Arab World English Journal
INTERNATIONAL PEER REVIEWED JOURNAL ISSN: 2229-9327
مجلة اللغة الانكليزية في العالم العربي

AWEJ, Special Issue on Literature No.1, 2013 Pp.187- 200

The Presence of Augustinian Thought in *Beowulf*

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Abstract
The identity and literary intentions of the author of the most well-known Anglo-Saxon epic poem *Beowulf* is probably going to forever remain a mystery; however, hints and traces of the author's philosophy can be if not determined then at least approximated with a fair amount of certainty. The poem is a bicultural composite, an amalgam of two different cultures: it is not entirely Christian or purely Anglo-Saxon. The essay focuses on Augustinian thought that pervades the poem and several features of the text, such as vocabulary used to describe the heroes and monsters of the poem and the melting pot of Anglo-Saxon and Christian customs. Also, the speeches of the main characters are explored and contrasted with the teachings of Augustine as found in his two most important texts, *De Civitate Dei* and *On Christian Doctrine*. The essay concludes by arguing that while we might never know for certain, it is safe to assume that the author of *Beowulf* had at least second-hand knowledge of Augustine's philosophy since it is, after a detailed analysis, clearly present in the epic poem.

Keywords: Augustine, Beowulf, Christianity, Anglo-Saxon poetry.

Introduction

Beowulf is arguably the most important literary work originating in Anglo-Saxon England. While the text seems relatively straightforward at first—a hero clashes with monsters—such a reading would be grossly reductive. A closer analysis of the poem reveals several narrative aspects that complicate such a basic interpretation. The poem features elaborate kinship ties and strong Christian influence in a pagan setting. Further, speech—not fighting—consumes most of the narrative. The poet remains anonymous, yet it is safe to conclude that his or her efforts resulted in an extremely sophisticated text. This essay will then examine the poem through the lens of the writing of Augustine, namely through *On Christian Doctrine* and *De Civitate Dei*, since such an approach reconciles Christian and rhetorical readings of the text. Tracing Augustine's influence on the poem, I claim that the author had at least some knowledge of Augustine's writing, as is illustrated not only in the several long speeches in the poem that clearly follow Augustine ideas on oral delivery, but also in the general concept of the text and its relationship to memory and pedagogy.

Main Essay

Examining *Beowulf* through Augustinian thought is a valid and fruitful methodological approach. Undoubtedly one of the most apparent features of the poem is the presence of Christianity—God is, after all, mentioned at the beginning of the text: "Scyld passed away at his appointed hour, the mighty lord went into the Lord's keeping" (*Beowulf*, 2009, p. 47). Mentioning God from the very start has a profound effect on how the poem is read since it celebrates God's supremacy over man in the narrative. As Owen-Crocker explains (2000), "[t]he poet establishes at the beginning of his work that no one, whatever his worldly success, can resist a greater force than human power, his fate, the workings of the Lord" (p. 22). This point is further substantiated later in the narrative when the author describes Grendel as wearing the mark of Cain, or during Hrothgar's frequent prayers to God. Moreover, we can interpret the dragon that Beowulf slays as a reference to Satan, an allusion that frequents the exegesis of the Apocalypse of St. John as well as medieval stories and manuscript illuminations (Risden, 2008, p. 72). Although containing many elements of pagan lore and culture, the poem seems to be indisputably Christian; as John D. Niles suggests (1993), "the poem pertains to a stage of English culture when pagan Germanic lore no longer represented a threat to Christian spirituality, so that pagan Scandinavia could be used as the setting of a poem that addresses issues of salvation and spiritual evil" (p. 97). In other words, the overwhelming number of pagan themes and symbols does not threaten the poem's Christian foundation.

That said, the claim that *Beowulf* is purely a Christian poem is bold and perhaps inaccurate. Although there are two primary frames of reference—Christian and pagan—and although "the broader Christian worldview possessed by the poet and his audience" circumscribes the "relatively benighted pagan perspective," the Christianity present in *Beowulf* cannot be understood to be the same as the one today (Sharma, 2005, p. 247). For instance, the poem never directly invokes any of the truly significant doctrines of Christian faith, such as the salvation of the soul or its immortality (Halbrooks, 2009, p. 106). These glaring omissions lead William Whallon to argue that the *Beowulf* author might have been familiar only with the basics of Christian faith, knowing only the stories from the opening chapters of Genesis, for example, but ignorant of other portions of the Bible (Whallon, 1962, p. 82). Whallon continues: "A missionary may have taught the poet only what could be combined with the native heroic ideals, and Beowulf may reflect the felicity of the combination. The poet lived in an age of religious

transition, but there is no cause for doubting that he thought his world-view consistent and, indeed, enlightened" (p. 82). Put differently, Christianity is prevalent in *Beowulf* but it was only slightly familiar to the people of Anglo-Saxon England; indeed, the poem displays Germanic society slowly adopting Christianity, often accommodating it to the existing Germanic customs and beliefs instead of directly replacing them. The poem therefore needs to be read with this in mind.

