

The Lonely King:
A Comparison of Heroic and Kingly Values within *Beowulf*

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Beowulf is a classic and ancient Anglo-Saxon hero's tale. The various monstrosities he faces define his story and character. His defeat of Grendel, his atrocious mother, and the dragon all reflect his prowess and courage as a heroic champion. But these victories also encourage the growth of ill-fated attitudes. As J. Leyerle describes, he is a hero that "follows a code that exalts indomitable will and valor in the individual." [1] In fact, the more Beowulf grows as a heroic warrior the more independent and prideful he becomes. And yet, in the midst of this he is pushed towards taking on the role of a king, which is a role he is woefully unfit to take. To lead a people-group requires a willingness to cooperate and a humility that a Beowulfian hero is simply disinclined to have. This disconnect between both ideals is the crux of Beowulf's journey. While Beowulf assumes both positions, there is a clear distinction between the characteristics of a successful hero and a successful king. Thus, the tale acts as a critique of a heroic culture that values pride and independence by showing the dangerous tendencies that this encourages, and what can happen when a hero is given power and responsibility.

Before we examine Beowulf's character, it is important that we begin in a proper Anglo-Saxon context of leadership, and specifically kingship. By having an example of an ideal leader, we will be able to compare and contrast attributes more effectively. Thus, I have chosen to use the historical character of Alfred the Great as an example of the ideal Anglo-Saxon king. I have chosen him as he was widely regarded as a wise and successful ruler, and was certainly one of the most celebrated kings in Anglo-Saxon history. [2] The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle outlines much of Alfred's rule and actions, and provides a wealth of history that can be used for interpretation. One of the most crucial points of his kingship was the decision to retreat from an overwhelming Danish army in A.D. 878 [3]. Alfred was in the town of Chippenham when an enemy army took the town by surprise. Although Alfred could have tried to stay and fight with the rest of his forces, his actions here demonstrate that he is conscious of the importance of a king. If Alfred fell here, the Anglo-Saxons would have been leaderless and at a severe disadvantage. Instead of attempting a heroic but possibly unwise attack, Alfred retreated and regrouped his armies, ultimately defeating or neutralizing most of the foreign threat. Alfred's decision suggests that he understands his importance as a king to the Anglo-Saxons, and knows that some situations are too dangerous for him to undertake

alone.

In addition to his self-awareness, Alfred the Great was also largely successful as a king because of his willingness to work with others. By working with other learned men he reportedly attained his renowned wisdom. As Asser writes in *The Life of King Alfred*, "his noble nature implanted in him from his cradle a love of wisdom above all things." [4] Alfred chased after wisdom and knowledge by inviting teachers and scholars from afar to teach him in his court. Although he was unlettered during his youth, his eagerness to learn from more knowledgeable men quickly transformed him into a wise king. More evidence of Alfred's willingness to cooperate can be found in the preface of his translation of Gregory's *Pastoral Care*. [5] This preface, along with the translated text, was directed and sent to holders of ecclesiastical office throughout his kingdom. In the preface, he calls attention to the rapid decline of literacy in England, and urges church leaders to take action against it by renewing the teaching of English and Latin to the laypeople. Again, this points towards Alfred's tendencies towards teamwork and synergy as he calls for his subjects to join him on his mission against illiteracy. Looking at these examples, it is no wonder that the Anglo-Saxons respected Alfred greatly. He was not a lonely crusader trying to tackle problems by himself, but rather, he is excellent example of a leader who made use of his resources and worked with others as a team.

With this framework in mind, we can begin to analyze the characteristics of Beowulf and examine how he matches up against the ideal qualities of an Anglo-Saxon king. Beowulf begins with the protagonist portrayed as an ideal heroic figure. He sails from his native lands in order to help defend an allied leader, Hrothgar, from a monster named Grendel that is stalking his lands. But alongside his immense courage and strength, his actions demonstrate this prideful attitude. A prime example takes shape in Beowulf's response to Unferth's provocations. Unferth is a warrior under the service of Hrothgar, and gives him a rather cold welcome shortly after his arrival. After Unferth belittles Beowulf by reminding him of his loss in a swimming competition, Beowulf tries to defend himself by spinning a tale about how he encountered sea-monsters and had to slay them. Though Beowulf may have been telling the truth, the legitimacy of his defense is arguable, as many scholars have noted. [6] It is a rather extraordinary claim, however it is simply a case of Beowulf's word against Unferth's as he tries to defend his reputation.

