

## Tradition, Pride and Glory in *Beowulf*

Ömürcañ Türkođlu

### Introduction

Beowulf stays as a myth in today's world as we have no proof that such a story happened back in time. Although the place and time were relevant to the real world, there were neither dragons nor monsters in the early 6th century. The story is not retaliation against humans, but monsters. The story was not titled at first years but later it was named after the protagonist of the story who was the mighty Beowulf. Beowulf in the story, implied as a savior of the people and the strongest among them. Thus, major events are either running around him or related to him. There are plenty of cases, actions or events which needs to be argued under the titles such as traditions, pride, and glory. For that reason, this article will be based on these three sub-titles which will explain the major events and question them. The point of view of the poet will be put aside because arguing on the text itself should extract the true feeling and meaning of the events that occurred and the decisions that had been made.

### Traditions

There in the harbor stood the ring-prowed ship, covered with ice and ready to sail. It was a ship fit for a prince. They laid down their beloved ruler, their ring-giver, in the hollow of the ship: they put their glorious leader beside the mast. They brought great store of treasure, wealth from faraway lands: it is said that never was a ship more splendidly furnished with weapons and armor, swords and mail shirts. On his breast lay a multitude of treasures to voyage afar on the sea with him (4).

This tradition of putting the corpse in a ship with treasures, as many as the deceased king worths, shows their belief and moral system. Greater things the deceased king accomplished, heavier the treasure put into the ship with him. Such tradition has some similarities with Greek mythology as they put some golds on to eyes or mouth when a dead person burnt into ashes or put into a box. But the gold that old greeks put near the

deceased body serves for a purpose and that purpose is to get across the river Styx. In Beowulf, such an afterlife was not mentioned but it was stated as “sad in spirit and with mournful hearts, they gave him to the sea. Neither counselors in hall nor warriors under heaven truly know who received that cargo”(4). They expect someone or some divine creature to receive the treasure with the deceased king.

At first, one can realize that Heorot was ordered to be built by Hrothgar to be the most magnificent, the most beautiful and the biggest among mead halls in the world and without a doubt, it became what Hrothgar wanted it to be. Behind this order lays too many questions. Hrothgar wanted to build the Heorot because he might have wanted to show off how a great king he was or to leave something spectacular for the king that he is going to choose and this shows his kindness and how much he was thinking about his country. Heorot might symbolize the glory of Hrothgar. Back in times, such traditions such as leaving an heirloom shows the kindness of a king or else, Hrothgar might have wanted to stay on his throne till the day he died and he would not have to think about the one who was going to replace him or dethrone him by using any sorts of force. Another sign of tradition bounded to Heorot was that king Hrothgar gave everyone golds and jewelry inside Heorot whenever he won a battle. “At the feast, he gave out rings and treasure”(9). This tradition of giving away valuable things to his people might have something in common with Islam in today's world because a muslim sacrifices a cow or a sheep and gives the meat to his or her neighbors whenever something they wanted happens, but in Beowulf, instead of the meat, they give away gold whenever king Hrothgar won a battle. It seems like over time, giving away golds and jewelry after something good happens, became a tradition.

It is clear to see this tradition when Beowulf wanted to give away his armor in case he could not kill the Grendel. As stated “If I am slain in battle, send to Hygelac the most excellent battle-dress that protects my breast; send him that finest of chain-mail shirts”(22).

Beowulf wanted to help Hrothgar as his father Ecgtheow knew the king Hrothgar and Hrothgar knew the Beowulf since he was a child. As stated “I knew him when he was

