

Wlenco odde Overhygd:

A Study of Anglo-Saxon Pride and the Conflict between the Heroic and Kingly

Codes in *Beowulf*

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***Beowulf*: Structure and Purpose**

The poem of *Beowulf* is known for being a story about a warrior's magnificent battles with monsters, and for being one of the strongest examples of epic poetry. Typically, scholars divide the poem into three parts that could be titled "Grendel," "Grendel's Mother," and "The Dragon," after the primary monsters of each section. The first two occur while Beowulf is still a young man, and the third takes place in Beowulf's old age as a king. This structure leads to another way the poem may be divided: youth and old age. By lines (or the surviving lines, at least), nearly three-quarters of the poem focuses on Beowulf's early life (approx. ll. 1-2209) while the last quarter describes his kingship and final years (approx. ll. 2210-3182). A shallow look at the text and mere proportions may lead one to conclude that the poem is the story, primarily, of a young warrior. The first portion of the story establishes for the reader all the important aspects of Beowulf's character. If a reader adopts this understanding of the work, the final section, seemingly different in tone and content, could be seen as existing solely to provide the reader with an honorable death of the hero, an Anglo-Saxon "happily ever after."

This perception would assume that the purpose of the poem is to describe Beowulf the hero, as the majority of the poem is dedicated to the young Beowulf, and the final section provides him with a hero's death. If this interpretation is true, why does the poem begin with the history of Scyld Scefing, a warrior turned king? Why are so many of the anecdotes provided by the characters and narrator focused on kingly examples, both good and bad, if the poem is to be about a champion? I argue that the final section of the poem is not an afterthought, nor is it even meant to stand alone from the rest of the poem. The poet, as an artist, deliberately leads the reader through the Grendel and Grendel's Mother sections to the struggle between heroic and kingly expectations that arises within the Dragon section. The poet invites the reader to observe

how Beowulf the warrior adapts (or, perhaps, fails to adapt) to being Beowulf the king. Although the poet is careful not to force a definitive interpretation on the reader, he certainly invites the reader to explore the peculiar disharmony between the heroic code and the kingly code as shown in Beowulf's later life. In order to provide the reader with the tools of analysis, the poet weaves the theme of kingship and bravery throughout the first two sections, even while Beowulf is still only a hero. In this respect, the first two parts—specifically the themes, characters, and events therein—are included by the poet as a crucial piece of evidence in building the case for or against a successful King Beowulf, an evaluation the poet wants the reader to formulate for his or herself.

To aid in the study of the poet's intentions and the challenge he places to the reader, I will compare the role of pride in heroic and kingly codes of *Beowulf*-ian society. The concept of pride is central to both codes, but its significance and acceptability differs greatly between the role of the king and the role of the hero. I will present two Old English words the poet uses for pride, *wlenco* and *oferhygd*, which contain unique implications and offer a glimpse into the limits of acceptable pride. I will then consider the contrast between Beowulf as a hero and Beowulf as a king, and how he changes (or does not) in his transition between roles. The next section of this paper will consider Hrothgar as a positive kingly figure and how his character and decisions compare with those of Beowulf. I will then analyze Hrothgar's sermon concerning Heremod and what role this advice plays in Beowulf's moral development. Finally, I will consider the implications of the tension the poet depicts between the kingly role and the heroic role in *Beowulf*-ian society and in Beowulf himself.

The Heroic Code and Kingly Code

A character's transition from the hero to leader is difficult, as the societal expectations for each role differ. The poet, however, presents the idea of pride as a central component to this conflict. For one role, pride is indispensable, necessary to create the bold and courageous hero that is expected; for the other role, however, pride is a tragic flaw that can lead to the downfall of both king and kingdom.

Anglo-Saxon society contained its own moral guidelines, including a hero's code, which defined acceptable and expected behavior for a warrior. The code indicated how one would gain fame, the ultimate goal of an aspiring hero. John M. Hill describes the Anglo-Saxon code as including "gift exchange, revenge obligation, and ultimate, perhaps even suicidal, courage."¹ The gift exchange refers to rewarding acts of bravery with riches or valuable items, and the revenge obligations occur when a friend, leader, or kinsman's death must be avenged. The final feature, the "suicidal courage," is where pride becomes a central component to the heroic value system. A hero was expected to prove himself in fights and battles, gain a loyal following, and undertake feats too dangerous for other warriors. Beowulf himself gives a short description of the heroic code of the Anglo-Saxons: "wyrce se þe mote domes ær deaþe; þæt bið driht-guman unlifgendum æfter selest" (ll. 1387-1389) Chickering translates this as "let him who may win fame before death. That is the best memorial for a man after he is gone," and Heaney translates this same passage as "Let whoever can win glory before death. When a warrior is gone, that will be his best and only bulwark."² This description seems quite self-centered, and it is. Proving

¹ John M. Hill, *The Anglo-Saxon Warrior Ethic*, (Gainesville: UP of Florida, 2000), 1.

² The two translations of Beowulf I refer to in this paper are Howell D. Chickering's translation and Seamus Heaney's translation. Chickering's translation offers a more scholarly focus and translates the text in a more literal, word-by-word fashion. Heaney's version is more poetic and presents possible connotations and nuances. Where the simple translation is required, I will use only Chickering's version. In some cases, I will include both Chickering and Heaney's translations to provide a comparison between interpretations or where Heaney's translation offers a

personal ability is the goal of the hero, and pride is central. This desire for fame should not be dismissed immediately as wholly conceited, as pride is interwoven in the expectations for a hero and the capacity to be a reliable and effective retainer.

The kingly code contains its own set of values, some of which, but not all, overlap with the expectations for a warrior. In simple terms, the king's primary responsibilities are "to receive, share out, and legislate in what he proposes, pronounces, and disposes."³ In addition, the king must retain a certain amount of "war power" with which he can defend his hall and kingdom.⁴ This quality, however, is tempered with the fact that the relationship between a lord and a retainer is, chiefly, "generosity on the lord's part and martial courage on the retainer's."⁵ The responsibility to defend the people does not rest solely on the king. The most important responsibility of a king is, therefore, the successful political leadership of the kingdom, a role that Hill describes as the "sitting king." Scyld Scefing, in the short biography at the poem's opening, fulfills both of these roles. In his young life, he "sceaþena þreatum" (l. 4; "seized mead-benches," Chickering); in his later years as king, he exercises political power, no longer through violence, as the neighboring kingdoms must "gomban gyldan" (l. 11; "pay him tribute," Chickering).

