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The —ick of It: Phalluses, Swords, and Character Development in “Beowulf” and “Morte d'Arthur”

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.

Abstract

This essay explores the quintessential accessory to any male warrior in medieval literature. The swords that belong to Grendel's Mother in the medieval epic poem “Beowulf” and King Arthur in the “Morte d'Arthur” are used as metaphors and symbols to illuminate specific motivations fueling medieval English representations of masculinity. Grendel's Mother's sword underscores anxieties of Hrothgar's people in “Beowulf”—namely, that of procreation and the subversion of traditional gender roles. Its destruction is key to understanding the disdain that the Danes hold against Grendel's Mother as an aberrant model of loyalty. King Arthur's, thrown into a lake and seemingly cleansed of its impurities, likewise highlights faults in his reign and their absolution after his death. The history of the medieval sword plays an important role in this analysis, as the jewels and engravings provide a new reading of weapons in medieval English poetry.

Keywords

Medieval Literature, English poetry, weaponry, Morte d'Arthur, Beowulf, Excalibur

The iron blade with its ill-boding patterns
 had been tempered in blood. It had never failed
 the hand of anyone who hefted it in battle,
 anyone who had fought and faced the worst
 in the gap of danger. This was not the first time
 it had been called to perform heroic feats.
 — “Beowulf” (ll. 1459-64)

The sword Hrunting, “a weapon with a name and, so to speak, a pedigree,” was the weapon gifted to Beowulf by Unferth, the same man who challenges him earlier in “Beowulf” (Ogilvy 372). The sword is referred to like a person when it is “called” to battle. This is just one example of how swords “with a history were known to the later Anglo-Saxons” and are more than just weapons for fighting in English medieval poetry. They were pieces of art or jewelry, highly personalized and often passed down from generation to generation (Ogilvy 372). They were decorated with rings to signify oaths made, they were coated in gold, etched with inspirational runes, and occasionally had the bones of past family members or animals melted into them as a source of strength for the warrior. Archaeologist Sue Brunning argues that the swords often “[created] a life history of events and people they are related to” (British Museum). It becomes clear that swords were more than ornament: they represented the value of an individual as well as the moral values their community.

While swords held this complex double-edged meaning in medieval English society, they seemed to take on added significance in early English epic poetry. Like that of elites of the day, Grendel’s Mother’s and King Arthur’s swords are both described in magnificent detail. Both are engraved, inlaid with jewels, and are considered to be signs of great power. The physical shape of a sword was also highly suggestive, as likely to symbolize the Judeo-Christian crucifix on which Jesus Christ died as it was to gesture towards a character’s reproductive organs and the privileges inherent to those sexual and gender orientations. What happens to these swords, whether they are burned and melted or thrown into bodies of water, is symbolic for what happens to the ones who carry them. Swords are used as synecdoche and metaphors to explain the complexities of the characters who wield the swords by symbolizing both the warrior’s qualities and actions. The sword in medieval literature reflects the warrior who wields it by standing in as a phallic symbol and the general concept of gender beyond its physical uses in war.

Swords as a Phallic Symbol

When Beowulf enters the den of Grendel’s Mother, he can’t help but take notice of the large sword stashed amongst her hoard. The sword that resides in Grendel’s Mother’s artillery, as it is called, “began to wilt into gory icicles / to slather and thaw” after Beowulf kills her (ll.1605–1606). The text recounts that during Grendel’s attacks, “All were endangered; young and old / were hunted down by that dark death-shadow” (ll.159–60). During these dark times, the poem suggests a great many men were being killed in Hrothgar’s kingdom, threatening systems of inheritance and making space for civil conflict. This is not only a fear for his own bloodline, but for the future of the entire kingdom itself. If understood as a phallic symbol, that the sword can be read as her ability to procreate without any male assistance. If so, its theft and the death of Grendel’s Mother highlights a larger cultural anxiety about birth rates within a culture of violence—underscored by a lack of children or pregnant women in the poem.

As a symbol of warrior expectations, that she maintains such a weapon suggests Grendel’s Mother chooses to perform this traditional male role. By extension, that would exaggerate an anxiety about women needing to perform typically male duties. The anxiety behind the existence of Grendel’s

Mother is not only that she acts in opposition to not just civilization but to its governing systems (e.g., when she kills Hrothgar's right-hand man instead of an entire hall of them as revenge for her son's death), but also that her success might normalize the coopting of male roles and benefits by women.

By contrast, the poem affirms Beowulf as the ultimate expression of masculinity, and credits him with rebalancing the society once he defeats Grendel's Mother. The line, "It was easy for the Lord, / the Ruler of Heaven, to redress the balance / once Beowulf got back up on his feet" comes right before Beowulf delivers the final blow to Grendel's Mother and seems like a side note from the scop or narrator (ll.1554–56). The "redressing" or the setting right of this "balance" suggests either the uneven distribution of political and or gendered power in this the society, as reflected by Grendel's Mother. The fact that God himself is mending the balance is a message to the poem's community that women should not be on their own and cannot function without the system of patrilineal negotiation.

Consider also that Grendel's Mother has an "armory," and took part in a type of "knightly exchange" when she killed Hrothgar's right-hand man (ll. 1558). She is performing in all the same ways that Beowulf has performed in order to achieve the respect from peers and followers. When Grendel's Mother is finally defeated, her sword reacts to her death by "wilt[ing] into gory icicles" (ll.1605). The term "gory" is used in reference to the blood that covers the sword's hilt, and the blood is also described as "scalding" or hot in later in the poem. When Beowulf takes the sword from her, he takes back the symbol of her masculine identity, responsibility, and power that she had possessed as a warrior. Together, these descriptions of the sword allude to the dissolution and eventual reclamation of the gender-specific male role of procreation and protection for the community. Once Grendel's Mother is killed, all of the power she once held dies with her, and so does the sword.

