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"Beowulf": Worda and Worca

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Beowulf: Worda ond Worca

A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department of English
The College of William & Mary in Virginia

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Arts

by

Christina M. Coyne

1995

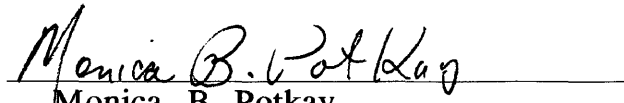
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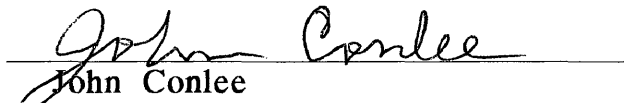
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Tina maðelode:

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þæs sig æþellingum ðanc,
ecean frodan, þæs ðe ic on aldre gebad,
þæt ic on ðone paperan betlicne
ofer eald gewin eagam starige!

Eft heo maðelode:

To my closest of dear friends, Tim and Maura, beloved of people to me, I must offer thanks, through many years, too long it is to tell, for support and advice, mind-treasures.

Beorscipe!

ABSTRACT

This paper undertakes to demonstrate that just as the Anglo-Saxon poem Beowulf celebrates an oral culture in which heroic words are tied to actions, it simultaneously criticizes that culture when its words become so disengaged from corresponding actions as to produce falsehoods, which in turn lead to a crisis of knowledge.

The study begins by suggesting that the poem calls for a balance between words and the actions those words describe. Making the distinction between a heroic model of language (words spoken to achieve glory and fame) and a literal model (words correlate to truthful fact or event) of language, I then propose that a heroic model can only thrive when not completely divorced from the literal: heroic words are at once separate from literal facts and inseparably connected to them.

The poem reveals heroic culture's need for a balance of language through the main character Beowulf. Throughout the course of the poem, Beowulf moves from a position where he gains praise by words which, though bold, are supported by actions, to a position where he does nothing but make speeches and promises that have no factual actions to support them. Just as with Beowulf, so too his society; essentially an oral culture, while it maintains a balance of words and works, and recognizes the importance of each, it is successful. However, again like Beowulf, as soon as the society surrenders actions in favor of words alone, it becomes flawed and will eventually be ruined, as is the fate of Beowulf's people, the Geats.

Such ruin ensues from the foremost problems that arise when heroic words are not tied to literal facts: a lack of knowledge and, more fundamentally, the impossibility of determining truth. Illustrating the problem of knowledge, the narrative of the poem progresses primarily by means of varied story repetition. Such repeated stories demonstrate that when words do not correspond to actions outside of themselves, versions are so divergent that it is impossible to know which of them is true.

Beowulf: Worda ond Worca

Grendel ravages Heorot. In return, Beowulf kills Grendel, whereupon Grendel's mother seeks revenge on the Danes. Retaliating, Beowulf kills Grendel's dam. Fifty years pass, and Beowulf, an older and arguably wiser king, kills a dragon that has plagued his people, but dies in the battle. The entire plot of the poem Beowulf can be succinctly condensed into just a few short sentences such as those above. What makes Beowulf interesting, however, despite the relative simplicity of the action, is the number of times and the variety of ways that the poem articulates the bare bones of the plot. For instance, after the narrator of the poem initially describes Grendel's death, the Danes sing of the event, re-rendering the story which readers already know (867ff). Then Beowulf returns to Hrothgar and tells the story all over again, so that readers are provided with yet another description of the carnage (957ff). Just when you thought it was safe to turn another page, Beowulf recapitulates the story for Hygelac, reiterating the very same events already recounted to readers (2070ff). As with the death of Grendel, each primary action that takes place in the story is told and retold, and retold again so that Beowulf is comprised of many more retellings than first tellings. And not just the primary events are subject to such a rule. Even minor details in the story are disclosed repeatedly. From descriptions of Beowulf's childhood to descriptions of the battle hall, it would seem that no aspect of the poem is free from a lengthy series of reiteration. The poem

does not tell a story so much as it retells many stories.¹

Perhaps even more interesting than the incidence of so many retellings of the stories in Beowulf is that each retelling performs a number of variations; no two narratives of single action are alike. Every new version supplies readers with modifications ranging from embellished details to completely contradictory information. That the narrative routinely progresses by means of varied repetition invites comparison first between story versions, and then between story and objective fact. Such comparisons between story and fact, at times commensurate while at others divergent, are the means by which the poem comments on the nature of an oral society such as that found in Beowulf. So long as a speech's verbal commentaries on actions and events truthfully correspond to those actions and events, an oral culture can thrive. Yet while the poem celebrates this notion of successful oral culture, it simultaneously criticizes it as well by demonstrating that, when words become disengaged from coinciding works, the result is untruth, which contributes to the downfall of the culture.

Much recent critical discussion of Beowulf, abandoning the unsolvable question of whether the poem was composed orally, has turned to the more interesting question of what the poem suggests about oral culture. Two recent arguments conclude that the poem comments favorably on a culture based on oral communication. In his "Anticipating Alienation: Beowulf and the Intrusion of Literacy," Michael Near argues that "The poem's

involvement with language is a marked and persistent hostility toward the epistemological foundation underpinning the practice of literacy" (321). Near suggests that the poem, while showing a world in transition from orality to literacy, continually reaffirms the positive aspects of an oral culture. Although Allen Frantzen disagrees that the poem illustrates a world in transition, he too insists that Beowulf is "a poem of many simultaneous textual states" (356) which "re-emphasize the most traditional issues of scholarship in the poem" (357) by calling critics to rethink the issue of multiple authorship, a result of an oral culture. He does so by linking the words "writan" (to write) and "forwritan" (to carve, to kill) as a sylleptical pair. Writing, i.e. literate culture, is associated with killing and death. I, however, maintain that the poem, rather than praising societies dependent on oral models of communication, demonstrates the problems inherent in an oral culture, and it does so through the titular character. Beowulf, first as its strongest and most valiant hero, represents the ideal of the oral culture from which he comes, and then as its king, reflects the gradual decline of that ideal. Throughout the course of the poem, Beowulf moves from a position where he gains praise by bold words which are completed by actions, to a posture where he does little but make speeches and promises that have no actions to support them. Just as with Beowulf, as long as the society maintains the balance of words and works, and recognizes the importance of each, the oral culture is successful. However, again as with

Beowulf, as soon as the society surrenders all action in favor of words alone, the culture is flawed and will eventually be ruined. So too, the culture demands a delicate balance between words and actions. While it highly values and accepts with little proof words spoken about events, those words must match actions.

The first indication of that necessary balance between words and actions comes in a speech from Hrothgar's "end-sitter" to Beowulf, who has just arrived in Hrothgar's kingdom:

Æghwæþres sceal
scearp scyldwiga gescad witan,
worda ond worca, se þe wel þenceð. (287b-289) ²

A sharp shield warrior must know how to judge words and works, he who well thinks.

