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“A Desperate Affair”

Processing and Healing from Trauma in *Beowulf*

In the winter of 2019, I was invited to attend a ~~conference~~/workshop on trauma and Shakespeare held by an organization ~~which worked with veterans and Shakespeare’s plays to~~ address the effects of PTSD. At one point in workshop, Bill, a bald-headed, tall man in clogs said, in relation to why so many of the soldiers that return from the United States’ wars continue to suffer from PTSD, (to slightly misquote) “We used do that, you used to come home and tell the story to your group, you tribe, now, we just say ‘Thank you for your service. There is no sharing.’” This sparked a thought: If sharing our trauma with each other is a thing of the past, beautifully written maybe this explains a piece of a poem nearly as old as the English language itself. For a poem that is the object of near universal dislike by ~~high school~~ students in the U.S., *Beowulf* didn’t leave much of an impression on me, good or bad. I was bothered by the repetition at parts, descriptions of events that had occurred only a few lines before the repetition. But it wasn’t until this ~~conference~~, until Bill brought up the importance of sharing traumatic events with one’s social group, that I began to understand these repetitions of battle scenes may have greater meaning. What I found was that in three distinct places *Beowulf* retells the story of battles he has just fought: after his fight with Grendel, after his victory over Grendel’s mother, and when he returns home to Geatland, and on each occasion he uses language that calls attention to the

emotional and psychological toll the events have taken. While this speech may read as post-battle boasting, a closer look reveals that it functions ~~differently than typical boasting.~~

nice transition to scholarship here

Scholarship on the role of boasting in *Beowulf* had been primarily concerned with the boast as a social or political tool. Dwight Conquergood writes, “Boasts launched men upon, and held them to, course of action which had life and death consequences,” consequences which were “personal, social, legal, and political” in nature (24-26). The boasts are also understood as a marker of heroic progression: “Recalling of past heroism is transmuted into a calling forth of future exploits. Past deeds function within a boast as both signposts and springboards for ever more daring feats of valor” (Conquergood 28). However, Robert Bjork points out that not all boasts are fulfilled as they are described, stressing the limitations of “Beowulf’s verbal reach” compared to “his physical grasp” (1005). This reading of the text suggests that boasting functions as a symbol of the limits of human knowledge and capacity. Another theory proposes that boasts hold significance for the relationship between the boaster and those around them. Linguistic studies of *Beowulf* found that increased allegiance of comrades was associated with boasts about oneself, and that boasts of others’ feats was associated with an increase in the “speaker’s status” (Rapaport 1335). While these interpretations have focused primarily on the boasts that precede valorous action, less attention has been given to the post-battle boast, which I argue is an important counterpart to its predecessor.

strong synthesis of critical perspectives in this paragraph

Relatedly, many scholars have understood *Beowulf* to have a traumatic element within it. For example, Eileen Joy claims that *Beowulf* deals with relevant questions to the contemporary period, writing that “the poem speaks to the very modern (and disquieting) set of questions regarding history’s relation to time, language, and social communities struggling with traumatic and cataclysmic events” (XXXXV). Ted Morrissey has taken this further, creating a “trauma

theory” reading of the poem and, while agreeing with past scholarship of *Beowulf* that finds a psychological element in the monsters, sees each as a representation of a real-world trauma experienced by the people of the poem’s time. Morrissey argues that Grendel’s lack of physical descriptors paired with his nighttime visitation while his victims are sleeping make Grendel a representation of the nightmares associated with trauma (122-123). Additionally, Morrissey ^{interesting} maintains that Grendel’s mother represents the trauma that women faced through intercourse, pregnancy, and labor – all which posed grave risks to their health and safety – through the womb like imagery of her dwelling and the sexualized language of her and Beowulf’s battle (135). Clearly, the traumatic elements within *Beowulf* have been explored and the role of the poet’s own trauma considered. However, less attention has been given to the characterization of Beowulf’s own trauma. In this paper, I will focus not on the boast per-se but on Beowulf’s language after the competition of his battles against Grendel and Grendel’s mother (the “post-battle speeches) and argue that this speech functions as a way of his own processing trauma.

