

Pride and Prudentius: Beowulf and the Seven Deadly Sins.

Mary O' Connor

University of Essex

Abstract

The period during which *Beowulf* was composed was one of great transition. The poem itself embodies and represents the conflict between the culture of the pagan settlers and Christianity. A particular aspect of the Christian doctrine was the allegorical poem, *Psychomachia*, by the Roman Prudentius. This work illustrates how an awareness of the concept of the seven deadly sins influenced the *Beowulf* poet. The work also explores the conflict between the warrior culture of the pagans and the ideologies behind the Christian conversion. Drawing on comparative quotations between *Beowulf* and *Psychomachia*, the work aims to highlight how the internal struggle of the title character of *Beowulf* reflected the moral dilemma posed between wanting worldly glory, to be gained from a life of pagan warrior culture, and conversely the eternal life, to be achieved from religious spirituality. This conflict ultimately reveals the main societal issue during the British Christian conversion.

Keywords: Beowulf, poem, Psychomachia, moral dilemma.

Essay

The seven deadly sins were derived from Prudentius' *Psychomachia*, a fourth century poem that centres on the conflict between vices and virtuous abstention, or the battle between the spirit and flesh. Each evil vice has a corresponding virtue, a spiritual shield that, if embodied, protects from the temptation of earthly sin. Also known as 'The Fight for Mansoul', *Psychomachia* is unique in that it was the first Western example of a purely allegorical poem (Osborn Taylor, 2010) that

outlines a righteous path to choose when “the strife of our evil passions vexes the spirits” (Prudentius, 1949, p.279). The works of Prudentius influenced many Anglo-Saxon writers (Orchard, 2002, p.124) and helped spread the idea of Christian virtue through Europe. The movement of Christianization reached England in 597 with Augustine of Canterbury’s pilgrimage to convert the pagan Anglo-Saxons (Orchard, 2007, p.124). Poetry in medieval England was judged on the poet’s ability to interweave various familiar folklore stories into one piece of work; *Beowulf* as an epic poem encompasses this tradition as its anonymous author alludes to the prevalent warrior culture and the concomitant aspects of these heroic characters. The inclusion of the characters in *Beowulf*, who portray various well known sins and virtues, would have been recognisable to medieval audiences, alongside those of paganism. *Beowulf* prolifically displays the presence of the Seven Deadly Sins, most notably Pride, Avarice, Wrath and Envy, in the poet’s depictions of the main characters.

Perhaps the most evident example of a deadly sin in *Beowulf* is Pride. A significant characteristic of the warrior culture of the *Beowulf* age, Pride is allegorically depicted as a soldier in *Psychomachia*; “[i]t chanced that Pride was galloping about, all puffed up.... In such style does this boastful she-warrior display herself... as she circles round on her bedecked steed” (Prudentius, 1949, pp.291-3). *Beowulf* as a character is presented as the embodiment of both the sin of Pride and the virtue of Humility. *Beowulf*’s many declarations of his extreme strength and battle glory denote his pride and desire to attain notoriety after his body expires;

For every one of us, living in this world
means waiting for our death. Let whoever can
win glory before death. When a warrior is gone,
that will be his best and only bulwark. (Heaney, 2006, l.1386-9)

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Beowulf lives and abides by this philosophy, fighting to live on after death. In his final act of glory, Beowulf ultimately sacrifices the security of Geatland¹ for his obstinacy in defeating the dragon alone, rejecting the warning made by Hrothgar;

This fight is not yours,
nor is it up to any man except me
to measure his strength against the monster
or to prove his worth. (Heaney, 2006, l.2532-5)

This pride in his ability, according to Margaret E Goldsmith (1962, p.73), is to be expected; “Beowulf... possesses that arrogant self-confidence which is the special trait of the supremely noble and courageous fighter.” It is thus possible to find the virtue within the sin; pride is synonymous with Beowulf’s reputation as a courageous leader.

