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What Makes a Good King?

Fortitudo versus sapientia. Strength versus wisdom. Brain versus brawn. What characteristics do we value in a good leader? While this answer may seem plain and simple from a modern day view, the Anglo-Saxon era had a completely different mindset when it comes to where their priorities lie. Although fortitudo is clearly favored in a perfect king when Beowulf was written, from a present day perspective sapientia is prioritized.

To begin with, how do we know that the people in Beowulf's time favored strength over wisdom? Two different kings with two different skill sets played major parts in the story yet there is one crucial fact that makes the favoritism painstakingly obvious; the story is told from Beowulf's perspective. If the poet wanted to exemplify the importance of both kingly qualities, they would have told the tale from an unbiased point of view. Yet the Beowulf that was told in the 6th century and studied in the 21st century, follows the path of a young man and his adventures of grandeur, fighting monsters and saving the day. It could have been told from the perspective of Hrothgar, an elderly yet wise king who had to make tough yet smart decisions for the sake of his people, and yet the author opted against that. With advancements made over hundreds of years, it's easy to understand that our priorities have changed with the times.

From the perspective of an Anglo-Saxon, strength was held in high regard. During this time, Britain was a warrior society ruled by a heroic code that valued strength, courage, and honor. Beowulf is an ideal example of such traits, for he had traveled to a foreign kingdom and

“had taken away all their unhappiness, the evil menace under which they had lived.” (Beowulf 55). He was honorable in his word, and carried out the promises he had made to prove himself in battle and free The Danes. While this looks great on Beowulf’s part, a young heroic man who has proven his worth to protect a kingdom that wasn’t even his own, does this reflect badly on Hrothgar, the smart yet weak king who was unable to protect the kingdom he resides in? Or vice versa; was Hrothgar smart for acknowledging his physical weakness in old age, and instead putting his pride aside for a younger hero to save his mead-hall from the “evil menace”?

What Hrothgar lacks in physical strength, he makes up for in smart decisions when analyzed from a present day perspective. A young and unproven warrior sailed uninvited to The Danes Kingdom, intending to slay monsters on their behalf. Other ruler’s may have seen this as a threat or an attempt for another kingdom to win the people’s favor by gallantly fighting evil and usurping the current king. Yet Hrothgar knows he is unable to serve as he had in his youth, and instead welcomes an old friend’s son into his mead-hall with open arms. Hrothgar’s wife Wealhtheow even takes it a step further and encourages Beowulf to “be a gentle guardian...and be to my son a friend in deed.” (Beowulf 64). Hrothgar is smart enough to accept the desperately needed aid from Beowulf, and his wife sees this as an opportunity for her son to make allies for when he ascends to the throne.

It appears that Hrothgar is fairly intelligent and entirely in control of the situation, but does this make him a good king? From the viewpoint from the middle ages, Hrothgar can be seen as naive while Wealhtheow senses the potential dangers of Beowulf’s success and makes an argument on behalf of her son’s claim to the throne. Hrothgar is desperate to make up for his shortcomings and his wife knows this, instead choosing to rally on behalf of her children.

Depending on the values of the era this was told in, one decision could have two completely different meanings.

If Hrothgar is weak due to his naive decisions regarding Beowulf's arrival, why is he described as a good king throughout the text? While the king of The Danes is old and senile during the timeline of the story, he once possessed the strong and courageous traits that Beowulf has when fighting Grendel and the mother of Grendel. Despite Hrothgar's current weakened state, he was once a strong warrior whose qualities were alike those of Beowulf. The king of The Danes is unable to fight, but is still described as a "gray-locked warrior, giver of rings." (Beowulf 50). From the perspective of an Anglo-Saxon, Hrothgar may be seen as a good king not for who he was during the time of Grendel, but rather for the battles he has fought in the past. The king of The Danes had already proven himself in previous battles, and thus his people had no reason to doubt his credibility as a ruler.

Furthermore, even though Beowulf came to fight a battle that was not his own, he still shows great respect for the king. "Then did the heroes, Hrothgar and Beowulf, salute each other" (Beowulf 51). Both kings are referred to as heroes despite their contrasting method of ruling and dealing with problems that arise, primarily the demon Grendel. Is this due to their ability to rule despite their differing methods of doing so? Or is it due to the fact that Hrothgar was once a warrior himself?

Beowulf seems like the ideal ruler for a majority of the tale, yet he falls short in the end and chooses an alternate path compared to Hrothgar, which costs Beowulf his life. Realistically, no matter how smart Hrothgar is or how strong he was in his youth, the old king would have died in a fight against Grendel. He acknowledges his shortcomings and allows a young warrior to fight his battle so he may continue to lead his people. This is a quality that Beowulf lacks, as he

goes on to battle a dragon that terrorizes his people, not realizing that his chances of survival at such an old age were slim. The king of the Geats could have followed the example of Hrothgar and allowed a younger warrior to fight his battles but instead remains cocky in his past abilities. He claims that “while I live, I shall always do battle.” (Beowulf 92). This could be seen as admirable, as the old king is willing to fight once more for the sake of others, or downright stupid, as he embarks on a battle that he will not return from. Beowulf had already proven himself to be a noble warrior, yet in his death he has failed to be a good king, for now the Geatish people are at the mercy of their enemies.

Hrothgar couldn't fight but he could lead while Beowulf displayed the opposite. Which one of their succeeding values makes them a good king? Analyzing this question from a present day perspective, it's clear that we highly favor sapientia, the wisdom of a leader. While we don't have kings anymore, we do have elected presidents that serve as modern day kings, and hopefully one day a queen. When a candidate is running for president, they engage in political debates and other displays of knowledge. We look for experience and a general understanding of what their role entails for the civilians. We don't have the candidates arm wrestle, and the winner claims the presidency. Most of our leaders didn't even serve in the military, our modern dragon to be slayed.

Our priorities as a society have changed but that does not mean that we can't learn from the Old English stories. Courage and strength are still important values, just a little bit less so than they were in the 6th century.