




2021

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### Recommended Citation

Bonafede, Jessie (2021) "The Good, the Bad, and the Violent: Analyzing Beowulf's Heroic Displacement and Transgressive Violence during the Grendel Quest," *Quidditas*: Vol. 42 , Article 5.  
Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/rmmra/vol42/iss1/5>

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**The Good, the Bad, and the Violent: Analyzing Beowulf's  
Heroic Displacement and Transgressive Violence  
during the Grendel Quest**

Jessie Bonafede  
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*Heroic actions are often associated with altruistic feats of humanitarianism, but in Beowulf, the connection between heroism and performative acts of violence reveal significant complications concerning how the poem codifies violence for social honor. A central conflict arises with the poem's contrasting presentation of Beowulf's dominance and physical power before and during the Grendel quest with the relatively low social status he incurs amongst his maternal kin group, the Geats. In this paper, I use anthropological and sociological theories of collective violence and dominance versus prestige hierarchies to rethink how violence interplays with the poem's treatment of lineage and other social influences informing appropriate tribal exchanges and effectively designating what constitutes heroism versus infamy. With this approach, I offer a critique of Beowulf's heroic performance as a socially displaced and transgressive character who must use his alterity to exploit non-normative opportunities for using dominance and acquiring prestige.*

Violence plays a central role in *Beowulf*. From structuring the main narrative to shaping the poem's many digressions, violence surfaces as a primary element informing the poem's many characters' interactions, their behaviors, and their primary aspirations. While Beowulf's exploits at Heorot may tantalize and entertain, scholarship should question how the poet's intricate portrayals of violence serve to satisfy and challenge concepts of alterity and heroism, which appear deeply invested in the social celebration and critique of reciprocal demonstrations of violence. Although Beowulf's decision to help Hrothgar and the Danes may at first appear as the altruistic underpinnings of a warrior hero cast in the epic genre, a careful examination of the poem's treatment of lineage and social influences that inflame tribal boundaries from within and between groups reveals Beowulf to be less a hero than a displaced and socially transgressive character caught within a precarious social position amongst the Geats struggling to overcome it. By applying

theories of collective violence and dominance versus prestige social hierarchies, I argue that the poem effectively compounds Beowulf's transgressive qualities through his lineage, actions, and behaviors, offering an additional critique of his character's heroic performance and alterity through violence.

A significant contradiction concerning Beowulf's heroic identity exists between his social standing while with the Danes and the one he enjoys amongst his Geatish kin, which complicates the poem's coding of violence for social honor. While at Heorot, characters remark on Beowulf's physical stature and reputation for aggressive action, suggesting a strong connection between heroism and one's potential for success through the explicit use of violence. Even Beowulf in heroic style brags about his violent abilities which he verifies for the Danes by upholding his boast and slaying Grendel and Grendel's mother. Yet, this heroic perception is drastically overturned once Beowulf arrives home and takes an audience with his king and maternal uncle, Hygelac. Here the poet reveals that

*Hean wæs lange,  
swa hýne Geata bearn godne ne tealdon,  
ne hýne on medobence micles wyrðne  
dryhten Wedera gedon wolde;  
swyðe wendon þæt he sleac wære,  
æðeling unfrom. (2183b-2188)<sup>1</sup>*

Long was he [Beowulf] lowly, as the Geats did not deem him worthy of much, nor would the lord of the Weders grant him much honor among the mead-benches. They truly thought him to be inept, a feeble nobleman.

While scholars have often dismissed this passage as flawed or relegated it to folkloric motif, the use of "Geata bearn" and "drihten Wedera" carries important social and political implications concerning King Hrethel's patrilineal kin and tribe, in particular his royal sons, and their apparent perception and treatment of Beowulf.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> This and all subsequent citations from *Beowulf* are taken from Klaeber, *Klaeber's Beowulf*. The translations that follow quotations in Old English are my own.

<sup>2</sup> For a discussion of Beowulf's low status, see Klaeber's commentary for line 2183b in Klaeber, *Klaeber's Beowulf*, 236.