However, Hrothgar’s sincere warning against succumbing to the trappings of pride suggests otherwise. The embodiment of humility, Hrothgar’s perception of Beowulf’s precarious morality implicates the young warrior in arrogant behaviour following his successes in battle; “O flower of warriors, beware of that trap. / Choose dear Beowulf, the better part, / eternal rewards. Do not give way to pride” (Heaney, 2006, l.1758-60). In order to fully raise Beowulf’s awareness of his excessive indulging in such character flaws, Hrothgar compares Beowulf to another leader, Heremod, who broke the code of *comitatus* by killing his thanes² in his own hall as he became increasingly fixated on material wealth;

He grew bloodthirsty, gave no more rings
to honour the Danes. He suffered in the end

¹ The Geats, or Goths, were just one of the many Germanic tribes that explored and settled in what was left of the Roman Empire during the Age of Migrations (North and Allard, 2007).

² A thane was a man whose relationship with the king centred on the devotion of the warrior to his leader. He would be granted land and gifts, particularly gold and weaponry, in return for his loyalty.

for having plagued his people for so long:

his life lost happiness. (Heaney, 2006, l.1719-22)

Hrothgar warns that to overlook mortality, as the morally ambiguous protagonist of his story did, is foolish, as it is the soul that will continue living after the physical body expires; “[t]hen finally the end arrives/ when the body he was lent collapses and falls/ prey to its death” (Heaney, 2006, l.1754-6). His warning is thus very direct; it is an acute focus on Beowulf’s weaknesses by a wiser man who has become increasingly fond of, and familiar to, his guest. This speech also reveals much about the speaker; through his tactful and empathetic advice, Hrothgar displays his own wisdom and humility. He is aware of his responsibility as ruler, but also realises the finite nature of man, thus investing in spiritual growth as opposed to worldly physicality; “Hrothgar’s generosity/ was praised repeatedly. He was a peerless king/ until age sapped his strength and did him/ mortal harm, as it has done so many” (Heaney, 2006, l.1884-7).

Beowulf’s epitaph after his death illustrates how he abided by Hrothgar’s advice during his fifty year reign. The poet notes his virtues as a just and generous king; “Thus Beowulf bore himself with valour; / he was formidable in battle yet behaved with honour/ and took no advantage; never cut down/ a comrade who was drunk” (Heaney, 2006, l.2117-80). Heroic to the end, the poet warns against the dangers of the most morally strong falling into the trappings of sin, as depicted by Prudentius’ (1949, p.299) ominous caution in *Psychomachia*; “God breaks down all arrogance. Greatness falls; the bubble bursts; swollen pride is flattened.” The correctness of values of warrior culture highlights the contradictions between heroic values and Christianity. Beowulf is ultimately killed, despite his fifty year reign as a much-loved king, by his quest for individual glory; “As king of the people I shall pursue this fight/ for the glory of winning.” (Heaney 2006 l.2513-4). John Halverson argues, however, that Beowulf’s façade of pride conceals his true heroic nature; “[h]e is not a victim of ego inflation; he simply cannot see any alternatives to his own way. He is a victim of the heroic milieu” (1969, p.608). As a victim of circumstance, Beowulf has no other choice than to fulfil his heroic destiny, leaving the outcome of his final battle to *wyrd*, or fate. Michael Swanton (1978, p.27) supports the view of Beowulf’s fatalism and argues that, instead of displaying *hubris*, Beowulf was simply placing his fate in the hands of god, offering his strength against that of the dragon in a fair match; “Beowulf dismisses his *comitatus* but continues to act in the light of the

ethical requirements of that group. He believes for an instant- the instant of *beot*³- that he *may* overcome the dragon, that he *may* preserve the way of life they all know.”