a boy. His father was called Ecgtheow, to whom Hrethel, king of the Geats, gave his only daughter in marriage. Now his bold son has come here to seek an old friend”(19). This neighborhood, friendship or loyalty might have tingled the feelings of Beowulf to help king Hrothgar defeat the fearful Grendel. Even in today's world, people help their friends or neighbors out when help needed and it seems like this choice of Beowulf, this specific tradition has a great role. To strengthen the case: "My victorious lord and king of the Danes bids me say that he knows your noble lineage, and that he welcomes you courageous men from over the sea”(20). So, one can say that helping each other became our habit a long time ago. Also, loyalty for their king was one of their habit back in time. One other tradition of them was to pray to gods when they were stuck in possibilities. As stated, “At times they made sacrifices at heathen temples; they prayed that the soul-slayer would help the people: such was their custom, the hope of heathens”(12). It is not something extraordinary as the majority of humans in today's world know the religions and religious figures and one who believes in them should pray to them, the gods. But in the upcoming lines, it is obvious that they gave up on gods and they tried to solve their problems for themselves. As stated "Stricken in spirit, they thought of Hell: they knew not the Ruler, the Judge of Deeds, the Lord God; they did not know how to praise the Protector of Heaven, the glorious King. Woe unto the man who in terrible trouble thrusts his soul into the fire's embrace, and neither hopes for comfort nor expects change”(12). The day of the slaughter of Grendel became a tradition song so that the next generations could not forget the war between Beowulf and Grendel. "Afterward, bards sang of the deadly spite and the enmity of this continuous feud and war, so that it became well known among the sons of men that Grendel had fought for a long time with Hrothgar”(11). This was a well-known tradition for old times and even in today's world. Stories included bravery and glory, carried on in words to next generations as a legend. “And then he narrated old legends in the traditional manner”(91). It is possible to hear a legend from every nation around the world. The stories about how that specific race has become alive.

## **Pride**

One must ask. What does pride mean for a monster? Well, it meant to fill his tummy full of humans for Grendel. "The evil creature was grim and fierce. Swiftly the

cruel, savage beast seized thirty thanes. Then he returned home, proud of his plunder; he sought his lair after the great slaughter”(10). For a monster, pride term is really simple. Ward Parks states that “This is not a heroic contest between champions but a lion pouncing on a helpless deer”(Parks, 3). What makes Grendel proud is to spread fear among men who were lesser in power. This seems to be boosting his pride. Throughout the human history, not just the monsters, there are plenty of kings and rulers who spread fear amongst his or her people to make them obey him/her even more. Fear gives humans no choice of independency and takes away their free will. It is interesting to see such a proudness emotion after Grendel seized thirty thanes and controlled the biggest mead hall, Heorot, with his fear for twelve winters. The monsters in *Beowulf* also had examples of human characteristics. Hill states that, “Indeed, for each monster there is a clear, human attribute: Grendel is the ‘hating hall-thane,’ his mother a wolfish avenger, and the dragon an ancient hoarder”(1).

On the other hand, mighty Hrothgar saw the slaughter in the morning and his pride was damaged. “The strong and enduring grief was a humiliation for the king”(11). “Grendel’s persecution was a great misery for Hrothgar; it was a breaking of the spirit for the lord of the Scyldings”(12). Such an event was a stain for his honor. Right after he gave a wonderful feast, his thanes were slaughtered and torn into pieces by Grendel. It was not an easy stain for a king even for a king like Hrothgar. This slaughter of Grendel went on for 12 winters which damaged king Hrothgar’s honor even more. He was desperate so, he needed a great help from others. A king like Hrothgar who always fought his own battle, now needed someone else to help him. What a burden that even Hrothgar was crushed under its weight.

I have also heard that this monster, in the fullness of his pride, scorns the use of weapons. Therefore, so that my deeds may redound to the greater glory of my liege lord, Hygelac, I scorn to bear sword or broad linden-wood shield to the battle; instead, I will grapple hand-to-hand with the enemy-foe against foe-in a fight to the death. The Lord’s judgment will determine whom Death will overtake (21).

The strength of Beowulf is not something to be underestimated. As one who has read the myth knows that mighty Beowulf killed the fearful Grendel with no weapons but with bare hands. He was either sure of his power or his honor did not let him use weapons which leads it up to the pride topic. Beowulf did want to face Grendel without weapons because Grendel would not use weapons. It would not be equal battle for him, he might have thought. Grendel used his claws and his monstrosity power. Killing someone who does not use a weapon, might have represented Beowulf in a bad way to the readers. Beowulf might have thought about that, it was not going to be fair if he used weapons and it could be a stain on his pride. If he used weapons instead of bare hands, there could be more criticism about him killing a defenseless creature. So, his decision about the weapons might only serve as a countermeasure against critics. Hill says, “That boast, along with his sense of stark contingency, contains two gestures: the move to a fair fight and the motive of glory; in conjunction, the two suggest a desire for renown rather than vainglory”(2). Unlike the battle with Grendel, Beowulf used armor and weapon in the fight against dragon. This time dragon had fire as a weapon so, the armor and weapon choice of Beowulf was on point. There could not be any criticism about damaging his pride. The dragon was the most powerful among other monsters and had a defence system of its own. Choosing armor and weapon for Beowulf would only be equality for him as Beowulf always fought at the level of defence system his foes had.