Suddenly, Beowulf's previous accomplishments alluded to in Heorot erode in Hygelac's hall, but the reasons remain obscured. From this passage, a major distinction can be drawn between the social value or importance of patrilineal versus matrilineal tribal identification for status acquisition influencing the poem's heroic context and the social codification of appropriate and heroic versus inappropriate and unheroic or even monstrous uses of violence.

The poet clearly establishes Beowulf's Geatish royal identity through his maternal line (that of Hrethel's daughter), and Beowulf's residence within his maternal tribe appears to contribute greater status to him abroad than at home amidst Hrethel's kin.<sup>3</sup> Erin Shaul has noted that there are 14 instances in the poem where Beowulf is identified as Ecgtheow's son, but only in the poet's narration and never from a character addressing Beowulf directly.<sup>4</sup> From these instances, Shaul determines that Beowulf's paternal lineage is evoked during times of weakness, such as the fight against Grendel's mother and the dragon, while his affiliation with the Geats occurs during times of triumph, such as the battle against Grendel.<sup>5</sup> Beowulf's consistent self-identification with Hygelac also focalizes on service to and acceptance by his kin and lord, so when Ecgtheow is evoked before Beowulf addresses Hygelac about his quest, it further signals the social and political insecurities of his character's group membership amongst the Geats. Furthermore, by likening the Geats' displeasure with Beowulf to a general and blanket lack of esteem and ability, the power of the community in recognizing, bestowing, or withholding honor as social status from warriors surfaces as a key regulating factor of warriors' actions despite their physical abilities or heroic aspirations.

Anthropologists and sociologists collectively identify two primary strategies for societal status acquisition, which can operate together

<sup>3</sup> In line 375, Hrothgar identifies how Hrethel offers Ecgtheow his "angan dohtor" (only daughter) in marriage.

<sup>4</sup> Shaul, "Beowulf's Father(s)," 3.

<sup>5</sup> Shaul, "Beowulf's Father(s)," 7-10.

and in varying combinations. First is status gained through dominance, or an individual actant's use of force and power against others, including fear tactics.<sup>6</sup> Second is status gained through prestige, or the societal recognition and rewarding of an individual due to their skills or contributions to the group.<sup>7</sup> While dominance strategies may allow individuals to quickly stand out from others, prestige strategies heavily regulate individual status and power by the group either condemning or condoning an actant's behavior with punishments and rewards.<sup>8</sup> Jim Sidanius and Felicia Pratto argue that within stratified societies, as people become functioning members of the established group, often group-based social hierarchies begin to inform which social powers and privileges individuals possess "by virtue of his or her ascribed membership in a particular socially constructed group such as a race, religion, clan, tribe, lineage, linguist/ethnic group, or social class."<sup>9</sup> This has significant implications for understanding how dominance and prestige strategies interact within *Beowulf* at the level of the individual character and collective tribe: having a partiality and talent for violence does not guarantee social honor.

6 See Waal-Andrews, Gregg and Lammers, "When Status is Grabbed," 445-446. The authors offer an important literary overview of anthropological scholarship concerning dominance and prestige social systems and strategies for status acquisition within each respective system.

7 See Goode, *The Celebration of Heroes*, 7. Goode defines prestige as "the esteem, respect, or approval that is granted by an individual or a collectivity for performances or qualities they consider above the average." By extent, failure to acquire appropriate amounts of prestige could negatively impact an individual's standing within the community and their access to community-based goods and services, ultimately having life or death consequences. Due to the role of the community granting or withholding prestige, prestige hierarchies can function as forms of social control for individuals by further instilling group identification and privileging those who contribute to group goals.

8 See Waal-Andrews, Gregg, and Lammers, "When Status is Grabbed," 457. The authors discuss how their research indicates that the current hierarchal system(s) within the group will greatly inform individuals' success when pursuing dominance versus prestige strategies for status acquisition. As individual actants engage with others, it is not in isolation but rather filtered through the cultural ideologies informing the very structure of their communities. Such findings can add clarity to *Beowulf*'s conflicting image as a dominant, imposing warrior that the Geats may love and accept yet have little respect for prior to his defeat of Grendel. Clearly, being physically powerful and performing violent acts influences character status and reputation in *Beowulf*, but being able to perform violence successfully is not the only factor determining social standing within the poem.