Beowulf also displays humility through his acknowledgement of his place in the hierarchy. By a respect akin to the philosophy of the divine right of kings, Beowulf refuses to have a superior overlooked in his favour;

Yet there was no way the weakened nation
could get Beowulf to give in and agree
to be elevated over Heardred as his lord
or to undertake the office of kingship. (Heaney, 2006, l.2373-6)

The humility that Beowulf displays in his resolution to abide by the laws of hierarchy is matched by his faith in God’s ultimate judgement over life and death; “may the Divine Lord/ in His wisdom grant the glory of victory/ To whichever side he sees fit” (Heaney, 2006, l.685-7). Beowulf’s final act of bravery is thus an acknowledgment of the combination of sins and virtues within himself; “[t]he epic hero may defy augury, but his defiance is at the same time a resignation, recognition that man can achieve so much and that no man lives forever” (Greenfield, 1962, p.99). Through his defeat of the dragon, Beowulf is able to attain both heavenly and earthly gain. He displays humble heroism, sacrificing himself on the altar of his citizens’ wellbeing, while achieving lasting fame by living on in the minds and folklore of future generations.

Generosity, particularly through the warrior code of *comitatus*, is of high political and social significance in the world of the Geats and their contemporaries, and thus has far greater importance than modern perception. There are many references to the connection of gold to light and joy, as Heorot is often described as “radiant with gold” (Heaney, 2006, l.308). The correlation of quality of life with the attainment of riches is an innate philosophy in warrior culture. Prudentius warned

³ *Beot* refers to the Anglo-Saxon tradition of boasting one’s previous deeds in accompaniment to a promise to fulfil a further act of glory.

against the susceptibility of weakening to the temptation of acquiring material possessions; “no man ever had such an iron nature to harden him that he could inflexibly scorn money or be proof against our gold” (1949, p.315). Gold holds a correlative relationship with the glory of a nation. The member of the forgotten clan who surrenders his gold to the earth highlights the synonymy between gold and the success of a nation. As sole survivor he can no longer place value on prosperity as he comes to the realisation that wealth is nothing without a community with whom to share it. In a community, however, the riches that are won in battle are passed to the king, who in turn offers proportionate amounts of treasure as reward to his thanes, as Beowulf declares;

Thus the king acted with due custom.

I was paid and recompensed completely,
given full measure and the freedom to choose
from Hrothgar’s treasures by Hrothgar himself.

These, King Hygelac, I am happy to present
to you as gifts. (Heaney, 2006, l.2144-9)

In a subversion of the values of the warrior culture, the poet warns against the danger of avarice and the futility of hoarding earthly possessions that bring no pleasure; “He had handled and removed / a gem-studded goblet; it gained him nothing” (Heaney, 2006, l.2216-7). The treasure trove of riches supports the fruitless perception of wealth as the items in the dragon’s barrow have rusted away in a display of redundancy. It is significant that the majority of collectables that have been destroyed by the ravages of time are battle armour, as the poet symbolically warns against the investment of the soul in gaining treasures through the glory of battle. To invest more heavily in material possessions than spiritual gain is morally ambiguous; “[t]he Beowulf poet, writing of strength and riches, is synchronously aware, not only that strength and riches are transient, but that the greatest human strength is inadequate, and the greatest human wealth valueless, when the soul is in jeopardy”. (Goldsmith, 1962, p.72) The Keeper of the treasure, as he deposits it in the barrow, also reflects on the capriciousness of time and the deaths of great heroes who no longer

have use for worldly riches; “[n]ow, earth, hold what earls once held and heroes can no more” (Heaney, 2006, l.2248-9). The warning of avarice extends to implicate the fragility of the warrior code as it rests on the exchange of gifts, indicating the decline of community progression through the decay of *comitatus*; “[t]he “cowardice” of the retainers is simply an expression of the priority of the individual over the group” (Halverson, 1969, p.608).