Rhetorical approaches to *Beowulf* resulted in a large body of scholarship that can be separated into two groups—archival studies and close readings of the poem. Two main traditions of rhetoric can be traced in Anglo-Saxon writing: the rhetorical tradition of antiquity and the tradition of rhetoric as contained in grammar (Knappe, 1998, p. 27). In addition, there has been recent research has conducted on the teaching of the "language arts": grammar, rhetoric, and dialectic, the trivium of Carolingian times (Knappe, 2013, p. 23). The issue of rhetoric must be understood in relation to other oral arts and traditions. Texts from the Greco-Roman period, with which the Anglo-Saxons were familiar, were not limited to rhetorical treatises, but also included pagan poetry, especially in the monastic tradition of Canterbury and Wessex (Werren, 1998, p. 87). This knowledge shared the same space with numerous traditions of the Anglo-Saxons, many of them "primordial and universal" among other Germanic tribes, such as the Anglo-Saxon boast, which is "a speech of self-praise" common to Germanic warrior societies (Conquergood, 1978, p. 1). The above might lead one to conclude that the tradition of rhetoric can be widely perceived in Anglo-Saxon texts such as *Beowulf*.

Unfortunately, imagining Anglo-Saxons as generally versed in the rhetorical practices of the Greeks and the Romans is naïve. For example, many of rhetorical texts were not accessible to the Anglo-Saxons due to the population's general inability to read Greek (Knappe, 1998, p. 7). In addition, hardly any texts dealing with rhetoric from antiquity and late antiquity were known (Knappe, 2013, p. 31); research suggests that Alcuin was the "only Anglo-Saxon who was well acquainted with the rhetorical tradition of antiquity" (Knappe, 1998, p. 13). The knowledge of rhetorical tradition was thus rare; nevertheless, the Anglo-Saxons were relatively well versed in the tradition of rhetoric within grammar: they knew most of the important works from antiquity and also paid close attention to figures and tropes, especially in the earlier Anglo-Saxon period (Knappe, 1998, p. 16). Furthermore, A.P. Church (2000) notes that Anglo-Saxon manuscripts demonstrate a thorough knowledge of *progymnasmata*, rhetorical exercises aimed at gradually teaching students the rules of rhetoric. Traces of these *progymnasmata*, Church argues, can even be found in *Beowulf* (p. 53). This leads Knappe (2013) to conclude that while the teaching of rhetoric itself was virtually unknown to the English, rhetoric taught through grammar was a common pedagogical practice in the early Middle Ages (p. 32).

In other words, Anglo-Saxon England was exposed to Christianity and was familiar with rhetorical practices, yet Christianity and rhetoric were slightly different from what we understand them to be today—Christian teachings and morals were assimilated into the Germanic core and only slowly changed the pagan roots of the Anglo-Saxons, while rhetorical practices were preserved through grammatical exercises rather than a direct knowledge of rhetoric and its application. This is where Augustine becomes important, as his work was widely known throughout the Middle Ages. J.D.A. Ogilvy (1967) describes Augustine's *The De Civitate Dei* as "the most popular" of Augustine's works in England, explaining that it "must have been known in England from the very beginning of the eighth century at the latest, and probably reached the island at least as early as the times of Hadrian and Theodore" (p. 82). In addition, Knappe (2013) includes Augustine's *On Christian Doctrine* as one of the few works directly dealing with

rhetoric known to the Anglo-Saxons in England (p. 31); Ogilvy (1967) confirms this notion by pointing out that Bede and Alcuin directly cited the text (p. 84). Describing Augustine as a convert from rhetoric to Chrstianity, James J. Murphy (1974) explains that it was his *On Christian Doctrine* that "attempted the marriage of rhetoric and Christianity" (p. 51, 43). Augustine and his *On Christian Doctrine* then becomes the logical text to examine if one wants to find traces of rhetoric and Christianity in Anglo-Saxon literature.

