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Abstract

Sees a number of parallels between Ransom (in *Perelandra*) and *Beowulf*—both in personal characteristics and the details of battles with their respective foes.

Additional Keywords

Beowulf—Characters—Beowulf; Beowulf—Influence on C.S. Lewis; Lewis, C.S.—Characters—Ransom; Lewis, C.S. *Perelandra*—Depiction of war

Battle Strategy in Perelandra: Beowulf Revisited

Darlene Logan

Heroic, kingly qualities are archetypal; we are, however, sometimes inclined to associate exclusively physical prowess with ancient heroes and superior intellectual capabilities with the modern. Yet when the poet put words of praise for Beowulf's kingly qualities into the mouth of Hrothgar—

Pu eart mægenes strang þond on mode frod,
wise word-cwida. (1845-1846)

--Hrothgar commends Beowulf for being both mighty in strength and wise in mind and speech. And when C.S. Lewis endows Ransom in *Perelandra* with heroic qualities (that foreshadow Ransom's becoming the Pendragon of Logres in *That Hideous Strength*), he too becomes a hero who combines those elements of physical bravery with spiritual and intellectual superiority.

Without question Beowulf had proven himself to be a splendid warrior—from the incident in his youth when he challenged and swam with his friend Breca in the open sea for five nights to his fearlessly entering the territory of Hrothgar with only a handful of men at his command and single-handedly combating Grendel at Heorot and Grendel's mother in her sea-witch cave. But, as Hrothgar noted, a potential king needed more attributes than physical skill in battle and valor; he also had to possess a certain dexterity with words (Beowulf was remarkably glib at court: one need only recall his poignant response to Unferth's verbal attack)—a rather natural, easy dexterity because of an intellectual and spiritual superiority. Articulate, shrewd, gracious, wise: Beowulf combined those attributes with his mighty strength remarkably well.

While Ransom, a philologist by profession, seems, at least at first glance, hardly a likely candidate for Geatish princehood, he does, nevertheless, embody those archetypal, kingly qualities which Beowulf had proven himself to possess. And while Ransom, with his first shaky steps on the floating islands of *Perelandra*, with his two-toned body (brownish-red and leprous white) that the Green Lady could not help but laugh at, displays little of the poised brilliance with which Beowulf dazzles first the Danish coast guard and then the entire Danish court, Ransom does, nonetheless, grow in stature throughout the course of the novel to eventually embody all of those qualities which Beowulf appears so naturally to possess. That Ransom by the very nature of his mission to *Perelandra*—to counter the Un-man's assault on the planet's new Eve—should be an intellectually and spiritually superior person is accepted immediately; but that he might actually have to combat Weston-Satan is less readily apparent. As a matter of fact, one of the supreme tests of Ransom was the little war that waged within himself in finally admitting and accepting the fact that he would have to face the Un-man in battle:

He sat straight upright again, his heart beating wildly against his side...it must be a deception, risen from his own mind. It stood to reason that a struggle with the Devil meant a spiritual struggle...the notion of physical combat was only fit for a savage...the habit of imaginative honesty was too deeply engrained in Ransom to let him toy for more than a second with the pretence that he feared bodily strife with the Un-man less than he feared anything else. Vivid pictures crowded upon him...the deadly cold of those hands...the long metallic nails...ripping narrow strips of flesh, pulling out tendons (p. 143).

Thus what Beowulf the hero of old takes as a matter of course—that he will fight to the death Grendel, the sea-

witch, or any foe be it dragon or man—Ransom must learn to accept. But accept he does, and remarkably well, for the outcome of the fight, while bitter and painful, is favorable: the Un-man is defeated, Venus' Green Lady is saved from Earth's Eve's fate, and Ransom emerges heroic in every sense. Thus the kingly qualities praised in Beowulf by Hrothgar can also be said of Ransom.

And yet Lewis, in Ransom's battle with the Devil, does more than simply have his protagonist emulate those noble qualities which Beowulf (indeed, any real hero) possesses. No, there exists more than this archetypal similarity between Beowulf and Ransom. I feel that Lewis has deliberately borrowed from and embellished those pre-battle and battle scenes between Beowulf and those two outcast creatures that plagued Heorot. I feel that the very battle strategy of *Perelandra* echoes much of what is found in the first part of *Beowulf*.

