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ENG 330
Male Heroism in the Middle Ages
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Concepts of *Lof* and *Weird* in *Beowulf* and *Song of Roland*

“Actions speak louder than words.” This is a common idiom in the English language, encouraging individuals not to boast about their success but instead to let their actions speak for themselves. However, this is not always the case for others; many people boast about their successes and supposed greatness, when in the end, they are no better than average. *Beowulf* and *Roland*, on the contrary, are recognized by their deeds as well as by how they boast about them. *Lof*, the combination of boasting and actions of the hero to make his reputation more renown, is a major theme in *Beowulf* and *The Song of Roland*. In each instance, their boasting and desire of a positive reputation is essentially to their downfall demonstrated through another major theme, *Weird*, fate, or divine intervention. A lack of rationale and common sense that most of us possess, led to their ultimate fates.

Lof is much more prevalent in *Beowulf* than in *Roland*. This is most likely due to the fact that *Beowulf* 's life was much more completed in text, while the story of *Roland* was only a brief period of his life. In both cases, nevertheless, the boasting is the same. These heroes brag about their accomplishments, and how they will not need help in defeating some enemy. Whether they were victorious or not is debatable when considering the actual battle and what has happened to the hero. *Beowulf* is constantly worried about how the world perceives him, and how he will be remembered in the future. To borrow a line from the character Marcus Aurelius in “*Gladiator*,” “How will

the world speak my name in years to come? Will I be known as the philosopher? The warrior? The tyrant? Or will there be a more golden sounding to my name? Will I be the Emperor who gave Rome back her freedom?" (Gladiator, 2000). Beowulf is concerned about his reputation just as much as Marcus Aurelius. In addition, Beowulf considers how his actions affect his reputation while he is alive, and has to brag about himself so others will respect him and know him.

This system of thought is most obvious before the battle between Beowulf and Grendel, when Beowulf debates with Unferth about prior events. He tells Unferth and those in the mead hall of Hrothgar:

...I had bound five Giants – their blood was upon me –
cleaned out a nest for them? Had I not crushed on the wave
sea-serpents by night in narrow struggle,
broken the beasts? (The bane of Geats,
they had asked for their trouble.) And shall I not try
a single match with this monster Grendel,
a trial against a troll? (Beowulf [419-425])

As I am informed that this unlovely one
is careless enough to carry no weapon,
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! With bare hands shall I
grapple with the fiend, fight to the death here,
hater and hated! (Beowulf [433-440])

Beowulf brag about his past accomplishments with the Giants and sea-monsters, but he also boasts about how he will kill Grendel, with no weapons or protective armor. Nothing else would bring about greater fame and renown than killing a terrifying monster with only his bare hands, which is ultimately what Beowulf hopes to gain. Beowulf admits later that he is more worried about how he will be remembered and his reputation than

anything else, “we must earn some renown / if we can, before death; daring is the thing / for a fighting man to be remembered by.” (Beowulf, [1386-1388])

Two more significant examples of this concept of *lof* appear in Beowulf: first in the fight with Grendel’s mother, and second, in the fight with the dragon, which causes his death. After his epic battle with Grendel’s mother Beowulf has the option of taking some of the vast treasure that she has acquired; the only thing that will appease his desire for fame is not the treasure, rather what he takes with him: the head of Grendel, nothing else. In the process, he also gains a seat near Hrothgar, a rare occurrence bestowed upon very few men, thus his fame grows. So now he has defeated two great monsters and will return home, not only with a bolstered reputation, but a lot of gold and other fortunes. He gave all his treasure away to his lord Hygelac and other members of his court upon his return to Geatland. While an obligation to his lord, such actions do not hurt an individual’s reputation when there is that much treasure involved. This fact was the cause of Beowulf’s generosity, but he most likely he cared not for treasure (as we saw with his battle against Grendel’s mother), but cared for his reputation above all else.