One could approach the text directly, carefully analyzing relevant sections and comparing and contrasting them with Augustine's writing. However, since it is highly probable that we will never know whether or not the Beowulf poet knew any of Augustine's work, I need to approach the issue in a slightly delicate manner. Therefore, I will address several different aspects of the poem before directly discussing the connection between *Beowulf* and Augustine, since such an approach will help establish the probability of my claim. Although the poem itself is clearly set in the Germanic world, intertextual evidence shows that the author of the poem might have been aware of several other texts, many of them composed in Latin. The texts contain elements that also reappear in the poem itself. Importantly, these elements are incorporated rather seamlessly into the main narrative, thus showing not only the poet's knowledge of Latin texts, but also his or her skillful use of pagan and Christian elements. For example, the compendium of mythical monsters *Liber Monstrorum* mentions Hygelac, who "ruled the Geats and was killed by the Franks, whom no horse could carry from the age of twelve" (*Liber monstrorum*, Book One, para. 2). Hygelac's presence in the text is significant since he is also present in *Beowulf* as the protagonist's uncle, which makes it reasonable to assume that the author of *Beowulf* was familiar with *Liber Monstrorum*. In addition, *Liber Monstrorum* not only uses a large variety of sources, but also "alludes to and manipulates his sources, both Christian and pagan," which only emphasizes the possibility that the *Beowulf* poet was familiar with Latin texts, namely those by Augustine, and incorporated them into his writing in the same manner as the author of *Liber Monstrorum* (Orchard, 2003, p. 87). More importantly, a close analysis of *Liber Monstrorum* shows that its author was familiar with Augustine's *The De Civitate Dei* (Orchard, p. 89). Importantly, Augustine's *De Civitate Dei* was one of the books that was widely known to the Anglo-Saxons, one that also discussed mythological monsters (Herren, 1998, p. 92). Some of its notions, as I will demonstrate later, also reappear in *Beowulf*. Furthermore, even though Latin learning had only small impact on the Germanic heroic poetry, many of the Germanic tropes such as the kenning correspond to the figurative diction of their Latin counterparts (Knappe, 1998, p. 23). Simply put, intertextuality, the borrowing of ideas and characters, and language use were common to the Anglo-Saxons, therefore making the connection between the Latin writing of Augustine and *Beowulf* plausible.

Heroism is one of the main themes of *Beowulf*: the author invokes the language of heroic lineage at the very beginning of the text to describe Scyld Scefing, Hrothgar's ancestor:

> Often Scyld Scefing seized the mead-benches
> from many tribes, troops of enemies,
> struck fear into earls. Though he first was
> found a waif, he awaited solace for that—
> he grew under heaven and prospered in honor
> until every one of the encircling nations
> over the whale's-riding had to obey him,
> grant him tribute. That was a good king! (*Beowulf*, p. 47)

Beowulf depicts an age of heroes and heroic exploits, a time when it was possible for figures such as Beowulf and Breca to not only hold a swimming contest on the open sea for five days while fully armed and armored, but also to fight vicious sea serpents and prevail. However, most of the narrative does not describe Beowulf's struggles against the three monsters. On the contrary, the majority of the text is composed of various speeches and declamations. Anglo-Saxon society was interested in oratory, which can be seen from the fact that some of the most memorable scenes—Beowulf's confrontation with Unferth, Hrothgar's "sermon," and Beowulf's final speech—not only play an important part in the narrative, but also are among the longest scenes in the poem. One such oral tradition present in the poem is that of *flyting*, "an expected convention of heroic society" in which one challenges someone else's claims, as is exemplified by the conversation between Unferth and Beowulf (Church, 2000, p. 62). Another type of speech present is the Anglo-Saxon boast, a spoken self-praise that was common among Germanic warriors during the early Middle Ages (Conquergood, 1978, p. 1-2). As Conquergood explains, the Anglo-Saxon culture "stressed the importance of speech in formal situations and that the boast was perhaps the most popular public speaking event," a fact pointed out by several references to boasting in the poem (Conquergood, p. 2). Hand in hand with heroism is another important feature of Anglo-Saxon England, that of gift giving. John-Henry Wilson Clay (2009) explains that one of the reasons for gift giving in *Beowulf* is to promote stability as well as to display power (p. 32). As the poet describes it:

> [i]t came to [Hrothgar's] mind
> that he should order a hall-building,
> have men make a great mead-house
> which the sons of men should remember forever,
> ……..……
> … it was soon ready,
> the greatest of halls; (*Beowulf*, p. 48)

Germanic society seems to be portrayed as a flourishing society at first sight, one without flaws and one that slowly adapts to its newfound religion, Christianity.

But we must be careful when evaluating the description of the Germanic tribes, as under the surface rests a critique of many of its customs. One of the significant aspects of the poem is the clear identification of Grendel as the direct descendant of Cain:

> … ever since Cain,
> killed with his blade his only brother,
> his father's kin; he fled bloodstained,
> marked for murder, left the joys of men,
> dwelled in the wasteland. From him awoke
> many a fateful spirit—Grendel among them (*Beowulf*, p. 63)