Both qualities (diplomacy and war strength) are important in a well-rounded king. However, one feature must not dominate at the expense of another. In fact, if tactful negotiation is successful, violence and domination are no longer necessary, as shown in Scyld's life. Succumbing to the allure of violence and heroism at the expense of the kingdom's security is a

more powerful expression of the text. This would be where the nuances and suggestions of the text may go beyond a literal translation. Additionally, if the two translations do not differ significantly, only one will be given

³ John M. Hill, "The King and the Warrior," in *The Hero Recovered*, ed. Robin Waugh and James Weldon (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 2010), 67.

⁴ Hill, "The King and the Warrior," 66.

⁵ Hill, *The Anglo-Saxon Warrior Ethic*, 3.

mark of a failed king. Here the tension between the kingly code and the heroic code arises. At times, a king must lay aside the “masculine” role of the warrior in order to make the best decisions for his people. Ultimately, the king must be willing to deny the impulse of pride in favor of a more passive approach if it will ensure the safety and stability of his kingdom, while the hero is not limited by any of these responsibilities. Pride, then, becomes a dynamic issue that requires careful analysis and consideration of context to determine whether it is a virtue or a flaw in each instance, as well as each character.

Pride

The modern English language itself has difficulty pinning down an exact connotation for the word “pride.” Proverbs 16 says "pride goeth before destruction"⁶; from this we would gather that pride should be avoided at all costs. On the other hand, parents who are proud of their children are not condemned for their pride. A person could even declare, without censure, that he is proud of himself after an impressive accomplishment; however, society disapproves of a prideful person. Ambition, closely related to pride, contains similar inconsistencies. Employers often advertise that they are looking for ambitious employees, and a man with ambition would be praised. However, ambition can easily be a criticism if someone is overambitious. Ambition is difficult to quantify and evaluate, especially when the outcome (failure or success) of the ambition has not yet been determined; nevertheless, the line and distinction between acceptable and excessive ambition still manages to arise in moral evaluations of action and behavior.

Just as modern society has difficulty creating a consistent view of an acceptable level of pride and ambition, Anglo-Saxon literature also contains inconsistencies and ambiguities in word

⁶ Prov. 16:18 KJV.

meaning that make discerning the extent of the heroic code difficult, especially in relation to the role of kings. At the heart of the evaluation of *Beowulf* lies the difference between the moral code of heroes and the responsibilities of kings. It is true that many qualities of kings overlap with merits of a hero; however, the differences between the roles account for the success or failure of a leader. In order to understand the intricacies of the roles of hero and king, it is helpful to consider the Old English words in *Beowulf* that correspond to pride. Two words, *wlenco* and *oferhygd*, have special importance in this discussion.

Wlenco

Wlenco, as defined by the Bosworth-Toller Anglo-Saxon dictionary, can be translated positively as "high spirit" or negatively as "arrogance, haughtiness, [or] insolence." The meaning the word assumes depends heavily on the context in which it occurs. Thomas Shippey describes *wlenco* as "the quality of a hero – or of a meddler."⁷ Much like the modern English word "pride," the moral connotations of *wlenco* are complex. Dennis Cronan offers a definition that attempts to decode the nuances of *wlenco*: "*wlenco* denotes a daring bravado which shades into the recklessness that can impair a person's judgment. *Wlenco* thus appears to have been a great-spirited courage which would lead one to daring undertakings for the good of others or to reckless endeavors that produce unnecessary risk."⁸ While Cronan's definition offers the ethical spectrum of *wlenco*, a reader must still rely on contextual clues in the poem to decipher whether an individual is being praised or criticized for his *wlenco*.

Wlenco, in a variety of forms, appears several times within *Beowulf*, as both a positive and negative description. The word first occurs when *Beowulf* and the Geats arrive at Heorot and encounter Wulfgar, who is described as a "wlonc haeled" (l. 331); this phrase can be

⁷ Thomas A. Shippey, *Old English Verse* (London: Hutchinson, 1972), 39.

⁸ Dennis Cronan, "Poetic Words, Conservatism, and the Dating of Old English Poetry," *Anglo-Saxon England* 33, no. 1 (2004), 34.

translated as "haughty noble" (Chickering), or even "proud warrior" (Heaney). Wulfgar then declares "Wen' ic þæt ge for wlenco, nalles for wræc-siðum, ac for hige þrymmum Hroðgar sohton" (ll. 338-340). Chickering translates this statement as "I expect in pride - scarcely in exile! - out of high courage you have come to Hrothgar." Heaney gives a similar translation, including statements such as "stoutness of heart" and "bravery". Wulfgar approves of their courage and quest for fame. Later, the poem mentions Hygelac's "wlonces wig-craeft" (l. 2953; "proud war-skill," Chickering; "Hygelac's pride and prowess as a fighter," Heaney). In the context of the passage, this is an admirable quality that strikes fear into the heart of Hygelac's opponents. *Wlenco*, in these cases, is held as an evidence of heroic strength and an admirable confidence.

This word, however, is not always positive within *Beowulf*. *Wlenco* is used to describe Grendel's mother gloating after her kill ("atoll æse wlanc," l. 1332) and the dragon's vanity concerning his riches ("maðm-æhta wlonc," l. 2833). In the foreshadowing of Hygelac's downfall, the poet indicates that the king's death is because "syþðan he for wlenco wean ahsode fæde to Frysum" (ll. 1206-7) Chickering's translation shows that the blame is placed squarely on Hygelac and his ambition: "he sought trouble, stirred up a feud, a fight with the Frisians, in his pride and daring". Although Hygelac is a strong and courageous warrior, his confrontation with the Frisians is unnecessary; the motivation is a mere feud, rather than a direct threat from the Frisians. The poet's criticism is of the needless conflict Hygelac invites. Similarly, Unferth accuses Beowulf of embarking on the swimming challenge with Breca "for wlence wada cunnedon ond for dol-gilpe" (ll. 508-509). The contest is "out of pride... through foolish boasting" (Chickering). Heaney presents an even stronger criticism of Beowulf's motivation with "just to prove that you could win". Beowulf does not deny this accusation but declares that

his competition with Breca was a result of their childhood rivalry and natural competitiveness (ll. 535-8). Beowulf recognizes that the feat was a competition inspired by boasting but does not apologize for it. He refers again to his ability to follow through with the boasts that he makes, both in the swimming competition and in Hrothgar's court, implying that his success vindicates his zeal. The poet seems to indicate that Beowulf is in the right, but the logic of *wlenco* is clearly indicated: ambition is justified by victory.