Finally, the last major boast of Beowulf was before the battle with the dragon. Not wanting any help to defeat the creature, Beowulf says:

...Battles in plenty
 I ventured in youth; and I shall venture this feud
 and again achieve glory, the guardian of my people,
 old though I am, if this evil destroyer
 dares to come out of his earthen hall. [2511-2515]
 ...I would choose not to take
 any weapon to this worm, if I well knew
 of some other fashion fitting to my boast
 of grappling with this monster, as with Grendel before. [2518-2521]
 ...From the keeper of the barrow

I shall not flee one foot; but further than that
Shall be worked out at the wall as Weird shall decide for us,
Every man's master. [2524-2527]
...await on the barrow the one of us two
who shall be better abelt to bear his wounds
after this onslaught. This affair is not for you,
nor is it measured to any man but myself alone
to match strength with this monstrous being,
attempt this deed...(Beowulf [2530-2535])

Even though he is old probably needed help, Beowulf refuses to back down from the battle. He believed that he would win the day, almost under the assumption that his reputation and past deeds could carry him through. Unfortunately, for our hero dies after defeating the dragon, the final feat on his list of distinguished actions.

The concept of *lof* is also present in *the Song of Roland*. Although it plays less of a role since there is much less boasting than that in *Beowulf*. Nevertheless, reputation seems to have a great influence in *Roland*. Again, just as in *Beowulf*, the arrogance of the hero leads to his death, but in the case of Roland it also leads to the death other many others. When he says, "I shall not call for aid! I shall not sound the horn! In doing so I would lose my good name in my beloved France." His belief in his own reputation results in the army behind him being completely destroyed. Oliviers tells him, "All this carnage is your fault! You outstretched yourself today. If you had listened when I spoke, King Charles would be here now. You have lost us by your pride, Rollanz." Roland viewed his reputation more important than all else, and this cost him his own life and the lives of his friends.

The idea of reputation, *lof*, and boasting in *Beowulf* played a different role than it does in the *Song of Roland*. In *Beowulf*, *lof* is used to build up the characters' attributes,

his courage, and himself; almost enabling the hero to face the monster. Some would say that Beowulf was foolhardy because he faced the tasks alone (which was not in the best interests of self-preservation). As for Roland, his reputation seems to keep the opposition at bay, especially when he is one of the few left. Instead of easily killing Roland, the pagans run away because they are afraid of him. He is widely known and feared because of his deeds and reputation, but it is not sufficient for survival. Instead of being smart and calling for backup, Roland chooses to attack without aid. This arrogance leads to the death of all the men, his best friend, and himself along with others tied to his fate. He is selfish, out for his own glory. Both characters, though, seem to lack logic in their actions. Beowulf is smarter or more thoughtful than Roland; he is seeking out glory for himself but would rather not sacrifice extra men unnecessarily, such as the case with Grendel's mother and the dragon. This could be correlated to the society that they each were a part of. Beowulf was partly Germanic, holding on to the pagan beliefs as well as the old ways, while incorporating the new Christian ideas and morals. Reputation still played a large role in their society; therefore it would be natural for the hero to worry about his reputation as well as appearing to worry about others. He appears as a savior, a knight in shining armor, ignoring logic for the safety of others. Roland, on the other hand, is written in a society where the pagan beliefs are gone; if someone still held onto them they converted or were killed. Reputation begins to play a lesser role because of the new value system and new beliefs. This is a major reason why Roland's actions appear worse than Beowulf's. Roland's culture has changed yet he seems to refuse to change. His glory

seeking leads to illogical decisions that will ultimately end the lives of others. His fate is directly tied to the fates of others, another central theme in both stories.

The concepts of fate, divine intervention, or *wyrd* are all found in *Beowulf*. Beowulf firmly believed that there was a guiding force in the world that would determine the outcome of his travels and actions. One of the first times that this becomes evident is in lines 572-573, “Weird saves oft / the man undoomed if he undaunted be!” Beowulf felt that if he was brave and unflinching, then many times he will be saved by Weird (fate) because it’s not his time to die. In correlation to this, he feels that it is fate or divine intervention that decides who lives and who dies. “To Beowulf the glory / of this fight was granted, (Beowulf [818-819]) and later “And the wise Lord, / the holy God, gave out victory; / the Ruler of Heavens rightly settled it / as soon as the Geat regained his feet,” (Beowulf [1553-1556]). These clearly show the role of fate and/or divine intervention controlling the outcome of the battle. There are other narrative parts that support the idea of a higher ruling power over man, as well as those that clearly show Beowulf holding this belief.

