

Heroic Behaviour and the Author

Lachlan Marnoch

Literary texts often attempt to communicate the values of the author; one of the techniques used to do so is the juxtaposition of heroic and unheroic behaviour. The reader is invited to identify with actions that are presented as heroic, and reject actions that are presented as unheroic. This essay will examine the way heroism is used in the epic poem *Beowulf*, written some time during the ninth to eleventh centuries by an anonymous author, and in the novel *Ransom*, written in 2009 by David Malouf. The values of an author are frequently seen in a text's portrayal of the nature of a hero; whether they are the invulnerable, implacable men of mythology and folklore, or the imperfect everyman that commonly takes centre stage in modern works.

Ransom presents the idea that even heroes have flaws. The novel's portrayal of Achilles, renowned as "the greatest hero of the Greeks" (Farred 1102), is of an imperfect, troubled individual. This is very apparent in the scene in which Achilles drags Hector's body behind his chariot:

He was waiting for the rage to fill him that would be equal at last to the outrage he was committing. That would assuage his grief, and be so convincing ... that he too might believe there was a living man at the centre of it, ... (Malouf 27)

The pejorative connotations of "outrage" leave no doubt as to the obscenity of Achilles' actions; however, the emotional meaning behind "grief" and "rage" establishes a sympathetic tone. Seeming to contradict this emotionality, the formal register actually creates a feeling of remoteness, mirroring Achilles' own disconnection from his actions. This passage uses emotionally evocative language to connect Achilles to the reader. Readers are invited to empathise with him, but also to dislike his behaviour. We expect a certain level of morality from our heroes, but Achilles is being decidedly immoral. So through Achilles' failure to be heroic, Malouf portrays heroes as being flawed creatures, similar to ourselves. Conrad also takes note of this notion, suggesting that *Ransom* dismisses the "classical cult of heroism, equalised all men, and insisted on the beauty of the

humble,” (Conrad 53). Farred compares Malouf’s Achilles to a celebrity recluse, accentuating his status as a flawed hero (Farred 1102). The result is that the reader is better able to identify with Achilles, generating a more emphatic connection with the audience.

Beowulf takes the opposite path. The titular hero has not a single physical or moral flaw, unless one includes lack of humility. As Drout points out, Beowulf is not a flawed hero. His heroic status also comes directly from his feats of strength, namely the slaying of monsters (Drout). Chickering agrees, citing the “Germanic custom of taking the symbolic measure of a man’s worth by the amount of gold he could win through valor,” (Chickering 260) which also suggests that skill in combat is central to a man’s regard in the society of the text. Beowulf’s introduction makes his greatness explicit:

There was no one else like him alive.
In his day, he was the mightiest man on earth,
High-born and powerful. (Anonymous 15)

Absolute terms, like “no one” and the superlative adjective “mightiest”, serve to portray Beowulf as an almost superhuman being. Emphasis is also placed on Beowulf’s status as nobility, indicating that in the poet’s version of the world one’s birth has some bearing on the capacity to be heroic. This contrasts starkly with *Ransom*, which emphasises the common, everyday hero. So Beowulf, as a hero, is defined by his great strength, his nobility, and his ability to slay monsters and protect the weak. He is to be admired rather than identified with.

While *Ransom* shows us a world in which heroes are imperfect, and commoners like Somax can rise to heroism, *Beowulf* instead portrays its hero as near-divine and practically infallible. The two texts have different ideas of what a hero is, but they both use the behaviour of the hero to invite readers to engage with the author’s beliefs in the nature of heroism.

