Love Thine Enemy:

A Psychoanalytic Examination of Ethics and Politics in *Beowulf*

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Liam Compton's paper, "Love Thine Enemy: A Psychoanalytic Examination of Ethics and Politics in *Beowulf*," adroitly balances modern theory with historical understanding in a provocative way that opens up new insights into a well-studied poem. He combines Sarah Ahmed's theory of affect and ethics with a close reading of Seamus Heaney's translation of *Beowulf* to answer the question, was Beowulf's delay in fighting Grendel – a delay which meant that one of his own men was killed – ethically justifiable? Taking an article by Arthur Moore, "Beowulf's Dereliction in the Grendel Episode," as a springboard for his own argument, he disagrees with Moore that Beowulf is acting strategically, but nonetheless comes to the conclusion that Beowulf acts ethically. Along the way, he provides several fascinating close readings of sections of *Beowulf.* For example, Liam argues that Beowulf's father's name, Ecgtheow, means "sword-servant," so by refusing to fight with a sword, Beowulf is implicitly rejecting the values of his ancestors, and adopting the values of a new community, defined by love.

-- Dr. Kathy Cawsey

T he aim of this paper is to examine the tension in *Beowulf* between protecting individual lives and upholding social values and to question the ethical value of a social structure in which the death of an individual is held to be in the best interest of the civilization. I focus on an early scene in the poem, in which Beowulf decides to wait for Grendel to make the first move in Heorot, rather than stopping him before he could eat one of Beowulf's sleeping allies. In his article, "Beowulf's Dereliction in the Grendel Episode," Arthur Moore

responds to this scene, noting: "the modern reader can scarcely be indifferent to the apparent discrepancy between Beowulf's failure to act and the prevailing concept of loyalty" (Moore 165-166). Yet, Moore goes on to defend Beowulf here. He argues that Beowulf's inaction was "in accordance with a prevailing concept of leadership" (169) and was strategically the safest move for the group. In response to Moore I argue that Beowulf's inaction was not strategically motivated, but ethically motivated. I suggest that Beowulf chooses to not make the first move in battle as a way of providing an opportunity for reconciliation—he approaches Grendel with love. Working with Sigmund Freud's conception of the purpose of civilizations: "to protect men against nature and to adjust their mutual relations" (63), I consider whether Beowulf's inaction—when regarded as an ethically motivated choice—can still be seen as beneficial to the society. In *Civilization and it's Discontents*, Sigmund Freud comments on two Christian commandments: 'Love thine neighbour' and 'Love thine enemies.' He writes:

> The behaviour of human beings shows differences, which ethics, disregarding the fact that such differences are determined, classifies as 'good' or 'bad'. So long as these undeniable differences have not been removed, obedience to such high ethical demands entails damage to the aims of civilization, for it puts a positive premium on being bad (Freud 94).

By examining Beowulf's approach to Grendel as an example of an attempt to love his enemy, I consider

whether following these two commandments does, as Freud argues, entail damage to the aims of civilization and I ask how good leadership can require allowing one of the people, whom it is that leader's purpose to protect, to be murdered.

Arthur Moore argues that readers should "keep in mind the likelihood that Beowulf [is acting] in accordance with a prevailing concept of leadership" (Moore 169) when, as he watches Grendel eat a sleeping Geat, Beowulf "deliberately holds back in order to learn Grendel's methods" (165). Moore's investigation is concerned with "the apparent discrepancy between Beowulf's failure to act and the prevailing concept of loyalty" (166). He focuses on understanding whether Beowulf faltered in his legal responsibility of loyalty. Moore concludes, "[Beowulf's] inaction can be largely explained in the light of what may be reasonably regarded as the Germanic view of the function of the leader—to act in the general rather than in the particular interest" (169). While readers may feel that it is horrific of Beowulf—and, indeed, of the rest of the Geats—not to act as Grendel kills another Geat, Moore reminds us that in preserving himself Beowulf is acting to protect all of the Geats. "The leader," writes Moore, "is in actuality the symbol of tribal security, solidarity, and continuity, and must therefore employ his powers as judiciously as possible" (168). Thus, Moore presents Beowulf as a living synecdoche: as the Geats' leader, his presence expresses the values of the entire group. Moore certainly establishes that there is no discord between Beowulf's inaction and his loyalty to the Geats—he shows

us that the one is essential for the other. His analysis illuminates the way in which, by the "prevailing concept of leadership" (169) Beowulf acted reasonably. But, despite any political right-doing on Beowulf's part, the question of horror remains on a more personal level: is it not grotesque to remain inactive as you watch the death of an ally? This scene demands readers consider the relationship between ethics and political order. If civilization exists to protect individuals, how can its continued existence depend on their deaths?

