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“Mindful God and One Man’s Daring”: The Christian-Pagan Conflict of *Beowulf*

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Abstract

Composed by an anonymous Christian poet between the seventh and the ninth century, *Beowulf* is an Anglo-Saxon epic poem that records the life of the Geat hero, Beowulf and his slaying of three terrible monsters, Grendel, Grendel’s Mother, and a dragon. Despite the story’s original pagan origin, this essay analyzes the extent to which the Christian faith of its poet influences the outcome of these slayings and the overall themes of the poem. An analysis of the characters of Grendel’s Mother and the dragon in particular presents strong parallels between the culture of the Anglo-Saxons and their monsters. Viewed in context of the poet’s Christian faith, these parallels call into question key pillars of the Anglo-Saxon way of life, including their own heroic code. Ultimately, *Beowulf* extolls the triumph of Christian morality over paganism and encourages reflection on how its morals might be applied to the present day.

Keywords

Beowulf; Christianity; Anglo-Saxon; heroism; paganism

Peer Review

This work has undergone a double-blind review by a minimum of two faculty members from institutions of higher learning from around the world. The faculty reviewers have expertise in disciplines closely related to those represented by this work. If possible, the work was also reviewed by undergraduates in collaboration with the faculty reviewers.

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A Geat woman too sang out in grief;
with hair bound up, she unburdened herself
of her worst fears, a wild litany
of nightmare and lament: her nation invaded,
enemies on the rampage, bodies in piles,
slavery and abasement. Heaven swallowed the smoke.”
—*Beowulf* lines 3150-3155

Although *Beowulf* concludes with three vicious monsters slain, the Geat woman’s final litany reveals the impending death of one last monster, the culture of the Anglo-Saxons. Throughout *Beowulf*, the Anglo-Saxons succeed in vanquishing their greatest foes; however, each slain opponent merely reflects a moral failing of Anglo-Saxon culture and its impending divine judgement. With images of their own culture turned against them, the Anglo-Saxons mask their opponents in monstrous labels, completely refusing to accept the fact that they share more similarities than differences with their own monsters and judge them by the same standards through which they judge themselves. While the Anglo-Saxons revel in their victories over what they perceive as entirely foreign beings, the poet uses one parallel after another to assert that God is the sole champion. Throughout the latter two-thirds of *Beowulf*, these parallels between Beowulf’s most fearsome foes, Grendel’s Mother and the dragon, and the Anglo-Saxons themselves reveal the moral corruption of Anglo-Saxon culture and present the slaying of the poem’s seemingly inhuman beasts as a triumph of the poet’s Christian faith over paganism.

As Beowulf enters into battle with the first of these foes, Grendel’s Mother, diction suggestive of revenge and blood feud characterize her as a thorough adherent of the Anglo-Saxon heroic code, acting as a criticism of the very definition of pagan heroism. According to Melanie Rost’s *Masculinity in Tolkien*, this social ethic served as a moral guide for Anglo-Saxon men as well as the protagonists of their poetry, including *Beowulf* (Rost 2). Although not formally defined in the poem, the Anglo-Saxon heroic code demands adherence to three key principles: “reciprocal loyalty between retainer and lord, revenge obligation, and the duty to win glory especially in the face of defeat” (Rost 3). These obligations traditionally belonged to Anglo-Saxon men alone (Rost 3); however, Grendel’s Mother, despite her female gender and monstrous appearance, perfectly fulfills all three. In particular, her pursuit of the revenge obligation and the duty to win glory in the face of defeat present strong parallels between her own behavior and that of the ideal Anglo-Saxon hero. Starting with the revenge obligation, the poet characterizes Grendel’s Mother as an “avenger” (*Beowulf* 1257) in her very first appearance, adding that she has “taken up the feud” (*Beowulf* 1333) in response to the killing of her son. With these two lines alone, the poet establishes a valid motive for Grendel’s Mother in accordance with the heroic code. She has come to Heorot, not out of some animalistic desire to kill, but to “avenge” the death of her son in blood feud with the Danes. In killing Aeschere, a close companion of Hrothgar, she succeeds and properly fulfills the second principle of the heroic code, the revenge obligation; however, neither Beowulf nor the Danes praise her heroism. Instead, they dub her “hell-bride” (*Beowulf* 1259), “troll-dam” (*Beowulf* 1391), and other monstrous epithets. Through these titles, the Danes thoroughly emphasize Grendel’s Mother’s lack of humanity and her status as a hellish being in direct opposition to Christian morality. Most importantly, however, they draw attention to her status as an “outsider,” a foreign being from beyond the Dane’s court (*Beowulf* 1357-1359). While these characterizations are not necessarily inappropriate – Grendel’s Mother did brutally murder an innocent man, and she certainly is not a Dane – they reveal a glaring example of corruption in the heroic code. Not only does its revenge obligation present the killing of the innocent Aeschere and the guilty Grendel as acts of equal moral standing, but it also frames them as