Wlenco is obviously an integral part of the heroic code. It embodies the desire to prove oneself, to glory in personal achievements. A hero must challenge himself with dangerous endeavors to prove that he is more courageous than other men. Though Grendel's mother is an enemy of Hrothgar and Beowulf, *wlenco* is still used to describe her pride in her success (l. 1332). One of the differences between a positive and negative interpretation of *wlenco* seems to be the necessity of the action. Hygelac's fight with the Frisians is motivated only by a petty feud; Unferth claims that Beowulf risked his and Breca's lives in a trivial competition. While the meaning and connotation of *wlenco* are circumstantial, the idea it implies (ambitious adventures to prove bravery) is an absolutely indispensable part of the *Beowulf*-ian heroic code.

Oferhygd

The question then is: if *wlenco* is such a crucial part of the hero's ambition, does pride ever become detestable? If so, where is this line crossed? Does *wlenco* ever become some stronger, darker quality? Within *Beowulf*, there is another word translated as "pride" that is consistently negative within the text: *oferhygd*. *Oferhygd*, in the negative sense, means "pride [or] arrogance". This same word occurs in Old English texts such as *Cædmon's Paraphrase*,

where it is used to describe Lucifer, who is “engel ofer módas” (“that angel of presumption”).⁹ Scott Gwara, in *Heroic Identity in the World of Beowulf*, argues that *oferhygd* is associated closely with “immoderation [and] impetuosity”.¹⁰ The word certainly has a less circumstantial meaning than *wlenco* and is used as several times a direct criticism in *Beowulf*.

Within *Beowulf*, the word is used twice in the context of Hrothgar's sermon to Beowulf after his victory over Grendel's mother. The sermon itself is a cautionary tale of Heremod, a courageous hero who is made king. Heremod brought harm to his people, a result of his “oferhygda dæl” (l. 1740; “his portion of arrogance,” Chickering). At the end of the description and sermon, Hrothgar pleads with Beowulf “ofer-hyda ne gym” (l. 1760; “Turn not to pride,” Chickering). Unfortunately, Beowulf does not always hold to Hrothgar's advice, for a form of *oferhygd* occurs before Beowulf faces the dragon. When planning his attack against the dragon, Beowulf “oferhogode... þaet he þone wid-flogan weorode gesohte sidan herge” (ll. 2345-7). In this case, *oferhogode* refers to how he “scorned to approach the dragon with troops” (Chickering), and was “too proud” (Heaney). Clearly, *oferhygd* describes an excessive level of pride where personal ambition becomes irresponsible and detrimental to the heroic code and violates the social expectations of the individual.

These two words are helpful ways of characterizing pride within the heroic and kingly codes in Anglo-Saxon society. While both words imply pride and focus on personal fame, *wlenco* has a stronger positive connotation; a hero exhibiting *wlenco* is motivated to challenge himself and acquire fame through daring ventures. Although this selfish ambition comes with some amount of foolishness, and often excessive risks, Anglo-Saxon society saw these flaws as forgivable in the hero. When pride and determination become unacceptable, however, the hero's

⁹ Benjamin Thorpe, trans., *Cædmon's Metrical Paraphrase of Parts of the Holy Scriptures* (London: Society of Antiquaries, 1832), 18, digital file.

¹⁰ Scott Gwara, *Heroic Identity in the World of Beowulf* (Boston: Brill, 2008), 36.

wlenco develops into the villain's *oferhygd*. This invisible line between *wlenco* and *oferhygd* becomes especially significant when the ambitious hero becomes a leader or a king. It is not unreasonable to suggest that *oferhygd* results when a hero, obsessed with *wlenco*, is unable to mitigate his pride in an acceptable way when his roles and responsibilities change. The same pride that is promoted in a hero is less acceptable in a king; a king who cannot relinquish the heroic code in favor of kingly responsibilities is an unsuccessful king who brings harm to his people.

Beowulf clearly exemplifies the heroic code throughout the entire poem. His ambition in both the fight with Grendel and Grendel's mother are justified with victory. Later in life, he is made king of the Geats and enjoys a prosperous rule, until his kingdom is threatened with the awakening of a dragon. Beowulf takes upon himself the responsibility of slaying the dragon; his victory, however, is purchased with his life.

While *wlenco* is a quality easily attributed to Beowulf, deciding whether *oferhygd* applies to Beowulf is more difficult, and is an issue that the poet himself does not present a direct answer to. The poet does, however, wish to raise this question in the reader's mind. A reader's evaluation of Beowulf's character (specifically, whether or not he succumbs to *oferhygd* in the dragon battle) impacts how the work is viewed as a whole. The poet offers within the text comparisons and principles that a reader can draw upon and consider to facilitate the analysis of Beowulf's character. Examining Beowulf's behavior as a hero in contrast to his behavior as a king indicates the place of both *wlenco* and *oferhygd* in the heroic and kingly codes, and can aid in the discussion of Beowulf and his potential *oferhygd*.

Beowulf, Hero and King

In the beginning of the poem and Beowulf's early life, the features of a hero are directly implied in his character. He establishes himself as a flawless warrior; the first description of Beowulf is that he is "mon-cynnes mægenes strengest [...] æþele ond eacen" (ll. 196-8; "the strongest of all living men... noble and huge," Chickering). He is already the perfect protagonist for the story. He declares his intention to aid Hrothgar without debating, questioning, or asking anyone's permission (ll. 198-200). It is implied that "snotere" ("sensible") men have concerns, but they "lyt-hwon logon [...] hwetton hige-rofne" (ll. 202-4; "said not a word... but encouraged such heart," Chickering). In this case, Beowulf's decision to risk his life is seen as admirable, even if the mission is dangerous.