In addition to the dangers of avarice, Prudentius depicts Wrath as being the force of self-destruction; “[f]ury is its own enemy; fiery Wrath in her frenzy slays herself and dies by her own weapons” (1949, p.291). Wrath decays the character, disfiguring the soul until it is unrecognisable; Grendel is the prime example of the devastating nature of Wrath. Grendel is the purveyor of original sin, stemming from his ostracism from society for being the descendant of Cain, with direct lineage from his ancestors, Adam and Eve. Just as Adam and Eve were condemned to the habitat of the wasteland outside the Garden of Eden, Grendel is banished to the mere, exiled from the Eden-like Heorot; “he had dwelt for a time/ in misery among the banished monsters” (Heaney, 2006, l.104-5).

As a grotesque symbol of the ‘other’, Grendel is a projection of the rage and fear felt by the warriors towards their foes; all evil of mankind encompassed in a single being; “[s]elf-sufficiency and love of the world would be the denial of man’s natural service to God, for which he was created. These, therefore, are the primeval sins” (Goldsmith, 1962, p.72). By de-humanising the enemy as a symbol of evil, the poet insinuates that the utilisation of human reason is a combative force against original sin. Grendel’s wrath originates from his exclusion from the nucleus of the community of people that operates around the social hub of Heorot. Translated as ‘Hall of the Hart’ (Overing et al., 1994), the mead-hall is the symbol of the wealth and success of the Danes. It is the centre of politics and celebration, the epitome of the strength of human civilisation.

The many references to light and warmth around the great hall are juxtaposed to the dark swamp-dwelling of Grendel and his mother; “He took over Heorot, / haunted the glittering hall after dark” (Heaney, 2006, l.166-7). The creation song performed by the *scop*⁴ outlines the light which is

⁴ Anglo Saxon court poets would perform a version of flyting. The *Scop* would denote the hero’s less favourable attributes, which would then be followed up with the warrior’s own defence and boasts of his actions.

associated with good, and the beginnings of a world that Grendel and his kin have never experienced, dwelling as they do, in the margins of society; “in His splendour He set the sun and the moon/ to be earth’s lamplight, lanterns for men” (Heaney, 2006, 1.93-4). Heorot as an establishment and a symbol of society, is representative of the good and holy. Grendel’s imposition on Heorot is synonymous with the battle between innate and original sin present in the spirit and psyche of the human race and the desire to overcome evil. Banishment alone, as a passive aggressive tactic, is not enough and Beowulf must fight to exterminate Grendel, as the symbol of evil, from the heart of society. As the saviour of community and the vanquisher of evil, he does so with convincing finality. John Halverson (1969, p.602) notes that “[w]hen Beowulf hears of Hrothgar’s peril, he takes no thought of his action, but responds instantly. It is his natural function... to restore order where it has been upset.” The poet is also keen to show the terror and isolation of the monster and his extreme bitterness at being rejected from society. Grendel is presented as a grotesque version of a human, displaying emotions that are vaguely human and having the figure of a man; a warning of the fate that awaits the descendants of warriors if they succumb to the temptations of the deadly sins.

Prudentius (1949, p.303) defined the concept of Envy as the covetousness of riches; “[w]ith fixed gaze they looked longingly at the reigns with their tinkering gold- foil, the heavy axel of solid gold, so costly.” Unferth, as the embodiment of Envy in *Beowulf*, covets instead the strength and achievements of the newcomer in Heorot; “Unferth, a son of Ecglaf’s, spoke/ contrary words. Beowulf’s coming, / his sea-braving, made him sick with envy” (Heaney, 2006, 1.500-2). The flyting that occurs on the night of the Geat’s arrival revolves around Unferth’s allegation of Beowulf’s cowardice. Critics have argued that this envy originates from Unferth’s inability to protect Heorot himself. His envy causes a backlash of boasts from Beowulf, resulting in the emasculation and humiliation of Unferth, which is exacerbated by the presence of his peers; “The fact is, Unferth, if you were truly/ as keen or courageous as you claim to be/ Grendel would never have got away with/ such unchecked atrocity” (Heaney, 2006, 1.1589-92). Unferth also shares the same story as the ancestor of Grendel, as, like Cain, he murdered his brothers; “You killed your own kith and kin” (Heaney, 2006, 1.586). The shadow over Unferth’s personality highlights his contrast with the banishment of the monsters for the same crime. However Beowulf displays a higher level of spiritual understanding when he condemns his challenger for his crimes by declaring that Unferth will “suffer damnation in the depths of hell” (Heaney, 2006, 1.1588). J.D.A Ogilvy argues that