The poem complicates the source of blame to which the sword might point regarding communal weaknesses: "It is a wonderful thing, / the way it all melted as ice melts / when the Father eases the fetters off the frost / and unravels the water-ropes, He who wields power/over time and tide: He is true Lord" (ll.1605–10). The "He," "Father," and "Lord" could be referring to God or Beowulf, complicating the sense of who has agency over fate and the future of this community. As Beowulf exits the water to meet Hrothgar's men, relief is expressed through the natural environs when "the lake settled" (ll. 1630). The lake settling also draws attention to Beowulf's control of the sea, or the "water-ropes." These water images, alongside the inclusion of "time or tide," allude also to a woman's gestational period of the lunar cycle, suggesting that he who wields power over women can claim a political title over a nation.

Sword as Warrior

While the sword that belonged to Grendel's Mother was a symbol of masculinity, Excalibur is a reflection of King Arthur's status as a ruler and the ways it too is entrenched in gender. King Arthur's famous sword is described by Jeffrey Jackson as "foundational for Arthur's rules and reign," a character almost unto itself (208). Excalibur has a special status much like Hrunting by "the way [Sir Bedivere] beheld that noble sword, that the pommel and the haft was all precious stones" (Malory 548). Like Grendel's Mother's sword, Excalibur is decorated with jewels and engraved with the history of King Arthur's lineage.

King Arthur had more than one sword, as Dorsey Armstrong points out, including Clarent, which was the sword of peace, as opposed to "[Excalibur], the sword of war" (87). While Excalibur was categorized as a sword of war, it was often King Arthur's first choice and the sword he reached for most when faced with peaceful acts, such as "crownings and dubbings, acts which function to bring other knights into alliance with Arthur, often in preparation for war" (Armstrong 85). The fact that King Arthur constantly reaches for his sword of war, even when inviting people into his *comitatus* or Round Table, reveals that his mind is always on the brink of war or violence. He holds war as an

important event to him as a King, even during times of happiness and peace. This is reflected by the fact that what led to his death was his decision to jump into an all-out war when Sir Gawain betrayed him. As a result of his need to fight, he lost nearly all of his knights, his Queen, and many other good men who were part of his kingdom and loyal to him.

As King Arthur lay dying from a severe battle wound, he requests that Sir Bedivere “go with [Excalibur] yonder water’s side; and when thou comest there I charge thee throw my sword in that water and come again and tell what thou sawest there” (Malory 548). If swords were made with bones from family members, when warriors went into battle, their weapons would carry the strength of their ancestors. Similar to Beowulf erasing Grendel's Mother's history, throwing Excalibur in the lake is akin to washing away King Arthur's sins or cleansing his history. This is appropriate for this moment right before his death and the event of taking last rights, also known as the Anointing of the Sick by the Roman Catholic Church. These last rights are “meant to lead the sick person to healing of the soul, but also of the body if such is God’s will” (Holy See). By anointing Excalibur in the lake, King Arthur asks God to heal its soul as well as his own before his death. King Arthur then chooses to take Excalibur, newly cleansed, with him into death, which implies an act of taking responsibility for having ruled his kingdom in war, not peace. By having Excalibur cleansed in the lake, he takes part in his own last rights, confessing the sins he committed as King before his death. While Grendel's Mother's sword ends up melting away and is cleansed from this world, King Arthur's sword—and reputation—remains intact.

Understanding the Medieval Sword

Nothing is ever as it seems in medieval literature. There are hidden meanings and messages in almost every detail. A tree is not just a tree, the clouds aren't just clouds, and swords are never just plain old swords. These weapons explain the complexities and interiorities of the characters to which they belong. They symbolize in greater detail what is being done to their owner and reflect their owner's morals and personalities. Swords carry family histories, inheritances, and stories of those who came before them. They can even be made with the bones of animals and ancestors as a symbolic transfer of strength from one generation to the next. The sword that belongs to Grendel's Mother in the poem “Beowulf” was the embodiment of that phallic symbol, with the many illusions to blood and fertility that are paired with male genitalia. Because of this symbolization, the reader is able to connect the real anxieties of Hrothgar's community as Beowulf defeats Grendel's Mother with her own sword. The way it melts and leaves behind only the hilt is symbolic of Beowulf taking away the masculine power she possessed, and restoring the balance within the kingdoms gender roles.

In these early poems, what is done to the sword is metaphorically or symbolically done to the character who is wielding it. When Grendel's mother is slain by Beowulf, her sword and the history of her family is wiped away. All of her strength and power is taken from her, and taken from the sword as well. The sword Excalibur in “Morte d'Arthur” is much more reflective of King Arthur himself. Using the knowledge that family histories were engraved on swords, when Excalibur is thrown into the lake, of the act washes King Arthur clean of his sins before he perishes. We also explore the fact that Excalibur was not King Arthur's only sword, but the one that he preferred most even though it was charged as a sword of war. A balance is restored later in the story when those who betrayed him also perish. Because swords were a part of the picture of “masculinity” and of knighthood, it's important to acknowledge the role that they played in medieval literature. The sword was something held in high regard as physical symbols of valor and honor that these men wore and fought with. It was a label passed down from generations and inherited from fathers before them.

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