The required ambition of a hero is especially apparent in the flyting with Unferth before Grendel is even confronted. Indeed, the only accusation Unferth can bring against Beowulf is that he is perhaps too courageous in his swimming contest with Breca (ll. 508-509). Beowulf shows no doubt of his ability and even claims that the problem will be resolved by the following morning (ll. 601-6). Beowulf, so confident in his success, also declares that he will fight Grendel without weapons, with only his "grape sceal fon" (ll.438-9; "own hand-grip," Chickering). This decision seems alarming and reckless at first, but Beowulf's decision is justified by his triumph. Beowulf's self-confidence is, most immediately, for his own benefit; he is likely aware that the story of his battle will be all the more impressive with the added detail of hand-to-hand combat. However, he also tells Hrothgar that his motivation is "swa me Higelac sie, min mon-drihten" (ll.435-6; "that Hygelac my lord may be pleased to the heart," Chickering). Heaney translates this same statement as "to heighten Hygelac's fame" (l. 435). In his young life, Beowulf is

driven by *wlenco*; his decisions are all in the interest of highlighting his heroic ability and making himself the greatest hero of the Danes and Geats.

Once Beowulf is king, however, the previously admirable heroic qualities are criticized by the characters and, potentially, the reader. Beowulf's *wlenco* confirmed that he was a strong warrior; now, as a king, his asset has become his weakness, making him potentially susceptible to *oferhygd*. By comparing Beowulf's behavior as a hero to his behavior as a king, a reader can make a personal evaluation of whether Beowulf has changed his priorities and has become a successful king. The poet's provides a direct comparison of the young hero of the first portion of the poem to the aged king in the final portion.

In his early life, Beowulf's audacity and unwillingness to take counsel are part of the typical heroic boldness; as a king, they are flaws that may have cost Beowulf his life. The loyal Wiglaf himself criticizes Beowulf's unwise refusal of advice. Upon Beowulf's death, Wiglaf mourns that he and others "Ne meahton we gelæran leofne þeoden rices hyrde ræd ænigne þæt he ne grette golweard þone" (ll. 3079 – 3081; "could not persuade... [the] kingdom's shepherd, by any counsel, not to attack that gold-keeper" Chickering). Wiglaf implies not only that he believes Beowulf was foolish to not listen to counselors, but also that Beowulf neglected his duty as the "kingdom's shepherd". Gwara argues that Wiglaf is unaware of the curse on the treasure, and that Wiglaf's analysis may not be fair, as he does not understand the motivation of Beowulf's action.¹¹ Though Wiglaf may be misinformed, the parallel between Beowulf's early and later life is unmistakable; Beowulf is still controlled by his own self confidence and characterized by stubbornness. The answer to whether or not this condition is an indicator of *oferhygd* lies, however, in the interpretation of the reader, and whether or not the reader chooses to see Beowulf as an arrogant king or a self-sacrificing leader.

¹¹ Gwara, *Heroic Identity in the World of Beowulf*, 51.

The dragon, as the ultimate monster, is more dangerous, terrifying, and deadly than Grendel or Grendel's mother. Beowulf himself recognizes the danger of the dragon and sees the dragon's existence as a judgment (l. 2329). Beowulf the king, however, seems to enter the battle in the same manner—perhaps with the same arrogance—as Beowulf the hero. Beowulf “oferhogode... þæt he þone wid-flogan weorode gesohte sidan herge” (ll. 2345-2347; “[he] scorned to approach the dragon with troops, with a full army” Chickering). Here, the word *oferhogode* occurs explicitly to refer to the prideful manner in which Beowulf rejects help from his armies. Although he does not deny the use of weapons as he did with Grendel, Beowulf's refusal of aid from others seems equally audacious when the magnified risk is considered. His *wlenco* is still the motivation for action, but the *wlenco* begins to resemble the foolish *oferhygd*, as he brings upon himself his demise and the peril of his kingdom possibly as a result of his pride.

As in his journey to Hrothgar's hall, Beowulf brings a small number of warriors with him to the dragon's cave as well. Once again, these men seem to be accessories; they play no active role in the fight (other than to be eaten, as is the case in the fight with Grendel). In the dragon confrontation, these warriors are quick to be labeled as cowards, as they are unwilling to come to the aid of the king. It is Beowulf, however, who distances them from the battle at the very beginning. At the mouth of the cave he tells them to “gebide ge on beorge” (l. 2529; “wait on the barrow,” Chickering). His motives are plain, and he openly declares that it is “ne gemmet mannes, nefne min anes, [þæ]t he wið aglæcan eofodo dæle eorlscepe efne” (ll. 2533-5; “[It is] not fitting for any, except me alone, to test out his strength against the monster, do a hero's deed” Chickering). Beowulf is concerned with the “eorlscepe efne” (l. 2535; “hero's deed” Chickering; “prove his worth” Heaney). Beowulf's reasoning could be seen as either noble and

courageous or unnecessarily foolish. Beowulf has established himself as a capable warrior; why must he now “test out his strength”? The dragon surpasses any monster he has faced, any feat he has accomplished. The final fight with the dragon is Beowulf’s opportunity to acquire the ultimate amount of fame, to accomplish a “hero’s deed” that cannot be surpassed. By sending away his warriors, he ensures an uncontested monopoly of heroism; however, one could also argue that he wishes to spare the lives of his retainers. Regardless of the reader’s perception of Beowulf’s character, in this case Beowulf’s solo approach results in the sacrifice of his own life and a defenseless kingdom.

Gwara argues that, within the poem of *Beowulf*, the “progressive victories [of kings] magnify their audacity, until they think that no enemy can ever harm them” resulting in *oferhygd*.¹² This analysis is unfair, as it considers only the life of a king after he is crowned, and does not take into account the societal expectations of his previous roles. The role of the hero (preceding the role of the king) requires ambitious acts of bravery. The more fantastic the goal, the more glory is acquired. Testing the boundaries of personal capabilities is required in the growth and proving of a hero; *oferhygd*, however, results when this ambition or *wlenco* trumps kingly responsibilities. If a hero is praised for his accomplishments, his reckless acts of bravery, the transition to kingship can be his ruin. As has been mentioned before, the poet never declares whether Beowulf has been overcome by pride in the final battle. He does, however, provide parallel descriptions of Beowulf’s character in both the first two sections and the final section of the poem, so a reader can evaluate whether Beowulf has successfully mitigated his heroic drive or has allowed it to overtake his kingly responsibilities.

¹² Gwara, *Heroic Identity in the World of Beowulf*, 45.

