

What is eternity?: beowulf and the rule of st. benedict



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At their deepest level, both *The Rule of St. Benedict* and *Beowulf* deal with the question of how one can go about using his short time on earth to achieve a form of eternity in the face of a dangerous, threatening, unpredictable world. *The Rule of St. Benedict*, for example, is a set of Christian rules introducing the “tools of the spiritual craft” that are meant to be “used without ceasing, day and night” (St. Benedict, 14) so that on the Day of Judgment, “our wages will be the reward the Lord has promised” (St. Benedict, 14). Alternatively, *Beowulf* is an Anglo-Saxon epic that glorifies the heroic duties of warriors and warrior-kings in a way that only reputation will perpetuate a warrior’s existence after death. Therefore, while St. Benedict proposed that the way to an eternal life is by leading a righteous and Godly life, *Beowulf* suggests that the way to an eternal life is through the Germanic heroic code; furthermore, both texts reveal similarities and differences in the value systems of these societies.

In *The Rule of St. Benedict*, eternity is a place where those who have lived in holy obedience will get to experience (St. Benedict, 14), and those who have not will spend their afterlives in the “torments of hell” (St. Benedict, 5). The way to an eternal life is by living a God-fearing life in the here-and-now; by giving up his own will, doing “the will of him who sent me” (St. Benedict, 15), “humbling our hearts” (St. Benedict, 16), and yearning “for everlasting life with holy desire” (St. Benedict, 13). While St. Benedict’s abbots and monks spent every passing moment preparing – doing “good works” (St. Benedict, 12) – for glory in the afterlife, *Beowulf*’s warrior-kings and warriors maintain that honor is gained during life through good heroic deeds. In *Beowulf*, eternity is memory and genealogy, achieved by living by the

principles of the Germanic heroic code: Beowulf says, “ As we must all expect to leave our life on earth, we must earn some renown, if we can, before death; daring is the thing for a fighting man to be remembered by” (Beowulf, lines 1385-1388). Beowulf’s determination to honor his father’s relationship with King Hrothgar by ridding his kingdom of Grendel’s tyranny exemplifies this; a capable warrior must use his abilities to fight evil for the better of all, as a warrior is “ granted glory in battle” (Beowulf, line 63). It is implied that, for Beowulf’s warriors and warrior-kings, “ hell” is either not being remembered as a hero or not having valiant ancestors.

Furthermore, there are struggles along the way to achieving eternal life. In Beowulf, Grendel, Grendel’s mother, and the venomous dragon best represent these struggles. Hrothgar fails as a warrior-king to protect his kingdom from Grendel and sees that each of his warriors “ then kept himself at a safer distance” (Beowulf, line 142) until Grendel and his mother are killed, but Beowulf successfully protects his own kingdom as a warrior-king by fighting the venomous dragon at the end of the story. In The Rule of the St. Benedict, on the other hand, these struggles are represented by sins, such as overindulgence, material possessiveness, and “ vulgarity and gossip and talk” that lead to laughter (St. Benedict, 18). If an abbot fails in his responsibility to teach God’s commandments and a monk strays from the Godly life, St. Benedict believed it is the abbot that “ will bear the blame” (St. Benedict, 8) and both the abbot and the guilty monk jeopardize their chances at eternal life. Thus, one loses his shot at eternity by giving into life’s struggles, because achieving eternity requires a fight; “ every day with

tears and sighs" (St. Benedict, 13) for St. Benedict's abbots and monks, glory in battle for Beowulf's warrior-kings and warriors.

Even though the ways in which the subjects in these texts achieve eternal life are different, the underlying messages in both of these texts reveal remarkably similar value systems. As St. Benedict said to "love your neighbor as yourself" (St. Benedict, 12), Beowulf adheres to this principle when he goes to Denmark to free Hrothgar and his kingdom from the tyranny of Grendel. In addition to this, St. Benedict claimed, "overindulgence is avoided" (St. Benedict, 41). If Grendel symbolizes gluttony by his excessive preying on Hrothgar's men, then it is reasonable to conclude that Beowulf's society also adhered to this principle. Another value that these two texts deal with is vengeance: "Do not repay one bad turn with another" (St. Benedict, 12). Since Grendel's mother comes to Heorot to avenge Grendel's death, and Beowulf ultimately defeats her, it seems that Beowulf also shares the value that vengeance is a fatal flaw. The treasure-hoarding dragon in Beowulf appears to represent St. Benedict's rule that "all things should be the common possession of all" (St. Benedict, 36) and that "distribution" is "made to each one has he" has "need" (St. Benedict, 37), i. e. the dragon has no need for the treasure he is hoarding and when he is killed the treasure is distributed to the people of the kingdom. Lastly, St. Benedict's belief that the abbot is the "shepherd" who bears "the blame wherever the father of the household finds that the sheep have yielded to profit" (St. Benedict, 8) is supported in Beowulf by the idea that Hrothgar's warriors were loyal and obedient to him until he failed as a warrior-king to defend them from Grendel.

In contrast, the fact that eternity is earned by battle victories in Beowulf and religious piety in The Rule of St. Benedict suggests that there are also a few differences in their value systems. For example, while Grendel's mother's death can represent vengeance as a fatal flaw, as argued above, it is also very obvious that this society pursued the instruction of justice by vengeance: Beowulf says to Hrothgar, " It is better for a man to avenge his friend than to refresh his sorrow" (Beowulf, lines 1383-1384). Since the Christian doctrine advocates a peaceful, forgiving attitude toward one's enemies (St. Benedict, 12), it is possible that these conflicting interpretations may be explained by the fact that this pre-Christian story is told by a Christian author. Another inconsistency between the values of St. Benedict's world and Beowulf's world is that of pride. Beowulf's warriors and warrior-kings pride themselves on their victories openly, while St. Benedict encourages his followers to attribute their accomplishments to God (St. Benedict, 13) and to humble themselves (St. Benedict, 16). Finally, St. Benedict's and Beowulf's societies both valued strength and bravery, although their definitions of these characteristics differ. For St. Benedict, strength and bravery are " spiritual tools" (St. Benedict, 14) that help Christians remain faithful to God and refrain from giving into earthly temptations; for Beowulf's society, strength and bravery are literally vital to a successful battle.

In both The Rule of St. Benedict and Beowulf, daily life is full of challenges that people must gracefully overcome in order to achieve eternal life.

Beowulf fought many battles, some harder than others; St. Benedict's abbots and monks had to abstain from the fleshly temptations of life (St. Benedict,

13). St. Benedict's abbots and monks led righteous and Godly lives, while Germanic warrior-kings and warriors honored victorious glory and loyalty to kinship. Finally, eternity in Beowulf is memory, while eternity for St. Benedict is Heaven.

Works Cited

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