Within these sentences, lays a merciful Beowulf. “Beowulf, protector of warriors, would not release his murderous guest alive, for he did not consider Grendel’s life of value to anyone”(33-34). One should understand that if Grendel was any good to anyone, Beowulf might have let him go because he proved himself to Grendel that he was stronger than him. Grendel, a dreadful creature he was, had no value to anyone except his mother who was also a monster. If Grendel, being a monster race but not harmed anyone or had some good for the humanity, Beowulf could have let him go because Grendel would not return to Heorot to slay any more thanes as he understood that humans had a protector. In the end, Grendel is a dreadful creature who carried evil spirits with him. Fidel Fajardo-Acosta puts Grendel’s behaviours in this way, “Studies of the nature and character of Grendel often point out the idea that in spite of his undeniably human characteristics Grendel can be seen as a symbol of evil in general”(Fajardo-Acosta, 2).

After Beowulf had slain the monster, he put Grendel's claw and shoulder up on the entrance of Heorot. "The brave warrior set the monster's claw with its armand shoulder under the curved roof for all to see: that was all that remained of Grendel's grasp"(34-35). Beowulf's this action was just to imply on people that "I did this" or "This is a presentation of my power" to be proud of himself. The more people saw it, the more respect and fame he gained. It is these type of decisions of him and his bravery that made him glorious, powerful and a good man in the first place.

Pride comes in different meaning at some part of the myth. After Grendel's mother attacked and killed Aeschere to revenge her blood feud, Hrothgar was broken in heart again. He made a speech to Beowulf to slay the monster if he dared. "Once again, you alone can help us: you do not yet know the perilous region where the outcast is to be found; seek her if you dare. Once again I will reward you with antique treasure and twisted gold as I did before – if you escape with your life"(61). This time pride was to revenge what was taken from him. This was what the blood feud meant for them. It was not just to accomplish greater deeds and show off of their powers but to revenge and take away something which was important for the foe. This might have created an endless cycle of blood feud but fortunately, it ended when Beowulf faced with the dragon and none of them survived. Only draw could have ended it. Grendel's mother had to avange her son so that she could fulfill blood feud. C. Nitzsche agrees this blood feud in this quote: "Whatever her maternal feelings, she actually fulfills the duty of the kinsman"(5). Later in the myth, it was mentioned that there was war between storm braving Geats and Scylfings. "The next day Hygelac avenged his brother Haethcyn's death when the Scylfing Ongentheow attacked Eofor the Geat: Eofor's sword split the Scylfing's battle helm, and Ongentheow fell mortally wounded"(109). In this battle, pride was still to avange what was taken from both sides.

## Glory

This term might be the strongest among others. People are in need of glorious kings so that they can feel safe under the roof of their houses. Such kings like Hrothgar

and later, mighty Beowulf. It seems like glory spreads real fast among the society of that time. "The glory of this son of Scyld spread widely in the Northlands, and he was famous"(3). This statement shows the basic psychology of that society. Stronger you are, faster your reputation would spread and more attention you get, which is still related to our times, the 21st century. One must have seen others wanting to become famous in today's world to get more attention, money, and power. Later Beowulf slain the beast, these sentences shows that he achieved the fame he was seeking. "Many a man spoke of Beowulf's fame; more than once it was said that nowhere over the wide earth – neither north, nor south, nor between the seas – was there a better warrior under heaven who was more worthy to rule"(37).

At some point, Grendel was another chance for Beowulf to show off his strength and add another glorious accomplishment for his glory to spread his fame among men even faster. "I returned from battle after I had bound five giants and destroyed their kindred, and at night on the waves I slew water-monsters"(21). It might not be for the sake of loyalty or friendship but the sake of his glory and fame. "I can give Hrothgar, wise and good lord that he is, heartfelt counsel: how he can overpower the foe and how he can remedy his affliction. If not, ever after he will suffer tribulations as long as his great hall remains in its lofty place"(13).