Hrothgar as the Ideal King

Clearly, there is room to question Beowulf's motives as a king and to doubt the legitimacy of his decisions. However, this possible failure within Beowulf's rule gives rise to the necessity for a good example, a moral standard against which a reader can evaluate Beowulf's actions. I suggest that the poet submits Hrothgar as a representation of a good king, a moral guide and, thus, a foil for Beowulf. In order to see where and why Beowulf fails as a king, we can consider Hrothgar and how he succeeds in his kingly role.

Many scholars have noted that comparing Beowulf's imposing physical presence to Hrothgar's weakness can indicate that "Hrothgar loses masculinity on martial grounds in comparison to the hyper-masculine Beowulf."¹³ This comparison is discreditable, however, because it considers "a weak king [against] the active hero."¹⁴ Comparing a hero to a king is invalid, as the decisions and actions of each are motivated by different responsibilities and expectations. The evaluation of Beowulf's kingly performance based on Hrothgar's success, however, is entirely legitimate. To facilitate this analysis, the poet clearly constructs a parallelism within the story between the two kings.

Hrothgar and Beowulf come from similar backgrounds. Both men are required to prove their right to rule through military conquests. They both enjoy success as heroes and kings for the majority of their lives. The rise of a final, undefeatable monster, however, presents the two men with an ultimate challenge.

Despite his skill in battle, Hrothgar finds himself confronted with a foe he cannot defeat; Grendel is altogether too powerful and too relentless for the aged king. Hrothgar presents no ability to deliver his people from the plague. Yet Hrothgar is never criticized for this difficulty.

¹³ Hill, "The King and the Warrior," 65.

¹⁴ Hill, "The King and the Warrior," 65.

Instead, the poet takes great care to show Hrothgar's distress, and how he "torn geþolode... weana gehwelcne sidra sorga" (ll. 148-9; "endured in torment all possible cares, the fullest agony," Chickering). Hrothgar and his counselors "ræd eahtedon, hwæt swið-ferhdum seleste wære wið fær-gryrum to gefremanne" (ll. 172-4; "considered all plans, what might be done by the bravest men against the onslaught," Chickering). They consider all possible options, and conclude that even with their "bravest men" nothing can be done. In fact, if Unferth is one of their greatest men, it is understandable why Hrothgar is unable to confront Grendel through battle. Though Hrothgar is helpless to stop Grendel's massacre, there is no indication in the poet's language that Hrothgar is irresponsible, cowardly, or incompetent.

With all the options presented and considered, the poet never records that Hrothgar suggests or attempts going against Grendel alone. The poem seems to imply, however, that this is not Hrothgar's responsibility, as his success is not guaranteed. He is an aged king who has not had to engage in any battles during the later years of his peaceful reign. Hrothgar's nation is also unstable. Hrothgar keeps in his court his nephew Hrothulf, who will eventually turn against Hrothgar's own children.¹⁵ The Danes also face a brewing conflict with the Heathobards, which Hrothgar later tries to dispel by marrying his daughter to Ingeld.¹⁶ To leave the kingdom with such an unstable ruling family and the threat of war with other nations, coupled with the loss of a wise king, would be devastating to the Danes. Although these are never explicitly stated as the reasons why Hrothgar does not go against Grendel alone, they are still factors indicating the complex responsibilities Hrothgar must consider as king. A reader must remember that the responsibilities of a king are both martial and political. Hrothgar chooses the role of the "sitting

¹⁵ Hill, "The King and the Warrior," 66.

¹⁶ Hill, "The King and the Warrior," 66.

king,” and although he has lost his ability to confront the monster physically, he retains his power and control as king.

Hrothgar’s choices as a king are met with approval from both the poet and characters within the story. After the fight with Grendel, the poet declares “Ne hie huru wine-drihten with ne logon, glædne Hroðgar, ac þæt wæs god cyning” (ll. 862-3; “Nor did they find fault with their lord and friend, gracious Hrothgar, that excellent king,” Chickering). This label (“god cyning”) puts Hrothgar in the company of Scyld Scefing, the great king of the Danes whose description of valor and bravery opens the poem (l. 11). Again, at the departure of Beowulf, the poet declares Hrothgar to be a “cyning aepelum god” (l. 1870; “the good king,” Chickering). This is not merely the narrator’s bias, however. Beowulf himself describes Hrothgar to Hygelac as a “rum-heart cyning” (l. 2110; “great-hearted king,” Chickering”). Even if Hrothgar is unable to defeat Grendel himself, his actions and decisions are deemed honorable by both the poet and the most courageous character in the story.

If Hrothgar is declared by the society to be a good king, one may wonder if there is enough evidence to allow for a comparison between Hrothgar and Beowulf. To legitimize the contrast, the poet emphasizes the commonalities between the difficulties and rules of both kings. Many of Hrothgar’s challenges at the time of Grendel’s attacks appear within Beowulf’s kingdom at the rise of the dragon. Beowulf, at this point, is also an old king (l. 2209). In fact, both Hrothgar and Beowulf have ruled for fifty years by the time each rulers’ monstrous enemy arises (l. 1769 & l. 2209). Beowulf also has enjoyed a prosperous reign, with no violence worth mentioning (l. 2208). The poet indicates that Beowulf’s nation is on verge of war (ll. 3153-5), without an heir to the throne, as Hrothgar’s kingdom was.

As a king, Beowulf has an example to follow. He has seen the “rum heort cyning” Hrothgar deal with a monstrous threat before without endangering his own life, a decision Beowulf himself approved. However, once Beowulf is placed in a similar situation, the choices he makes do not reflect Hrothgar’s example at all.

In light of Hrothgar’s past experiences, what should Beowulf have done? That is to say, if Hrothgar’s approach was superior to Beowulf’s, how should Beowulf have approached the fight with the dragon? It cannot be said for certain that, had Beowulf behaved like Hrothgar, he would have survived. The poet offers no clear moral evaluation of Beowulf’s choices. The poet does, however, hint at crucial moments that Beowulf behaves foolishly. Beowulf, as noted before, takes no counsel before throwing himself into the conflict (ll. 3079-81). If he were to rely on the input of other men, as Hrothgar did (ll. 172-174), perhaps another conclusion could have been reached that would have increased the chances of Beowulf’s success. There is also the promise of future aid from the Danes. As Beowulf departs, Hrothgar tells him “Hafast þu gefered þæt þam folcum sceal sib gemæn[e], ond sacu restan, inwit-niþas þe hie ær drugon, wesan” (ll. 1855-9; “You have brought it to pass that peace-bond, friendship, shall tie our peoples, and strife shall sleep, malicious attacks which they weathered before,” Chickering). His promise implies that the alliance between the Geats and the Danes will ensure a preservation of peace. If the purpose of their association is to preserve peace, the Danes, provided Hrothulf’s rebellion has not yet occurred,¹⁷ could have been called upon to contribute the efforts of their greatest warriors to resolve the issue of the dragon.