Beowulf's and the Geats' inaction at the murder can be rationalized in two ways. The first way is that—as Moore suggests when he argues: "had Beowulf acted rashly in Heorot and thus failed to defeat Grendel, the Danes would have remained in a desperate predicament" (168)—taking action would have put Beowulf himself in danger, and since he is the group's leader, the symbolic impact of his death would threaten the "security, solidarity, and continuity" (168) of the tribe. By arguing that Beowulf has a strategic purpose in waiting for Grendel's attack, Moore (perhaps too generously) defends this sacrifice as a necessary way of ensuring the survival of the group—the implication is that the Geat's death was unavoidable. In this way we can understand Beowulf's inaction as a way of protecting the largest number of people, causing the fewest possible deaths. Thus, in an ethical sense, Beowulf's inaction can be justified as the least damaging possible choice. However, this is only the case if Beowulf would have actually put the group in danger by attacking Grendel before he could attack one of the

members of the group. Beowulf does not, as Moore writes, "deliberately [hold] back in order to learn Grendel's methods" (165), rather, he is simply "watching for the first move the monster would make" (Heaney 736-737). Moore's defense of Beowulf depends on his suggestion that Beowulf's reason for waiting is a strategic one. However, it is doubtful that Beowulf would need to watch Grendel fight to assure his own victory. By the time that he is in the mead-hall Beowulf already has a plan to fight Grendel in hand-to-hand combat and has been told by the Geats about Grendel's methods. Moreover, if Beowulf is depending on a last-minute bit of reconnaissance here, it suggests more serious negligence on his part. Surely Beowulf has both the time and resources for research if Grendel's attacks have lasted "twelve winters" (147) and "the news was known over the whole world" (150). Since there is clearly strategic information already available about Grendel, the information gained from this death is not necessary. That Beowulf needed to watch Grendel kill to learn about his methods is a weak interpretation, and one that serves more to frame Beowulf as negligent than prudent.

The second way that Beowulf's inaction might be rationalized is in an ethical, rather than strategic sense. This is best understood through a psychoanalytic reading; given the way that Moore positions Beowulf as the embodiment of social affect. Freud's psychoanalytic theory, particularly as Sarah Ahmed presents it in her work on affect places heavy emphasis on the way in which a society's values manifest themselves affectively and how affect is subsequently embodied by that society. I apply

this theory to *Beowulf* to illuminate the implications of the inclusion and exclusion of bodies in a society according to the structuring of that society. As well, as a way of working within Moore's own understanding of Beowulf as a physical symbol for collective values. Insofar as Beowulf "embodies the special virtues and ambitions of the tribe" (Moore 168) his physical body can be seen as a conduit through which collective emotion can be realized: in the process of embodying, Beowulf physicalizes "virtues and ambitions" (168)—things, which are, themselves, otherwise incorporeal. Thus, Beowulf transforms affective space into physical space by providing the group with a totally unified, physical body with which to manifest ideals. Insofar as the Geats are bound by "the bond of union…to make their own actions subservient to [Beowulf's] renown" (Moore quoting *Germania* Ch.14), the group can be understood as a single collective body and thus, we can see the formation of a group identity. Freud's "theory of how love is crucial to the formation of group identities" (Ahmed 130) is useful here in examining the implications of this collective unification. He writes that: "groups are formed when '*individuals . . . have substituted one and the same object for their ego ideal and have consequently identified themselves with one another in their ego*' (Freud 1922: 80, emphasis Freud's)" (Ahmed 130). Group identity formation depends on the re-shaping of individual identities aligning with a love object and the simultaneous collapse of each individual identity into a single group identity, reshaped around a single ideal. The significance of this is not only that love synthesizes individual

identities to create a collective, but that this synthesis results in the loss of the individual identity. This means that the role of the individual in the collective is incompatible with role of the individual as such. In being a part of the group, the identity of the Geat who was killed is subsumed into a collective identity. Under this view, Grendel's attack stands as an injury to the collective body, but cannot be considered a murder since the unified body survives the attack. This does not fully explain why Beowulf would allow Grendel to attack, since—although less serious than allowing a murder—allowing a preventable injury to the collective body is still unethical.

Despite this, I maintain that Beowulf's inaction is grounded in ethics rather than in strategy. To demonstrate why, I will examine an article by George Clark in which he argues that, by directing critical attention on the monsters in *Beowulf,* a 1936 lecture by J.R.R. Tolkien "comes near to making the polarization of monstrous violence and human order an absolute" (Clark 410). Clark rejects this polarization; instead he works to reconcile monstrous violence and human order by demonstrating their inseparability. Clark demonstrates how order is tied to violence through ancestral connections symbolically instilled in arms and armour. Clark describes Beowulf's armour: "bequeathed to Hygelac as a token of love and loyalty, two principles of order in the human world, Beowulf's equipment escapes its sinister associations of violence and death" (422). Clark makes it easy to see how—although love erases *connotations* of violence—violence and love are inextricably connected here in the