The guard's enigmatic words have been interpreted to mean that a good warrior will know the difference between words and works and keep that difference clear. ³ Yet why should the guard concern himself with a hero's knowledge of words and deeds? Given his military job of guarding the coast against attackers, it is surprising that the guard would ruminate and philosophize on appropriate behavior for a warrior. Klaeber suggests that the lines are an apology of sorts for the guard's official attitude, meaning "it was my duty to scrutinize your words and your conduct" (139). However, since in his preceding speech Beowulf offers little in the way of words and conduct to scrutinize, I suggest that the line is spoken not in self-reference to the guard's action, but rather as a warning to Beowulf not to separate his

words from his actions.

For in his speech to the guard, Beowulf offers only words. Beowulf offers no proof of his abilities; he mentions no brave feats he has otherwise accomplished. All that he extends is the heroic affirmation that he can tell the king how to get rid of Grendel. Given the lack of works put forth by Beowulf, the lines spoken by the guard appear not to refer to the guard himself as the one who must judge Beowulf's words and works. Further evidence that the passage applies chiefly to Beowulf is that the puzzling line indicates that it is the one who thinks well who must distinguish between words and works. In the lines immediately preceding the guard's response, Beowulf characterizes himself as someone who does think well, as is evidenced by his offer to counsel the king. His self-characterization points to Beowulf as the recipient of the warning to keep clear the distinction between words and actions. Clearly Beowulf has shown a facility of speech, yet he has given no actions to indicate his stature. The guard notes Beowulf's propensity for speaking instead of acting, and this line acts a reminder to the hero to follow through on his words. Right from the beginning, the coast guard pinpoints the balance between words and works that the poem recommends, namely that though words and actions are distinct, they must be inseparably connected, and he names Beowulf as the character who represents that balance.

If Beowulf's confrontation with the coast guard illustrates the ideal

model of language in oral society, a model in which language must represent truth, it also shows that in heroic culture words often diverge from works, to the extent that words alone become important. For right from the beginning, the coast guard ignores his own advice and relies more heavily on words than actions, especially when he accepts Beowulf's words at face value. He does not ask for a list of actions which corroborate Beowulf's claim, or for any other proof of heroism. Judging words alone, he takes the troop to see the king after he remarks:

Ic þæt gehyre, þæt þis is hold weorod
 frean Scyldinga. Gewitaþ forð beran
 wæpen ond gewædu; ic eow wisige. (290-292)

I hear that, this is a troop friendly to the lord of the Scyldings.
 Go forth carrying weapons and war dress; I will lead you.

Indeed, his response emphasizes that he has **heard** about this troop and their friendliness, proving that heroic words are sometimes accepted without actions to back them up. Beowulf comes to fight Grendel as a result of hearsay, and it is hearsay that paves his way into Hrothgar's kingdom.

The end-sitter is not the only figure who bases his attitude toward Beowulf on hearsay, who takes words at face value; Hrothgar himself shows how stories alone have shaped his opinion of the hero as he recalls,

Ðonne sægdon þæt sælipende,
 þa ðe gifsceattas Geata fyredon
 þyder to þance, þæt he þritiges
 manna mægencræft on his mundgripe
 heaþorof hæbbe. (377-381a)

Then seafarers said, those who brought gifts thither to the

Geats in thanks, that he had the strength of thirty men in his handgrip, the one brave in battle.

Again heroic words spoken of Beowulf by someone else become vital information. Hrothgar, basing his opinion on nothing but the stories he has heard, assumes that Beowulf possesses the strength and heroism those stories claim for him. Words spoken about the hero seem more important than any actions he has performed.

Beowulf's advent into Danish territory and his confrontation with the guard therefore offer two models of language that permeate the poem. Beowulf's boasting that he can kill Grendel and the guard's acceptance of his boast demonstrate a heroic model of language wherein a man speaks words for the express purpose of achieving fame for himself or for conferring glory on another. The stories Hrothgar heard from sailors exemplify the heroic model, making the hero seem meritorious. Yet existing concurrently with the heroic in the poem is a second, literal model of language, suggested by the coast guard's warning to Beowulf, in which words are tied to and describe objective facts and actions. Beowulf empirically does have the strength of thirty men and has performed deeds which correspond to his claims. The end-sitter's warning illustrates that the success of Beowulf, and by extension oral culture, hinges on a nexus between the heroic and literal models. What is said for the purpose of achieving fame must also be linked to or completed by corresponding objective facts or actions.

Another way to describe the balance the poem portrays between the heroic and literal models of language is to say that words engineered for the effect of bringing praise must be truthful. Indeed, truthfulness of language is a major concern of the poem, as seventeen forms of the word "soð" ["truth"] appear with reference to words spoken or heard by the characters (Bessinger and Smith 211). For example, Beowulf asks if the story he has heard about Grendel is true, and later he begins his speech to Unferth by saying "soð ic talige" [I maintain the truth"] (532). He continues to berate the cowardice of Unferth by addressing him with the words "secge ic þe to soðe, sunu Ecglafes" [I say to you in truth, son of Ecglaf] (590). The herald's message of Beowulf's death at the end of the poem is spoken "soðlice ofer ealle" ["truthfully to all"] (2899). The poem constantly asserts that whatever is spoken does indeed happen to be true. The accumulation of truth terms awakens readers to the fact that one concern of the poem is finding truth in what has been said, or finding the connection between the heroic and the literal truth.

Such a connection lies in the character of Beowulf. On the one hand, Beowulf exemplifies the heroic model of language. He begins a pattern of verbal self-praise in the final words of his speech to the end-sitter as he asserts,

Ic þæs Hroðgar mæg
 þurh rumne sefan ræd gelæran,
 hu he frod ond god feond oferswyðeþ. (277b-279)

Concerning that [the terror of Grendel], through an open heart,
I can teach Hrothgar counsel, how he, wise and good, will
overcome the fiend.

Beowulf is always certain to say exemplary things about himself, and in this, his first speech, he makes it clear that even though no one knows the likes of such a monster as Grendel, he, Beowulf, can tell the king how to get rid of it. Beowulf boasts of his wisdom; he chooses his words specifically to make himself appear glorious, a device which increases in significance as his speeches progress.

Without a doubt, Beowulf is at all times inordinately concerned with being spoken of as heroic, and he places an extraordinary emphasis on words. The paramount comment that is made about him in the poem comes in the last line: he is "lofgeornost," ⁴ or "most eager for praise." He is not most eager for battle, nor for action, but what he wants more than anything else is to be commemorated in words. The hero never merely performs an act; he continually announces and discusses what he is about to do. Before fighting Grendel, he emphasizes to Wealtheow that he will perform a heroic deed (636-7). After killing Grendel, he stresses that he has accomplished a work of courage (959). His seeking verbal praise and fame is made clearer in his speech to Hrothgar before his fight with the dam. Beowulf declares

Ure æghwylc sceal ende gebidan
worolde lifes; wyrce se þe mote
domes ær deaþe; þæt bið driht-guman
unlifigendum æfter selest. (1386-1389)

Each of us must experience the end of life; let he who can

acquire fame before death; that will be the best memorial for a warrior after death.

The hero wants words; he wants songs to be sung about his renown. Continually throughout the poem, glory, praise, and fame are linked to verbal recitation.

