

Beowulf: king or warrior?

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Beowulf: King or Warrior? For most people, thinking about becoming an adult conjures images or memories of leaving behind their reckless ways, settling down, and becoming more responsible. Just as growing up in today's culture means becoming more reserved and restrained, the same is true in Beowulf. Beowulf would rather remain a fearless warrior than become King, because to be a good King, Beowulf must leave behind the warrior lifestyle that gained him so much fame and glory. As a young warrior, Beowulf is able to travel the land seeking battles that will solidify his status as a brave and fearless hero. The reason Beowulf travels to Heorot to fight Grendel in the first place is fueled as much by his desire to be praised for this heroic deed as it is to help King Hrothgar and his people. Beowulf announces that he has come to Heorot to help the king, but then goes on to boast about how he is famous for acts just like this and came to know about Grendel from his people, saying " my people... advised me... that I should seek you because they know what my strength can accomplish" (10). To further elevate his status as hero, Beowulf then boasts that, he " alone... shall settle affairs with Grendel" (10). 1 It is Beowulf's duty as a warrior to please his King, so Beowulf will not only fight alone but he also vows to fight Grendel with no weapons or shields, saying that " my liege lord Hygelac may be glad of me in his heart, I scorn to bear sword or broad shield... but with my grasp I shall grapple with the enemy... foe against foe" (10). 1 Grendel is described as extremely strong and powerful without weapons and also as a monster and demon, most likely because of deformities that were commonly considered demonic and monstrous in the early medieval world. So for Beowulf to fight without weapons is a very brave move that could only be made by a warrior

and not by a king, because a king would need to act more consciously of the consequences that might come from such a careless action. Such careless and brave exploits are important to cementing Beowulf's heroic legacy. It is clear that a man's heroic record is very important to his identity by the way he is introduced with his string of heroic deeds, almost as a prefix to his name. And equally as important as a man's heroic deeds is his paternal lineage. Given that male warriors are also introduced as their father's son with no mention of their mother, it is clear that women in this patriarchal culture are far less significant than men and are merely viewed as property and decoration. As Hrothgar reminisces about Beowulf's father, he praises him for being an honorable man, saying, "[he] gave his only daughter for his home" (9).² It is important for a warrior to acquire a great legacy as a warrior and to live up to the legacy of his father. Ironically, it is Beowulf's brave and reckless achievements that make him suitable to be king, yet make him incapable of being a good and stable ruler to his people. By the end of the poem, Beowulf, unable to leave behind his warrior spirit, feels the need to engage in one more battle that will make him feel like that fearless warrior once again, so he battles the dragon. Although, Beowulf defeats the dragon, he is killed in the process and leaves his people without a king and open to invasion from the Swedes. However, Beowulf died as he lived, as a warrior, and his people remembered him fondly as a famous king and warrior. Bibliography Beowulf: A Prose Translation, Translated by E. Talbot Donaldson. Edited by Nicholas Howe. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2002.