Beowulf was a firm believer in the higher power that controls the outcome of events. He attributed his victories to this power on several occasions. One perfect example is after he defeats Grendel’s mother in the depths of the water:

Not easily did I survive
 the fight under water; I performed this deed
 not without a struggle. Our strife had ended
 at its very beginning if God had not saved me.
 Nothing could I perform in that fight with Hrunting,
 it had no effect, fine weapon though it be.
 But the Guide of mankind granted me the sight
 - He often brings aid to the friendless –

of a huge Giant-sword hanging on the wall,
 ancient and shining – and I snatched up the weapon.
 When the honor afforded, in that fight I slew
 the keepers of the hall. (Beowulf [1655-1666])

He tells that without God's help of showing him that sword, he would not have won the battle and would not have lived to tell of it. Fate did not deem this as his time to end; therefore it, or divine intervention, showed Beowulf the means to defeat the monster. Likewise when he fought the dragon, Beowulf knew he was fated to die at that point, all because his sword had failed him. The narrator writes, "He must now dispute this space of time, / the first in his life when fate had not assigned him / the glory of battle." (Beowulf [2574-2576]). He knew that the failure of his sword meant God would not save him, and that he would die because his fate had arrived.

Fate is also important in *Roland*, perhaps even more so than *Beowulf*. The fate of everyone in the story seems to be tied to that of Roland. In his arrogance, not sounding the horn led to his untimely fated death and suffering when "his brain bubbles out through his ears." Unfortunately for others, their fates are tied to his. His future wife, Alde, dies upon the news of Roland's death. "'Your answer rings strangley in my ears, O King...may it please the angels in heaven that after Rollanz, I do not remain in this world at all...' Color Drained from Alde's cheeks, and she slipped to the marble floor at the king's feet. She was already dead, this promised wife of Rollanz." Even later still, Guenes' fate was tied to that of Roland. Had Roland not died, and then Gunelon would not have been tried for treason, would have not lost the battle, and would have still been alive for years to come. Ultimately, in *the Song of Roland*, the fate of Roland directly

affects the lives and deaths of many men and one woman. Whatever would happen to Roland, would happen to them.

Fate plays a similar role in each story, unlike the role of reputation. In *Beowulf*, it is called Weird, fate, and divine intervention, while in *Roland*, it was more simply fate which tied things together. God was mentioned numerous times in *Roland*, but he did not appear to have the same impact (i.e. interfering with events and making the decisions who lives and who dies) as he did in *Beowulf*. Both have Christian overtones, so beliefs such as being the ruler of man and the idea of Paradise when you die are evident, but fate had a different impact in each. Fate decided who lived and who died, but the actions of Beowulf resulted in few deaths of other people. No one died in any of his battles, and few died directly because of his actions and decisions. However Roland's actions lead to the death of his army, his friend, his wife to be, a traitor and the traitor's supporters, etc. all because he did not blow the horn. His fate was tied directly with the fates of others. If he would have listened to logic, such as his friend Oliviers, and thought it through, he would have known to sound the horn for support and he could have survived that day, along with everyone else. This, combined with the diminished importance of reputation, makes Roland appear to be a poor model for life because his selfish behavior affected so many others. Contrary to this, Beowulf's actions are not selfish, in the sense that he willingly sacrifices only himself, for the good of all. Pagan beliefs were to seek glory but at as little expense as possible as told in this story. That is the difference between the two heroes.

In both *the Song of Roland* and *Beowulf*, the two concepts of *lof* (reputation) and fate (or divine intervention) are evidently portrayed. They both are integral to interpreting

the stories, but reflect some of the ideals of their respective cultures. Roland had more references to the belief in God and seemed to show the irrationality of the hero through his desire for glory, a reflection of the developing French culture and Christianity. Beowulf was a more admirable character, appearing to look out for others while enhancing his reputation, however fate is a large factor in his beliefs and actions, which reflects the Germanic culture at the time. Both stories demonstrate the two concepts and play a major factor in each story. The ways in which they were demonstrated differed, causing this reader to prefer Beowulf to Roland.

“Gladiator.” Universal Studios. Dir.: Ridley Scott. Wri.: David Franzoni. 2000.