But verbal recitation is unquestionably conjoined with literal actions which complete the words. Hrothgar reinforces such a point as he tells Beowulf that

þu þe self hafast
dædum gefremed, þæt þin [dom] lyfað. . . (953b-954)

You have done deeds so that your fame is assured.

Fame, which is nothing more than heroic language, is united with the "doing" of an action. A similar connection between fame and action is made later by Beowulf himself. After Beowulf slays Grendel, the narrator comments, "þær wæs Beowulfes mæðo mæned" [there was Beowulf's glory recited] (856). The action brings about the speech act which glorifies the hero. While the action is necessary, the glory is the hero's ultimate goal.

Showing again the necessary connection between words and actions, a description of Beowulf immediately follows his speech to Hygelac:

Swa bealdode bearn Ecgðeowes,
guma guðum cuð, godum dædam,
dreahten æfter dome. (2177-2179a)

So the son of Ecgtheow showed himself brave, a warrior famous for battles, for good deeds, he acted in pursuit of glory.

Beowulf presents himself as famous. As a function of language, fame is

achieved by the stories spread about Beowulf's battles and deeds. The final line indicates words as well as works: "He **acted** in the pursuit of **glory**." The line clarifies the relationship between words and works in the poem; the hero must act in order to achieve glory and fame. Heroic language must be balanced by literal language.

When Beowulf's heroic language converges with literal truth, his character is at its most powerful. The best examples of such convergence are Beowulf's boasts. The heroic boast usually consists of a catalog of the hero's past deeds followed by an assertion of his courage and intent to act in the future. Generally accepted as a convention and distinguishing characteristic of heroic speech in epic poetry, it has been viewed in ways varying from nothing more than a mark of epic to instances of a hero's gratuitous pride.⁵ Dwight Conquergood, however, views the Anglo-Saxon boast in a positive light, arguing that a given boast is a "Serious utterance with personal, social, legal, and political consequences" (26). He explains that

The "I have done" part of a boast is significant only because of its ability to determine the "I will do" section. Every "I did" carries with it an implicit "I must continue to do." The boaster uses the past to find the pattern of action which will guide his conduct in the unknown future. (28)

In other words, the purpose of a boast is to lay a foundation of what has already been accomplished as a means of conveying past heroism, but also as the impetus which spurs on new action; it weds the heroic model of

language to the literal. The vital element of a boast is, thus, whatever new action completes bold words--which do not so much describe an action as much as the intent to act.

Beowulf's heroic words are completed by actions which follow them in the first two-thirds of the poem, before he becomes a king. He begins the poem as an active character who always successfully completes his boasts. Obviously he has sailed from Geatland on a mission to kill Grendel, his first major action in the poem. His early speeches make manifest that his glory is a result of action. In his first speech to Hrothgar, he assures the king,

...hæbbe ic mærdā fela
ongunnen on geogoþe. (408b-409a)

I have accomplished glorious deeds in my youth.

Furthermore, he enumerates those deeds; he not only has slain five enemies, but has single-handedly killed a tribe of giants, and murdered water beasts (419-422). He continues his boast to Hrothgar,

ond nu wið Grendel sceal,
wið þam aglæcan, ana gehegan
ðing wið þyrse. . .
.....
ic þæt þonne forhicge, swa me Higelac sie
min mondrihten modes bliðe,
þæt ic sweord bere oþðe sidne scyld,
geolorand to guþe, ac ic mid grape sceal
fon wið feonde ond ymb feorh sacan
lað wið laþum. . . (424b-426a; 435-440a)

And now against Grendel, against the monster, I alone shall perform this affair, against this giant demon.

I then, so that Hygelac my liege lord may be happy in mind about me, scorn to bear sword or broad shield, yellow wood to battle, but I with a grip must grapple against the fiend and fight concerning life, foe against foe.

Beowulf again repeats his boast before retiring to Heorot for the night, demonstrating the importance of proving himself heroic:

No ic me an herewæsmun hnagran talige
 gupgeweorca, þonne Grendel hine;
 forþan ic hine sweorde swebban nelle,
 aldre beneotan, þeah ic eal mæge. (677-680)

I claim myself no poorer in war strength, war works, than Grendel claims himself; therefore I will not kill him with a sword, though I could.

In each boast Beowulf has informed Hrothgar of his plan not only to fight Grendel alone, but to do so with no weapons other than his hand. Such intentions certainly are bold, and the boasting words of Beowulf are completed later by his actions, in which he does precisely what he has said he would; using only his own hands, he kills the monster by ripping off its arm (815-20). His words make him appear worthy of glory, but he only receives the fame and glory he seeks when his actions correspond to his words.

Beowulf boasts again about exacting revenge on Grendel's mother, words also supported by later corresponding actions. To Hrothgar the warrior avows,

Aris, rices weard, uton hraþe feran,
 Grendles magan gang sceawigan.
 Ic hit þe gehate: no he on helm losað,
 ne on foldan fæþm, ne on fyrgeholt,

ne on gyfenes grund, ga þær he wille! (1390-94)

Arise, guardian of the kingdom, let us quickly go, to look at the track of the kin of Grendel. I promise you this: she in cover will not escape, nor in the bosom of the earth, nor in the mountain wood, nor on the bottom of the sea, go where she will!

Beowulf consoles Hrothgar with further bold words. He assures the king that he will find the mother and kill her as well, no matter where on or under earth she happens to be. And once again, Beowulf backs up his words with actions. He traces her footsteps to the mere, arms himself, and slays her (1440-1569). His words, though seemingly intended to earn him respect and praise, are nonetheless followed up by action.

Beowulf's boasts to Unferth and Wealtheow are also completed by corresponding action. When addressing Unferth at Hrothgar's court, his fourth speech, Beowulf catalogs more glorious actions he performed, including swimming for five nights, killing a sea monster, and destroying nine other sea beasts (544-576). In his fifth speech, to Wealtheow after she offers him the cup at feast, he proclaims his plan to act:

Ic gefremman sceal
 eorlic ellen, oþðe ende-dæg
 on þisse meodu-healle minne gebidan. (636b-638)

I shall accomplish a heroic deed, or in this meadhall await my end-day.

Early in the poem, Beowulf's valiant language is based on and completed by literal action.

Beowulf recognizes the necessity of action to balance his heroic words

in each of the above instances. So important are actions to him that he encourages his own men to gain praise through actions (a permission he refuses to grant in the final scene with the dragon). As he lies down for the night before his fight with Grendel, the poem relates that "ond hine ymb monig snellec sæ-rinc sele-reste gebeah" [and around him many courageous sea-fighters sank to hall-rest] (689a-690). His company is known as courageous and ready to fight with him if necessary. In fact, a member of Beowulf's troop actually kills a sea-dragon before Beowulf follows Grendel's mother into the mere. As the hero prepares for the fight,

Sumne Geata leod
of flanbogan feores getwæfde,
yðgewinnes, þæt him on aldre stod
herestræl hearda; he on holme wæs
sundes þe sænra, ðe hyne swylt fornam. (1432b-1436)

A man of the Geats deprived a certain one of life with an arrow
bow, swimming, that the hard arrow stood in his body, he on the
water was slower of swimming when death destroyed him.