¹⁷ The exact timeline of events is questionable, as some genealogies have Hrothulf killing Hrothgar to take over the kingdom (we assume that Hrothgar has died by the time Beowulf reaches his fiftieth year), while others state that his treason is against Hrothgar’s son (Chickering 321), in which case the Danish kingdom could possibly have been intact at the point of Beowulf’s fight with the dragon.

The poet's challenge to the reader is clear: does Beowulf appear to be a better or worse king than Hrothgar? The two kings have different approaches to a similar issue. The poet presents his readers with Hrothgar as a positive kingly figure whose actions and decisions are deemed acceptable. When Beowulf behaves differently, is he failing where Hrothgar succeeds, or is he behaving more nobly than Hrothgar? Although he does not make a direct moral judgment, the poet includes the parallels between the kings to encourage the reader to compare a "god cyning" with Beowulf's later actions and draw conclusions concerning whether or not Beowulf has behaved as a reasonable king or a selfish hero.

Hrothgar's Sermon

It is clear, however, that Beowulf is advised by Hrothgar to avoid pride. While the evaluation between the actions of the kings may be difficult, Hrothgar's sermon on pride allows a reader to compare the morals of Beowulf and Hrothgar. In understanding the significance of Hrothgar's sermon, a reader must consider the context of the sermon. Hrothgar delivers the sermon upon Beowulf's victory in the fight with Grendel's mother. This seems to be a near-death experience for Beowulf; he confesses "Ic þæt unsoften ealdre gedigde" (l. 1655; "Not very easily did I save my life," Chickering). This contrasts his previous boasts, where he is so confident in his victory. After fighting Grendel, his only expressed disappointment is that Grendel lived long enough to escape, for he wanted Hrothgar to see the mighty monster he destroyed (ll. 960-2).

Previously in the poem, Beowulf describes his swimming contest with Breca and presents a significant statement: "Wyrð oft nered unfægne eorl, þonne his ellen deah" (ll. 573-4; "So fate often saves the undoomed man when his courage holds," Chickering). What seems like a passing remark gives Hrothgar (and the reader) an indication of Beowulf's perception of his own

mortality; apparently Beowulf believes that fate will intervene if he finds himself in an ambitious battle. This sentiment appears again when Beowulf recounts the fight with Grendel's mother. After telling how he found the mystical sword in the mere, Beowulf (almost as an aside) says "oftost wisode winigea leasum" (ll. 1663-4; "most often [God] guides the friendless, distressed," Chickering). Beowulf, on the whole, presents a confidence in his abilities, but falls back on divine intervention when his own strength alone is not enough to save him.

Hrothgar has heard Beowulf's boasts and has witnessed his ability as a warrior. However, Beowulf has also confessed to Hrothgar that he assumes divine intervention will save his life in an ambitious battle. A reader also learns that Hrothgar can tell that Beowulf will not always be a warrior. Although it is not stated until after his sermon, Hrothgar anticipates that "þe Sæ-Geatas selran næbben to gecesenne cuning ænigne, hord-weard hæleþa, gyf þu healdan wylt maga rice" (ll. 1850-3; "the Geats could not choose a better king anywhere alive, a hoard-guard for heroes, if it pleased you to rule the land of your people," Chickering). Hrothgar has a multidimensional view of Beowulf as both a warrior and a future king. Thus, his sermon should be seen as applying to both Beowulf the warrior and Beowulf the king.

Hrothgar opens his sermon with praise of Beowulf and an interesting evaluation of his moral character. Rather than marveling at Beowulf's strength and ability, Hrothgar declares "Eal þu hit geþyldum healdest, mægen mid modes snyttrum" (ll. 1795-6; "Steadily you govern your strength with wisdom," Chickering). This seems to be an odd aspect to praise, and is obviously chosen by Hrothgar (and, thus, the poet) for a reason. Hrothgar appears to present this idea of strength with moderation as the key to avoiding *oferhygd*, which he will elaborate on in his sermon.

The sermon is a cautionary tale, describing the failed rule of Heremod, a Danish king. To this man, “*ðeah þe hine mihtig God mægenes wynnum, eafepum stepte*” (ll. 1716-8; “God had given him the joys of great strength,” Chickering). This seems to be a direct warning against Beowulf’s dependence on divine intervention. Hrothgar implies that, although God does intervene and give strength, it is possible to abuse that aid. This man, as a king, began to have a “*breost-hord blod-reow*” (l. 1719; “blood-thirsty [heart],” Chickering). As a result, “*nalla beagas geaf Denum æfter dome*” (ll. 1719-20; “never a ring did he give, for glory, to the Danish men,” Chickering). This refusal of rings seems to be the pivot point for king Heremod. How does this seemingly small act of selfishness turn a strong warrior into a blood-thirsty king?

Heremod’s hoarding of rings was not mere monetary greed. The text indicates that he was jealous of his rings, specifically, not treasure in general. The financial value was not nearly as significant for Heremod as the social symbolism of the rings. The ring-giving was significant in *Beowulf*-ian society, as a king would give his loyal warriors rings after a victory to reward them and ensure future allegiance. The rings the men would receive would act as a symbol of their bravery, an indication of their aid to the king, and a sign of the glory they had received.¹⁸ To withhold rings would be to “[disgrace] one’s retainers.”¹⁹ For Heremod, presenting his warriors with rings would mean sharing the glory in victory. He refuses to present rings to his men, and therefore “[stops] rewarding his retinue for the risks they took in his campaigns.”²⁰ By hoarding the rings, Heremod says, essentially, that he is to receive all the glory for his nation’s victories.

Heremod is, of course, not behaving rationally; not rewarding his warriors only encourages bitterness and betrayal. Heremod is operating based on the foolish desire for a

¹⁸ Gwara, *Heroic Identity in the World of Beowulf*, 35.

¹⁹ Gwara, *Heroic Identity in the World of Beowulf*, 35.

