in strength / and battle deeds than Grendel does himself; / and so I will not kill him with a sword.’] (675-9)

In an article titled “Beowulf’s Armor”, George Clark references a statement made by Taylor Culbert commenting that fighting without weapons represents an act of “elemental savagery” as the “participants hit and tear each other’s flesh with bare hands” (421). Yet at the same time this type of fighting also requires “innate cleverness” from the opponents (Clark 421). In comparison, Woolf states that Beowulf’s desire to fight without a sword or a shield demonstrates an act of fairness in battle, seeing as Grendel does not fight with weapons (90). However, when coupled with Beowulf’s boasting words about his physical strength, his arrogant comments about his past triumphs, and his desire to fight Grendel alone, the act of fighting with only his hands seems like nothing more than an over-achieving performance in an attempt to further show off and impress society with his heroic qualities. The sword symbolically represents the heroic experience and the maturity of a hero, as it is a common gift that is given to a nobleman who has been victorious in battle (Clark 423). Therefore, Beowulf’s desire to fight without a sword or shield implies that he thinks he is above regular heroic noblemen because he can win the battle against Grendel without the help of any weapons.
Beowulf performs ostentatious actions to emphasize his triumphs

In addition to Beowulf’s over-achieving act of fighting Grendel without a sword, he engages in another flamboyant act to confirm the brutal death of Grendel and amplify the celebration of his personal glory. After Beowulf rips off the arm of Grendel with his bare hands, the defeated giant trudges off to die in the forest. Grendel’s arm is then hung up in the mead hall during the celebratory feasting over the giant’s death. Although Beowulf has achieved what he came to do, he still feels the need to chop off the head of Grendel’s dead body after finding it in the forest: “rébe cempa – tó dæs be hé on ræste geseah / gúdwérigne – Grendel licgan [...] heorsweng heardne – – ond hine bá héafde becearf” [the fierce champion, for on a couch he saw / Grendel lying lifeless [...] a hard sword-stroke, and his head chopped off] (1585-6, 1590). The head is then brought back on a stick and hung up in the mead hall for everyone to see: “on flet boren / Grendles héafod – bær guman druncon, [...] wîteséon wræséon wrætlíc; – weras on sáwon” [they dragged by its hard / Grendel’s head across the hall-floor [...] everyone stared at the amazing sight] (1647-8, 50). Beowulf’s act of mutilating the giant’s body emphasizes his need to promote the heroic act of murder that he has successfully achieved and also demonstrates Beowulf’s desire to be visually remembered as the heroic warrior who killed Grendel. Furthermore, the beheading places more emphasis on the death of the giant and on the war-victory than on the positive outcome, which is the fact that Beowulf has saved the community from further harm. Thus, Beowulf is more interested in killing the enemy and being named champion than he is in providing protection and reestablishing security for his allies. However, Beowulf is largely a product of his society, as the society at large is also focused on praising Beowulf for his murderous acts of violence throughout the poem, as opposed to being saved.

Beowulf receives support from the monarchy and society

Beowulf is encouraged by society and greatly honoured by the nobility for his heroic efforts. While Beowulf is getting ready to embark upon his
quest to the land of the Danes, men of his community support his efforts: “Done sidfæ him – snotere ceorlas / lythwón logon – béah hé him léof wære, / hwtton higerófne, – hæl scéawedon” [Wise men did not dissuade him at all / from that journey, though he was dear to them; / they encouraged his bold spirit] (202-4). Furthermore, after the killing of Grendel, King Hrothgar speaks the following passage during the celebratory feast:

Nú ic, Béowulf, bec, / secg betsta, – mé for sunu wylle / fréogan on ferhbe; – heald ford tela / níwe sibbe. – Ne bid bé nænigre gád / worolde wilna – be ic geweald hæbbe [...] dædum gefremed – bæt bín dóm lyfad / áwa tó alder. [Now I will cherish you, / Beowulf, best of men, like a son / in my heart; hold well henceforth / your new kinship. You shall have no lack / of the worldly goods which I can bestow [...] you have done such deeds that your fame will endure / always and forever.] (946-50, 954-5)

Beowulf is praised by the nobility for his courageous deeds and is rewarded with gifts of treasure and fame. Beowulf is not particularly interested in the treasure, as he gives most of it away to his fellow noblemen. However, as previously discussed, he has no shame in soaking in all the attention and fame for himself. At one point in the poem, King Hrothgar acknowledges Beowulf’s boasting statements by saying,

‘ne hyrde ic snotorlícor / on swá geongum feore – guman bingian. / bú eart mægenes strang – ond on mode fróð, / wís wordcwaída. [...] Mé bín módséfa.’ [‘I have never heard / a shrewder speech from such a young man. / You are strong in might and sound in mind, prudent in speech [...] Your character pleases me.’] (1842-45, 53)

Hrothgar encourages Beowulf’s boasting language and thus gives Beowulf no reason to believe that he is being anything other than a perfect hero in the eyes of the nobility. This may be true, that the nobility reveres these qualities in a hero. However, there is a flaw in the nobility’s definition of a hero, if a hero is revered for being a self-centred man who always tries to work solo and take all the credit, because this goes against the code of honour that requires
noblemen to fight together as a team for their community.