Neither Beowulf nor his men hesitate to act in the first two-thirds of the poem.

The heroic model of language begins to break down, however, when the poem progresses to a point where heroic language begins to diverge from the actions that would prove it to be true. That such deterioration will occur from the detachment of actions from words is forecast early in the poem by an old story-teller who sings Beowulf's praises after the slaughter of Grendel:

Hwylum cyninges þegn,
 guma gilphlæden, gidða gemyndig,
 se ðe ealfela ealdgesegen
 worn gemunde, word oþer fand
 soðe gebunden; secg eft ongan
 sið Beowulfes snyttrum styrian,
 ond on sped wrecan spel gerade,
 wordum wrixlan. (867b-874a)

Sometimes the thane of the king, warrior covered with glory,
 mindful of the songs, he who remembered a large number of
 the old sayings, found other words truthfully bound together;
 the man again began to recite with skill the adventure of
 Beowulf, and to utter successfully a skillful story, to vary words.

Initially the passage praises "Beowulf by placing him in the already existing pantheon of traditional heroes" (Irving 85). Conferring praise is a primary function of this passage. But equally as significant is its second function, namely emphasizing that the words the scop is going to sing about Beowulf are completely divorced from the warrior's action of killing Grendel. Since Beowulf has not yet told anyone of the battle, it is curious that someone was able to construct a song about it. Yet the poem alerts readers that an older and wiser man in the group who knew of the old heroes and old songs began to sing the same songs of Beowulf. He constructed orally a victory hymn for the hero that was not based on his actual deed. It is as though he took the shell of a well-worn song of praise and substituted Beowulf's name where appropriate. The passage clearly relates that the story-teller "found words." Use of the verb "fand" is suggestive. Instead of formulating an original song which takes as its subject the slaughter, the story-teller, in songs he knew about other heroes, found expressions to use to describe Beowulf. His story

is not at all based on Beowulf's actions, but rather on older stories sung of other heroes.

Even more puzzling than the verb "found" is the adverb "eft." The lines inform readers that the man **again** began to recite the adventure. Yet the character appears for the first time in this scene; therefore, it is the first time he could possibly tell a story. The word "eft" simply indicates that the singer is doing for another time what it is he has always done in the past, namely reciting, not the tale of Beowulf, but a generic encomium of praise. Such a reading, however, emphasizes the story's complete lack of attachment from the actual event. The singer is not concentrating on the details of Grendel's death. Rather, he is singing a song just like any other of hundreds of songs he has sung at similar times. What has occurred, namely the death of the monster, makes no difference to the song.

As if to prove how little Beowulf's actions concern the song sung in praise of them, just after claiming that Beowulf is regaled in song by the story-teller, the poem goes on for thirty-five lines to relate the story of Sigemund's deeds. Never once is any action of Beowulf mentioned. Again, readers must look to context to understand why the story-teller sings of Sigemund. By comparing Beowulf to a hero who has performed renowned deeds, the old man implies that Beowulf is equally as heroic as Sigemund. Yet the technique he uses to illustrate Beowulf's heroism ignores the action for which the hero is renowned. Beowulf's wrestling with Grendel bears only

a superficial resemblance to Sigemund's killing the dragon with Fitela. The old man could have sung the very same song without Beowulf's presence at all; his actions aren't necessary to it. The words spoken about him take the place of the action he has performed.

Though the heroic words do not describe the event, Beowulf IS worthy of the praise accorded him in this passage. The heroic language works here because it is tied to a literal truth--Beowulf did kill Grendel after all, did indeed fulfill his boast. The passage does, however, predict the problem that will arise when language is not tied to literal truth: it will be impossible to know what actually occurred when language and actions are not commensurate. What Beowulf actually did is not evident from the song itself. This passage according fame to Beowulf in songs can only be understood because readers already know what Beowulf has done; prior to reading the passage, we know the literal action that took place. The song offers none of that information. As soon as readers are not privileged with prior knowledge, stories not tied to actions will be rendered meaningless.

Further supporting the notion that heroic language only works when connected to a literal truth is Beowulf's retelling of the fight with Grendel to Hygelac. Virtually ignoring all events of the battle, Beowulf reports to the king,

To lange ys to reccenne, hu ic ðam leod-sceaðan
 yfla gehwylces hond-lean forgeald
 þær ic, þeoden min, þine leode
 weorðode weorcum. (2093-2096a)

It is too long to tell how I repaid the people's foe hand payment
for each of crimes. There I, my king, honored your people with
works.

It is certainly odd that Beowulf would refuse to comment on the details of the fight because it would take too long, specifically considering that he spends much time retelling other stories. He has just returned to his own land where his own king has heard nothing of his previous deeds. What he ought to do is relate in considerable detail the events of his adventures. Yet that it not what happens. Beowulf ignores the majority of the fight in order to relate what he finds pertinent. He tells his own people, not about the fight, but about the honor and glory he has won. His retelling of the event simply has little to do with objective actions of the event. But again, the heroic language successfully conveys Beowulf's honor because it is tied to truthful events in the poem which readers already know. By the time we read this passage, we have also read of Beowulf's defeat of Grendel and his mother.

While heroic and literal language converge in the first two-thirds of the poem, by the last third of Beowulf, when the hero has become king, the heroic model of language collapses since it is no longer supported by literal action. Aside from the dragon scene, the poem offers readers little description of actions Beowulf performed as king; indeed the poem "is silent about all public duties of a king relating to law-making and the administration of justice" (Goldsmith 215). The speeches of the warrior-

grown-old increase in reflection and rhetoric, while concentrating less on the promise of action. After he is alerted to the problem with the dragon, Beowulf does not jump to action immediately, but reflects on his youth, on having witnessed the accidental death brought about by Haethcyn, and on the anguish such an untimely death caused the father (2426-2459). He continues to ponder the war between the Swedes and the Geats (2472-2509). In fact, the king spends 85 lines reflecting and speaking about his past life before he ever addresses the issue of the dragon. Such a lengthy reflection shows that by the time he has become king, Beowulf's character is shaped by words. I agree with Margaret Goldsmith who claims that "The evidence shows that Beowulf's wisdom manifests itself in speeches rather than in actions" (220).

Critics have found one aim of Beowulf's elaborate and lengthy musings to be delaying the action of the fight itself. J.D.A. Ogilvy and Donald Baker suggest that "Although he does not flinch from it, he is in no hurry to rush upon his fate. Instead he pauses to gather strength and resolution by looking back over a life of valiant deeds" (76). Surely his thoughts and speeches retard the movement of the poem while adding to its elegiac tone by concentrating on both the youth and battles that Beowulf has lost. But at the same time that Beowulf's reflections slow down the poem, it is clear that the hero concentrates on speaking rather than acting. Portraying him in the final third of the poem as a man given to words is the

very fact that such extended locutions are placed in the mouth of Beowulf.