9 Sidanius and Pratto, *Social Dominance*, 32.

The scholastic efforts of John M. Hill and Peter Baker have helped to expose important features informing the poem's portrayal and development of the warband, motivations underpinning characters' social engagements, and violence as the marker of cultural success.<sup>10</sup> Hill examines the reciprocal nature between lords and retainers and reasons that the foundation of this reciprocal lord-retainer relationship is not one of altruism, but of social debt for status encouraging social order: one's participation in violence mandates the promise of gifts, or is evoked in the reverse from situations where gifts have already been bestowed upon retainers to consolidate their participation in future violent engagements.<sup>11</sup> Baker's development of an economy of honor offers insights into how wealth, its acquisition, distribution, and meaning, functions in association with performative acts of violence for the acquisition of honor.<sup>12</sup> In order for this poetic economy to operate and for characters to be successful, heroes must actively partake in violent acts to enhance their individual and group identities. Mastery over a prescribed enemy economically and symbolically augments the warrior's honor or *weorð* through possession of his enemy's loot and his reputation for dominance, which in turn benefits the king and tribe via the warrior's continued

10 Both Hill's and Baker's efforts assist with answering difficult questions concerning the high level of risk associated with violence strategies and character motivations for participating in violent exchanges, as well as countering simplistic justifications for or the generalized acceptance of violence as the mere fundamental business of heroic and villainous warriors. Considering the ways in which violence permeates the early medieval culture, from the Kentish and Anglo-Saxon law codes, human remains and injuries from Anglo-Saxon archeological records, and historical chronicles, such as Bede's *Ecclesiastical History*, the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, and the *Annales of Cambriae*, concerns regarding the use of violence and its material, political, and very real human costs has connections well beyond the parchment and into the very culture(s) producing and consuming literary works. For discussions concerning violence and the Anglo-Saxon law codes, see Gates and Marafioti, *Captial and Corporal Punishment*; Hyams, "Feud and the State"; Oliver, *The Beginnings of English Law*; Richardson and Sayles, *Law and Legislation*; Simpson, "The Laws of Ethelbert"; and Wormald, *Legal Culture*. For discussions concerning violence, warriorship, and archaeology, see Davidson, "The Hill of the Dragon"; Harke, "Early Saxon Weapon Burials" and "Warrior Graves?"; and Reynolds, *Anglo-Saxon Deviant Burial Customs*.

11 Hill, *The Anglo-Saxon Warrior Ethic*.

12 Baker, *Honour, Exchange and Violence*.

membership.<sup>13</sup> That said, questions still persist concerning what kind of violence gets used, by whom, and when; precisely how legitimate versus illegitimate forms of violence are coded; and how individual versus collective action and identity manifest and break down because of violence.<sup>14</sup>

Throughout the poem, patrilineal tribal identification appears to be the primary form of societal organization with a ruling (royal) family at the top of the hierarchy that can trace its lineage back to a central powerful patriarch. The importance of patriarchal lineage functions to activate strong social boundaries between tribes and consolidate group identity within the tribe. Additionally, the poem presents two secondary influences on societal hierarchical structure: patrilocal marriage alliances in which a woman from one tribe marries into the natal kin group of her husband, and retainership where a warrior from a different tribal affiliation takes up residence and pledges service to a lord of a different tribe. The implications for either arrangement appear to help broker, if ineffectively, intertribal violence by providing offspring that bond and invest social interests between tribes or by offering a place of refuge and opportunity for

13 See Baker, *Honour, Exchange and Violence*, 35-76. Baker notes that while treasure can enter the poem's economic system via manufacturing, gifting between nations, paying tributes or wergilds, and even scavenging battlefields and graves, that these are subverted by the poem's emphasis on treasure seized during violent engagements between factional tribes.