**Beowulf tries to act as a one-man-army**

Throughout the entire poem about Beowulf, his desire to fight alone goes against the communitarian ideology that the warriors uphold. Although, Beowulf does travel, feast, celebrate, and belong to a team of noblemen in his youth, his speeches do convey a strong desire to work individually without the help of his team of soldiers. This suggests that Beowulf wants to receive all of the gratitude and honour for himself. He makes it clear that he will be the one to fight and kill Grendel and he takes all the credit after the battle is over. In one of Beowulf’s speeches to King Hrothgar during a victory feast he states,

‘Wæron hér tela / willum bewende; – bú ús wél dohtest. / Gif ic bonne on eorban – ówihte mæg / bíre môdlufan – máran tilian, / gumena dryhten, – donne ic gyt dyde, / gúdgewearca, – ic béo gearo sóna.’ [‘Here we were honorably / entertained with delights; you have treated us well. / If ever on earth I can do any thing / to earn more affection, than the battle-deeds I have done already, / ruler of men, I will be ready at once.’] (1820-5)

Beowulf speaks for his team in the first line by saying [“we”]. However, he goes on to say [“I”] three times, focusing all the attention on his courageous deeds for personal recognition. Furthermore, Beowulf makes it clear that he fights for the purpose of gaining fame, as he is interested in earning [“more affection”] from the nobility, rather than providing protection to the community at large.

Even after more than fifty years pass, Beowulf still tries to maintain his superior stature acting as a one-man army. A dragon becomes a big threat to the safety of the people who live under Beowulf’s reign. As a king and warrior, Beowulf proceeds to fight the dragon and makes a speech to his noblemen stating that he must fight alone: “‘Nis bæt éower síd / ne gemet mannes – hefne mín ánes / bæt hé wid áglæcean – eofodo dæle’” [‘It is not your way, / nor proper for any man except me alone, / that he should match his strength against this monster’] (2532-4). Georgianna claims that Beowulf’s speech is a “rambling monologue” that allows him to delay the battle between
him and the dragon (829). Although, Beowulf was keen on giving lengthy speeches before commencing battles in his youth, the old Beowulf may be subconsciously delaying the fight because he knows that he is not as strong and powerful as he once was and does not have many years left. Yet, Beowulf’s desire to fight single-handedly once again demonstrates his desire to receive more recognition to his name. However, the dragon wounds Beowulf. Consequently, a nobleman named Wiglaf steps in to help Beowulf, because he is insistent upon remaining true to the code of honour, which requires soldiers to work together and sacrifice themselves in the face of danger or death for one another.

Since Beowulf knows that he is near death at this point in his life before going to fight the dragon, arguably speaking, Beowulf may have longed to fight alone for one final attempt to bring glory to his name and ensure his status as a legendary hero. Beowulf likely longed to die a “wundordéade swealt” [wondrous death] as he did, rather than alone in his bedroom (3037). As Beowulf is dying, he asks Wiglaf to make sure that “hlæw gewyrcean / beorhtne æfter bæle – æt brimes nósan, / se scel tó gemyndum – mínum léodum” [a tomb be built / shining over my pyre on the cliffs by the sea; / it will be a monument to my people] (2802-4). Evidently, Beowulf wants to guarantee that he is remembered and worshipped for decades after he is gone, as he is adamant about ensuring that his tomb is built with certain details. However, with all of the talking that Beowulf does during his lengthy speech before attempting to kill the dragon and his second speech to Wiglaf as he is dying, Beowulf does not choose a new king to take over after he is gone. His words suggest that he is more concerned with the future of his name. As Beowulf has no offspring, he leaves his people without a ruler, thus, forgetting to consider the future of their existence.

Conclusion

Beowulf is influenced by his socio-cultural traditions of favouring and rewarding heroic figures. He does not often acknowledge the assistance of other warriors. Instead he speaks of his accomplishments in great detail
during his speeches to the court, which ensures that everyone is made aware of his heroic qualities over other soldiers. Thus, Beowulf seems caught up in claiming personal fame and aspiring to uphold the image and qualities of an ideal heroic figure according to the nobility and society. Beowulf’s need to emphasize his own heroic qualities through boasting words and over-achieving actions implies that the competition involved with being a heroic warrior is fierce. His self-centeredness shows a disregard for the code of honour, as he prefers to fight alone so that he may reap in the glory by himself. Furthermore, Beowulf’s final words regarding his request to have a special tomb built in his honour, demonstrate his complete thoughtlessness for the security of his people, who are left without a king or an heir to the throne. Beowulf’s self-absorption and disregard for other soldiers and his people as well as his failure to adhere to the code of honour destabilize his position as a hero. Yet these failures are not recognized by the nobility or society, as Beowulf clearly fulfills the expectations of a hero in the eyes of the most of the characters in the poem seeing that he is constantly praised for his behaviour and personality. Therefore, the definition of a hero is flawed in the epic poem because it allows Beowulf to disregard the nobleman’s code of honour to attain heroic victory.

Bibliography