When Beowulf finally decides to act against the dragon, his heroic words are not completed by supporting literal actions. First he states that he intends to kill the dragon with no assistance from anyone in his troop:

Ic geneðde fela
guða on geogoðe, gyt ic wylle,
frod folces weard, fæhðe secan,
mærdū fremman. . .
.....
[to his men] Nis þæt eower sið,
ne gemet mannes, nefn(e) min **anes**,
[þæt] he wið aglæcean eofodo dæle
eorlscype efne. Ic mid elne sceall
gold gegangan, oððe guð nimeð (2511b-2514a; 2535b-2536).

I ventured many battles in my youth, yet I desire, wise old guardian of the people, to seek a feud, perform a glorious deed. . . . That is not your venture, nor the measure of a man, **except mine alone**, that he deal strength against the monster, even a heroic deed. I must obtain gold with courage, or battle take me.

Yet unlike Beowulf's other two adventures, he is unsuccessful in completing the action he suggests he will in this boast. Though the dragon is slaughtered, Beowulf does not complete the deed alone as he boasted he would, but with the aid of Wiglaf. ". . . Ond hi hyne þa begen abroten hæfdon, sib-æðelingas" [and they **both** had killed him, related nobles] (2707-2708a). The point cannot be overstated--the hero does not follow through with the action he promises.

Although he does not kill the dragon alone, battle does indeed take Beowulf. However, it is crucial to understand that the line "oððe guð

nimeð" is not an imperative part of the hero's promise. A disclaimer like "or battle/death will take me" seems to be a standard formulaic component of the heroic boast. Such a device appears in other of Beowulf's boasts as well (Bessinger and Smith 171).⁶ The primary character of a boast comes from the initial words which describe the action the hero vows to perform. In this case, the essence of the boast is that Beowulf will kill the dragon alone and thus win its gold. The fact that battle does seize him in death does not evince completion of the boast, as the hero himself does not perform the act he sets out to do. Even though he dies trying, he does not perform the literal act.

Just as Beowulf initially fails to kill the dragon alone, he also fails next to remain true to another line of his boast. When detailing how he will fight the dragon, Beowulf swears:

Nelle ic beorges weard
oferfleon fotes trem. . . (2524b-2525a)

Nor will I flee the guardian of the hoard by the step of one foot.

Yet Ogilvy and Baker notice that after Beowulf does not injure the dragon with the sword Naegling, "the dragon belches even fiercer fire, and Beowulf is forced to step back, a contradiction of his [earlier] *beotword*" (77). Beowulf's fight with the dragon is marked by such contradictions between his heroic words and literal actions. By the time Beowulf dies, he has moved from a position where he gains praise by words, which though bold, are

completed by actions, to a posture where he does little but make speeches and promises that have few actions to support them.

When heroic words become disengaged from literal actions, problems with knowledge and truth arise; in a culture where stories may not be tied to actual events, it is difficult to determine truth because it impossible to know anything with certainty. At its heart, Beowulf demonstrates the lack of knowledge and impossibility of finding truth in an oral culture where heroic words are not checked by actions. Beowulf's first speech to the end-sitter again acts as the introduction to the problems of determining knowledge and truth in an oral culture:

þu wast, gif hit is
swa we soþlice secgan hyrdon
þæt mid Scyldingum sceaðona ic nat hwylc,
deogol dædhata deorcum nihtum
eaweð þurh egsan uncuðne nið,
hynðu ond hrafyl. (272b-277a)

You know, if it is as we truly heard said, that among the Scyldings I know not which enemy, the mysterious persecutor in the dark nights, shows through terror unknown hostility, humiliation and slaughter.

The speech exposes the problems with knowledge in the poem; the boundaries of what is known and not known cannot be trusted when words are not tied to truthful facts. In sum, Beowulf says to the guard, "you know the truth about Grendel which I don't." This is, however, a problematic statement since it occurs within a speech which also assumes the unknowability of Grendel. The opening "you know" is simply incorrect--the

guard knows of Grendel, but he certainly doesn't know what Grendel, "the mysterious persecutor" is. Moreover, Grendel is described as wreaking "unknown" hostility and terror. Yet elsewhere the poem describes the reason for his hostility as a result of his lineage:

wæs se grimma gæst Grendel haten,
 mære mearcstapa, se þe moras heold,
 fen ond fæsten; fifelcynnes eard
 wonsæli wer weardode hwile,
 siþðan him Scyppend forscrifen hæfde
 in Caines cynne--þone cwealm gewræc
 ece Drihten, þæs þe he Abel slog;
 ne gefeah he þære fæhðe, ac he hine feor forwræc,
 Metod for þy mane mancynne fram. (102-110)

The grim demon was called Grendel, a known march-stepper, he who held the moors, fen and fastness; the unhappy man guarded the land of the monstrous race for a while, after the creator had condemned him in Cain's race--the eternal lord avenged the killing, for this he who slew Abel; he did not rejoice in the feud, but he banished him far from mankind, the Measurer, because of crime.

Grendel, descended from Cain, is called "monstrous" and "unhappy" because of his family. The poem connects the reasons for his terrorization of the Danes with his being condemned by God for such a lineage. He has been cut apart from mankind and destined to live as a monster with monsters. Clearly, the poem provides information that is known about the hostility and terror Grendel heaps on Hrothgar's kingdom, thus rendering the last use of "unknown" in Beowulf's response to the end-sitter as inaccurate.

Emphasizing that he does not know for certain the truth of Grendel's carnage, Beowulf prefaces his speech with the disclaimer, "if it is as I truly

heard said" (272b-273a). He recognizes that his entire understanding of the event is based on a story that has been told about it in his land and that his actions are based fully on that story. Causing himself great inconvenience and trouble, he assumes the story to be true, and departs for Danish ground. Nonetheless his disclaimer lets readers know that he is aware that the story is a retelling of a previous event, and as such, it might not be true.

Since the very nature of Beowulf's disclaimer is itself ambiguous, readers are not able to know precisely what his response means, thus demonstrating the problem with accepting words alone as fact. Should "soplice" be taken to modify "secgan," or does it more appropriately modify "hyrdon?" In the first case, it is the saying, or the story, that is presented as true. Yet placed more closely to the "hyrdon" and given the fact that Beowulf has no way to verify the story, it seems that the "truly" belongs with the verb "heard." The lines remain hauntingly ambiguous as there is no way to determine what part of the story Beowulf has heard about Grendel should be considered true. It is possible that the lines mean that Beowulf truthfully heard the stories, i.e., he is not lying about having heard them, thus allowing the possibility for doubt in the words of the stories themselves. Or it is possible that the stories themselves are true, thus the hero has heard truthful accounts. Regardless, the passage brings home the idea that a listener has no way to decide if something he has heard is true. Beowulf has heard nothing but words, nothing but stories, and cannot know what is true.

