

Heroic Narrative

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WAR AND REPUTATION.

Throughout the Middle Ages, but especially in the earlier centuries, literary texts composed in poetry and prose and produced in the British Isles, Scandinavia, and throughout Continental Europe reflected both the dominant warrior culture and the emerging ideals of personal reputation and honor. Such literary works typically celebrated the exploits of larger-than-life, hyper-masculine legendary heroes who fought monsters, battled the enemies of Christianity, and often died tragic martyr-like deaths. In heroic tales and in a variation on the genre in French culture, the *chansons de geste* (songs of deeds), the establishment and maintenance of the hero's reputation (the hero's *los* or *pris* in French) was the driving force inspiring the extraordinary feats and physical exploits by which the male protagonists earned their heroic credentials. Such heroes were expected to display a balance of *fortitudo* (physical courage) and *sapientia* (discretion and wisdom). The tragic downfall of the hero often occurred because of an imbalance of these epic virtues, when his discretion waned and he displayed overweening pride in his physical prowess. In the *Song of Roland*, for example, Roland does not heed the cautions of his companion Oliver and delays calling for help until it is too late. Except for emphasis on such single character traits, however, the usually anonymous authors of heroic narratives paid little attention to the psychological motivations of their male protagonists, who demonstrated less emotional interiority and soul-searching than did their later chivalric romance counterparts. Nor were these heroes' exploits literally spurred by an interest in wooing a fair damsel or saving her from distress. Indeed, in these early heroic narratives love and the softening presence of women were almost completely absent. Typically, little to no information was provided about wives, sweethearts, or other emotional entanglements that might distract from the heroic imperative to perform mightily against almost impossibly dangerous foes, often in the interests of preserving physical security or in defense of their Christian faith.

THE HEROIC NARRATIVE IN ENGLAND: BEOWULF.

The harsh conditions of early medieval life placed a premium on small tribal units of warriors and an overlord who repelled the raids of neighboring groups and made frequent forays of their own. Early heroic literature celebrated their exploits and memorialized their deeds for later audiences in what has been called "the tale of the tribe." Social conditions, then, led to the rise of a literature peculiarly fitted to immortalizing the heroes of such social units. In English, the first of these heroic narratives was the Anglo-Saxon alliterative poem *Beowulf*, which is preserved in only one manuscript (now at the British Library), a miscellany (anthology) of stories of monsters, marvels, exotic locales, and fantastic creatures of huge size. Although it is the earliest major literary text produced in England, this story is actually set in Denmark and other Scandinavian locales. Before it was copied into the manuscript in its present form, the poem now known as *Beowulf* underwent many oral and possibly written revisions during a period from

about the seventh to the eleventh century. Beowulf celebrates the heroic exploits of its title-hero, who is endowed with youth and superhuman strength, especially a mighty grip. These attributes enable Beowulf to rescue the court of the aged Danish king Hrothgar from the ravages of the semi-human monster Grendel, whose ancestry is traced to the biblical character Cain, Adam's "bad" son. Grendel has terrorized and gruesomely killed Hrothgar's retainers, called thanes, who nevertheless remain loyal to their chief despite decades of Grendel's murderous, nightly raids on their residence in Hrothgar's mead hall Heorot. The interior of the hearth-lit Heorot represents a haven of social solidarity, physical safety, and celebratory male bonding that contrasts with the brutally harsh winter landscape outdoors. The thanes' life-risking loyalty was part of the early medieval heroic code practiced by male members of a communal group known as the comitatus. In the comitatus the thanes were bound to their overlord in a special reciprocal relationship in which the lord offered material rewards and a social identity in return for his thanes' military and political allegiance.

REPETITIONS AND REINFORCEMENTS.