Unferth's envy stems not from a distinct lack of status among his Danish peers, but from his being upstaged by the more impressive warrior; "[f]ar from being a coward, Unferth seems to have been a champion... [he] gained and kept possession of the sword Hrunting, a weapon with a name, and, so to speak, a pedigree" (1964, p.372). Although depicting the danger of envy, Unferth absolves his sin through his eventual respect of Beowulf as the stronger man, donating Hrunting as a family heirloom to him. Beowulf's god-like forgiveness of Unferth is closely linked to the Catholic idea that to repent is to absolve the sin committed. Unferth is thus paralleled with Grendel and his mother again, as the envy felt by Grendel manifests as rage. Grendel is shown to lack the human capabilities of temperance, holding instead; "unmanly sloth with vile expectation" (Prudentius, 1949, p.295). John Halverson calls to attention the extreme polarisation of the society based around Heorot and the mere of the monsters;

[Heorot] is a socially collective world, where the pleasures of human companionship can be enjoyed in the feasting and drinking, in the sharing of treasure, in talking, in the playing of the harp and the reciting of old tales. The world out there- cold, dark, and cheerless, is dominated by the fens and moors haunted by the two monsters, solitary creatures who cannot participate in the joy of humanity and who savagely hate its existence. (1969, p.601)

In medieval England, prestige in warrior culture was placed on power, courageous exploits and materialistic possession of weapons. The introduction of the concept of envy to a pagan community would have greater resonance if the society held an affinity with the issues outlined in the fables or oratory performances that relate to Christianity. The juxtaposition of the monsters denotes the subhuman inability to control animalistic emotions.

The interpolation of concepts found in Prudentius' *Psychomachia* into the plot of *Beowulf* illustrates the dilemma of choosing between glory on earth and an eternity in heaven. To yield to earthly pleasure is to delve into the world of sin, highlighting the juxtaposition of ideals between Anglo-Saxon doctrines and those of Christianity. Beowulf abides by tradition in this sense and his plight is a quest for identity in an ever changing world. The lack of sexual references also alludes to the change in values. *Beowulf's* lack of sexual references is questionable when colloquial riddles originating from the same era dictate the prolific use of sex, suggesting that the acknowledgement and discussion of sex was a common occurrence in Anglo-Saxon societies. A turn away from pagan sexuality to Christian chastity, as depicted in literature such as *Psychomachia*, could be the reason

for *Beowulf* being devoid of “experience of the flesh” (Prudentius, 1949, p.285). The conflict between opposing ideals of pagan heroism and Christian virtue is one that underlines the contradiction at the heart of Beowulf’s morality. Consequently, Greenfield alleges that a heroic figure such as Beowulf is condemned for exploiting his strength as his greatest attribute; “[l]ife’s ephemerality is the context in which its hero struggles. The proximity of the immortals, in human engagements in epic, highlights man’s fragile tenure on life” (1962, p.102). The hero must therefore aspire to immortality in the eyes of his society, or spend an eternity in the personal hell of underachievement. However, by aspiring to glory within the warrior culture the hero risks spiritual degeneration; such is the choice when the clash of cultures occurs between warrior culture and imposing Christian doctrine. *Beowulf* can thus be described as a social commentary on the struggles between personal achievement and spiritual well being. These difficulties persist in modern society, leaving no doubt about *Beowulf*’s importance as an enduringly relevant and poignant text.

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