In *De Civitate Dei* Augustine discusses Cain and Abel and explains that they belonged to two different cities, the city of God in Abel's case and the city of men in Cain's (Book 15.1). Later in his treatise, Augustine mentions various monsters and turns to the Bible to explain them, concluding that "either these things which have been told of some races have no existence at all; or if they do exist, they are not human races; or if they are human, they are descended from Adam" (Book 16.8). Many of the important discussions on the nature of mankind comes from

the fifteenth book of the text, and archival research shows not only that *De Civitate Dei* was possibly the most popular of Augustine's work in the Anglo-Saxon England, but also that the fifteenth book was cited nearly as often as all the other books combined (Ogilvy, 1967, p. 82). The decision of the *Beowulf* poet to clearly identify Grendel as the descendant of Cain in a narrative with several other non-human monsters, such as the sea serpents and the dragon, is further emphasized by reading it in light of Augustine's clarification of the various creatures and their relationship to mankind. Grendel, for instance, is not a monster but a direct descendant of Adam. Just like Augustine's Cain is "moved by that diabolical, envious hatred with which the evil regard the good, for no other reason than because they are good while themselves are evil" (Augustine, *De Civitate Dei*, Book 15.5), Grendel is "rotten with sin" (*Beowulf*, p. 59). Beowulf might seem to be the opposite of Grendel—a fierce warrior but also a godly man—yet such a simple conclusion would be premature. Manish Sharma's analysis of the words *gebolgen* and *bolgenmod*—"swollen in mind" or "swollen in spirit"—shows that these terms are applied only to Beowulf, the monstrous King Heremod, and all the monsters except Grendel's mother (2005, p. 251). These terms, Sharma continues, "link the hero to his monstrous opponents and suggest that some moral ambiguity accompanies Beowulf's ability to attain this state" (p. 251). The careful choice of diction on the poet's part leads the reader to understand that the line separating the bold Beowulf from the vicious Grendel is thin and can be easily crossed, a fact that is seen in the case of Heremod, who "cut down his table-companions" while he was "enraged" (*Beowulf*, p. 68). Sharma's study of the Heremod passage shows that a term meaning "growth" or "swelling" is immediately contrasted to a reference to Heremod's evil deeds, therefore making him resemble Grendel more than Beowulf (2005, p. 259). The notion of "swelling" also leads to a paradoxical situation, in which the hero must become more than a human: he must gain inhuman strength in order to fight the monsters, but it is precisely this "swelling" that is one of the main traits of the monsters. In other words, facing the monsters with their own weapons results in becoming one of them (Sharma, p. 264).

Heroism itself is not the only aspect that seems to be criticized in the poem. As I previously mentioned, boasting played an important part among the Germanic tribes, yet it is boasting that was criticized in Old English didactic literature that existed alongside the essentially Germanic literature such as *Beowulf* (Conquergood, 1978, p. 3). The poem reflects such attitudes in several places, as it features boasts that are never fulfilled: the first negative instance of boasting takes place when Hrothgar mentions that warriors often made boasts before being slaughtered by Grendel; the second is in Wiglaf's speech urging remaining retainers to help Beowulf slay the dragon (*Beowulf*, p. 53, p. 81). The boasts are then public vows of courage and resolve, yet they do not have to be executed. Another clearly Germanic custom that comes under attack is gift giving, this time associated with Heremod: "No rings did he give to the Danes for their honor" (*Beowulf*, p. 69). The custom of gift giving creates expectations and obligations that need to be met in order to gain one's loyalty; in addition, these expressions "of loyalty, the desire for honour [sic] and prestige, the uncertainty of reciprocation, carry within themselves the latent seeds of jealousy, pride and treachery – and if these qualities grow too powerful, they will rupture and fragment existing social relations, even while strengthening others" (Clay, 2009, p. 318). Clay further adds that the custom of gift giving is in *Beowulf* identified as way of promoting loyalty, yet the poem itself explicitly shows that it cannot be relied upon: Beowulf's retainers are given rings and battle gear but still they do not relieve their lord in the final fight. The materiality of our world cannot be trusted; it was, after all, Cain who built the physical city

of man, while Abel, "being a sojourner, built none" (Augustine, *De Civitate Dei*, Book 15.1). Another aspect of the Germanic culture that is clearly criticized is the issue of avenging one's death by killing the perpetrator of the original crime. The poem demonstrates that such revenge can easily spiral out of control and lead to the deaths of many. Importantly, revenge is also the motivation of Grendel's mother for killing Æschere: "[Grendel's mother] would avenge her boy, her only offspring" (*Beowulf*, p. 66). Further, a more detailed analysis of the words and terms describing Grendel's mother and her behavior shows that, unlike Grendel, the poem never depicts her as enjoying the killing or feasting on the victim; in terms of Anglo-Saxon society, her act is completely justified (Owen-Crocker, 2000, p. 222).