14 See Scheper-Hughes and Bourgois, "Making Sense of Violence," 1-5. Anthropologists Scheper-Hughes and Bourgois in their introduction to the collection *Violence in War and Peace* argue that the use of violence within cultures are heavily influenced by the customs and structures of power within specific cultures: "Cultures, social structures, ideas, and ideologies shape all dimensions of violence, both its expressions and its repressions." Violence can take many forms, and as it gets integrated into the social structure, it becomes cloaked in "part of the routine grounds of everyday life and transformed into expressions of moral worth." Still, it is critical to remember that while violence leads to destructive outcomes and causes harm, societies consistently develop ways to permit, encourage, and enjoin its usage with morality and a sense of duty that sustain multiple layers of socio-political, economic, public and private norms. Furthermore, see Tilly, *The Politics of Collective Violence*. Tilly offers a useful typology of violence and framework for identifying how relational exchanges between individuals and groups function to impact the character of violence strategies, as well as motivate people's participation or nonparticipation. Of particular interest for this discussion of *Beowulf* are his insights concerning violent rituals, broken negotiations, and coordinated destruction as collective violence strategies within societies, and how these strategies respond to motivational factors, like us-them boundaries and polarization versus brokerage strategies within and between societies. By considering the interplay between these various mechanisms that influence individual versus group violence, *Beowulf*'s character motivations and interactions within his kin group and among the Danes reveal significant social pressures that impede and facilitate his success and failures.

marginalized or exiled warriors. Such is the case for Beowulf's father, Ecgtheow, who takes up residence at Heorot after Hrothgar pays wergild for the "fæhþe mæste" (459) that he commits.

Interestingly, while the specific details of Ecgtheow's fæhþe mæste remain obscure, it is clear that Ecgtheow's actions have significant social consequences for his own character and Beowulf. Immediately after learning of Hrothgar's intercession, we learn that "ða hine Wedera cyn / for herebrogan habban ne mihte" (461b-462) (then the nation of the Weders was not able to have him [Ecgtheow] due to the terror of war). The Geatish royal house's decision to ostracize Ecgtheow and refuse him sanctuary as a result of his offense raises questions as to Ecgtheow's personal tribal affiliation with them as well as the complexity of intertribal political networks in play. Since the Geats fear war as a result of harboring Ecgtheow due to the fæhþe mæste, it suggests that doing so would incite great enmity from an undisclosed third party. David Wilton has offered a significant reassessment of the Old English word fæhða which he argues carries more specific meanings for a singular hostile act or offense committed by an individual.<sup>15</sup> While this does not exclude the possibility for retributive conditions, it significantly redirects focus to the individual at fault within the society opening up more possibilities for understanding how such groups respond to the use of violence by and against others, either through wergild negotiations, like Hrothgar, or through ostracization, like the Geats. Regardless, this homicide indicates a grave transgression of current intertribal affiliations and culturally appropriate or sanctioned violence strategies—a possible behavioral characteristic that will become central to Beowulf's own actions within the poem.

Ruth Lehmann and Erin Shaull offer strong linguistic evidence for Ecgtheow's inclusion in the Scylfing royal Swedish lineage and the complications this adds to systems of inheritance and decisions for

<sup>15</sup> See Wilton, "Fæhða Gemyndig: Hostile Acts." By examining the phrase *fæhðe ond fyrene* in *Beowulf*, Wilton reasons that *fyrene* should be understood as apposition to the *fæhðe*, therefore creating a common intensified link between a specific hostile act as a crime, rather than in addition to it, like feuding-cycles.



offering refuge to exiled warriors.<sup>16</sup> Given evidence for marriage alliances, and their propensity to fail, Ecgtheow's marriage to Hrethel's daughter may have fallen within this tradition as a means to quell previous hostilities and deactivate intense social tribal boundaries; but when Ecgtheow commits his great crime, the marriage becomes subjected to a breach of negotiations in which the Swede's resume enmity and the Geats reclaim their princess, much like Queen Hildeburh in the Finn episode.<sup>17</sup> The final result is that tribal hostilities reignite starkly across lineage-based social boundaries between the Geats and the Swedes overriding and polarizing social bonds across the tribes.