The structure of Beowulf reflects not only the simple social life of raiding, distributing booty, and feasting, but also the recurring need for the social values of bravery and measured judgment. The poem has three episodes recounting the hero's contests against three increasingly ferocious monsters. After slaying Grendel, Beowulf and the over-confident Danes are startled out of their victorious complacency by an even more brutal retaliatory attack by Grendel's mother, who kills one of Hrothgar's most valued thanes. Beowulf follows Grendel's mother to an underwater cavern, clearly a monstrous parallel to Hrothgar's Heorot. After defeating this grotesque female in her lair and beheading Grendel, a more difficult struggle than his first monster fight, Beowulf returns a hero to his homeland, the kingdom of the Geats, which is ruled by another king named Hygelac. The hero eventually succeeds Hygelac on the Geatish throne. Following fifty years of successful rule, Beowulf finds himself in a similar position to that of Hrothgar at the poem's beginning when the Geats are attacked by a fire-breathing dragon. Instead of following Hrothgar's example of admitting his limitations, elderly Beowulf insists on fighting the dragon alone when his loyal retainer Wiglaf—a version of himself in his heroic youth—offers to oppose the dragon's venomous flames on his behalf. The old hero succumbs to the monster's venom as young Wiglaf ultimately slays the dragon. The poem ends with a fiery Viking funeral as Beowulf's now leaderless and vulnerable subjects mourn their king's passing. If Beowulf's attempt to brave the dragon against impossible odds was motivated by pride, his behavior was nevertheless consistent with the heroic ideal. It may, however, be significant that the poem does not eulogize its title hero with the trope "That was a good king!" which had been repeated several times throughout the poem to characterize successful, praiseworthy kings such as the Dane Scyld Scefing. Another ambiguity of the poem's thematic meaning is its use of Old Testament biblical references (for example, the mention of Cain), which are intermingled with pagan values in a way that suggests contact with, but not full conversion to, Christianity.

LITERARY AND HISTORICAL SIGNIFICANCE.

Often considered the first great poem in English literature, Beowulf is important not only for the story it tells but for its literary qualities as well. Composed and later written down in the

language of the Anglo-Saxon tribes who had begun settling in England in the middle of the fifth century, the poem makes skillful use of the distinctive qualities of this Germanic dialect (commonly called Old English), which had a strong stress accent on the first syllable of most words and a tendency to express new ideas through compounding. As the poem was recited, perhaps to the accompaniment of a harp, listeners gathered in a hall would hear the insistent repetition of initial sounds (known as alliteration), which drew attention to key words (usually three to a line). Alliteration also helped the poet to remember the text (3,182 lines in its final form), which was probably passed on, in its early stages, only through memorization. The success of Beowulf lies, to a great degree, in its skillful use of oral-formulaic phrases called kennings like "whale-road" (the sea) and "ring-giver" (king), which are often concealed metaphors which cast a sharp light on a familiar subject or allow the listener to imagine it in a new way. Thus, the ship travels on the sea just as the whale swims on a "path." Or, when Beowulf speaks, he "unlocks his word-ward" to give out words just as the lord gives out to his followers rings or other gifts. This diction, then, expresses the values of the society.

THE Tradition of Alliterative Poetry

The literature of the Old English period, lasting roughly until about 1100, had certain distinguishing characteristics, one of the most important of which was the use of alliteration, instead of rhyme, to organize poetic lines. Early medieval verse was presented orally, and sound was as important as sense, so alliteration, the repetition of an initial consonant or vowel in a succession of several words, was an effective technique that was common not only in Old English (a Germanic language that had been brought to Britain by the Angles, Saxons, and other invading tribes beginning in the middle of the fifth century), but also in French and Spanish poetry of this period. Beowulf was composed in the Anglo-Saxon alliterative line with three stressed words per line beginning with the same initial sound, and alliteration continued to be used sporadically in English poetry even as the language evolved into Middle English (highly influenced by the French spoken by the ruling class) after the Norman Conquest in 1066. An example from this period is Lawman's thirteenth-century Arthurian poem, *The Brut*. The tradition of alliterative verse became hugely popular again in the second half of the fourteenth century in what some scholars refer to as the "Alliterative Revival" when some of the most beautiful sounding, as well as intellectually challenging, poems in various genres were rendered in alliterative verse. Prominent examples from romance are *The Alliterative Morte Arthur* and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, in which a description of Gawain's travels over cliffs in strange countries, far from his friends, illustrates the power of the alliterative line:

Mony klyf he overclumbe in contrayez straunge,
Fer floten from his frendez fremedly [as a
stranger] he rydez. (713–714)

Dream visions in alliterative verse include *Pearl* and *Piers Plowman*, while allegorical and philosophical poems include *Winner and Waster* and the *Parliament of Three Ages*.

SOURCES

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