The fact that many of the traditional customs are displayed as relics of the past might lead us to conclude that Christianity takes its rightful place as the ideology to follow in the poem. After all, it is God, and not Beowulf's luck and presence of mind as Risden (2008) mistakenly claims, that ensures the hero's victory over Grendel's mother (p. 45):

There the son of Ecgtheow would have ended his life
under the wide ground, the Geatish champion,
had not his armored shirt offered him help,
the hard battle-net, and holy God
brought about war-victory—the wise Lord,
Ruler of the heavens, decided it rightly,
Easily, once he stood up again. (*Beowulf*, p. 66-67)

Immediately after Beowulf rises, he notices a magic sword among the possessions of Grendel's mother; the juxtaposition of the "holy God" who "brought about war-victory" once Beowulf "stood up again" with the description of the sword suggests that God provided the sword to ensure Beowulf's victory (Hala, 1998, p. 46). God, then, not only grants blessings, but also takes part in the narrative, intervening on the behalf of the pious and just. Yet the old customs are not abandoned so easily and the Christianity present in *Beowulf* is different from how we understand the religion today. The poem depicts a world that is only gradually adopting Christian values, a world that is neither entirely pagan nor totally Christian. For example, Whallon (1962) points out that although Beowulf is a Christian king who has for fifty years ruled over the Geats, presumably also Christian, his death is honored with a pyre rather than interment (p. 87). Interestingly, Beowulf gains the dragon's hoard, and even though he wishes for the treasure to be used for his people's wellbeing, he is buried with most of it (Risden, 68). We might interpret this act in two ways: either his followers wish to honor their fallen lord by burying the treasure with him, or they feel that with Beowulf's death a part of their culture passed away as well, thus disposing of the treasure as a sign of further conversion from Paganism to Christianity. Either way, the relationship of the poem's characters to Christianity is ambivalent at best. The figure of Hrothgar might be viewed as an outstanding Christian: he not only often invokes God in speech, but his people also regard him as a just ruler and "protector of the Scyldings" (*Beowulf* 53). Nevertheless, Hrothgar, "the mighty lord, long-good nobleman," suffers through Grendel's killing spree for twelve years (*Beowulf*, p. 48); the fact that he appears powerless amidst a large number of honorifics stressing his fame and deeds should strike the reader as incongruous (DeGregorio, 1999, p. 320). Hrothgar's simultaneous portrayal as an idealized protector and a helpless king is further emphasized by the associates he keeps, namely Unferth, a man accused of kinslaying, and Hrothulf, Hrothgar's nephew that kills Hrothgar's

sons after the lord dies (DeGregorio, p. 320, 330). It appears that even a godly man such as Hrothgar is not without faults, and his inability to face Grendel as well as his choice of rather controversial figures as his close advisors paints him in an unfavorable light.

To summarize, *Beowulf* portrays a culture that might deem itself Christian yet has distinct pagan roots. The clash of the two cultures produces ambiguity, often casting doubt on characters and events that might be initially viewed favorably. Significantly, the interpretation of the poem's events closely follows Augustine's teaching on rhetoric as outlined in *On Christian Doctrine*. As the poem develops, Augustine's presence gradually reveals itself only to become nearly explicit at the end; the poem then becomes not only a documentation of Augustine's ideas on oral delivery, but also a record of the Anglo-Saxon society's progression from Paganism to Christianity. Although its nature might seem at times ambiguous, speech assumes a central role in the poem. As Conquergood (1978) in his discussion of the Anglo-Saxon boast points out, Beowulf has seven boasts in the narrative while Grendel or even Unferth has none (p. 2); this technique of displaying one's importance and virtue in the narrative is repeated in other Anglo-Saxon literature such as "The Battle of Maldon." Beowulf has several speeches throughout the poem, one of the most memorable being the speech addressed to Unferth:

> Time and again those terrible enemies
> sorely threatened me. I served them well
> with my dear sword, as they deserved.
> They got no joy from their gluttony,
> those wicked maneaters, when they tasted me,
> sat down to their feast on the ocean floor—
> but in the morning, wounded by my blade,
> they were washed ashore by the ocean waves,
> dazed by sword-blows, and since that day,
> they never hindered the passage of any
> sea-voyager. (*Beowulf*, p. 54)

Together with Beowulf's boasting at the beginning of the speech—"I had greater strength on the sea, more ordeals on the waves than any other man"—his speech might be described in terms of Augustinian rhetoric, specifically as belonging to the grand style (*Beowulf*, p. 54). Although originally aimed at discussing sermon delivery, Augustine's classification is applicable to public speaking in general. The grand style is then one of the three styles of oral delivery—the other two being the moderate and subdued styles—and is distinguished by its higher frequency of verbal ornamentation as well as its forcefulness and emotionality (Augustine, 1958, book 4.20.42). Augustine then continues by explaining that the vocabulary of the grand style is often not determined by careful choice but rather by "the force of the things discussed" and "the ardor of the heart" (Augustine, Book 4.20.42). Interestingly, Augustine uses an example of a warrior to further explain the grand style: "For if a strong man is armed with a gilded and bejeweled sword, and he is fully intent on the battle, he does what he must with the arms he has, not because they are precious but because they are arms" (Augustine, Book 4.20.42). Beowulf's boast confirms Conquergood's explanation that boasting has positive connotations in heroic poetry, since the boast not only counters Unferth's accusation that Beowulf is a coward, but also reveals Unferth as a morally questionable character (Conquergood, p. 2). The poem then displays

young Beowulf as a pagan, yet an admirable one that even follows Augustine's advice on the grand style.