Though the circumstances of Beowulf's residence in Geatland remain ambiguous, a half-Swedish paternal lineage and his father's crime help clarify and compound the apparent prejudice and alterity his character experiences from his youth until his return from Heorot. Not only must Beowulf's character bear the social cost of his father's crime, but he must also reside, compete and cooperate with kin who remain at war with his paternal lineage, the Swedes. Since the typical or tacit expectation is that offspring identify through their tribe's patriarch, Beowulf suffers status displacement within a group-based social hierarchy that privileges paternal lineage as a key marker of prestige.

Given the context of Beowulf's social polarization, his decision to assist Hrothgar should not be interpreted as a definite marker of heroism; after all, heroism operates within the domain of prestige

16 See Lehmann, "Ecgþeow the *Wægmunding*," 1-5, and Shaull, "Ecgþeow, Brother of Ongeneþeow," 269. By analyzing the linguistic features of the Scyldings along with Germanic and Old English naming practices that favor frontal alliteration, Lehmann argues that Ecgþeow fits the alliterative vowel pattern of Ongeneþeow, Ohthere, Onela, Eadgils, and Eanmund, thus designating him as Swedish. Shaull extends Lehmann's conclusions by focusing on the shared deutertheme of *þeow* between Ecgþeow and Ongeneþeow, likely associating them as a younger and older brother.

17 Interestingly, Hrothgar states that he "hine cuðe cnihtwesende" (372) (knew him as a boy), suggesting that at some point Beowulf was at Heorot, most readily explained by Ecgtheow's residence there. Later, Beowulf states that Hrethel took him in at age seven (2428-2431). For a discussion on fosterage practices and influences on the text, see Klaeber's commentary for line 2428 in Klaeber, *Klaeber's Beowulf*, 245.

and thus relies heavily on confirmation by one's society. Rather, Beowulf's decision functions as a shrewd attempt to overcome the socially imposed hierarchical barriers he faces: first, through asserting his supreme individual dominance over the fierce Grendel and second, by effectively brokering peace between the Geats and the Danes upon his success. Assigning heroism to Beowulf's quest is not as straightforward as it may appear, especially concerning how Beowulf violates the lord-retainer relationship with Hygelac and the current intertribal polarization that exists between the Geats and Danes. While scholarship has relied upon face-saving tactics and Beowulf's potential obligation to Hrothgar because of Ecgtheow, the fact remains that the Danes and Geats are hostiles at war and Grendel is not the Geats' enemy. According to Mary Dockray-Millar, a warrior's power or dominance within the heroic context is not guaranteed but rather must be actively and aggressively earned through winning certain masculine-aligned attributes that will demarcate him as a high-status warrior.<sup>18</sup> The perceived risk of death associated with the individual's actions as devotion to group goals instead of self-interest also factor into society's labeling the individual as heroic and granting him prestige.<sup>19</sup> But the hostilities between the Geats and Danes complicate this process and point towards it being socially transgressive, if not outright foolish, due to the threat that Grendel poses and to whom.

Beowulf's actions raise a rather insidious question of whose social goals he is pursuing and if these are reasonable within the poem's heroic context. When speaking to Hygelac about his journey, Hygelac's response reveals significant tensions between individual and group interests. Hygelac exclaims:

18 Dockray-Miller, "Beowulf's Tears of Fatherhood," 1-10. Dockray-Miller likens the poem's dependency on oath- and risk-taking to what Gillian Overing terms as the "ultimate masculine statement—I will defeat the monster or die" trying. The possibility for death becomes a significant aspect of warriors seeking prestige through dominance displays, and such displays should ideally progress group goals respective of social hierarchy. Unfortunately, as Dockray-Miller suggests, the male bonds that sustain such a warrior society are fragile and subject to shift and degrade.