Such a problem with knowledge is inherent in all of the stories that are told about Grendel. They, like Beowulf's comments about the monster, emphasize that the monster is somehow unknowable through medium of language. Grendel is introduced to readers just as he is to Beowulf—in a passage which emphasizes both that Grendel is known to men principally through tales, yet through tales which fail to make him fully known:

forðam [secgum] wearð
 ylða bearnum undyrne cuð
 gyddum geomore, þætte Grendel wan
 hwile wið Hroþgar, heteniðas wæg,
 fyrene on fæhðe fela missera,
 singale sæce; sibbe ne wolde
 wið manna hwone mægenes Deniga,
 feorhbealo feorran, fea þingian,
 ne þær nænig witenan wenan þorfte
 beorhtre bote to banan folmum;
 (ac se) æglaca ehtende wæs,
 deorc deapscua, duguðe ond geogoðe,
 seomade ond syrede; sinnihte heold
 mistige moras; men ne cunnon,
 hwyder helrunan hwyrftum scriþað. (149b-63)

Therefore to men it was known, not hidden from the children of men, sadly with mournful tales, that Grendel fought for a while against Hrothgar, waged war, crime and feud for many half years, continual strife. He did not desire friendship toward any of the men of the host of the Danes, to remove his deadly evil, to settle with riches. Nor need any of the wise men there expect bright compensation at the hands of the slayer; (but he) the monster was pursuing, dark death shadow, old retainers and young warriors, he hovered and plotted; he ruled over perpetual night and the misty moors; men did not know whither the ones skilled in hell's mysteries go by means of turnings.

Readers are here given the content of the stories told of Grendel. The lines begin by indicating that men knew, through songs, what Grendel did. What

comes in the middle is a statement of the monster's nature and motions. Yet the passage ends by emphasizing that men do not know the nature and motions of the monster. The passage contradicts itself by simultaneously asserting that the Danes both know and don't know about Grendel. The inconsistency demonstrates the problem with accepting words alone: sometimes stories change, or are simply wrong. It is difficult to know someone or something objectively when one can only rely on stories for information.

Most dramatically displaying the problem of a lack of knowledge about the truth which results when heroic language is completely divorced from the literal are three major textual incongruities in the poem. Each demonstrates that it is impossible to know anything objectively when words are not tied to facts. One continually debated incongruity in the poem Beowulf is the cluster of passages describing the hero's youth. The very first time that Beowulf addresses the King of the Danes, he attests,

Ic eom Higelaces
mæg ond magoðegn; hæbbe ic mærdā fela
ongunnen on geogoþe. (407b-409a) ⁷

I am Hygelac's kin and young thane; I have undertaken many
glorious deeds in youth.

Leaving nothing to Hrothgar's imagination, Beowulf lists the heroic acts he has performed:

ða ic of searwum cwom,
fah from feoundum, þær ic fife geband
yðde eotena cyn, ond on yðum slog

niceras nihtes, nearoþearfe dreah,
 wræc Wedera nið --wean ahsodon--,
 forgrand gramum (419b-424a)

When I from battles came, bloodstained from enemies, where
 I bound five, destroyed the kin of giants, and on the waves slew
 water monsters at night, suffered dire distress, I avenged the
 affliction of the Weder Geats--they asked for troubles--I ground
 to pieces hostile ones.

It would certainly seem, at least according to Beowulf, that his youth was
 marked by heroic and exemplary deeds. As a result, even as a child he was
 favored in court. He tells readers,

Ic wæs syfanwintre, þa mec sinca baldor,
 freawine folca æt minum fæder genam;
 heold mec ond hæfde Hreðel cyning,
 geaf me sinc ond symbel, sibbe gemunde;
 næs ic him to life laðra owihte,
 beorn in burgum, þonne his bearna hwylc,
 Herebeald ond Hæðcyn oððe Hygelac min. (2428-2434)

I was seven winters old when the lord of treasure, beloved
 prince of the people, took me from my father; King Hrethel
 kept and guarded me, gave me treasure and feasts, mindful of
 kinship; during his life, a man in the fortified place, I was no
 more hated by him than any of his sons, Herebeald, Haethcyn,
 or my Hygelac.

Loved even by the King as much as Hrethel's own sons, offered feasts and
 wealth, Beowulf lived as a model of heroic youth.

The heroism and favor Beowulf claims for himself, however, contrast
 sharply with the narrator's much later description of the hero's youth as far
 from heroic:

Hean wæs lange
 swa hyne Geata bearn godne ne tealdon
 ne hyne on medobence micles wyrðne

drihten Wedera gedon wolde
 swyðe (wen)don, þæt he sleac wære,
 æðeling unfrom. (2183b-2188a)

Long was he despised
 so that the sons of the Geats did not consider him brave, nor on
 the mead bench would the lord of the Geats render him
 possessed of much; they very much expected that he would be
 slack, a feeble prince.

Coming later in the poem, the story has changed, for now the hero is described as slack and feeble, and certainly not loved by all.

How is it possible to resolve the difference of opinion surrounding the antithetical descriptions of Beowulf's youth? Presumed unreliability of either Beowulf or the narrator cannot resolve the tension. Laurence de Looze does a thorough job of illustrating the reliability of both speakers and I accept his conclusion that "The voice of the implied author is authoritative at all times. It gives no sign of being unreliable, nor does it invent 'fictional events'. . . . Even when portions of the Beowulfian narrative are displaced from the authorial to one of the other narrating voices in the poem, the accounts are equally 'reliable'" (145). Given de Looze's assumption, namely that the tellers of the contradictory versions of Beowulf's youth are both reliable, how can readers determine which version is the truthful one?

Some critics, Arthur Brodeur and Kenneth Sisam among them, offer context as a way of resolving the incongruity. Their arguments suggest that heroic language conflicts with literal truth, for they believe that a single fixed fact is not to be found, but that varying descriptions of history can be

true in different contexts. These varying histories are designed not to describe objectively what happened, but to make a different sort of truth claim: they proclaim that a character does deserve fame. So each new telling of the story is driven by the goal of fashioning Beowulf as a supreme hero. Brodeur writes, "[This] inconsistency is easy to understand and pardon; the author's fondness for contrast misled him into attempting to enhance Beowulf's manhood by setting it off against imagined sluggishness in youth" (237-9). Sisam similarly argues, "The poet exaggerates a mood or argument in order to make a strong impression, and at another place, for the same immediate purpose, says something inconsistent" (46). In the first version of his youth, Beowulf's courageous acts are intensified by being cumulatively listed. In the other, his courageous acts are intensified by being juxtaposed with sluggishness, in much the same way that light seems brighter when juxtaposed with darkness. Despite the method, the end result is the same in both instances--an argument constructed to make Beowulf seem more glorious.

The problem with accepting the argument for context lies in the fact that the heroic need for fame has been isolated from the literal deed. As such it is impossible to determine a truthful and unarguable context. With no proof of literal truth, just as easily and with as much proof as Brodeur determines the context to be Beowulf's heroism, another critic might determine that the overriding context shows Beowulf to be a reprehensible

liar, while still another critic might suggest that the context demonstrates the influence of Christianity on the character of Beowulf. At no time do the passages themselves offer a clue as to their context. Any context forced on the passage is an external imposition from the critic.

What the passages do show with frightening clarity is that it is impossible to know the truth of Beowulf's youth because the words spoken of it in the poem do not correspond to an objective factual event. The versions presented are varied, so that finding truth is an impossible task. Whatever version happens to come last seems to replace the prior one as truthful. By offering such divergent accounts, which show the impossibility of knowing the truth, the poem condemns a culture which has no objective truth behind variant stories.

