

# The tragedies of two heroes



In Beowulf and Beroul's *The Romance of Tristan*, the heroes Beowulf and Tristan are magnificent fighters. Their numerous victories against seemingly insurmountable odds and powerful enemies are testaments to their battle-talents. Yet the two heroes employ violence in their exploits for different reasons and for different goals. While Beowulf engages in battle for almost purely an attraction to fighting and the recognition of violent success, Tristan does so out of passion and devotion to love. The Geat noble Beowulf is described and praised as a superb warrior as soon as he is introduced to those in need of his help. When Hrothgar first encounters Beowulf in his battered court, he recalls the fame of Edgetheow's son: "The seafarers used to say, I remember...that this fighting man in his hand's grasp had the strength of thirty other men" (63). And Beowulf is quick to verify the rumor of the great power in his hands, relating the time "I had bound five Giants—their blood was upon me—" and when he "crushed on the wave sea-serpents by night in narrow struggle, broken the beasts" (64). Boastful, but seemingly able to substantiate his words with action, he asks as a matter of fact, "And shall I not try a single match with this monster Grendel, a trial against this troll?" (64). Beowulf's confidence in his abilities is quite apparent in this meeting of Geats and Danes, as is his desire to do battle as a gauge of his power. He offers to fight the monstrous descendant of Cain with more concern for testing himself than actually protecting Heorot. "So that my lord Hygelac, my leader in war, may take joy in me, I abjure utterly the bearing of sword or shielding yellow board in this battle!" the warrior declares (64-5). The battle with Grendel must be a fair one, so that if he wins Beowulf may claim renown and affirm yet another achievement for his legend. Conversely, if Beowulf's concern were primarily saving Hrothgar's kingdom, the Geat

would certainly welcome the support of weaponry and his men, strong warriors in their own right and perhaps valuable assistance in dealing with Grendel (although Beowulf easily defeats the hellish behemoth). The inclination toward battling for sport fuels Beowulf's heart at an even earlier age. During the initial feast at Heorot, Beowulf relates his swimming race with Breca when they are teenagers. Although morning finds Breca but not Beowulf " cast by the sea on the coast of the Battle-Reams," Beowulf sheds a different light on who has won (68). Even after destroying the sea creatures that drag him down into the sea as he and Breca race, Beowulf searches out and kills " seven sea-monsters, in the severest fight by night I have heard of" (69). Nothing compels this behavior in the future king of the Geats more than a fiery desire for contest and test of his limits. In fact, Beowulf's desire to fight for satisfaction and glory continues until his death. Following the battle with Grendel, the Geat prince pursues Grendel's mother and vanquishes the monster in the *Were*; his prize for battling her is the head of Grendel. Having now saved Hrothgar's people twice, Beowulf can joyously leave the Scylding state with a grand legacy for the Danes to forever remember him by.

Beowulf's final battle with the dragon is another example of his desire for a challenge and a chance for triumph at an ancient age. While it should be noted that the elderly king of the Geats also sets out to fight because of the dragon's decimation of his mead-hall and murder of his people, the dragon's hoard is what Beowulf discusses in his speech to his subjects. " Now shall hard edge, hand and blade, do battle for the hoard!" he cries (130). " By daring will I win this gold; war otherwise shall take your king, terrible life's-bane!" (131). And when Beowulf approaches death, the glory of his newly acquired treasure is what is on his mind. He tells Wiglaf, his beloved