Beowulf's boastful and confident manner of speaking contrasts with another important speech in the poem—Hrothgar's "sermon" delivered directly after Beowulf defeats Grendel's mother. In the speech, Hrothgar defines the qualities of an honorable hero by contrasting Beowulf's deeds with Heremod's. But instead of praising the slaying of monsters, Hrothgar cautions Beowulf against becoming too proud and reminds him of human frailty:

> Defend yourself from wickedness, dear Beowulf,
> best of men, and choose the beter,
> eternal counsel; care not for pride,
> great champion! The glory of your might
> is but a little while; soon it will be
> that sickness or the sword will shatter your strength,
> ……
> death, o warrior, will overwhelm you. (*Beowulf*, p. 69)

The speech is striking not only because of its apparent displacement in the flow of the narrative—reminding a victorious hero of his mortality instead of greeting him as the victor—but also because of its emphasis on teaching. When discussing Heremod's foul deeds, Hrothgar encourages Beowulf to learn from his example in order to understand virtue: "For your sake I have told this, in the wisdom of my winters" (*Beowulf*, p. 69). Hrothgar's lengthy speech on pride and human frailty contrasts with the abrupt appreciation of Beowulf's defeat of Grendel's mother. The nature of the speech seems to follow Augustine's rules on teaching through sermons: "He who teaches should thus avoid all words which do not teach" (Augustine, 1958, Book 4.10.24). The whole speech appears to conform to Augustine's rules of the moderate style, certainly not plain but also not as explosive as Beowulf's address to Unferth (Augustine, 1958, Book 4.20.40). Other critics have commented on the speech, concluding through careful analyses of Hrothgar's diction that the speech is uniquely characterized by substantial use of repetition that is suggestive of the rhetoric of a preacher (Davidson, 2005, p. 147). In addition, Davidson notes that the cautionary tale of Heremod is stylistically different from the rest of the speech, thus isolating the digression from the rest of Hrothgar's sermon (p. 148). As mentioned, the poem contains several occasions of inhuman "swelling," which is connected to Beowulf, Grendel, the dragon, and, importantly, the monstrous Heremod (Sharma, 2005, 251). The stylistic use of Beowulf's swelling as being practically the same as Heremod's serves not only to blur the line between human and inhuman, virtuous and monstrous, but also to emphasize the nature of Hrothgar's speech, and the Heremod tale in particular, as a cautionary tale addressed exclusively to Beowulf. Furthermore, swelling is in Hrothgar's speech identified with pride, a connection often made in the Bible (Sharma, p. 260). Therefore, Hrothgar's speech balances Beowulf's boasting and defines pride as dangerously close to the monstrous nature of Heremod. Such rebuke seems especially important considering Beowulf's indirect criticism of Hrothgar after the death of Æschere, reminding the old king that "[i]t is always better to avenge one's friend than to mourn overmuch" (DeGregorio, 1999, p. 328; *Beowulf*, p. 65).

Augustine's perception of rhetorical skills is peculiar when we consider modern perspectives; while he considered the character of the speaker or his eloquence important, the most critical factor that distinguished a good speech from a bad one is God. Murphy further explains that medieval rhetoric exemplified by Augustine is not interested in composition;

although precise vocabulary and style are important to Augustine, the Ciceronian notions of "invention" or "arrangement" are ignored (Murphy, 1974, p. 289). Words, then, do not convince the addressee, but "prompt" him or her to recall the interior truths present in every person (Murphy, 288). Murphy further explains Augustine's notion of truth: "[A] piece of conventional signage (what we call language) is merely intended to *remind* the hearer of an existing process, and to start it under way in the hearer's mind so that the hearer will himself carry his own mind along to a desired objective" (p. 289). Such concept of rhetoric places great stress on individual judgment and private interpretation. Another distinction is that speakers do not persuade the listeners; instead, listeners move themselves (Murphy, p. 289). Beowulf is described as "glad-hearted" after Hrothgar's sermon, taking his seat without commenting on Hrothgar's speech (*Beowulf*, 69). Such immediate reaction makes clear that the speech has a lasting effect on Beowulf, as can be seen in Beowulf's final speech to Wiglaf. The reaction also suggests that he was heard willingly and obediently, another important factor in Augustinian rhetoric, therefore showing that Horthgar, despite his inability to defend his kinsmen from Grendel's attacks, not only is a moral center of the poem, but also has a lasting effect on Beowulf (Augustine, 1958, Book 4.17.34). Concluding that Beowulf's reaction is a sign of him being "moved" in the Augustinian sense might appear to be a conjecture on my part; however, other references to Augustinian ideas of rhetoric make it more plausible than one might initially admit. Augustine explains that anyone making a public speech "should pray that God may place a good speech in his mouth" (Augustine, Book 4.30.63). The notion that it is God who provides speakers with eloquence is hinted at in Hrothgar's reaction to Beowulf's speech after the discovery of Æschere's death is made: "The old man leapt up, thanked the Lord, the might God, for that man's speech" (*Beowulf*, p. 65). While it might be interpreted in two different ways – Hrothgar is either thanking God for providing Beowulf with the speech, or thanking him for making Beowulf appear at Heorot – the following are quite evident: firstly, Hrothgar is associated with speech resembling a sermon and therefore with God; secondly, Hrotghar's speech warning Beowulf from being overwhelmed with pride is in direct contrast to Beowulf's boasting at the beginning of the poem; lastly, Hrothgar is eloquent speaker that manages to steer Beowulf away from Heremod's fate.