After his victory over Grendel, Beowulf returns to Heorot and all the Danes celebrate. At this point in the poem, the reader has heard Beowulf make his boast about defeating Grendel, listened to the description of the battle with Grendel, and now, once again, is subject to Beowulf own description of the events. Beowulf tells Hrothgar, “My plan was to pounce, pin him down/ in a tight grip and grapple him to death –/ have him panting for life, powerless and clasped/ in my bare hands, his body in thrall./ But I couldn’t stop him from slipping my hold./ The Lord allowed it, my lock on him/ wasn’t strong enough; he struggled fiercely/ and broke and ran” (*Beowulf* 962-969). While Beowulf is victorious and his “doings were praised over and over again,” his telling of the story is less boastful than one would expect considering his great fame and triumph (855). Beowulf speaks of a failed “plan,” describing an unexpected turn of events in

which he “couldn’t stop him from slipping my hold.” This admission of failure in the line of battle is curious considering how easily he could omit this fact and allow the Danes to see him as infallible. Further, Beowulf describes the battle as “The Lord allowed [Grendel to escape]” and Beowulf’s “lock on him/ wasn’t strong enough.” The great warrior’s honesty about his momentary weakness (or, at least, insufficient strength) and being overpowered by his opponent show that Beowulf did not pass unaffected by his encounter with Grendel. Additionally, the hopelessness of having the “Lord” fail him is yet even more disheartening. However – the reader has experienced the battle scene twice, only an approximate 120 lines after hearing it the first time. If the goal was to continue to flaunt his victory, the admissions of failure would have little place, so why include such a repetitive piece? The repetition of the story, but now through Beowulf’s perspective, is significant because it emphasizes the sharing of trauma. This is not an isolated occurrence. Beowulf exhibits a similar pattern with his fight against Grendel’s mother.

nice short sentence

Once again, after a death-defying feat, Beowulf returns, victorious, and the people of Heorot celebrate. However, Beowulf yet again speaks to Hrothgar about the battle in words less prideful than one would anticipate in a victorious speech, saying “I barely survived the battle under water./ It was hard-fought, a desperate affair/ that could have gone badly; if God had not helped me,/ the outcome would have been quick and fatal” (1655-58). Beowulf frames his victory in the terms of God’s will, and while this may have been the result of Christian influence it has the effect of making Beowulf’s battle seem out of his control. His description of the battle as having a potentially “quick and fatal” end shows his awareness of his personal sense of safety being jeopardized. This description of the events occurs approximately 30 lines after he stops fighting with Grendel’s mother, and the repetition paired with the confessional language once again functions as a revelation of trauma to the group. This disclosure of trauma to others is not

really clear writing here

without cause or efficacy. For example, disclosing trauma help people “make meaningful sense of their experiences through the use of language and stories. This relationship between narrative, self and identity is central to our understanding of the response to trauma, and links with the social constructions that help to build notions of self and identity” (Hunt 92). This is in line with the way humans evolved; we are dependent on one another for healing emotional stress:

Virtually all mammals seem to benefit from companionship; even lab rats recover more quickly from trauma if they are caged with other rats rather than alone. In humans, lack of social support has been found to be twice as reliable at predicting PTSD as the severity of the trauma itself. (Junger 95)

Evidence of the evolution of pro-sociality in humans paired with Beowulf’s language makes clear that the after-battle speeches likely function as a way for Beowulf to process and heal from the trauma that he experiences in combat.

Furthermore, the immediate post battle speeches are followed by *yet another* retelling of Beowulf’s fights when he returns to Geatland. Upon arriving home, Beowulf meets with his king and uncle, Hygelac, and tells him of his fight with Grendel, saying

There deadly violence came down on Hondscio
and he fell as fate ordained, the first to perish,
rigged out for combat. A comrade from our ranks
had come to grief in Grendel’s maw:
he ate up the entire body.