19 Goode, *The Celebration of Heroes*, 344-345.

*Hu lomp eow on lade, leofa Biowulf,  
þa ðu færinga feorr gehogodest  
sæcce secean ofer sealt wæter,  
hilde to Hiorote? Ac ðu Hroðgare  
widcuðne wean wihte gebettest,  
mærum ðeodne? Ic ðæs modceare  
sorhwylmum seað, siðe ne truwode  
leofes mannes; ic ðe lange bæd  
þæt ðu þone wælgæst wihte ne grette,  
lete Suð-Dene sylfe geweorðan  
guðe wið Grendel. Gode ic þanc secge  
þæs ðe ic ðe gesundne geseon moste.” (1987-1998)*

What happened to you on that journey, dear Beowulf, after you suddenly resolved to seek a fight at Heorot far off across the salty sea? Did you in any way remedy the widely known miseries of Hrothgar, the renowned king? I for this anxiety of mind have been agitated over your expedition with surging sorrow and heavy grief, for I did not trust the venture of my dear man. I long urged you not to challenge that slaughter-guest, instead, to allow the Danes to settle the feud with Grendel themselves. I give thanks to God for allowing your safe return.

Attention is initially focused on Beowulf’s impulsive decision to sail to Heorot and fight Grendel which place’s Beowulf’s decision outside of normative expectations: as an unanticipated decision, it becomes inextricably linked with Beowulf’s personal desires over that of the tribe. Furthermore, Hygelac calls attention to Beowulf’s actions opposing his own advisement which resonates at the level of kinship bonds and hierarchical obligation: as Hygelac’s retainer, he should act in accordance with his provider’s wishes. It stands to reason that for Hygelac’s character and the Geats more broadly, they doubt how Beowulf’s goal will benefit the tribe. Hygelac’s doubt about Beowulf’s abilities continues to signal Beowulf’s lower status and the perceived futility of any group rewards: it is the Danes’ problem, so let them handle it without negatively depleting the Geats of warriors, armor, wealth, and reputation. Additionally, when compared to other intertribal engagements presented in the poem, encounters between tribes lead to either coordinated destruction or brokerage via marriage: neither of which Beowulf attempts at Heorot. Once again, the poem presents important social and relational mechanisms coding intertribal engagements and its association with appropriate violence-based strategies. But the

transgressive qualities of Beowulf's actions are exactly what afford his character the opportunity to demonstrate his dominance abroad in order to achieve prestige from the Geats. By helping their Danish enemies overcome Grendel's terror, he procures personal renown for his extraordinary power as well as brokers lasting peace with the Danes, which benefits the Geats since it closes the social boundaries that have been keeping them apart. Before leaving Heorot, Hrothgar declares:

*"Hafast þu gefered þæt þam folcum sceal,  
Geata leodum ond Gar-Denum  
sib gemænu, ond sacu restan,  
inwitniþas þe hie ær drugon . . ." (1855-1858)*

"You have made it so that the people of the Geats and Danes will nurture mutual peace and lay to rest conflict, the enmity previously harbored ..."

Yet Beowulf's shrewd decision-making and success are still dependent upon his physical abilities to dominate his target foes through violence. Interestingly, the poet offers ways in which Beowulf is not only capable of extraordinary feats of violence, but even has an affinity for it that may also extend beyond normative socio-cultural boundaries. The flyting episode with Unferth presents an excellent opportunity to question Beowulf's preoccupation with violence, especially concerning his competition with Breca. The fact that Beowulf capitalizes on the extreme feat of slaying nine sea monsters after five nights in the water to manipulate Unferth's flyting and promote his own dominance raises concerns about prestige.<sup>20</sup> We learn from Unferth's version of the story that Breca is

20 For a detailed and insightful summative analysis of the Unferth and Beowulf flyting episode's connection to Norse literature, see Clover, "The Germanic Context," 466. Clover argues that

