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Examining Humility as a Christian Value

In *The Life of Saint Germanus of Auxerre*, Constantius of Lyon paints Saint Germanus as a humble man, full of love for God. He is a Christian bringing the wonders of Christianity to barbaric and misled people. In the Old English poem *Beowulf*, the strong and boastful Beowulf of the Geats rescues the Danes from the monster known as Grendel. Beowulf's a warrior who kills monsters using his God-given traits. While Germanus stays humble to God, seeks eternal rewards, and yearns for secrecy, Beowulf advertises his strength, his wealth, and his well-earned fame. And although Beowulf appears to be guided by the Christian God, Beowulf's actions and values stand in sharp contrast to the saintly humility of Germanus. Ultimately, Germanus' position as a bishop in the Catholic Church affirms that his values are the representative Christian ones, a sign that *Beowulf*, although Christian in appearance, may not be as Christian of a text as it appears.

While Saint Germanus consistently acknowledges God's presence throughout his miracle work, Beowulf rarely mentions God's role during his battles. As Constantius of Lyon documents in *The Life of Saint Germanus of Auxerre*, even though "men's minds" look to Germanus and "the bishops for teaching," Germanus recognizes that God is the one ultimately working the miracles (Constantius of Lyon 88). For example, upon passing a jail "crowded with prisoners awaiting torture and death," Germanus springs into action. He calls on the guards to free the prisoners, but with no avail. As a result of the inaction, he turns to his "old resource," namely

"the divine majesty" (Constantius of Lyon 101). Germanus "[throws] himself on the ground in prayer," allowing God to do his good work through his servant's prayers (Constantius of Lyon 101). With God's help, the gates of the jail "[fly] open," freeing the prisoners (Constantius of Lyon 101). Although he initiated the miracle, Germanus' complete belief in the power and goodness of God proves that he recognizes the limits of his powers. Rather than emphasizing his strength, the narrator highlights Germanus' humility to God. God, not him, is directly serving the people and Germanus knows it.

Beowulf, on the other hand, revels in his own strength, hardly ever mentioning the work of God in defeating Grendel and Grendel's mother. After Beowulf fatally wounds Grendel, Beowulf "rejoice[s] in his courage" and "his great night-work" (Chickering 97). Following the fight, the halls of Heorot are described: "[t]hus he had cleaned it…defended it well" (Chickering 97). Beowulf, not God, defended Heorot and Hrothgar's kingdom from Grendel. He, in this case, refers not to He, God, but to Beowulf, the "strongest man who ever lived" (Chickering 95). By omitting explicit mentions of God, Beowulf gets the glory. Hrothgar's words to Beowulf following the fight are particularly telling: "But now, by yourself, you have done such a deed that your fame is assured…May Almighty God reward you with good" (Chickering 103). In the eyes of the Geatish fighters and the people of Hrothgar's kingdom, Beowulf has helped God. Yes, God played a part, but it was "Beowulf's courage" that killed Grendel and "changed…fate" (Chickering 109). In turn, everyone is convinced that Beowulf earned the "song upon song" and the praise that poured over him that same day (Chickering 99). Furthermore, as the poem narrates, Grendel escapes and is not killed. In an effort to promote personal gain and deflect blame, Beowulf frames this one "misstep" as an act of God: "I could not keep [Grendel]…from an early departure…God did not will it" (Chickering 105). In the eyes of Beowulf, God still

determines the outcome. However, although God ultimately decides fate, the triumphant moment belongs to Beowulf. In contrast to Germanus, Beowulf is not humble to God; rather, he manipulates God's work in his favor.

While God played an active and all-important role in the release of the prisoners in Germanus' story, the God in *Beowulf* remains distant and obscured by Beowulf's pride. Although both follow the same religion, their visions of God undoubtedly clash. And due to Germanus' position as bishop of Auxerre and a saint in the Roman Catholic Church, Germanus' understanding of God must adhere to Roman Catholic Christianity more than Beowulf's. Essentially, to be Christian in the Catholic context means to stay humble to God. Notably, this humility extends beyond God; Germanus and Beowulf's conflicting motivations showcase this continuing tension.

While Germanus works miracles as a servant of God because he seeks rest and an eternal place in heaven, Beowulf rescues the Danes from Grendel out of a desire to showcase his strength and receive tangible and temporary rewards such as treasure and fame. As his days as God's servant reach their end, Germanus begins describing his expected rewards from God. These rewards are not material; Germanus describes yearning for "quiet and eternal rest" (Constantius of Lyon 104). And God delivers these wishes by "inviting the tired hero to receive the reward of his laborious days," a place in heaven (Constantius of Lyon 104).

Beowulf, on the other hand, thinks not of heaven but of celebrating with mead and overwhelming praise. After Beowulf kills Grendel, Hrothgar assures Beowulf that "valued treasures" and "old twisted gold" await him were he to return from his fight with Grendel's mother (Chickering 129). Hrothgar knows what motivates Beowulf, that is gold and celebrations in his honor. Beowulf's motivation comes from these temporary rewards, a stark contrast to

Germanus' desire for eternal reward in heaven. In turn, since Germanus embodies the Christian values, Beowulf's motivations are not pure or truly Christian. These motivations seem to flow from his heretical valuation of wealth.