²⁰ Gwara, *Heroic Identity in the World of Beowulf*, 45.

monopoly of praise. He will not allow another to share in his glory. He has been overtaken by *oferhygd*, the type of obsessive pride that overthrows true responsibility and endangers Heremod's nation.

The story causes us to question what would drive Heremod to become so possessive of glory and overrun by *oferhygd*. The story implies that Heremod enjoyed a time of acceptable success as a warrior, utilizing his great strength given to him by God (ll.1716-7). As a young warrior with no other responsibilities, Heremod's obsession with glory would have been reasonable. When his role changes from a hero to a king, however, Heremod's obsession only grows. Now he is expected to not only reward others for their bravery, but to let others bring him glory, as Beowulf does for Hygelac (ll. 435-6). This practice is in direct opposition to the hero's *wlenco*. Gwara describes Heremod's decision as "a clash of incompatible identities" and claims "Heremod does not transcend the competitive warrior outlook" (35). The dissonance between the expectations of a king and the engrained hero's code is too strong; Heremod cannot be both a hero and a king and thus fails in both roles.

In light of the story itself, we ask again why Hrothgar chooses to deliver this story to Beowulf. Hrothgar has seen Beowulf begin his life as a hero, just as Heremod did. Beowulf, to fulfill *wlenco* and the heroic code, has taken unnecessary risks in his battles in an effort to increase the amount of praise he will receive. Hrothgar has also observed Beowulf's worrisome reliance on God's deliverance from battles that may be too great. Hrothgar may see this combination as a gateway to *oferhygd*. He warns that *oferhygd* occurs when a warrior's continued success leads him to think that he will never be defeated (ll. 1735-40). This is a risk associated with both heroes and kings. The second dimension, the unreasonable need for glory as a king, is not mentioned directly in Hrothgar's analysis, but is certainly implied in the story of

Heremod. Heremod, and possibly Beowulf, fails as a king because he is obsessed with the heroic code “that subordinates the national good to the attainment of personal glory.”²¹ This element of *oferhygd* arises when one should think of others more than himself, but instead endangers both his life and followers.

Upon the completion of the narrative, Hrothgar offers practical advice on how to escape the grasp of *oferhygd*. He tells Beowulf, “Bebeorh þe ðone bealo-nið [...]ond þe þæt selre geceos, ece radas” (ll. 1758-60; “Guard against that awful curse [...] and choose the better, eternal gains,” Chickering). This seems to be an appeal to Beowulf’s analysis of the heroic code previously mentioned: “let him who may win fame before death. That is the best memorial for a man after he is gone” (ll. 1387-9, Chickering). Choosing “eternal gains” would involve creating a lasting memorial that is free of reproach; although Heremod’s desire was for fame, his ultimate legacy was shameful. Hrothgar mentions again Beowulf’s current fame: “Nu is þines mægnes blæd ane hwile” (ll. 1761-2; “Your fame lives now, in one strong time,” Chickering). He then, however, begins to describe all the tragedies that could befall Beowulf as a king, such as sickness, old age, or death in battle (ll. 1762-8). He mentions these dangers not to dishearten Beowulf, but rather to remind him of his mortality so he can avoid being like the king to whom “no hine with dweleð adl ne ylðo, ne him inwit-sorh on sefa[n] sweorcedð” (ll. 1735-8; “no thought of harm from illness, age, or malicious tongues darkens his mind,” Chickering). The man who does not hold in view the potential for his own death is susceptible to a false feeling of immortality and *oferhygd*.

At the end of the sermon, Hrothgar considers his own experiences as both a prosperous king and a king faced with adversity. He recalls how, for over fifty years, he has defended his people “hig wigge beleac” (l. 1770; “by my war-strength,” Chickering). Hrothgar presents this

²¹ Gwara, *Heroic Identity in the World of Beowulf*, 35.

information perhaps to show how heroic endeavors can be properly integrated into the kingly role. Hrothgar then describes the change in his kingdom, where he is suddenly opposed by a monster he cannot defeat alone (ll. 1774-8). He does not, however, indicate disappointment in his own failing but rather is thankful that he “on aldre gebad” (l. 1779; “came through alive,” Chickering). Hrothgar includes himself at the end of the sermon on *oferhygd*, perhaps to present himself as an example of a good king or, at least, one who is not overcome by *oferhygd* and recognizes the proper role of a king.

Hrothgar recognizes the potential for *oferhygd* in Beowulf’s life and kingly rule. His sermon comes at a crucial time in Beowulf’s journey as a warrior: he has just fought the two most challenging monsters of his career and is about to enter an era of relative peace that will extend until the dragon. The poet, through Hrothgar, must remind Beowulf of his own mortality, before years of peace and complacency cause him to forget to control his strength with wisdom. The need for glory must be tempered and be balanced with kingly responsibility. Peace and success may lead Beowulf to remember only the outcomes of his fights (therefore, his victories) rather than the potential harm his risks brought him. Even before Beowulf reaches his late life, the poet includes Hrothgar’s sermon to provide a warning for Beowulf against the need for fame when the kingly code and responsibilities must take the preeminence.

The reader must then decide whether Hrothgar’s sermon falls on deaf ears. Again, the word *oferhygd* is only used once to describe Beowulf in the final section of the poem. Do the events of the dragon battle, however, indicate that the *oferhygd* Hrothgar warns against has taken hold in Beowulf’s life? Or is he sufficiently aware of his own mortality to eliminate the possibility of *oferhygd*? The sermon is obviously included because Hrothgar sees the possibility

of *oferhygd* in Beowulf's future life; whether or not Beowulf takes this advice to heart becomes a deciding factor in whether his kingship is to be viewed as a success.

Conclusion

Gwara argues that "*oferhygd* steals upon a powerful and successful king, and... derives from a sense of one's invulnerability" (199). I disagree with this representation. *Oferhygd* does not begin in a kingship, cultivated by prosperity; instead, it is the heroic recklessness, the *wlenco*, that is not moderated when the responsibilities of the individual change. In any man's transition from hero to king, this conflict between expectations needs to be resolved. The poet presents Beowulf as a case study of this transformation, and challenges the readers to conclude for themselves whether Beowulf successfully adapts to the leader role, or whether he becomes a victim of uncontrolled *oferhygd*.