Also, Beowulf's response to Unferth includes a sweeping judgment of the Danish people. "He [Grendel] knows he can trample down you Danes / to his heart's content, humiliate and murder / without fear of reprisal," he claims. (BW 695) Beowulf follows up with a claim of his own, "he will find me different. / I will show him how Geats shape to kill." (BW 601) While mocking the Danes for their inability to solve their own problems, he simultaneously claims himself to be the solution to their misery. Whether or not this is true is beside the point: the strong language used shows just how self-confident Beowulf is. This encounter with Unferth is one of the first examples of Beowulf's burgeoning pride.

After Beowulf defeats Grendel and his mother it seems that Hrothgar no longer views pride as an admirable quality in Beowulf. His tone changes drastically now that Beowulf could become a king in the future. He cannot condone prideful behavior in Beowulf because it would be unbecoming of a king. This is evidenced by Hrothgar's sermon to him, where he directly says, "do not give way to pride." (BW 1760) Firstly, this statement implies that Beowulf was prideful in the past, and that Hrothgar observed this. There would be no point in correcting Beowulf for an attribute he did not have. Secondly, Hrothgar's quick change in attitude toward pride reinforces the division between expectations of kings and heroic warriors.

Hrothgar first tells the story of Heremod, a king that was "eminent and powerful and marked ... from the start / for a happy life," (BW 1717-1718) but ended up bringing about the destruction of his people. Hrothgar further describes him as a man who "vented his rage on men he caroused with, / killed his own comrades," and was "a pariah king / who cut himself off from his own kind." (BW 1713-1715) In the end, Heremod is blamed for refusing to honor his people with wealth, and for becoming increasingly bloodthirsty. In many ways, he is very similar to Beowulf, and acts as a foreshadowing of his future tragedies. Beowulf is, like Heremod, naturally blessed with great strength and a position of power as the son of King Ecgtheow. He is also pariah of sorts, as he maintains his sense of heroic independence even after he becomes a king. This is best exemplified in his last battle with the fire-dragon, which he chooses to fight alone. Lastly, Beowulf also brings about his nation's downfall when he sacrifices himself to kill the dragon. Without an heir or designated regent, the Geats are leaderless and more vulnerable than ever. With all of these striking similarities,

it can be safe to argue that Heremod's story is meant to be a warning for Beowulf. Hrothgar presents Heremod as an example of behavior to avoid when it comes to kingship.

Hrothgar's sermon to Beowulf also reveals a great deal about the tradition of kings. In addition to Heremod's tragic story, Hrothgar also shares his own past. He talks about how he "ruled the Ring-Danes' country / for fifty years, defended them in wartime / with spear and sword." (BW 1769-1771) Out of his successes came a self-confidence and arrogance, as he admitted "I came to believe / my enemies had faded from the face of the earth." (BW 1772-1773) But with Grendel's attacks, his fortunes and pride were completely reversed and he was put at the monster's mercy. Coupled with Heremod's story, a pattern emerges that portrays pride as a tragic and damning flaw within kings. Both stories include how pride was a handicapping and undesirable attribute for kings, and point towards a tradition of pride as a ruinous thing to have.

After his victory over Grendel and his monstrous dame, Beowulf's vanity and sense of independence continue to grow. Soon after he returned to his home country, Hygelac would fall in battle and Beowulf would fill his throne. As King, the poem records his rule as rather bloody. Beowulf led the Geats to a "comfortless campaign when he killed Onela," who was responsible for the death of Hygelac. (BW 2476) Furthermore, he is noted to have "had survived / every extreme, excelling himself / in daring and in danger." (BW 2478) Even after he takes on the role of a king, Beowulf is still trying to act like a hero by putting himself in battles and dangerous extremes. This is a dangerous gamble as a king, since Beowulf is now the heart of the Geatish people. If he dies, they would die leaderless, especially since he has no offspring to inherit his throne. This outcome is fully realized in Beowulf's last battle with the dragon.

One of the last, and arguably most convincing examples of Beowulf's ego is provided right before and after he goes to fight the fire-dragon. Before the fatal battle, the poet directly addresses Beowulf, explaining that "the prince of the rings [Beowulf] was too proud / to line up with a large army / against the sky-plague. He had scant regard / for the dragon as a threat, no dread at all." (BW 2340) The poet goes on to explain that Beowulf's confidence stemmed from the great number of battles he had fought, including his fights with Grendel and his mother. This shows that Beowulf

has continued to carry his old pride and independence with him, even up until this point. The formal boast he gives to his personal compliment of warriors is also highly indicative of this, as he plainly states, "as king of the people I shall pursue this fight / for the glory of winning." (BW 2351) Here, he blatantly admits that one of his main reasons for fighting is for the glory of it. Again, this type of behavior is reminiscent of Beowulf's heroic character. He's fighting for himself, and he displays a great pride by deciding to fight alone.

