A Comparison of Beowulf and Achilles as National Characters

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A Comparison of Beowulf and Achilles as National Characters.

Among all primitive people there is great need for warriors and hence a tendency to honor the warrior and to celebrate his deeds in poetry and song. Myths and legends gradually cluster about some great hero until at last he comes to embody the ideals of the nation to which he belongs. Beowulf and Achilles are two such representatives of national characteristics, and in their lives and deeds we may trace the prototypes which at an early period influenced the development of the Teuton and the Greek.
Both of these characters are represented as being preeminently brave and strong in battle. Achilles is given such apppellations as "welter of cities," (Iliad p. 154) "man of valor," (Iliad p. 164) "swift-footed," (Iliad p. 314) "smasher," (Iliad p. 216) and many others of the same sort. We are told that he was the greatest warrior among the Danaans and that even his appearance and the sound of his voice "spread terror unspeakable among the men of Troy." (Iliad p. 372.) He is said to be exceeding mighty above all mankind (Iliad p. 432) and his bodily strength is well illustrated by the description of his struggle with the river Scamanderos: "Then he grasped
a tall fair-grown elm, and 
it fell uprooted and tore away 
all the banks." (Iliad p. 422) Him-
self goddess born, he is an 
especial favorite of the gods 
who frequently give him aid 
in times of dire need as 
when Poseidon and Athena 
help him escape from 
the river Scamanderos. 
(Iliad p. 424) Achilles' armor 
is celebrated for its quality 
and when it is stripped 
from the shoulders of Patro-
clus (Iliad p. 366) his goddess 
mother Thetis has Hephaistos 
make him a new armor 
and glittering arms. (Iliad p. 385;)

In like manner Beowulf 
is represented as being a 
man of such fine appearance 
that the coast wanderin
declares he has never seen a "greater earl on the earth" and he feels sure that "unless his countenance belie him, that is no ordinary man." (Beowulf p.21.) Beowulf seems to consider war the worthiest of occupations for he says, "All my life will I wage war, fare, while lasts this sword which has often served me early and late." (Beowulf p.120.) He was not a quarrelsome fellow, however, for in his dying speech he says that he has "sought out no wily quarrels." (Beowulf p.129.) The appellations applied to Beowulf are of a less savage and cruel sort than those used in describing Achilles. Instead of being described by such
adjectives as "cruel" or "man-
slaying," he is designated
by such epithets as "honored
warrior," (Beowulf p. 81.) "The
hero blessed with victory"
(Beowulf p. 66.) and "dear Beowulf."
(Beowulf p. 61.) In one place
where his bravery in battle
is thought of, he is called
"the vast wolf," and it is
said that he came off from
the battle "by his own strength
swimming the waves, upon
his arm the hea; thirty suits
of armor, when all alone
he went down to the sea."
(Beowulf p. 113.) "In his strength,
the poet says, "he was the
best of men in his day of
this life, noble and mighty."
(Beowulf p. 19.) "He knew him as a boy and
that he has the strength of thirty men in his grip. (Beowulf p.26) His strength and endurance are shown by the statement that he swam seven days and nights in the ice cold sea, and on that occasion killed nine nineties. (Beowulf p.36.) When he dived down through the water to kill Grendel's mother "it was the space of a day ere he got sight of the bottom." (Beowulf p.75.) Finally as an old man it was his very strength which became the cause of his death. "Too strong was the hand, as I have heard, which by its blow overtaxed all swords whatsoever." (Beowulf p.127) The blow which he deals the
fire dragon broke his sword and he died from his wounds after cutting the serpent asunder in the middle with his short sword. (Beowulf p. 128) Like Achilles he has celebrated arms which no one else can use to as great advantage as he. When hunting the good sword lent him by Unferth failed him in time of need, the Ruler of men granted him that he saw "an old powerful sword hanging on the wall." (Beowulf p. 87.) Several other allusions are made to the fact that God helped Beowulf, and the poet says concerning the fight with Grendel that Egtheow's son would have perished had not "Holy God,
the wise Lord, brought victory to pass." (Beowulf p. 77.)

Like most great warriors of antiquity Beowulf and Achilles are both great boasters. When we consider how self-esteem was regarded by the Greeks and Romans, it is not surprising to find them putting boastful speeches into the mouths of their heroes. Cicero does not hesitate to give due credit to himself for exposing Cataline and saving the city; Horace is by no means niggardly in his praise of his own poetry; and Caesar's powers of composition seem to be about equally divided between describing the strength of the Gauls
and telling what a decided victory he won over them.