The reader of Beowulf is bombarded with anecdotes about good and bad warriors and kings, both in the main narrative of the poem and in the side-stories of background characters. The different actions of each and the moral commentary on their characters (or lack thereof) make the analysis of *oferhygd* and *wlenco* more complicated than Gwara's definition. There are no recorded failings of Hrothgar before the arrival of Grendel, and yet he does not succumb to *oferhygd*. Conversely, Beowulf has been forced to overcome adversity in his young life (ll. 2183-9) and yet shows behavior that leads Hrothgar to believe that *oferhygd* will be a problem in the future.

The poet and characters provide an outline for the responsibilities of a ruler according to the kingly code. A good king is one who rules his people diplomatically (as Hrothgar does), defends his people (as Scyld does), and rewards loyalty and bravery among his retainers (as

Heremod does not). When the king subordinates any of these responsibilities with *wlenco* (or his desire for personal glory), this king becomes a failed ruler who has succumbed to *oferhygd*.

Even given this simplified understanding of the kingly and heroic codes, evaluating Beowulf's fight with the dragon is still challenging. The poet offers little help in the text. As was noted previously, both Beowulf and the dragon lose their lives in the end; thus, Beowulf's feat cannot be ruled as a universal success or a universal failure.

The words of the poem, on a superficial level, describe Beowulf the king positively. The poem indicates that he took at least some of Hrothgar's advice to heart: "gin-fæstan gife, þe him God sealed, heold hilde-deor" (ll. 2182-3; "he guarded the gift that God had given him, the greatest strength that man ever had," Chickering). The poem also declares that, after being made king of the Geats, "he geheold tela fiftig wintra" (ll. 2208-9; "he ruled it well for fifty winters," Chickering). The poem refers to Beowulf, even after the battle, as a great king (l. 2789, l. 2809). The representation of Beowulf is complicated and sometimes almost inconsistent; the poet is still unwilling to pick a side in the debate of Beowulf's morality.

Perhaps the closest a reader gets to a direct moral evaluation are the words of Beowulf himself. Beowulf directly reveals his own inner-conflict and perhaps even hints at his preoccupation with *wlenco* while he "beot-wordum spræc niehstan siðe" (ll. 2510-1; "made his battle-vows for the last time," Chickering). He confesses "Ic genedde fela guða on geogoðe; gyt ic wylle, frod folces weard, fæhðe secan, mærdū fremman" (ll. 2511-4; "Often I dared many battles in my youth; I wish even now, an old folk-guard, to seek a quarrel, do a great deed," Chickering). He makes this declaration before he addresses the men who are with him. Perhaps this is almost a monologue, a description of Beowulf's own private thoughts. Regardless of who is being addressed, Beowulf indicates that he sees this fight with the dragon as being similar to

his deeds as a youth. At this moment, Beowulf is not thinking as the Geatish king of a fifty-year rule; instead, he has the mentality of a young warrior again, as if he was entering Heorot, “[seeking] a quarrel” with a monster like Grendel once more.

In order to understand the global picture of the heroic and kingly codes, the context of the entire poem must be considered, and not the final portion alone. This paper has focused on the parallelism within the text between Beowulf’s two roles, the acceptable kingly role as shown in Hrothgar, and thematic indications that Beowulf may be prone to excessive pride at the point of his fight with the dragon. These contextual clues are included by the poet to aid the reader’s determination of whether Beowulf acts out of foolishness, and whether his decision to confront the dragon alone is inspired by *oferhygd*, rather than pure altruistic care for his people. If Beowulf succumbs to pride, he has not resolved the conflict between the hero role and the kingly role in an acceptable way.

This is, once again, not a conclusion the poet forces the reader to make. In fact, it would be improper to impose an interpretation of the entire work, for there is no consensus among the characters, nor the representations of Beowulf, nor even among scholars who have studied the work. The moral evaluation of Beowulf’s actions is to be a personal decision for each reader, and the poet merely gives tools and context for this analysis, rather than presenting a simple, direct piece of commentary on Beowulf. This is not to say, however, that the decision the reader makes is unimportant or insignificant. Because the Dragon section relies on the context of the Grendel and Grendel’s mother sections, the conclusions the reader draws concerning the end of the poem impact the interpretation of the beginning. If Beowulf is seen as a victim of uncontrolled *oferhygd* in the final section, then his actions in his young life appear as warning signs of impending doom. If the reader chooses to see Beowulf as an ideal king making the best

choice for his kingdom, the experiences of his young life must exist to enable his heroism in the final section. Additionally, a reader with that perception would understand the kingly role differently, and would see Hrothgar, with his different approach to violent threats, as an inferior king. The context provided in the first two sections informs the reader's understanding of the hero – king conflict. Thus, whether or not Beowulf resolves the final disparity between his heroic and kingly roles shapes the reader's understanding of Beowulf as the hero, Hrothgar, and the place of pride in the kingly code.

While the poet does not force an interpretation of Beowulf's actions, he does, implicitly, give the final word on Beowulf's overall moral character. The poet ends the work with the words of Beowulf's nobles. His men, at his funeral, speak his praises: “cwædon þæt he wære wyruld-cyning[a], mannum mildest ond mon-ðwærust, leodum liðost ond lof-gearnost” (ll. 3180-3; “They said that he was, of the kings in this world, the kindest to his men, the most courteous man, the best to his people, and most eager for fame” Chickering). Without further clarification, the final evaluation of Beowulf's character the poet wishes to leave with the reader comes from the mouth of Beowulf's retainers rather than from the narrator. Whether or not Beowulf's decision to fight the dragon is honorable, selfish, or somewhere in between, this is the last word that the poet presents on Beowulf. The ambiguity of the poem overall--with all its anecdotes, foils, sermons, and contrasts--brings into question Beowulf's motives in the final portion of the story. The poet offers an expansive enough grey area for that debate. He does not, however, intend for the conclusion we draw from the debate to define our entire perception of Beowulf's character. The poet, satisfied with the nobles' evaluation, offers no further commentary and leaves us to consider their eulogy. Beowulf is praised, mourned, and remembered as an honorable king, “mannum milust ond mon ðwærust, leodum liðost,” and a brave and noble

warrior, “lof-gearnost.” The two roles are inseparable in Beowulf’s life, and are mentioned side by side at his funeral. Overall, Beowulf is both a good hero and a good king. It is, then, the balance of the two—the appropriate sacrifice of one for the development of the other—with which the hero-turned-king must struggle.

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