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Heroes in Oral Epics: contrasting Achilles and Beowulf

PPT Thesis: Achilles and Beowulf represent contrasting heroic ideals, which are shaped by their respective cultures

History of Poetic Traditions

Anglo-Saxon Period: transition from Paganism to Christianity

- Beowulf is set in 5th and 6th century Pagan Scandinavia (Denmark and Sweden)

Beowulf is known from a single manuscript.

Beowulf Epic History and Brief Plot Overview

Beowulf is believed to have been composed/transmitted orally between many poets; its manuscript is dated between 975 and 1025 AD — The author is unknown

- Within the work there are mentions of the technique of scop's performing.
Noise and music mingled together before the leader of Healfdene's forces,
the harp was touched, tales often told,
when Hrothgar's scop was set to recite
among the mead-tables his hall-entertainment
about the sons of Finn, surprised in ambush,
when the hero of the Half-Danes, Hnaf the Scylding
had to fall in a Frisian slaughter. (Beowulf 1063-1070) Liuzza Translation

Part One

- Denmark: King Hrothgar has a mead hall Heorot, celebrations from which makes noise that angers a nearby monster, Grendel. The monster terrorizes Heorot nightly for 12 years, taking Hrothgar's warriors and devouring them
- Beowulf, prince of the Geats, hears of the Dane's troubles and arrives offering to deal with Grendel.
- After a night of feasting Grendel appears from the Moors, Grendel fights Beowulf **who refuses to use a weapon**, and Beowulf rips off his arm leaving him fleeing mortally wounded.
- After celebrating, Grendel's mother comes to avenge her son's death. Beowulf is not there during this attack, but pledges to Hrothgar that he will once again defend Heorot. Grendel's mother is tracked to her lair, which has never been reached prior. Beowulf fights and kills her with a sword, and then returns home.
 - The sword used on Grendel's mother belonged to Grendel, and was found during the battle, a weapon forged for giants.

- Neither Grendel or Grendel's mother was able to be injured by weapons forged by man.

Part Two

- King Hygelac of the Geats dies in a battle, his son dies, and Beowulf succeeds to the kingship, ruling peacefully for 50 years
- A fire-breathing dragon becomes angered by a treasure robbery, and ravages Geatland.
- Beowulf (aging) fights the dragon, knowing he will likely die, and kills it, but ultimately suffers a bite wound in the neck that kills him

Beowulf dies a "noble" death, but does he leave his people in a negative state?

- The Geats worry they are defenseless to attack without Beowulf's presence.

Defining and Influencing the Hero Genre: The Iliad

The Iliad, specifically Achilles, defines heroism through achievement of glory and other self-serving ideals.

Influence: modern war epics, Alexander the Great, concept of the tragic hero

- Tragic Hero: the central character of a play, film, etc., depicted as a noble figure who experiences a tragic downfall

"My silver-footed goddess mother Thetis says that there are two ways my death may come. If I stay here and fight, besieging Troy, my chance of ever going home is lost, but I shall have a name that lasts forever. Or if I go home to my own dear country, I lose my glory but I gain long life. Death cannot run so fast to overtake me." (Iliad 9.410) Wilson translation

Defining and Influencing the Hero Genre: Beowulf

Beowulf represents heroism through loyalty, faith, courage, and a general desire to support the common good of the people.

"Again he was stalwart, not slow of zeal, mindful of glory..." (Beowulf 1529) Liuzza Translation

"One may, indeed, say, if he acts in truth and right for the people, remembers all, old guardian of his homeland, that this earl was born a better man! My Friend Beowulf, your glory is exalted throughout the world, over every people; [...] You shall become a comfort everlasting to your own people, and a help to heroes." (Beowulf 1703)

Influence: knights, Viking saga, Lord of the Rings

Glory: A Comparison

Achilles: seeks out glory, but primarily for personal vengeance

- Achilles decides not to fight in the war after Agamemnon takes his war prize
- Only rejoins the war after Hector kills Patroclus, to avenge his friend

—just so, Lord Agamemnon

enraged me. But that happened in the past. So let it go, though I am still upset. I must control the feelings in my chest, and go to look for Hector, who destroyed the one I loved the most, my head, my life. Thereafter, I will welcome death, whenever Zeus and the other deathless gods may wish to bring it. (Iliad 18.110) Wilson

Beowulf: seeks out glory, but primarily for the good of his people

- Beowulf is fighting Grendel due to his attack on the peoples' Mead Hall of Heorot, generally for the protection of the commons

“Be a protector to my band of men,
my boon-companions, if battle should take me, and send on to Hygelac, beloved Hrothgar,
the gifts of treasure which you have given me.” (Beowulf 1480) Liuzza Translation

“I shall win honor and fame, or death will take me!” (Beowulf 1491)

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