The poem makes the same condemnation using the divergent narrations of the circumstances surrounding Beowulf's initial decision to depart for Hrothgar's kingdom. The initial account of his decision to go to the land of the Danes is recorded as follows:

Het him yðlidan
 godne gegyrwan; cwæð, he guðcýning
 ofer swanrade secean wolde,
 mærne þeoden, þa him wæs manna þearf.
 þone siðfæt him snotere ceorlas
 lythwon logon, þeah he him leof wære;
 hwetton hige(r)ofne, hæl sceawedon. (198b-204)

He commanded a good wave traverser be prepared for himself, he said he wished to seek the war king over the swan road, the famous prince, when need of men was his. For that expedition wise churls very little blamed him, though he was beloved to

them; they urged the valiant one, beheld the omen.

Indeed, Beowulf's fellow Geats seem pleased that he has decided to go to Hrothgar's aid. Even though his peers loved Beowulf, and would have regretted his loss, the passage stresses that not only did they not criticize his decision to fight Grendel, but they urged him forward. Nowhere is there even a hint of regret at his choice. The omens were fine, and the wise men supported him. Yet when Beowulf returns to Geatland and addresses Hygelac, the king admits,

Ic ðæs modceare
sorhwylmum seað, siðe ne truwoðe
leofes mannes; ic ðe lange bæd,
þæt ðu þone wælgæst wihte ne grette,
lete Suð-Dene sylfe geweorðan
guðe wið Grendel. (1992b-1997a)

For this I seethed mindcare with surging sorrow, I did not trust
the undertaking of the beloved man, I long bid you that you not
approach that murderous sprite in any way, that you let the
South-Danes settle themselves of the war against Grendel.

The story has changed; there is no prior indication that Hygelac tried to hold Beowulf back at all. Quite the contrary is true--it would seem that the king, described by scholar Kenneth Sisam as the wise leader whose opinion would matter most (46), urged the adventure forward. Hygelac's remark is simply incongruous with all earlier statements. And again it is impossible to know which version of the story is true. The poem provides us with no objective record of Hygelac's feelings or fears at Beowulf's departure; we have only two contradicting stories. The best we can do, again, is know that

it is impossible to know much in a culture where heroic language does not correspond to literal truth.

The final incongruity indicates that condemnation just as convincingly as the first two. The first depiction of Heorot during the fight with Grendel suggests that the building barely suffered from the struggle:

Dryhtsele dynede; Denum ealle wearð,
 Ceasterbuendum, cenra gehwylcum,
 eorlum ealuscenwen. Yrre wæron begen,
 reþe renweardas. Reced hlynsode.
 þa wæs wundor micel, þæt se winsele
 wiðhæfde heapodeorum, þæt he on hrusan ne feol,
 fæger foldbold; ac he þæs fæsts wæs
 innan ond utan irenbendum
 searþoncum be smiþod. þær fram sylle abeag
 medubenc monig mine gefræge
 golde geregnad, þær þa gramman wunnon.
 þæs ne wendon ær witan Scyldinga,
 þæt hit a mid gemete manna ænig
 betlic ond banfag tobrecean meahte,
 listum toluccan, nympe liges fæþm
 swulge on swaþule. (767-782a)

The splendid hall dinned, distress (literally ale-sharing) was to all the Danes, to town-dwellers, to every bold one, to earls. Both were angry, fierce house guardians. The hall resounded. Then was much wonder that the wine hall withstood the battle brave ones, that it did not fall on the earth, fair building; but to that extent it was fast inside and out with iron bands fastened by skill. There from the floor bowed away many a mead bench, as I have heard said, adorned with gold, where the hostile ones fought. For this wise men of the Scyldings did not expect before that any man by ordinary means at any time could shatter it, splendid and adorned with bone, could pull it apart with cunning, unless the embrace of flame would swallow it in heat.

Despite the intensity of the battle, and the force generated as a result, Heorot withstands the blows because of its skillful construction. Built so

masterfully, the hall could survive even this fight of great magnitude. Yet such a sentiment contrasts with the description of the hall presented after the battle:

Wæs þæt beorhte bold tobrocen swiðe
eal inneward irenbendum fæst,
heorras tohlidene; hrof ana genæs
fyrendædum fag on fleam gewand,
aldres orwena. (997-1002a)

But that glorious building was bent and broken, its iron hinges cracked and sprung from their corners all around the hall. Only its roof was undamaged when the blood stained demon burst out of Heorot.

For no apparent reason, the portrayal of Heorot has mutated. Suddenly the building is reported to be "broken," hardly commensurate with the earlier statement that it stood firm. Its hinges are no longer attached to the building; surely the hall cannot both stand firm and be shattered at the same time. There is no way for readers ever to determine which version is accurate; since the story is not wedded to fact, we will never, we can never know.

When such glaring and wildly divergent incongruities appear in poem which spends so much time emphasizing that words must correspond to objective facts and actions, the incongruities show the genuine danger of allowing words a life of their own, free from objective truth. The poem intimates that a culture which allows words such power is flawed. Just as the characters, and specifically Beowulf, must back their words with actions, so must the culture. When the heroic model of language is allowed to exist

apart from the literal for its own sake, it is impossible to know anything. A culture is reduced to nothing but stories that change. And the imminent consequences of that reduction are for the society what they are for Beowulf: an early and unnecessary ruin.

Causing such ruin for his society is the disjunction between Beowulf's heroic boast to kill the dragon alone and his inability to do so. The shame suffered by the Geatish troop and felt by the entire society is brought about by Beowulf himself. Beowulf facilitates the poem's movement from action to inaction as he orders his men NOT to join him in the battle. He commands them,

Gebide ge on beorge byrnum werede,
 secgas on searwum, hwæðer sel mæge
 æfter wælræse wunde gedygan
 uncer twege. Nis þæt eower sið
 ne gemet mannes, nefn(e) min anes,
 þæt he wið aglæcean eofodo dæle,
 eorlscype efne. (2529-2535a)

You wait on the barrow, protected with byrnies, men in armor,
 which of us two can better endure a wound after the murderous
 onslaught. That is not your venture, nor the measure of a man,
 except mine alone, that he deal strength against the monster,
 even a heroic deed.

Obviously aware of the importance of glory brought about by deeds, Beowulf prevents his men from reaping that glory since he will not allow them to take part in the deed. Since the poem moves from a position where words are met with actions to a position where no actions correspond to the heroic words of Beowulf and his troop, the Geats suffer shame and exile.