kinsman, “ Make haste, that I may gaze upon that golden inheritance, that ancient wealth...more calmly than may I on the treasure’s account take my departure of life and of the lordship I have long held” (138). Once again, Beowulf here speaks also as a king who would like to leave his people a wealthy inheritance, but the fire of his pride and craving for triumph, however dimly lit, is still present as life wanes. Beowulf dies “ an aged man in sorrow,” but he does take satisfaction at having lost his life fighting for something and winning it (139). Contrary to Beowulf’s intentions for fighting, Rivalen’s son Tristan participates actively in violence for his love, Yseut the Fair. While his battle with Morholt is not motivated by passion for the Irish princess, most of the other battles and incidents of violence in which Tristan takes part involve some sort of symbol of devotion, protection, or retribution in the context of love. While Tristan, Yseut and Governal remain exiled in the Forest of Morrois, Tristan’s dog, Husdant, is released to determine “ whether he is miserable because of his master” or it is mad (81). When Husdant is allowed to wander and finds his master, Tristan is the only person sorrowed by his appearance. Worried for him and his lover’s safety, the nephew of Mark decides that it is “ Better for him to be killed than for us to be captured because of his barking. I regret very much that he will have to die, for he is a fine animal” (83). Here, unequivocal devotion is shown by the knight, who for love of a fair lady would kill his companion Husdant, so loyal, so devoted to its master. Only through the advice of the very person for whom he would sacrifice his dog does Tristan spare the canine and “ try to teach him to hunt game without barking” (83). Even after the love potion has worn off, the love Tristan has for Yseut is strong. When King Mark instructs Yseut that she must vindicate herself with oath, she devises a plan that would allow her to make

a truthful swear, yet put Tristan in potential danger, should he be caught. While a simple lie for the Irish princess would suffice and not be such a dishonorable act (for she is already engaged in an adulterous relationship of her own will), Tristan is more than willing to shame himself in leper's dress and appearance and risk being caught. After Yseut's vindication, Tristan further participates in violence to eliminate his enemies, the ones who know of his relationship to Yseut. Hiding in a thicket of thorn bushes, he first kills away Denoalan ruthlessly. " To save himself he cut off the villain's head and did not even give him the time to say, ' I am wounded' (146). Adding to the brutality, Tristan cuts Denoalan's hair off to show Yseut. When he visits Yseut's chambers later, with her help " against the light by the curtain he saw Godwin's head" (148). The battle-accustomed knight kills the nosy baron with a bow and arrow, which " pierced Godwin's eye and went deep into his head and his brain" (148). If Tristan can help it, no one who jeopardizes his affair with Yseut will survive. The barons, evilly portrayed in the poem but simply harsh, disapproving advisors of King Mark, are brutal victims of Tristan's deep love for Mark's queen. Tristan's final and perhaps most blatant violent outburst occurs when he arrives at Cornwall from Brittany. Desperate to see his love, Tristan resorts to self-mutilation and mad force to find his way to Yseut. " He did not want anyone to think he was in his senses and he tore his clothes and scratched his face. He struck any man who crossed his path. He had his fair hair shorn off... He walked along looking like a fool and everyone shouted after him and threw stones at his head" (153-4). Although Beroul tells us that Tristan does these things to give the appearance of madness, his willingness to perform such acts lend credence to Tristan's vulnerability to violent madness as a result of his deep passion. Nothing, not

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even his own dignity and identity, compromised through violent means, will deprive his loyalty to Yseut. Both Beowulf and Tristan are examples of tragic heroes willing to use violence in extremes in order to arrive at goals or maintain happiness. Beowulf, in his desire for universal fame and for the joy of battle, risks his life without second thoughts. The Geat-king's final endeavor, though he does not have to embark on it since the dragon only seeks to protect its treasure, is one that he cannot resist, and it costs him his life. On the other hand, Tristan has violent tendencies and a tolerance or fearlessness of violence because of his insatiable hunger for love. He is willing to kill his enemies, his companions, even hurt himself or let himself be hurt, for the sake of keeping his affair with Yseut alive and thriving. Ultimately, the tragedy lies in the fact that the violence cannot produce solutions for these heroes' problems at the most important moments; for all Beowulf's exploits and triumphs in battle, he does not gain the complete loyalty and respect of his men in his final battle (and perhaps dies because of their cowardice), and Tristan ironically dies from the attack of a knight victimized by his wife's adultery, which Tristan helps perpetuate.