Beowulf's dismissal of his personal guard is also a key recurring example of his sweeping self-confidence. After he gives his formal boast, he tells them to "remain here on the barrow, / safe in your armour ... This fight is not yours, / nor is it up to any man except me / to measure his strength against the monster / or to prove his worth. I shall win the gold / by my courage." (BW 2356) This is not the first time Beowulf has done this. When facing Grendel's mother, he chooses to fight by himself as well, despite having a band of warriors that had journeyed with him for the purpose of helping him fight. While that previous choice to fight alone might certainly be considered to be foolish, the decision to fight the dragon alone proves to be catastrophic. Beowulf is no longer simply a warrior when he fights his last battle – he is a king with a responsibility to his people. Recognizing this, one of the warriors that accompanies him named Wiglaf bewails the fact that "when the worst happened / too few rallied around the prince." (BW 2890) Beowulf's insistence to fight alone continues an ongoing pattern in his behavior, reflecting how his heroic pride and independence severely handicapped him in his last battle, and may have even cost him his life.

However, it would also seem reasonable to consider whether Beowulf actually feels prideful, or is merely posturing. Several statements made by Beowulf seem to support this, such as the farewell he gives before leaving to fight Grendel's mother. He says, "if I should fall / and suffer death while serving your cause ... If this combat kills me, take care of my young company, my comrades in arms." (BW 1487-1481) Here, Beowulf's words seem to stem from a genuine fear of death, which would not be the case if he were wholly confident in his ability. While this may be the case, there is no denying that there is an underlying expectation of heroes. This can be seen clearly in the reaction that Beowulf's audience gives. Immediately after his boasts, Hrothgar is recorded as being gladdened, and affirms his trust in Beowulf's ability. (BW

605-610) This reaction is quite unexpected, since Beowulf's broad insult towards the Danes was targeted towards his vassal warriors, and indirectly insults Hrothgar himself as the leader of the Danes. Thus, it can be inferred from Hrothgar's acceptance that attributes of pride and arrogance may have been socially expected qualities in a heroic warrior.

The differences between the roles of a hero and a king can be further illustrated by comparing Beowulf and Hrothgar. Hrothgar never confronts Grendel directly in battle, but deals with the problem through warrior vassals. In fact, the only real progress against the monster's intrusions starts when Hrothgar welcomes Beowulf to fight on his behalf. This cautious behavior might seem cowardly, but could actually be a very valid strategy. From what we observed with the Geats and Beowulf, a kingdom dies when the king dies. Thus, it would make very good sense for a king to stay away from combat and leave it to his warriors. Risking his life in personal battle would not only endanger his own life, but the livelihood of his entire land as well. Hrothgar's cautiousness opposes Beowulf's reckless battles, particularly his last battle with the dragon. Looking at both approaches, it is demonstrably apparent that Hrothgar's strategy triumphs. He survives the ordeal with his life and kingdom intact by reserving his strength and relying on others, while Beowulf loses everything because he constantly risks death on the frontlines of battle.

With the end of tale, we can see how the character of Beowulf critiques the heroic culture of arrogance and independence, as demonstrated by his tragic rise from a heroic warrior to kingship. The dangers of pride are summed up quite well by Hrothgar, who warned Beowulf by saying, "For a brief while your strength is in bloom / but it fades quickly; and soon there will follow / illness or the sword to lay you low ... and death will arrive, / dear warrior, to sweep you away." (BW 1768) A truly effective leader, from the angle of Beowulf and from the example of Alfred the Great, is not simply a particularly skillful warrior. Otherwise, the nation's fate will be reliant on a single person, which would put them in a very precarious situation should that person succumb to injury or death. True nation building and leadership requires a willingness to cooperate and delegate authority.

NOTES

[1] Leyerle, *Medium Aevum*, pg. 89

[2] Asser, *The Life of King Alfred*,

[3] Trans. Ingram, J. H. *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*. Echo Library, 2009. Print.

[4] Asser, *The Life of King Alfred*, pg. 8

[5] Alfred, *Pastoral Care*, pg. 2-3

[6] Hughes, G. (1977). *Beowulf, unferth and hrunting: An interpretation*. *English Studies: A Journal of English Language and Literature*, 58, 385-395.

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[2] Asser. *The Life of King Alfred*. Trans. Simon Keynes. London: Penguin Books, 2004. Print.

[3] Trans. Ingram, J. H. *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*. Echo Library, 2009. Print.

[4] Gregory. *Pastoral Care*. Trans. Alfred. Print.

[5] Hughes, Geoffrey. "Beowulf, Unferth and Hrunting: An Interpretation." *English Studies: A Journal of English Language and Literature* 58 (1977): 385-95. ProQuest. 28 Jan. 2014.