The relation of the Unferþ episode to the Norse flytings . . . is immediate and detailed, both with respect to situation (the hostile investigation into the reputation of a newcomer by a man who stands in a delegate relation to the king and is explicitly known as a man of words) and the nature of the speeches themselves: in form (Claim, Defense, and Counterclaim); in tone (the blend of insult, competitive boasting, and curse); in the use of sarcasm (most characteristically in concessive clauses); in the emphatic I/you contrast and the use of names in direct address; in the combat metaphor; in the matching of personal histories and the exposure of dubious or shameful deeds (and their sarcastic reconstruction); in the telltale preoccupation with the moral negotiability of past events; in the use of familiar oppositions and paradigms; and in such correspondences of detail as the charges of drunkenness and fratricide and the Hell curse. The only conspicuous incongruity is the absence of a sexual element - but then the Beowulf poet is not known for developing the erotic dimensions of his gothic tale.

What is most useful about Clover's analysis for this argument, is how her assessment of the

rewarded by his society for completion of the contest, while Beowulf effectively is not, and these points remain undisputed by Beowulf's version. Furthermore, this match was completed during their youth, the likely period of time that the Geats held him in low regard. If the purpose or stakes were to finish the swimming match, then Beowulf did not fully adhere to the parameters of the competition for status; though he may have exceeded (as he claims) in demonstrating greater power or dominance, his actions ultimately fail to warrant him social prestige as it does for Breca. Beowulf claims that

*“Breca næfre git  
æt heaðolace, ne gehwæper incer,  
swa deorlice dæd gefremede  
fagum sweordum—no ic þæs fela gylpe— . . .”* (583b-586)

“Never yet at battle play has Breca, nor either of you two, carried out as bold a deed with shining swords—I do not boast of this— . . .”

However, by his own admission, the killing of sea creatures was reserved for defensive purposes and should not be taken as the primary objective of the contest: “Hæfdon swurd nacod, þa wit on sund reon, / heard on handa; wit unc wið hronfixas / werian þohton” (539-541) (“We had naked swords, hard in our hands, when we swam in the ocean; we intended to defend ourselves against whales”). Whether his dispatchment of the sea monsters happened or consequently benefitted all sea travelers as Beowulf claims, the fact remains that defense against sea whales was secondary to the swimming contest and his actions, though impressive, are not enough to secure heroic honor and social status.<sup>21</sup>

literary and social components involved in flytings reveal elements associated with Tilly's framework of violent rituals as a prominent form of collective violence: most specifically, the reliance on coordinated group identity through a stylized enactment of us-them boundaries; the adherence to a publicly scripted interaction aimed at inflicting damage (physical or social) as group members compete for priority within a recognized arena, such as the mead-hall; known scorecards and fixed or finite stakes; a clear differentiation between (proper) participants and targets, such as warriors and outsiders; and finally, the presence of monitors and/or spectators: see Tilly, *The Politics of Collective Violence*, 101.

21 For a discussion of boasting words in *Beowulf*, see Nelson, “Beowulf's Boast Words.” Nelson argues for redefining the meaning and function of the two types of boasting words and their compounds that appear in *Beowulf*: *beot* and *beotword*, and *gylp*, *gylpword*, *gilpwide*, and *gylpsprac*. She advocates for understanding *gylp* as boasting or bragging and *beot* as a promise or vow to the hearer. This context lends support for Beowulf's claims to have slayed nine sea monsters, or at least some of them.

That said, Beowulf's success against these sea enemies (identified as aglæcan in line 556) foreshadows the poet's obfuscation of the aglæca identity during Beowulf's fight with Grendel, effectively conflating the hero with the villain and complicating how violence and heroism interact. Although Beowulf has his bet to socially fall back upon, the poet's decision to have him fight unarmed via a hand lock completely intensifies the power element of his dominance display, setting his character well apart from any warrior who attempted the fight before him. But the fight also solidifies Beowulf's aggressive nature and propensity for destructive violence, perhaps his father's disposition. The poet emphasizes Beowulf's commitment to the total destruction of his foe:

*Nolde eorla hleo ænige þinga  
þone cwealmcuman cwicne forlætan,  
ne his lifdagas leoda ængum  
nytte tealde. (791-794)*

The protector of men did not wish by any means to let that deadly visitor go alive; he did not consider his [Grendel's] lifedays of use to any of the people.