Beowulf’s boasting impresses us as being merely the frank statement of what he and all his associates recognize as true concerning himself. There is no attempt to make himself appear greater than he is and he fulfills all his boasts. He is so frank, in fact, that we never even wish he had left it to someone else to tell of his deeds. Through all his successful career Beowulf remains untinged with haughtiness or foolish pride. Hrothgar says, “The fame of thee, my friend Beowulf, is spread abroad among every people far and wide.”
Thou dost hold it all with patience, yea, all thy might with prudence of mind."
(Beowulf p. 84.) This is one of the surest tests of character. If there is any vanity in a person the surest way to discover it is to make him successful. How many men have never shown their love of praise and petty pride merely because "their lot forbade." Throughout his career Beowulf not only shows no tendency to overestimate his own abilities; but he is always ready to give credit to whom credit is due. He says of his fight with Grendel's mother that he would hardly have escaped alive had not God
sheltered him. (Beowulf p. 82) Beowulf acknowledged his obligation to Higelac by saying, "Every favor comes from thee." (Beowulf p. 103.) The only instance in which Beowulf's boasting displeases us is when he tells about his swimming match with Edda. Beowulf's boast that he will show Grendel the strength and courage of the Geats has a deplorable ring. (Beowulf p. 36.) This is the only time Beowulf displays any anger toward a fellow man; but his frank disposition leads him to quickly forgive Unferth's insinuations and we find him, before he went down into the mere to kill Grendel's
mother, willing to Unferth "the old heirloom, the wondrous wavy sword of tempered blade." (Beowulf p. 74.)

In contrast with Beowulf’s boasting Achilles boasting seems self-conscious. It is the result of vanity rather than mere child-like frankness and, although what he says of himself is true, it is nevertheless repugnant. There is always present that emulation which is repugnant wherever found. Achilles had boasted that he would not fight till Hector should come near his hut with consuming fire, (Iliad p. 180) and to make good his boast he refrained from war until many of the Trojans have
bitten the earth because of his wrath. (Iliad p.389) He boasts to Patroclus that if the Trojans should even see the visor of his helm shining hard by, they would flee swiftly and fill the watercourses with the dead. (Iliad p.316) When he offers the prizes at the celebration of Patroclus' funeral he says confidently, "If in some others honor we Achaians were now holding our games it would be I who should win the first prize and bear it to my tent." (Iliad p.458) This and other passages of like tenor impress one as being genuine boasting unmitigated by any attenuating circumstances.
The attitude of Achilles and Beowulf toward woman, although mentioned only incidentally, may well be considered in this connection since it serves to show the status of woman in the two civilizations. Achilles ideals of woman are low. He regards her as so much chattel to be given as the reward of valor. (Iliad p. 6.) He speaks of the women he has won by his spear when he sacked the rich cities about Troy as he would of so much booty taken from the enemy. (Iliad p. 376.) When Odysseus requests him to appease his wrath against Agamemnon for taking Briseis away, Achilles says, "So then the sons of Athena..."
alone of all mortal men: love their wives? I too loved mine with all my heart, though but the captive of my spear" (Iliad p 171.) This sounds very well but the character of his love is shown a few pages later where he says, "Would that Artemis had slain her (Briseis) with her arrow at the ships, on the day whereon I took her to me, when I spoiled Lynnessos; so should not then so many Achaeans have bitten the wide earth beneath their enemies' hands, because of my exceeding wrath" (Iliad p. 388.) This attitude toward woman is not confined to Achilles alone but pervades the entire
atmosphere of the poem.

When we pass from
the Greek to the Teutonic people
we enter a different social
atmosphere. The worth of
the individual is emphasized,
and woman shares the
freedom so dear to this
sturdy race. Beowulf treats
woman with that same
frankness and honesty
which characterizes his
relations with men. He and
his comrades show a
marked reverence for
woman and a deference to
his counsel such as was
unknown to the Greeks.
Queen Haeltheow is present
at the feast and passes
the cup. She greets Beowulf
kindly and thanks God
that a deliverer has come. She is well-pleased with Beowulf's resolution to accomplish noble deeds or abide his end in the mead-hall. (Beowulf p. 37.) After Beowulf has killed Grendel and they again feast in the hall, Wealthow presents Beowulf with a collar and admonishes him, "Prosper well; show thyself strong; and be kind in thy counsel to these youths." (Beowulf p. 61) This speech is worthy of a high-minded, freedom-loving woman, such as can be produced only in a civilization which holds high ideals of womanhood.

Probably the greatest point of contrast between
Beowulf and Achilles is the altruistic spirit of the one and the utter selfishness of the other. The motive of Beowulf in crossing the seas and undertaking the combat with Grendel was an altruistic one. (Beowulf p. 22.) To cleanse Heorot of such a monster was a dangerous undertaking and yet Beowulf is anxious to undertake it for the Scyldings and since he has heard that Grendel uses no weapons he declares that he also will fight empty-handed "so that the heart of Hygelac, my lord, may be gladdened because of me." (Beowulf p. 29.) Achilles would have been utterly incapable of expressing
such a thought. His only anxiety would have been

to gladden his own heart

by increasing his own renown.