The villains of both works—perhaps they are archetypal too—are referred to repeatedly as outcasts, and much of the description of them is concentrated on the power and evil-doings of their claw-like hands: Grendel tears his victims apart and devours them while the Un-man tortures helpless creatures, catching them in his long hands and ripping their flesh from their heads down their backs.

That Grendel will meet his match in Beowulf is established, for just as Grendel has been able to take on thirty men in one encounter, so Beowulf is said to have the power of thirty in his strong hands. Ransom, initially fearful that he will be outmatched by demonic strength lying in wait in the body of Weston, realizes early in the fight that the two bodies are evenly matched. Rather "unheroically," Lewis writes:

On the physical plane it was one middle-aged scholar against another. Weston had been the more powerfully built of the two men, but he was fat; his body would not take punishment well. Ransom was nimbler and better breathed. ...It was a fair match (p. 155).

Before each battle, after Beowulf would pray to God and then leave the outcome of the battle in His hands, Beowulf would engender within himself a righteous anger, bad bolgenmod. This anger seemed to give him the drive, the determination, to combat his enemy with every bit of the physical and mental strength he needed to fight a good fight. During the battle with the Un-man Ransom, even shouting a line from *Maldon* (boast words, perhaps?), experiences this same kind of righteous anger:

Then an experience...came over him—a torrent of perfectly unmixed and lawful hatred. The energy of hating, never before felt without some guilt...rose into his arms and legs till he felt that they were pillars of burning blood...this filled Ransom not with horror but with a kind of joy. The joy came from finding at last what hatred was made for (pp. 156-157).

In the actual fight with Grendel, Beowulf is weaponless: he depends upon his hand-strength to defeat the enemy that has plagued Hrothgar's court for many years. Ransom, too, must fight weaponless; he uses the skills which he had developed as a young boxer in preparatory school. And, like Beowulf, he tries to fling himself upon his enemy and hold onto him to the death that he feels his hands must administer:

His hands taught him terrible things. He felt its ribs break, he heard its jaw-bone crack.

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literature could give. Lewis found more adequate the picture of someone studying English from its beginnings to 1830, getting the rest by himself, than someone studying literature from 1830 to the present and being ignorant of the beginnings.⁷

This emphasis on the importance of the early literatures of English helps us grasp Lewis's understanding of the poet's task to write in a public, classical, and objective frame. It was this poetry that Lewis was immersed in, a poetry often read aloud to the court audiences and gatherings in large halls which hardly permitted private images and esoteric metaphors. The earlier literature not only emphasized but fed upon stock responses to centralized conventions: "Once again, the old critics were quite right when they said that poetry 'instructed by delighting', for poetry was formerly one of the chief means whereby each new generation learned, not to copy, but by copying to make, the good stock responses."⁸ Lewis had been reiterating the necessity of the stock responses, an emphasis closely allied to his emphasis on the natural law. For it was the natural law, for Lewis ingrained in human nature, that showed a man what he ought to do, not that he always did what he ought. It was the natural law which taught the stock responses through the help of poetry, a conventionalized society, and a cosmic model which took account of the natural law. Now poetry had changed, society's conventions were no longer explicitly undergirded by religious forces or the natural law, and the model of the universe was physical and physiological in emphasis rather than metaphysical.

I think that the difference between these two worlds can be adequately focused for us in some poetic banter between Kingsley Amis and Lewis on *Beowulf*. After quoting Tolkien's line, "There is not much poetry in the world like this," Mr. Amis begins:

So, bored with dragons, he lay down to sleep,
Locking for the last time his hoard of words
(Thorkelin's transcript B), forgetting now
The hope of heathens, muddled thoughts on fate.

Councils would have to get along without him;
The peerless prince had taken his last bribe
(Zupitza's reading); useless now the byrnie
Hard and hand-locked, fit for a baseball catcher.

Consider now what this king had not done:
Never was human, never lay with women
(Weak conjugation), never saw quite straight
Children of men or the bright bowl of heaven.