The portrayal of heroic behaviour can also imply the author’s philosophical beliefs. The moral world of the text is reflected in the actions of, and consequences to, the characters. *Beowulf*, set in a

period when Christianity was still spreading through Scandinavia, is clearly written from a Christian perspective. Chickering comments that Christian learning “is part of the furniture of the poet’s mind and it provides him with a traditional and highly developed symbolism of good and evil, light and dark” (Chickering 271). We can see a little of this symbolism as the poet condemns the pagan practices Christianity was replacing at the time of setting; the failure of Grendel’s victims to be heroic is used in this way, as can be seen in the following lines:

Sometimes at pagan shrines they vowed
offerings to idols, swore oaths
that the killer of souls might come to their aid
and save the people. That was their way,
their heathenish hope; ... (Anonymous 13)

The negative connotations of the adjectives “pagan” and “heathenish” serve to degrade non-Christian belief systems, while the term “killer of souls”, presumably a vague description of a pagan deity, also casts paganism in a poor light. These words (including the noun “idol”, which calls to mind the Ten Commandments in a biblical allusion) form a lexical chain associated with paganism. However, “that was their way” and the emotional noun “hope” establishes a sympathetic tone, inviting the reader to understand their desperation. This is also perhaps an indirect reference to the idea of salvation, which comes up in the following passage:

Oh, cursed is he
who in time of trouble has to thrust his soul
in the fire’s embrace, forfeiting help;
he has nowhere to turn. But blessed is he
who after death can approach the Lord
and find friendship in the Father’s embrace. (Anonymous 13)

Hell is invoked with the tactile image “fire’s embrace” and juxtaposed with heaven. The repetition of the word “he” creates an accusatory tone. The unheroic behaviour of the victims, coming across as underhanded, is condemned, but presented in a sympathetic way.

The lack of heroism in these people is contrasted with that of Beowulf, who, in the next stanza, immediately springs to the defence of Hrothgar, the king of a land he has no allegiance to. This

brings the value of charity to the fore and presents Beowulf as classically heroic. These two passages establish a thoroughly didactic manner, overtly instructing the reader in morality.

Explicit didacticism can be jarring to a modern audience; Repp makes the argument that didacticism in an “overt or heavy-handed manner of instruction suggests its author is intellectually arrogant, dogmatic, or prejudiced, giving the reader reason to distrust the lessons it seeks to convey” (Repp 285); however, the poet in this case assumes that his values are ubiquitous to his audience and merely seeks to reaffirm them. This is an example of how the different cultural values of a reader can heavily influence the meaning one makes from a text. A person from a non-Christian background reading this text in the present day could possibly become resistant to the text because of its didacticism, while for an Old English-speaking Christian listening in the ninth century, it would be more likely to increase one’s affinity for the poem.

Beowulf’s overtly moralistic approach contrasts with the more understated expression of values in *Ransom*. Instead of openly dictating his principles, Malouf weaves them subtly into the narrative. An example is the chapter in which Priam has an epiphany about the nature of chance. After relating this idea to Hecuba, she reacts as follows:

“The randomness, the violence. Imagine the panic it would spread.” (Malouf 62)

The reader is invited to disagree with Hecuba, who is portrayed as stubborn and conservative, and agree with Priam. Priam is the hero (in the sense that he is the protagonist) of the novel, and he believes in the influence of chance. His most heroic behaviour, leaving the safety of Troy for the dangers of Achilles’ camp, is motivated by his new belief. Although he doesn’t reject the gods utterly, he sees that their influence does not reach into every corner of his life, and instead of filling him with despair it inspires him. A possible reading of this chapter is that it is a rejection of omnipotent divinity and an embrace of free will; it can also be seen as an acceptance of atheist morality, that is, the idea that morals and order do not depend on religion to uphold them. So Priam’s heroic behaviour in this case is contrasted with Hecuba’s lack of heroism; and in the text

Priam's heroism is related directly to an acceptance of free will and radical thinking, while Hecuba remains rigidly conservative.

One of the reasons literature is so highly valued is because of the lessons it teaches us. These lessons, in this case heroism, from the authors' own values, and from society's ethics, and are coded into the text from which readers are invited to engage in. For instance, while *Beowulf* uses didacticism to convey Christian morality, *Ransom* blends Malouf's values into the narrative, guiding readers to identify with his beliefs. Both texts, however, use heroic behaviour and the lack thereof to suggest the author's attitudes and changing cultural concepts of heroism. Whether a reader chooses to accept or reject these lessons depends on one's socio-cultural background. Nevertheless, the portrayal of heroism is frequently an important component in the moral fabric of a text.

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