Later in the poem we learn

that it was to fulfill the

desire of the people that Beo-

wulf put out to sea. (Beowulf, 37.)

No better instance of Beowulf's

consideration for the feelings

of others can be found

than the fact that when

Hrothgar offered him Hrunting,

the sword which had failed

him at the critical moment,

he accepted it thankfully

and "uttered no word in

blame of that edged sword.

We must agree with the

poets comment that "he

was a great hearted man."

(Beowulf, p. 88.) When Beowulf is
about to return home he thanks Hrothgar for entertaining him and his followers so well and promises future help if need arises. "If," he says, "I learn beyond the course of the waters that thy neighbors beset thee sore, as did thine enemies in days gone by, I will bring a thousand thanes and warriors to help thee." (Beowulf p. 87) Hrothgar's thankfulness to Beowulf shows how great was the favor he had received. Hrothgar says, "Thy great heart pleased me above and more, dear Beowulf." (Beowulf p. 90.) When Beowulf returned home he gave all the gifts which he had received from Hrothgar to
his king Ingvald. (Beowulf p. 103.)

Even in the hour of death Beowulf’s thoughts are for the welfare of his people. He returns thanks to God, that in his death day he has been able to win such treasures for his people and to Higlaf says, “Fulfil ye now the needs of the people!” (Beowulf p. 132)

How different is the character of Achilles, always jealous of his own honor and willing to sacrifice his dearest friends to advance his own interests. When he finally permits Patroclus to wear his armor forth to battle he selfishly admonishes him, “Yet long not thou apart from me to fight with the war-loving Trojans; thereby
will thou diminish mine honor” (Iliad p. 317.) Toward such a man we feel as Patroclus did when he said, “The grey sea bare thee, and the sheer cliffs, so untoward is thy spirit.” (Iliad p. 315.) Because Agamemnon took from him his need of valor Achilles sulks in his tent and refuses to protect the Danaans from the attacks of mauling Hector. (Iliad p. 180.) When the Achaeans are hard pressed and about to perish Odysseus appeals to Achilles for help. “Up then!”, he says, “if thou art minded even at the last to save the failing race of the Achaeans from the war din of the Trojans” (Iliad p. 148.) But Achilles is not minded to save even the last remnant,
and all appeals to altruistic motives are wasted on him. He even prays to the gods to destroy both the Trojans and the Achaeans that he and Patroklos alone might have the honor of undoing the coronal of Troy. (Iliad, p. 317.) Notwithstanding all appeals for help from his perishing countrymen, notwithstanding the fact that already many noble warriors had bidden the dust because of his wrath, Achilles stands idly by and allows the works of destruction to go on about the ships. It is only after his friend Patroklos has been slain by Hector that he decides to go into the combat and then from no noble motives but merely
To vent his wrath upon a weaker foe. Instead of exercising self-control Achilles is completely mastered by his anger. Love for his countrymen cannot move him; but anger leads him whither it will. Even his generosity impresses one as being only wise egotism. When he gives magnificent prizes to the contestants at the funeral games in honor of Patroklos, we feel that he does so merely to increase the fame of Teleus' son about which he has shown himself so jealous, (Iliad p. 478) as Nestor says, "Achilles, for all his valiance careth not for the Danaans nor pitie them at all. ... He is for reaping alone the reward of his valor. (Iliad p. 226)
It is a notable fact that all men, no matter how degraded they may be, still have some sense of honor. Murderers frequently boast of their honesty and say they have never stolen a penny. So a band of outlaws may have a rigid code of ethics which they scrupulously follow in their dealings with one another. It is from this principle that the saying "there is honor even among thieves" originates. Crime seems frequently to be the result of a conscience which is undeveloped with reference to certain questions of conduct. Achilles shows a certain sense of honor when he declares to Odysseus that he will speak openly the things that
are in his heart. "For," he says, "hateful to me even as the gates of hell is he that hideth one thing in his heart and uttereth another." (Iliad p. 170.) One would hardly expect such a denunciation of deception from a man who has prayed the gods to destroy his countrymen that he might thereby win greater renown for himself. Achilles nurses his wrath till it finally becomes a point of honor with him not to desist from his anger till Hector come to his ship with destroying fire. (Iliad p. 316.) He rejoices in the implacable spirit which he possesses and says proudly that his heart swells with wrath whenever
he thinks of the treatment which Atrides has given him. (Iliad p.180.) In estimating the character of the individual in such cases as this, we must remember that the ethics of that period sanctioned many things which are now considered morally culpable. For example, it was considered a mark of moral courage to avenge the wrongs of a friend upon the perpetrator. Thus Achilles merely follows a custom of the time when he says, "My soul biddeth me abdive; no longer nor abide among men, if Hector be not first smitten by my spear and yield his life, and pay for his slaughter of Patroclus. Now go forth..."
that I may light on the destroyer of him I loved, on Hector; then will I accept my death whensoever Zeus willeth to accomplish it." This willingness to give his life in what he considers a just cause has a genuine heroic ring.