Someone has told us this man was a hero.
But what have we to learn in following
His tedious journey to his ancestors
(An instance of Old English harking-back)?⁹

Through his jesting, Mr. Amis is posing some important questions and judgments. His questions are those a modern would ask an ancient. If Mr. Amis was an ancient or if he was sympathetic to the interests and the concerns of *Beowulf* and the ancient literatures, he would probably pose different questions. Mr. Amis first judges *Beowulf* inhuman and thus in some sense inadequate because sexual relations were not central to him, as they seem to us moderns. He also asks what importance might there lie in studying the old literatures, in journeying back to *Beowulf* and his ancestors. The second question Lewis spent a lifetime answering. The first Lewis responded to with this double couplet:

Why is to fight (if such our fate)
Less 'human' than to copulate,
When Gib the cat, I'll take my oath,¹⁰
Wins higher marks than you for both?

Notes

I. Introductory

¹C.S. Lewis, *Preface to Paradise Lost* (1942; rpt. New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1961), p. 92.

²See George L. K. Morris, "Marie, Marie, Hold on Tight," *T. S. Eliot*, ed. Hugh Kenner (Englewood-Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1962), pp. 86-88.

³Walter Hooper, "Preface," *Selected Literary Essays* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1969), p. ix.

⁴Chad Walsh, "C. S. Lewis: The Man and the Mystery," *Shadows of Imagination*, ed. M. R. Hillegas (Carbondale: Southern Illinois Univ. Press, 1969), pp. 9, 10.

⁵Walter Hooper, "Preface," *Selected Literary Essays*, p. viii.

⁶Helen Gardner, "Clive Staples Lewis, 1898-1963," *The Proceedings of the British Academy*, 51 (1965), 422, 423.

⁷C. S. Lewis, "Our English Syllabus," *Rehabilitations* (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1939), pp. 90-1. This essay and "The Idea of an 'English School'," are the two defenses Lewis gave for the Final Honour School of English Syllabus.

⁸C. S. Lewis, *Preface to Paradise Lost*, p. 57.

⁹Kingsley Amis, "Beowulf," *Essays in Criticism*, 4 (Jan. 1954), 85.

¹⁰C. S. Lewis, "To Mr. Kingsley Amis on His Late Verses," *Essays in Criticism*, 4 (April 1954), 190. This is one of the six poems not printed in the posthumous *Poems*, edited by Walter Hooper.

Special Events

ANNOUNCEMENT of a Special Session on J. R. R. Tolkien at the Annual Meeting of the Missouri Philological Association, March 24-26, 1983 at Missouri Western State College, St. Joseph, Missouri. The aim of the session is to reach an understanding of Tolkien's achievement as it stands ten years after his death and as it is likely to develop thereafter. Send abstracts and requests for conference information to: Barbara Gitenstein, Dept. of English, Central Missouri State Univ., Warrensburg, Missouri 64093. Deadline for abstracts is Dec. 10, 1982. Send requests regarding session information to the session chairman: Dale W. Simpson, Dept. of English, Missouri Southern State College, Joplin, Missouri 64801.

BATTLE STRATEGY continued from page 19

The whole creature seemed to be cracking and splitting under his blows (p. 156).

But just as with Grendel, Weston retreats. *Beowulf*, however, had severed Grendel's arm from his body, and the enemy of the Danish people ran away to die. With the later attack by the monster's mother, *Beowulf* realizes that he must face another enemy, and he meets her in her sea-cave. To do battle with her, *Beowulf* must plunge into the water, facing both her and other sea-enemies along his descending journey. So too must Ransom make this sea journey and descend into a kind of hell in order to completely rid *Perelandra* of the devilish scourge. In part of the flight with the sea-witch, *Beowulf* is straddled by her and she attempts to kill him with her dagger. In *Perelandra* it is Ransom who is actually astride his enemy's chest, squeezing its throat with both hands. And when the enemies are killed, both heroes address themselves to a kind of head-booty: *Beowulf* severs Grendel's head from his body to take it to Heorot; Ransom, to assure himself that Satan in the body of Weston is truly dead, hurls a stone as hard as he can into the Un-man's face, smashing it beyond all recognition, leaving it with hardly anything that could be called a head. Both heroes then have faced and defeated almost overwhelming enemies, both emerging victorious to become kings in their own right--appropriate examples of those heroes which blend physical strength with wisdom.