The last aspect of Hrothgar's speech—directing Beowulf away from earthly matters and towards God—is further emphasized in Beowulf's dying speech. The final speech follows Augustine's guidelines on the subdued style, that is to use it in order to teach (Augustine, 1958, Book 4.17.34). His speech is somber in tone and nearly absent of epithets that are used throughout the poem in large numbers (Hala, 1998, p. 34). Importantly, the narrative of the dragon's attack repeats the notion of "swelling":

> … To [Beowulf] that was
> painful in spirit, greatest of sorrows;
> the wise one believed he had bitterly offended
> the Ruler of all, the eternal Lord,
> against the old law; his breast within groaned
> with dark thoughts—that was not his custom. (*Beowulf*, p. 75)

Manish Sharma (2005) points out that the word for "offended" ("gebulge") is grammatically and semantically related to the terms denoting "swelling" (*gebolgen* and *bolgenmod*) that constitute the monsters, and potentially Beowulf, as something monstrous and

unnatural (p. 263). Sharma continues: "In a sudden flash of insight… Beowulf's apprehension appears to turn inward, toward what is conceivably monstrous and 'offensive' in his own nature…. Beowulf's fear that he has swelled/offended ("gebulge") is absolutely and literally accurate—he *has* become 'swollen,' and within a Christian frame of reference this state would signify his 'offence'" (p. 263). Mirroring the realization of his potentially monstrous nature and showing an understanding of his morality, Beowulf's final speech is short and somber in tone:

> For all these treasures, I offer thanks
> with these words to the eternal Lord,
> King of Glory, for what I gaze upon here,
> that I was able to acquire such wealth
> for my people before my death-day.
> ……
> You are the last survivor of our lineage,
> the Wægmundings; fate has swept away
> all of my kinsmen, earls in their courage,
> to their final destiny; I must follow them. (*Beowulf*, p. 83)

The stoic nature of his final speech shapes Beowulf into a *rex justus*, a pious and kind ruler closer to the ideal of Augustine than one would expect a Germanic warlord and monster-slayer to be (Niles, 1993, p. 96). Importantly, Beowulf is addressing Wiglaf, the last of his kin; Davidson (2005) has pointed out that the language of Beowulf's final speech sets it apart from diction like Hrothgar's in its intentional use of kinship terms (p. 153). Beowulf is visibly changed in the speech; gone is the boisterous warrior full of vitality. A different Beowulf is speaking to Wiglaf in the speech—a man who rejoices in the fact he has lived a fulfilling live, a ruler who hopes in the preservation of his people, but also a teacher who hopes to pass final knowledge before he dies. By this time the addressee of the poem has seen the great Beowulf rise and fall, thus he or she can finally evaluate his life and legacy.

The fact that *Beowulf* explicitly states its events are set in the past—"the judgment of God would guide the deeds of every man, as it still does today"—helps in better evaluating Beowulf's final speech and the poem as a while (*Beowulf*, p. 83). Even though the poem is set in fifth and sixth-century Scandinavia, it expresses a

response to the two great sources of tension in English culture during the late sixth through the early tenth centuries: the integration of Germanic culture and Christian faith into a single system of thought and ethics, and the integration of all the peoples living south of Hadrian's Wall and east of Offa's Dyke into one English nation ruled by the West Saxon royal line. (Niles, 1993, p. 106)