purpose of arms and armour. Interestingly, Clark reveals a different relationship between love and group identity than one formed through shared ideals. He argues that while armour explicitly symbolizes violence, it acts simultaneously as a token of "the bond of love joining generation to generation" (420). Armour, then, symbolizes the formation of a different sort of group identity than we see in Heorot. As the embodiment of the virtues and ambitions of the group, Beowulf can be considered the love object around which the group in Heorot unifies. This collective body has no history prior to its formation around Beowulf. Armour, by contrast, carries with it the values of past generations. Wearing armour or bearing arms passed down from previous generations means identifying as a part of an established group with existing relationships. In this way, we can see how—in the same way that an individual's identity dissolves into a group's identity through alignment with a love object—a group identity formed around a love object might dissolve into another identity if two love objects align. If Beowulf, as a love object, were to align his values with another symbol of love (such as a piece of armour) the identity of his group—and his leadership—would be subordinate to this other love object. Beowulf's refusal to wear armour and use weapons, then, can be read as his rejection of the obligations of the past and a way of gaining agency as the Geat's leader.

By rejecting these love objects, Beowulf keeps the group's identity distinct from ties to the past. The significance of this is in the relationships that both Beowulf and Grendel have to their ancestries. Beowulf is descended

from "a noble warrior-lord" (Heaney 263) and is referred to in the active voice as "Ecgtheow's son" (529). Alfred David notes that by synecdoche '*ecg*,' meaning '*edge*' "stands for *sword* and Ecgtheow means 'sword-servant'" (Heaney xxxi). Understanding Beowulf as the son of the sword strengthens the implication that his choice not to use weapons when facing Grendel is a way of gaining agency by separating himself from his ancestry. Unlike Beowulf's birth, the poet describes Grendel's birth passively: "from Cain there sprang / misbegotten spirits, among them Grendel" (1265-1266). Grendel's birth is neither direct nor honourable as Beowulf's is. This passivity makes it hard to be certain whether Grendel is a blood relative of Cain's, or simply influenced by him in a relationship like that of a thane and a lord. Beowulf's purposeful separation from his own ancestry mirrors the distance between Grendel and his ancestry. In relinquishing himself of arms and armour, Beowulf becomes fundamentally like Grendel—unarmoured and unarmed, both characters are defined by isolation from ancestral values. In his relation to Cain—whether by blood or simply by loyalty—Grendel is characterized by a radical separation from the familial and to a certain extent from the self. The poem's structure and language implies that Cain's murder affected more than just his brother. In the lines: "Cain had killed / his father's son, felled his own / brother with a sword" (1261-1263) the killing is written twice, implying that Cain committed two murders: he killed both "his own brother" and "his father's son" (1262-1263). That the action is repeated here suggests that Cain

killed not only "his own brother with a sword" but also himself—"his father's son" (1262-1263). As well, enjambment separates "felled his own" from "brother with a sword," creating a double meaning that suggests once again that Cain damaged himself—he "felled his own" (1262). Cain did not simply betray his brother, he also fundamentally damaged himself by separating himself from kinship. This may seem paradoxical at first, since Grendel "had dwelt for a time / in misery among the banished monsters, / Cain's clan, whom the Creator had outlawed / and condemned as outcasts" (104-107). While it might seem strange that Cain can have a clan, being fractured in this way, this clan is not a true collective brought together by love, but a collection of separate individuals who have no place elsewhere—outcasts. The instability of his group is visible in the poet's use of the past tense, which indicates that Grendel is no longer a part of Cain's group and implies the very separation from the familial that defines Cain and those who are like him. Cain and Grendel possess those "undeniable differences" (Freud 94) that make them unable to be members of a society. Yet, Beowulf becomes like Grendel, providing the possibility for Grendel to identify with him and become a part of his society—or, to use Freud's language, civilization.

Beowulf's choice to not use weapons provides him with a way to love his enemy: by distancing himself from familial ties, Beowulf becomes like Grendel. Thus, we can understand Beowulf's inaction as a way of providing space for Grendel to become a part of society. If he is

approaching Grendel with love, then until Grendel's attack, Beowulf has no reason to fight him. It is in this way that we can understand the ethical framework behind Beowulf's inaction. By discarding the weapons and armour that tie him to his ancestry, Beowulf confronts Grendel without prejudice and, in doing so, provides him with the chance to enter society instead of opposing it. For Beowulf to attack Grendel first would, in this case, be an act of malevolence on Beowulf's part.

Clark describes Beowulf's approach as "seemingly atavistic nakedness" which "becomes a kind of innocence confronting the monster's diabolically armed malevolence" (Clark 422). It is hard to disagree when we reflect on the consequences of Beowulf's rejection of his Pagan ancestry in favour of the fundamentally Christian "love thine enemy" approach. Certainly, Beowulf's inaction was ethically "good" insofar as he extended the group's ethics to include Grendel by loving him. But, an individual had to die for Beowulf to be justified in attacking Grendel. Is the death of a member of a civilization not contrary to the aims of the civilization? Perhaps Beowulf's inaction in this scene arouses discomfort in modern readers for good reason—to become like Grendel means to share with Grendel what Grendel shares with Cain: the act of murder—the destruction of both another person and oneself.

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