This disregard for life may seem fitting for a warrior fighting in battle, but it signals Beowulf's singlemindedness: the monster must die. This becomes a peculiar sentiment when placed within the poet's previous conflation of Beowulf with Grendel. The poet revisits the intensity and savagery of this behavioral disposition by claiming that "*wæs gehwæþer oðrum / lifigende lað*" (814b-815) (each was loathsome to the other while alive). Here, there is no longer a distinction between what makes a warrior's use of violence heroic versus condemnable except for the influences and primacy of the society that supports each actant. It should not be surprising then when Beowulf "*Nihtweorce gefeh, / ellenmærbum*" (827b-828) (Rejoiced in the night's work, from heroic deeds) that the initial claim focuses on the delight Beowulf takes in the violence he afflicts against Grendel. Cleverly, the poet adds apposition that functions to socially relegate those extreme, even bestial actions to the social

plane of prestige, thus legitimating Beowulf's heroism over his and Grendel's monstrousness for the audience. Although Hrothgar and the Danes will rejoice in Beowulf's efforts, perhaps it should come as no surprise that upon his departure, Hrothgar counsels Beowulf on proper leadership and cautions him against committing the atrocities of bloodlust previously enacted by Heremod. As discussed, dominance through force evokes status through fear and Beowulf has proven himself mightier than most. This fear becomes tamed through society's influence over warriors as the community grants or withholds prestige from them based upon the social perception of their violence use, who benefits from it, and why.

On the surface, Beowulf appears to be a typical warrior seeking status through actively dispatching foes and saving communities. However, by applying anthropological and sociological theories of violence alongside theories of social dominance versus prestige hierarchies, scholarship can explore multiple ways in which Beowulf's character effectively defies normativity, further complicating the poem's concerns regarding authority, governance, and appropriate violence usage. The history and development of early medieval kingdoms in Britain is a history fraught with dynamic cultural and political changes, including evolving ideas about secular and ecclesiastic authority, kingship and governance, legal codes for corporal and capital punishment, and even burial practices and locations based on social standing.<sup>22</sup> Furthermore, violent invasions from across both land and sea borders continued to cultivate anxieties concerning outsiders and their potential impact on and place within society.<sup>23</sup>

Approaching violence from these perspectives reveals new opportunities for distinguishing and reading the poem's displays of violence in deeper conversation with the poem's representation of

22 For considerations of legal developments and their connection to the body and violence, see O'Keeffe, "Body and Law," and Gates and Marafioti, *Capital and Corporal Punishment*. Additionally, for a discussion of archeological evidence for victims of war, homicide, and executions, the significance of burial sites, and considerations of evolving legal systems, see Reynolds, *Anglo-Saxon Deviant Burial Customs*.

23 For a discussion of how arrivals and departures functions within *Beowulf*, and the threats they can pose, see Hill, *Narrative Pulse of Beowulf*

intertribal politics and various digressions, such as the Finn episode and recount of Heremod, and developing historical socio-political landscapes. The poem offers important clues for determining the source of Beowulf's heroic motivations: a questionable paternal lineage and an affinity for violence that transgresses the poem's presentation of intra and intertribal politics. Given his inability to perform dominance in a socially appropriate way that would cause the Geats to grant him prestige within the group's social hierarchy, Beowulf must use his alterity to his own advantage. Where he may transgress social expectations, these will ultimately become the mechanisms by which he both thrives and later dies.

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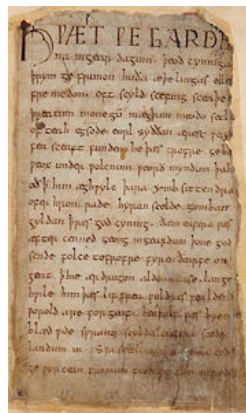
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***First Page of Beowulf  
Cotton MS Vitellius Axy  
Manuscript c. AD 910-1010***