Berswulf in like manner possesses a strong sense of honor but it takes a more humane form than in Achilles. This sense of honor is shown most clearly after the death of Higelac when Hjord and all the people wished Berswulf to become king. But all this persuasion could not influence Berswulf to do what he considered dishonorable. Instead of becoming king he served Heordred as a but
of regent till the young prince was old enough to rule alone. (Beowulf p. 114) Thus he shows his loyalty and thankfulness to Hygelac for the favors he had received from him. Had all royal personages possessed Beowulf's sense of honor many of the darkest pages in the catalogue of crimes would never have been written. Beowulf's honor as a warrior will not permit him to carry arms when he goes into the combat with Grendel because he has heard "that the monster in his rashnessreckles nor of weapons." (Beowulf p. 14) Beowulf had high ideals concerning what the true warrior should be. The do or die spirit
is expressed in his resolve, "I shall bravely accomplish noble deeds or abide mine end in this mead hall" (Beowulf, p. 37.)

To such a man death is more welcome than dishonor. Such willingness to sacrifice even his life for the sake of his ideals is worthy of the highest type of stoic philosopher. This is the spirit which throughout the course of the ages has inspired unquiet martyrs to endure the flames for conscience's sake. It is the spirit which has guided the philosopher in his search for truth and sustained the political and social reformer through all the abuse and persecution heaped upon him. It is the spirit which must
animate every great movement so long as humanity remains true to itself, and one age brands as heresy the views which become the orthodoxy of succeeding generations.

The most repulsive trait of Achilles' character is his inhumanity. There are some things which we can pardon in a character when we consider the age and country in which he lived; but with all our charity we can never bring ourselves to look with leniency upon a disposition so fierce that it is not satisfied with slaying its enemy but must heap insults and indignities upon the senseless clay. It is related of Charles I that when
visiting Luther's grave, one of his attendants suggested to him that the body of the reformer ought to be dug up and burned. Although the emperor had relentlessly persecuted the Protestants he replied chivalrously, "No! I make war on the living, not on the dead." (Barlow's General History p. 442.)

The savagery of Achilles in dragging Hector's body around the Walls of Troy has become a household tale until Achilles' very name has become synonymous with cruelty. We are very apt to form our judgment of a character by some one or perhaps a few prominent traits. Thus if we find in anyone some trait of character which we
admire, we are inclined to idealize that person. This perhaps accounts for the sense of disappointment which we often experience at some unexpected action on the part of a friend. We often in like manner form an aversion for a person because of some one unpleasant trait. When we picture Achilles, boasting that because of his wrath he would "cut the throats of twelve noble sons of the men of Troy" before Patroklos' funeral pyre (Iliad p. 376) and "drag thither Hector to give raw unto dogs to devour," (Iliad p. 453) we lose sight of whatever good traits he possesses, and he stands forth before us, the incarnation of ferocity.
There is nothing in Achilles which appeals to our sympathies. He impresses me as being a cold, inhuman fighting machine, at which we may gaze in wonder but which we cannot love. On the other hand, Beowulf is so humane that we lose sight of the warrior and love the man. He develops into a noble man, not by the intervention of the gods at the proper time, but by a gradual growth just as each one of us must develop.

When he was young, as we are told, he was not much esteemed either by the people or by the king. They thought him a slothful, unwarlike fellow, and he endured much sorrow on that account.
By performing good deeds he grew in strength and force of character. When we contemplate his matured character, we feel that his greatness is the result of his own efforts and this together with his frank, unselfish disposition gives him a strong hold upon our affections. We feel that he uses war only as a means to something better. He does not delight in slaughter purely for its own sake. When he goes out to kill it is always because some enemy threatens the public welfare. He is in league with the good element in its strife with the powers of darkness. Perhaps in this is to be found the reason why he appeals to us so strongly. In everyone
is the desire to see the good triumph over the evil and the hope that virtue will some day be rewarded. Hence, since Beowulf champion's the cause of the good he appeals to one of the universal instincts of the race. With awakened interest and active sympathy we follow him through his various adventures, glancing in his victories and rejoicing in his courage until at last he crowns his life by an heroic death.