Germanus and Beowulf take opposing views on flaunting material wealth. As an example, in response to the spread of Pelagianism, Germanus and another bishop from Gaul journey to Britain to promote the Catholic faith. After Germanus preaches the word of God "not only in the churches, but at the crossroads, in the fields, and in the lanes," those with allegiance to Pelagius emerge in their "dazzling robes" with a "crowd of flatterers" (Constantius of Lyon 87). In this confrontation, the holy bishops represent "divine authority" and "faith," while the Pelagians—the "teachers of perverse doctrines"—represent "human presumption" and "bad faith" (Constantius of Lyon 87). This delineation between the two groups clarifies the Christian values by assigning characteristics to both the true Christian and heretic groups. Heretics "[flaunt] their wealth," while Christians do not. Germanus incorporates this humility through all aspects of his life (Constantius of Lyon 87). He dresses in "poverty-stricken" clothes (Constantius of Lyon 99), travels with as few companions as possible (91), and rides on "the poorest of mounts" (91). In contrast, Beowulf sees "no shame in…sumptuous gifts" (Chickering 107). His beliefs and behaviors seem to resemble the heretic values of the Pelagians. To him, showcasing his accumulated wealth and gifts is not shameful, but rather a way of showing strength.

Along those lines, Germanus distributes his wealth while Beowulf accumulates it. Upon arriving in Ravenna, Germanus is showered with attention. He's "courted" by princes, nobles, and an empress (Constantius of Lyon 101). At one point, out of the "deepest humility [for] servants of God" such as him, the empress offers him "a huge dish of silver laden with many

kinds of delicious food" (Constantius of Lyon 101). But Germanus does not indulge in the food himself, rather he "distribute[s] the food to those who served him," letting the "silver…[pass] through his hands to the poor" (Constantius of Lyon 101). Moreover, as his "secret entry into the city" shows, Germanus does not desire such a gift from the empress to begin with (Constantius of Lyon 100). When the situation does arise, Germanus does not hold onto those gifts. His priorities are bringing people to God, not collecting personal wealth.

Beowulf, however, is consumed by his wealth, even as the end of his life is approaching. After ruling the Geats for "fifty winters," Beowulf has become an "aged guardian of the precious homeland" (Chickering 179). Yet his pride and confidence have not faded. When the Geatish people are confronted by a treasure-protecting dragon spreading "fiery terror," (Chickering 189) Beowulf claims the fight for himself: "It is not your business…except me alone" (Chickering 201). And when the battle goes awry, with the dragon "pierc[ing Beowulf] right through the neck with his sharp fangs," Beowulf thinks not of death or heaven, but instead considers "inheritance" (Chickering 213) and possible "treasure" (Chickering 215). In the aftermath of the battle, he orders Wiglaf to "find the treasure" so that Beowulf may "have one full look at the brilliant gems" (Chickering 215). Beowulf tells Wiglaf that he's "given [his] old life-span for this heap of treasures" and that a memorial called "Beowulf's barrow" must be built in his honor (Chickering 217). This mound—"high and famous"—allows Beowulf to "[enjoy] the wealth of his stronghold" (Chickering 237). Unlike Germanus, Beowulf craves treasure. And when that treasure presents itself, Beowulf holds it close and does not distribute it among the Weders or give it to the poor. His men follow his careful instructions and bury him with his "gold in the ground" where it is untouchable and "useless to men," yet forever in Beowulf's reach (Chickering 241). As Germanus' actions demonstrate, Christians do not hoard wealth. In this

way, although Beowulf leaves the world as a hero to many, he does not exemplify good Christian values. Beowulf's obsession with accumulating wealth also feeds his distorted conception of the future.

While Germanus seeks recognition from God, Beowulf finds it among his fellow mortals, showing their differing views on fame and legacy. Germanus does not seek fame among men. He wishes to perform miracles and convert people under the eyes of God, not the eyes of the people. By "always [trying] to keep his deeds secret," he aims "to be insignificant in men's eyes" (Constantius of Lyon 92). In terms of physical items or treasure, Germanus leaves only "scanty possessions" after his death, largely due to his position on wealth. Separated from material wealth, "[Germanus] himself lives on in his daily miracles" having created a legacy that honors his commitment to God (Constantius of Lyon 106).

Beowulf, on the other hand, "marche[s] through..hall[s] with his hand-picked troop," indulging in the praise and "[walking] in glory" (Chickering 177). To him, pride is an admirable trait. In terms of legacy, Beowulf knows he "must come to the end of [his] life," and claims the "best memorial for a man after he is gone" is his fame (Chickering 129). He is buried together with his treasure and people speak of his "nobility and deeds of courage" (Chickering 243). The man "most eager for fame" has found it (Chickering 243). When compared with Germanus, Beowulf's death and resulting legacy does not adhere to the Christian ideal. Germanus served God out of a desire to fulfill God's holy work, not to please the people on Earth.

Evidently, Saint Germanus' and Beowulf's values stand in opposition. According to Germanus and, therefore, the Catholic Church, a Christian should continually recognize God's role in miracles and "battles" won. Beowulf fails in that regard. A Christian should do their work—whether that be working miracles or fighting monsters—out of a desire to serve God and

receive eternal reward for that service in heaven. Beowulf's infatuation with shiny objects blinds his ability to see and desire that eternal reward. As Germanus shows, a Christian should not flaunt or accumulate their wealth, yet Beowulf manages to do both. Although *Beowulf* alludes to biblical references such as the Story of Creation from Genesis and the kin-slaughterer Cain (Chickering 55), these references come into conflict with the lack of Christian morals that Beowulf exhibits. Examining this conflict between religious values illuminates the text's pagan origins, ultimately revealing the possible Christianization of the oral epic.

Works Cited

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