While the pre-literate tradition of the poem is uncertain, *Beowulf* is a product of a literate culture which emphasized its Christian and Latin tradition as much as its Germanic roots (Church, 2000, p. 54). The poem's decision to highlight its origin in history should not be overlooked, especially when its Christian nature that continually criticizes non-Christian elements of the poem is taken into account. As the poem progresses, the addressee witnesses Beowulf's transformation into a godly man; *Beowulf* strives to change its audience by showing characters Christian enough to sympathize with but at the same time their pagan nature and customs make their redemption certain. One of the important ideas of Augustine's writing is the attempt to find a way to understand the motives behind our actions so that we can make ethical decisions, which is achieved through memory; however, since our personal memory is subject to

misunderstanding, Augustine turns for an answer to events that can be verified through authenticated accounts (Stock, 2005, p. 10). Brian Stock further explains that the addressee of a text or speech is personally responsible for what Stock calls a "post-reading experience," that is the time spent contemplating a text after having finished reading it (p. 11). The poem's ambiguity—Beowulf's "swelling," Hrothgar the ineffective defender versus Hrothgar the preacher, and Christianity coupled with old Germanic customs—serves to highlight the importance of a post-reading experience; by not providing a clear-cut explanation of the characters and events readers are forced to revise the poem, thus mimicking Hrothgar's and Beowulf's reliance on past events in interpreting the present and predicting the future. Furthermore, setting the poem in the past only emphasizes the poem as a historical and therefore reliable text in Augustinian terms, which allows the addressee to apply it as a tool for interpreting his or her current situation. As Murphy (1974) explains Augustine's attitude to the past, it "may be slight and difficult to detect, but here in embryo is the basic postulate of the medieval arts of discourse: that the past should serve the particular needs of the present" (p. 87).

In spite of never attributing them to the rhetorician, Augustine uses many of Cicero's ideas on rhetoric in the Book IV of *On Christian Doctrine*: "[A] certain eloquent man said, and said truly, that he who is eloquent should speak in such a way that he teaches, delights, and moves" (Book 4.12.27). Yet Augustine differs from Cicero in one significant way – by having "the positive ideal of spiritual conversion in mind" (Murphy, 1974, p. 62). Augustine claims that trying to enjoy material and physical aspects of our lives like wealth or pleasure for their own sake is sin, or being cut off from God (Murphy, p. 290). On the other hand, it is the application of "corporal and temporal things" used in order to "comprehend the eternal and spiritual" that should be the goal of every Christian (Augustine, 1958, Book 1.4.4). Hrothgar succeeds in steering Beowulf towards Christianity, yet the hero is not fully identified with the religion by the end of the poem; although referred to as "a shepherd of a kingdom," he decides to challenge the dragon against the council of his earls, a decision criticized by Wiglaf after his death:

> Often many earls must suffer misery
> through the will of one man, as we have now seen.
> We could not persuade our dear prince,
> shepherd of a kingdom, with any counsel,
> that he should not greet that gold-guardian,
> let him lie there where he long had been,
> inhabit the dwellings until the end of the world:
> he held to his high destiny. The hoard is opened,
> grimly gotten; that fate was too great
> which impelled the king of our people thither. (*Beowulf*, p. 86)

Although Wiglaf also clings to old Germanic customs, the criticism of Beowulf's action as unnecessary is evident. Beowulf's epithet at the very end of the poem – "the mildest of men and the most gentle, the kindest to his folk and *the most eager for fame*" – shows another critique of Beowulf and of paganism and Germanic ancestry in general (*Beowulf*, p. 88, emphasis mine). *Beowulf* is in a way a cautionary tale directed at all Christians, showing "that personal restraint and clemency – Christian virtues – are as worthy of praise as the successful pursuit of renown" (Owen-Crocker, 2000, p. 235). The audience of the poem is invited to critically evaluate Beowulf's deeds and apply them for their own wellbeing.

Conclusion

Beowulf is an epic poem that records the conversion of a renowned hero toward a more Christian identity. Although he is still partially pagan, as his funeral pyre shows, Beowulf is Christian enough to gain the audience's sympathy. The narrative displays a world which lies on the boundaries between old Germanic heritage and new Christian culture; it is then juxtaposed with the idea of reform and teaching virtue through the character of Hrothgar. The reader is then invited to consider Beowulf's qualities and flaws as well as his own. Importantly, Augustine believed in redeeming one's sins through an active effort to become a better person:

> For in each individual, as I have already said, there is first of all that which is reprobate, that from which we must begin, but in which we need not necessarily remain; afterwards is that which is well-approved, to which we may by advancing attain, and in which, when we have reached it we may abide. Not, indeed, that every wicked man shall be good, but that no one will be good who was not first of all wicked; but the sooner any one becomes a good man, the more speedily does he receive this title, and abolish the old name in the new. (Augustine, *De Civitate Dei*, Book XV.1)

If a sinful person can purify his or her soul from all sin, then Beowulf can and vice versa, if a pagan adhering to old customs can become Christian, although with flaws, so can *Beowulf's* audience. The poem is then a vessel of Augustinian thought, carefully applying Augustine's ideas in order to promote general goodwill and solidify Christian faith by subtly inviting the audience to judge the events in the narrative and discard the old pagan customs in favor of Christian sensibility.

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