necessary and even heroic. However, in portraying Grendel’s Mother as a horrifying monster for perpetrating a murder, the Danes do not apply this aspect of their heroic code to her. They appropriately view Aeschere’s killing as a horrid act, but it is not the act itself that they take issue with, merely the person who commits it. Because Grendel’s Mother is not a Dane, the heroic code suddenly ceases to apply, and she becomes a monster for seeking revenge. In her place, the Danes would just as gladly kill an innocent to avenge their own as the heroic code demands, and by turning the heroic code against them, Grendel’s Mother makes this moral corruption all the more obvious. In addition to Grendel’s Mother’s fulfillment of the revenge obligation, her choice to fight barehanded and die the death of a warrior reveals her success at winning glory in the face of defeat and further criticizes the immorality of the Anglo-Saxon hero. Guided by the heroic code, the Anglo-Saxons firmly believed that “the quality of a man is not known until he is sore beset” (Rost 6), particularly through a defeat in combat. Even when death seemed inevitable, no Anglo-Saxon hero worthy of renown would shy away from battle in defense of his lord or kin (Rost 6). Exhibiting even the slightest amount of cowardice in such a dire situation would make him a man of poor “quality” and deny him all the glory of a warrior’s death (Rost 7). Keeping this facet of the heroic code in mind, Grendel’s Mother thoroughly demonstrates her “quality” in choosing to fight Beowulf, a near-legendary warrior who brutally killed her own son with his bare hands (*Beowulf* 817-818). Throughout their violent encounter, Beowulf, even with a sword at his command, fails to damage her entirely and forgoes his weapon once again as a man “who intends to gain enduring glory/ in a combat” must do (*Beowulf* 1533-1536). Beowulf, however, draws little attention to the fact that Grendel’s Mother makes the exact same choice. She, too, faces her opponent barehanded, gloriously grappling with the Geat as his equal (*Beowulf* 1542). Only once she has clearly bested him does she pull out a knife to avenge her son (*Beowulf* 1546-1547). The fact that she fights Beowulf on behalf of her slain kin alone makes her worthy of admiration from the Anglo-Saxon perspective; however, her decision to do so with her bare hands, viewed in the context of the heroic code, should make her glorious as well. Even though Beowulf eventually gets the upper hand through his chain mail and his auspicious finding of an ancient sword (*Beowulf* 1547-1548, 1564-1566), Grendel’s Mother still dies a warrior’s death, having secured glory for herself through her choice to fight with her hands. However, just as she receives no praise for pursuing revenge, Grendel’s Mother once again receives no credit from the Danes for fighting barehanded as any Anglo-Saxon hero must do. Her brutality in combat makes her monstrous to the Danes, while that of Beowulf makes him a glorious hero.

In drawing attention to this contradiction, the poet makes clear that the Anglo-Saxon definition of heroism is one that rewards violence and brutality. Keeping in line with the heroic code, those who fight most brutally, tearing the limbs off their opponents barehanded, are glorious. Meanwhile, those who shy away from violence, as Unferth does just before Beowulf’s battle with Grendel’s Mother (*Beowulf* 1471), are cowards. In yet another example of the immorality of Anglo-Saxon culture, the worth of their men relies almost entirely on their proclivity toward violence and only increases with the brutality of their methods.

Just as Grendel’s Mother acts as a criticism of the heroic code, the dragon, juxtaposed with an allusion to king Heremod and the nature of Beowulf’s funeral, offers another image of Anglo-Saxon immorality, framing Anglo-Saxon culture as one corrupted by the sin of greed. In particular, the poet directs this criticism toward the peak of their hierarchy, the king. Bound by the heroic code, the king has a duty to his thanes just as much as they do to him. A good king will reward his thane with “rings and torcs of gold as well as public recognition for his heroic deeds” (Rost 3), while a bad one will deny him both. Hrothgar presents a clear example of such a ruler in the form of the despised Heremod, a king who refused his people the gift of rings and hoarded his gold (*Beowulf* 1716-1720). In a similar manner, the dragon guards a “heathen trove” (*Beowulf* 2216), the theft of a mere fraction