As mentioned before, it is obvious that Beowulf saw Grendel as another glorious story to add his name. In the book, it was mentioned like this: "Then that good man, kinsman of Hygelac, thought of his boast that evening"(33). Beowulf was still in battle with Grendel when he was thinking about his boast. He must have felt so powerful when he got Grendel into his deadly grip and that might be the reason for him to think such boast during the battle. Beowulf knew all along that he would kill Grendel or else, he would not leave his armor and weapon behind. This move was just to boast him even more and wrote songs about his daring battle. Even before he confronted the dragon, he boasted his glorious deeds and his adventures for all to remember what he had accomplished.

Beowulf killed Grendel in front of everyone and severed his arm from the shoulder. Everyone saw the strength of Beowulf and praised in the name of his glory. When Beowulf killed Grendel's mother, there was no one to watch him slaying that monstrosity of creature. This would not be enough for Beowulf to be boasted for his glory so, he took the ancient sword which helped Beowulf to slay the monster and Grendel's head with him so that he can show others his evidences of glory and he was in the mere fighting with his foe. As it was stated "Yes! Joyously we bring battle spoil from the mere as evidence of glory. Not without trouble did I carry out the difficult task: I barely escaped with my life in the struggle under the mere"(73). Mighty Beowulf also mentions that the task was not something to accomplish easily. As others did not see how he killed the monster, he was in need of explaining how hard it was to kill Grendel's mother. This kind of act was to imply on people that this task was extremely difficult even for the mighty Beowulf. This would help the people to draw on their canvas that how powerful Grendel's mother was. Yet, Beowulf had slain the creature.

"Now that the dragon lies dead from its wounds and is bereft of the treasure, go quickly to find the hoard under the gray stones, beloved Wiglaf. Make haste so that I may clearly see the ancient treasure, the gold and sparkling gemstones, so that having beheld that costly treasure, I may the more easily leave this life and the kingdom that I have long held"(120).

Beowulf tore off Grendel's arm up from his shoulder in the greatest mead hall which was Heorot and he slain the mother of Grendel and took the sword and Grendel's head with him as evidence of his glory. In this block quotation above, it is obvious that the hoard was the most spectacular evidence for his glory so far. Even while dying, he wanted to see the precious golds and gems so that he could die in relief of leaving another evidence of his glory under the name of his. Besides from Beowulf slaying a dragon in an evenness battle in its glory, the treasure he saved from the dragon was the best heriloom for him to leave behind for the storm loving Geats. "Thanks be to the Lord of All that I was permitted to win such wealth for my people before my day of death"(121).

Not so was Heremod to the descendants of Ecgwela, the glorious Scylding. His greatness did not bring joy to his people, but slaughter and destruction instead. Swollen with rage, he killed his drinking companions and comrades

at arms, and at last the infamous king turned away from the fellowship of men, although mighty God had given him great force of spirit and resources of power to rule over others in the gladness of his heart. Yet in his breast there grew an inhospitable and savage spirit, and he gave no treasure to bestow glory on his fellow Danes. He suffered from that strife, and brought long-lasting destruction on his people. Learn from the example of Heremod: always remember your greatness of spirit, Beowulf. A wise and experienced king tells this tale for your sake (75-76).

At the beginning of *Beowulf*, it is well open to everyone that Beowulf is a hero who likes to spread his fame by his glorious battles. In every saga of him, he mentions the God's control of fate and god-sent power to him. Hrothgar did warn him to be careful with these complicated boasts as they could drive him to be an arrogant hero. Hrothgar gives him a couple of examples to prove what he was referring to as seen above in the quotation. Before the battle of dragon, Beowulf did mention the fate again but not the God's control over his fate. E. Goldsmith states that, "Only in the last part of the poem does Beowulf speak of Fate without speaking also of God's control of Fate, and this is in keeping with my contention that the old king has lost his trust in God"(5). What this uncovers is that Hrothgar was right to give such examples to Beowulf and make him avoid those mistakes which others did. This also makes us think of how greater king Hrothgar was. Hrothgar won battles, his glory was known among others, but he was not a king of his own arrogance.

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