There was blood on his teeth, he was bloated and dangerous,
all roused up, yet still unready to leave the hall empty handed. (*Beowulf* 2076-2083)

nice analysis/close reading after each quotation

Here, Beowulf is confronting the causalities, the loss of life, his has witnessed in battle, and while he is responsible for this reporting this information to Hygelac, he does so in a way that reveals the trauma of the incident. The use of three different phrases to describe his fellow warrior's death – “come to grief,” “deadly violence came down,” and “the first to perish” – emphasizes the powerful effect this incident has had on Beowulf. Further, the graphic and gore-filled language of “blood on his teeth” and “bloated” fill the reader with an acute sense of disgust and fear. Beowulf's language leaves no room for doubt: this is a traumatic event. Having told the story of this fight to Hrothgar, Beowulf again discloses his battle with Grendel's mother to Hygelac, saying,

For a while it was hand-to-hand between us,
 then blood went curling along the currents
 and I beheaded Grendel's mother in the hall
 with a mighty sword. I barely managed
 to escape with my life; my time had not yet come. (2137-41)

The descriptions of the violence – “blood went curling” – and Beowulf's repeated admission of near failure and death – “I barely managed/ to escape with my life” – all point to this being a near death experience for Beowulf. Moreover, he is once again in his telling of the tale unwilling to focus solely on the outcome (his victory) but on the elements of the fight that showcase the hardship and terror of the situation. Why, after returning to his homeland and to a people that doubted him in his youth (2183-2189) would Beowulf include details that put him in a vulnerable light? And one must remember that the reader has, at this point in the story, had to experience these battles three times. Sharing trauma, as this paper argues Beowulf is doing, can be a reclamation of a self-narrative, one in which humans are able “to order our experiences,

great
 questions!

 this is so
 valuable,
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create a degree of meaning in our lives, and exercise agency” (Poltera 65). While it may not be textually obvious that Beowulf is in need of a restructured self-narrative, he may be putting these events into a context in which they have meaning. It is true that humans are evolutionary predisposed to helping each other (and get a social reward for doing so) and therefore will aid strangers at the risks of their own lives, but the sharing of trauma, particularly that which is sustained in warfare, can help people with PTSD heal due to a sense of “shared public meaning” (Junger 55, 97). It is this meaning that “gives soldiers a context for their losses and their sacrifice that is acknowledged by most of the society. That helps keeps at bay the sense of futility and rage that can develop among soldiers during a war that doesn’t seem to end” (Junger 97). But what about the political importance of Beowulf’s battles? The violence that Beowulf experiences has political and social consequences that are both personal and between tribes, but this does not mean that he is unaffected psychologically by these events. Consequently, there may be a possible a dual function to his speeches: reassuring the kings of good faith and victory and a self-healing element. The idea is supported by Nigel C. Hunt’s research into sharing stories of trauma, in which he concludes that

yes

Narratives about traumatic stress are much more than personal narratives...trauma itself is not only psychological – it is interpersonal, social and political – so it is inevitable that people’s trauma narratives are going to contain social and political elements. Narratives may be just as much about history and about politics, as about the psychological state of the narrator. (Hunt 44)

Clearly, Beowulf may be making this post-battle “boasts,” to serve a political or social purpose, but this would not necessarily discount the idea that it serves the purpose of healing from trauma.

right. good distinction here

Either way, Beowulf's language choice in combination with the otherwise unexplained repetition of these stories are clear evidence that this speech is functioning to process his trauma.

Currently, the options available for U.S veterans with PTSD have some variety but are limited in many respects. Majority of the proposed treatments are psychotherapy and medication, and while these have a promising success rate (about 53% for therapy and 42% for medication), there are few options that entail expressing these stories to a wider social group ("National Center for PTSD"). If, as evidence suggests, humans are dependent on social groups to create meaning from the trauma they face – particularly trauma sustained in war – it stands to reason that the responsibility for this issue lies beyond the individual to heal. There is, I believe, a tendency among citizens of the U.S. to place the burden of healing on the individual who is yes, sadly suffering. The focus on resiliency and perseverance neglects the role of social groups in caring for individual who have made sacrifices or been unjustly treated. While the ability to overcome struggle is a noble trait and should be valued, this does not erase the obligation we have to each other. We honor our veterans with memorials and monuments, but a close examination of the severed relationship we have to one another will show that the sacrifices made and trauma sustained by our veterans remains unspoken. In a social group that held these people and their trauma within it, we would not need reminders. Perhaps also, a space in which they could share the experiences?

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