of which drives him to rage (*Beowulf* 2219). In this case, the poet evokes his Christian faith, using the word “heathen” to attribute a pagan immorality to the dragon’s hoarding of wealth. In drawing this connection, the poet ties the sin of greed to paganism itself, suggesting that the faith of the Anglo-Saxons upholds and encourages the greedy behavior exhibited by both the dragon and Heremod. Further, the fact that the dragon is so susceptible to greed yet entirely unable to put his wealth to use presents another parallel to the Anglo-Saxons. After Beowulf kills the dragon and claims his treasure for the Geats, he, too, has no use for it. In fact, the treasure recovered from the dragon’s barrow is loaded onto Beowulf’s funeral pyre and destroyed with his body in a pagan funeral (*Beowulf* 3015). Just like the dragon, Beowulf sacrifices his own life for a mound of treasure that brings no one, not even himself, pleasure once he is gone. No matter what afterlife awaits Beowulf, his treasure will not accompany him there. While Beowulf himself is not a greedy man, his life, sacrificed for treasure, and his body, destroyed in a pagan funeral with no consideration for the God he claims to serve, both reflect the attitudes of the Anglo-Saxons as a whole. Their materialistic culture, centered around the pursuit of wealth and power, stands in direct opposition to Christianity and invites the presence of greedy dragons, whether human or reptile.

Ultimately, in killing these two monsters, living personifications of Anglo-Saxon immorality, Beowulf symbolically kills his own culture in an act that the poet presents as a triumph of Christianity over paganism. As the poet makes clear shortly after the death of the dragon, “what God judged right would rule what happened/ to every man, as it does to this day” (*Beowulf* 2858-2859). Similar references to divine judgement follow the killings of both Grendel’s Mother and Grendel himself, suggesting that God condemned both; however, this specific line does not describe the death of any monster. Instead, it refers to Beowulf himself, framing his death as yet another act of God’s will. Just as He issued judgement upon Beowulf’s enemies, God judged that ending Beowulf’s life was “right.” Although it may seem unreasonable to condemn a seemingly heroic man to death, the poet reveals God’s motivations behind this judgement through the circumstances of Beowulf’s fate. While Beowulf lived his life as a warrior, he does not die a warrior’s death. In killing the dragon, he dooms himself to slowly bleed out, “deadly poison suppurating inside him” (*Beowulf* 2715), as he lies on the floor of the dragon’s barrow. In the end, Beowulf does not die by a direct attack but by the corrupting influence of the dragon’s poison. In a further insult to his heroic life, he brings this fate upon himself, killing his opponent while mortally wounded and denying himself a death in combat. Considering his status as prince of the Geats, this fate applies to his people just as well. As revealed through their similarities to Grendel’s Mother and the dragon, the poison of greed suppurates within the Anglo-Saxons, as does the sinful nature of the heroic code they follow. While their monsters may differ from the Anglo-Saxons physically, greed and violent feuding demanded by the heroic code plague the lives of all and will eventually bring about their downfall. Beowulf fights to protect his people from this fate, but the monsters he slays merely reflect the moral failings of the Anglo-Saxons. Ultimately, Beowulf’s death, which leaves his kingdom on the verge of cataclysmic war (*Beowulf* 2911-2914), is God’s final act of judgement against them. By killing Grendel’s Mother, Beowulf acts as an instrument of God in opposition to the same heroic code he lives by, and by killing the dragon, he overcomes the greed that corrupts his people. However, by sacrificing his own life and condemning his kingdom to destruction in his absence, Beowulf finally breaks this cycle of feuding, greed, and violence upheld by Anglo-Saxon culture. Therefore, even though the poet ends *Beowulf* on a bleak note, the collapse of the immoral culture of the Anglo-Saxons creates a vacuum for a new culture of morality to fill, one guided by the Christian faith of the poet.

Reading through *Beowulf*, I was entirely unprepared for this overwhelmingly Christian message expressed within the epic poem. Personally, I expected another classic monster story, possibly something about the “outsider” and their conflicts with a dominant culture, framed with a few elements of Christian-pagan animosity; however, I now realize that the Christian faith of the poet

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resonates throughout the entirety of *Beowulf*'s conflict. It came as a surprise to me, but upon close examination of the characters of Grendel's Mother and the dragon, I firmly believe that *Beowulf*, despite its Anglo-Saxon origin, is a thoroughly Christian story with an undeniably Christian message. It strikes me not as a retelling of an ancient pagan story, but as a response to a rapidly changing culture, a change that its author supports wholeheartedly. Keeping these themes in mind, I can see why *Beowulf* remains a beloved story to this day, and our continued appreciation for this story makes me wonder how its themes retain their relevance for a modern audience. Obviously, there are no more Anglo-Saxons waging blood feud and hoarding gold today, but could some of their immoralities have survived? Are there aspects of our own lives, institutions, and cultures that perpetuate violence and cruelty, monsters we must slay for each other just as Beowulf did for his people?

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Works Cited

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