Perhaps the most interesting irony of the poem is the fact that Beowulf, the very same man who chided Unferth for not acting when it was necessary to do so against Grendel, is the very reason why his own troops do not act in the fight with the dragon. Earlier in the poem Beowulf reprimanded Unferth for not acting against Grendel:

Secge ic þe to soðe, sunu Ecglafes,
 þæt næfre Grendel swa fela gryra gefremede,
 atol æglæca ealdre þinum,
 hynðo Heorote, gif þin hige wære,
 sefa swa searo-grim, swa þu self talast;
 ac he hafað onfunden þæt he þa fæhðe ne þearf,
 atole ecg-þræce eower leode
 swiðe onsittan, Sige-Scyldinga;
 nymed nyd-bade, nænegum arað
 leode Deniga, ac he lust wigeð,
 swefeð ond snedeþ, secce ne weneþ
 to Gar-Denum. (590-601a)

I say to you in truth, son of Ecglaf, that never would Grendel have performed so many horrors, horrid monster against your lord, humiliation in Heorot, if your mind were, mind as fierce in battle, as you yourself maintain, but he has discovered, that he does not need very much dread, the feud, horrid sword-storm of your people, of the Victory-Scyldings; he takes a toll, shows mercy to no men, of the people of the Danes, but he has his pleasure, puts to sleep and feasts, expects no fighting from the Spear-Danes.

This portion of Beowulf's speech to Unferth clearly finds fault with the inaction of the Danes. The hero blames Danish warriors for allowing Grendel the free reign of Heorot that permits the monster to slaughter as he does. Beowulf continues his speech by assuring Unferth that he has come to act, and that his actions will end the reign of Grendel. Yet by the end of the poem, Beowulf is at as much fault for the negative consequences of his

lack of action, and that of his warriors, as he proclaims Unferth to be for Grendel's earlier continued terror. First his men must suffer shame and exile for failing to join Beowulf's struggle with the dragon. Among Beowulf's troop, Wiglaf notices that when Beowulf is losing the struggle, the time for action has arrived and announces,

Nu is se dæg cumen,
 þæt ure mandryhten mægenes be hofaþ,
 godra guðrinca; wutun gongan to,
 helpa hildfruman, þenden hyt sy,
 gledegesa grim! (2646b-2650a)

Now is the day come that our liege lord has need of the might of good soldiers. Let us go to him, to help our war-chief while there may be heat, grim fire-terror.

The younger warrior calls for action, yet just as the Danes do not fight against Grendel, the Geatish men do not battle the dragon. After the death of Beowulf, Wiglaf illustrates in no uncertain terms the need for action as he rebukes the remaining men:

Wergendra to lyt
 þrong ymbe þeoden, þa hyne sio þrag becwom.
 Nu sceal sincþego ond swyrdgifu,
 eall eðelwyn eowrum cynne,
 lufen alicgean; londrihtes mot
 þære mægburge monna æghwylc
 idel hweorfan, syððan æðelingas
 feorran gefricgean fleam eowerne,
 domleasan dæd. (2882b-2890a)

Too small a number of defenders thronged around the lord when his distress befell him. Now receiving of treasure and giving of swords, all enjoyment of hereditary estate, joy, for your family must cease. Deprived of landrights, each man of their kinsmen must turn away [be exiled], when nobles from afar hear of your flight, a glory-less deed.

Wiglaf definitely views the band's refusal to act as a severe offense against both Beowulf as well as the society. The transgression is so grave that the men and their families will lose all of their comforts and possessions, as well as their reputations. In fact, members of the family must necessarily be exiled, so shameful is the lack of action.

Wiglaf's reprimand confirms that some level of action is necessary as a means of achieving fame and glory, the ends of action, but also as a means to maintaining a glorious society. The Anglo-Saxon words used to describe the inaction of Beowulf's company further document that relationship between deeds and words. The lack of action is described as a "dom-leasan dæd," or a glory-less deed. Inherent in the description is the idea that a deed, well done, ought to effect glory. In this case, no action brings about no glory. A warrior's existence is based on achieving fame and glory via his actions; without actions, he can gain no glory, so he leads "edwit-lif" [a shameful life] (2891).

But Beowulf effects more than shame and exile for the Geats; his inability to combine heroic and literal language causes his death which results in the suffering and destruction of his society. Wiglaf predicts such resulting destruction as he declares,

þæt ys sio fæhðo ond se feondscipe,
wæl-nið wera, ðæs ðe ic [wen] hafo
þe us seceað to Sweona leoda,
syððan hie gefricgeað frean userne
ealdor-leasne (2999-3003a)

That is the feud and the enmity, deadly hate of men, for which
I have expectation that the people of the Swedes will seek us
out after they learn of our lifeless lord.

The younger warrior clearly connects between Beowulf's death (from the failure to fulfill the promise of his words) and the imminent collapse of his society. The collapse of the heroic model of language must necessarily be followed by the collapse of a culture based on it.

Just as Beowulf can only be a successful hero when his words are not completely divorced from his actions, the poem appears to indicate that for an oral culture to be successful, it too must maintain a connection between words and works. Heroic words not tied to literal works cause problems with knowledge and truth, which lead to further slippage between words and works, and ultimately to the downfall of an oral society.

Notes

1. The existence of so many stories helps to prove that the poem cannot be simply about the narrative events. So too does the fact that the outcomes of all narrative events are told well before those events take place. Well before Beowulf ever undertakes a fight with Grendel and his mother, readers already know that "Ac him Dryhten forgeaf wig-speda ge wiofu, Wedera leodum, frofor ond fultum, þæt hie feond heora ðurh anes cræft ealle ofercomon (696b-699) [But the Lord had granted the people of the Weders a web of success in war, help and support, that they, through the craft of one, all overcame the fierce fiend.] Similarly readers are perfectly aware that Beowulf will slay the dragon but will be killed himself in the process. The poem concedes before the action that "Sceolde [li]þend-daga æþeling ær-god ende gebidan, worulde lifes, ond se wyrm somod" (2341b-2343) [The king good from old times shall live to see the end of his transitory days, of the life of the world, together with the dragon.] And again before Beowulf is killed the poem gives the ending away as it relates, "no þon lange wæs feorh æþelingas flæsce bewunden" (2423b-2424) [Not much longer was the life of the hero bound in his flesh.]
2. All citations from the text of Beowulf are taken from Fr. Klaeber's third edition of the poem. Translations of the epic are my own.
3. See the translation of Beowulf by Howell D. Chickering, Jr. which suggests that the phrase "must know how to judge words and works" means "must know the distinction between words and deeds, keep the difference clear" (65).
4. Dennis Cronan provides an extensive discussion of the word "lofgeorn" and its subtleties of meaning in his article entitled "Lofgeorn: Generosity and Praise."
5. For a more thorough study of the heroic boast, see H. Munro Chadwick, The Heroic Age, Cambridge, 1912; C.M. Bowra, Heroic Poetry, London, 1952; J.R.R. Tolkien, "The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth Beorhthelm's Son," Essays and Studies, 6, 1953, page 14; and Margaret E. Goldsmith, The Mode and the Meaning of Beowulf, London, 1970.
6. See his boast before fighting Grendel's dam at line 1490b-1491: "ic me mid Hruntinge dom gewyrce, oþðe mec deað nimeð." For a similar device see lines 441 and 447.

7. Norman E. Eliason's "Beowulf's Inglorious Youth," Kemp Malone's "Young Beowulf," and Raymond P. Tripp's "Did Beowulf Have an 'Inglorious Youth'?" all offer excellent further analysis of this and the following two passages.

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