Beowulf: An Epic Poem About Courage

An “epic poem” often features long journeys, battles with terrifying fiends, and heroes who display true cunning and bravery when faced with numerous trials. In Beowulf (translated by Seamus Heaney), the titular character is widely considered to be an excellent example of the quintessential epic hero; he outsmarts and kills Grendel (Heaney 661-835), dividing his winnings with the citizens in Denmark (Heaney 1653-1654). After killing Grendel’s mother, who is seeking revenge on Heorot following the death of Grendel, Beowulf’s bravery is celebrated at another feast. This essay will argue, however, that Beowulf proves himself to be the opposite of courageous in his retelling of this battle to Hrothgar and his people (Heaney 1651-1670). By misleading the Danes, Beowulf cannot hope to embody the valour that we can see in other epic heroes, such as Odysseus in Emily Wilson’s translation of The Odyssey, or Gilgamesh in the epic of the same name.

After his battle with Grendel’s mother, Beowulf returns to Heorot with treasure from her cave (Heaney 1653), which he calls a ‘token of triumph’ (Heaney 1654). Though the battle may have been won by the epic hero, it can hardly be seen as a victory. Because the entire fight scene with Grendel’s mother is riddled with euphemistic language (Nitzsche 293-294), and Beowulf is unable to contend with the masculinity that the ‘hell-dam’ (Heaney 1292) presents, he returns to Heorot both as less of a man, and an epic hero. As Dana M. Oswald points out, he may have survived the fight; but Beowulf lost his ability to control his sword – and therefore – his masculinity (101). The underwater lair of Grendel’s mother is described as a hall (Heaney 1515); hence, as James A. Heffernan comments, she subverts the traditional role of a peace-weaving Queen (88). As Beowulf was not ‘man enough’ (Heaney 1468) for Grendel’s mother, he feels compelled to erase and alter the events of the fight in his retelling of the story to the Danes.

Beowulf deliberately avoids mentioning exact details of the fight with Grendel’s mother, using the plural forms ‘dwellers’ (Heaney 1666) and ‘enemies’ (Heaney 1669) to mislead the citizens at Heorot. In hiding truths about the battle, however, Beowulf only serves to remind us how threatened he is by the masculinity of Grendel’s mother (Oswald 108), and how worthy of an adversary she was (Oswald 106-107). If we consider Grendel’s arm to be a symbol of masculinity (Oswald 86), Beowulf leaving this symbol in the cave of Grendel’s mother highlights how he returns with a sense of fragmented manhood; perhaps he is too ashamed to return it to Heorot.

The blurring of gender binaries throughout the passages with Grendel’s mother can be seen when Beowulf is straddled by her (Heaney 1545). This blurring links the characters together; Beowulf and Grendel’s mother are both avenging the deaths caused by the other: for Beowulf it is Aeschere (Heaney 1323); and for Grendel’s mother it is Grendel (Heaney 1278). As Jane C. Nitzsche notes, Grendel’s mother subverts the expected femininity of women by aligning herself with the expectations of masculine avengers (292).

Furthermore, if Beowulf is avenging Aschere’s decapitation (Heaney 1669), why does he choose to bring back the head of Grendel rather than Grendel’s mother – the murderer (Oswald 100)? Whilst it could be argued that ‘Beowulf removes the heads of his foes to rearticulate his

mastery over their bodies' (Oswald 99), I would argue that the decapitations occur because Beowulf is desperate to prove himself. In a medieval society, although women had rights, they were rarely seen as equal to men. As Peter S. Baker highlights, women were often just viewed as objects: they were expected to promote peace between neighbouring lands, and act as a domestic housewife (116). Grendel's mother has been largely overlooked, with scholars such as Tolkien not considering the importance of her character (Oswald 77). Perhaps Beowulf fears that Hrothgar and his people will be less impressed with his epic battle if the foe was a woman. He doesn't have the courage to be honest or vulnerable in the mead hall.

Although an epic hero is often elevated through acts of violence, I would argue that heroes such as Odysseus are admired more for having the comfort in their masculinity to show emotion and vulnerability. As Odysseus is a 'complicated man' (Wilson 1), he is more human; hence his seemingly supernatural feats are more impressive. Beowulf, as an epic character, always seems inaccessible – as if he is suppressing his emotions in the same way that he suppresses the details of the fight with Grendel's mother. The citizens of Heorot do not know that Beowulf has lied however; only the audience do, and we are left feeling uncertain about whether Beowulf is as courageous as we are initially led to believe.