

Why does Beowulf try to fight without a warrior band?

—with comparative reference to other Old English

and Old Icelandic heroic literature

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1. Introduction

In many Germanic heroic poems, we can often attract our attention to the scenes in that the heroes fight against monsters. According to *Beowulf*, there are the scenes of Beowulf's fights against two ogres and a dragon. Why does he decide to fight alone against tough monsters? Why does not he fight with many vassals to defeat the monsters without difficulty from the beginning? It is certain to be said that Beowulf has the strength of thirty men;

ðonne sægdon þæt sælipende,
 þa ðe gifsceattas Geata fyredon
 þyder to þance, þæt he þritiges
 manna mægen-cræft on his mundgripe
 heaþorof hæbbe.
 (A crew of seamen who sailed for me once
 With a gift-cargo across to Geatland
 Returned with marvellous tales about him:
 A thane, they declared, with the strength of thirty
 In the grip of each hand.)¹

And thus it may be natural that he should have the ability to fight alone against such monsters. In the scene of his fight against the dragon, he finally fights with his attendant, Wiglaf, but Beowulf was, at first, resolved to fight alone;

ne gemet mannes,
þæt he wið aglæcean
eorlscype efne.
gold gegangan,
feorhbealu frecne,
(This fight is not yours,
Nor is it up to any men except me
To measure his strength against the monster
Or to prove his worth. I shall win the gold
By my courage, or else mortal combat,
Doom of battle, will bear your lord away.)²

¹ *Beowulf*, ll. 376-81. (with Seamus Heaney's translation in parentheses. The rest is omitted.)

² *Beowulf*, ll. 2532-37.

Nobody knows whether he wished to need others' help for the fight. He must have some reasons to be forced to make a decision to fight in the situation. Furthermore, the situation may have resulted from common conceptions among the Germanic heroic culture. Now, I will show some points of view concerning the acts with the comparison between other Old English and Old Icelandic literature. The points to discuss will be three; hero's superhuman strength, heroism and loyalty. When these elements are combined together, heroes in Germanic literature are apt to decide to move into action of their lone fighting. For readers, the scenes may be more impressive than other parts of the stories.

2. Preliminary to the discussion

It should be admitted that Beowulf is not alone in the scenes of the battles. In his fight against Grendel, his followers attack the monster with their swords when Grendel wishes to go back to his den;

	þær genehost brægd
eorl Beowulfes	ealde lafe,
wolde freadrihtnes	feorh ealgian,
mæres þeodnes,	ðær hie meahton swa.

(Time and again,
Beowulf's warriors worked to defend
Their lord's life, laying about them
As best they could with their ancestral blades.)³

In the next against his mother, in order to find her den, the king Hrothgar takes Beowulf and his followers along there;

	Wisa fengel
geatolic gende;	gumfeþa stop
lindhæbbendra.	

(The wise king mounted
The royal saddle and rode out in style
With a force of shield-bearers.)⁴

In the last fight of Beowulf, he and his eleven followers go to the battle field to destroy the dragon, and moreover, one of his followers even helps him to fight against the monster;

Gewat þa twelfa sum	torne gebolgen
dryhten Geata	dracan sceawian.

(The lord of the Geats took eleven comrades
And went in a rage to reconnoiter.)⁵

Though the poem shows the fact that Beowulf does not fight alone, his superhuman strength always causes his determination to fight alone, when he fights against the monsters in each battle. On the other hand, Beowulf does fight alone in that sense that, for example, he actually does not fight the dragon alone, but does try and decide to fight alone.

³ *Beowulf*, ll. 794-96.

⁴ *Beowulf*, ll. 1400-1402.

⁵ *Beowulf*, ll. 2401-402 and 2604-10.

3. Superhuman strength in battle

In the scenes of Beowulf's fighting against the monsters, one of the reasons of his decision to fight alone is his superhuman strength in battle. In *Beowulf*, we can find some description of the nature of Beowulf's superhumanness in battle, with the exception of the aforesaid one. In order to find the den of Grendel's mother, Beowulf jumps into the mere, but if he were a normal human, he could not stay under water all the day;

æfter þæm wordum Wedergeata leod
efste mid elne, nalas ondsware
bidan wolde; brimwylm onfeng
hilderince. ða wæs hwil dæges
ær he þone grundwong ongytan mehte.
(After those words, the prince of the Weather-Geats
Was important to be away and plunged suddenly:
Without more ado, he dived into the hearing
Depth of the lake. It was the best part of a day
Before he could see the solid bottom.)⁶

Likewise, he floats on the sea in winter and fights by himself against the monsters in the sea;

ða wit ætsomne on sæ wæron
fif nihta fyrst, oppæt unc flod todraf,
wado weallende, wedera cealdost,
nipende niht, ond norþanwind
heaðogrim ondhwearf; hreo wæron yþa.
...
Me to grunde teah
fah feondscaða, fæste hæfde
grim on grape; hwæpre me gyfeþe wearð
þæt ic aglæcan orde geræhte,
hildebille; heaþoræs fornam
mihtig meredeor þurh mine hand.
(Shoulder to Shoulder, we struggled on
For fire nights, until the long flow
And pitch of the waves, the perishing cold,
Night falling and winds from the north
Drove us apart.
...
Kept me safe when some ocean creature
Pulled me to the bottom. Pinioned fast
And swathed in its grip, I was granted one
Final chance: my sword plunged
And the ordeal was over. Through my own hands,
The fury of battle had finished off the sea-beast.)⁷

⁶ *Beowulf*, ll. 1492-96.

⁷ *Beowulf*, ll. 544-46, 553-58.

Equally, however, his followers may realise that they are no help to the hero because of a lack of superhuman strength like Beowulf's. Thus, he also may realise that he must fight alone and then actually makes up his mind to do so. Just before his fight against a dragon, Beowulf tells his followers that the dragon is not equal to them except for him;

Nis þæt eower sið
 ne gemet mannes, nefne min anes,
 þæt he wið aglæcean eofodo dæle,
 eorlscype efne.
 (This fight is not yours,
 Nor is it up to any man except me
 To measure his strength against the monster
 Or to prove his worth.)⁸

In Beowulf's fight against a dragon, most of his followers flee from the battlefield.⁹ However, the reason for their fleeing may be not only cowardice but also their thought that their assistance for Beowulf's fighting against the dragon is no help. Heroes are given superior gifts in order to achieve their goals by their own power.¹⁰ In the case of Grettir, in Grettis Saga, we can perceive his superhuman strength from the speech of a housewife when he helps her across the river.¹¹ She does not know if he is a human or a troll, as he has superhuman strength. Indeed, he can fight alone against a she-troll, which has terrible power for fighting, after helping the woman.¹² Thus, superhuman strength is necessary for hero to fight against the monsters equally.

When fighting the monsters, Beowulf and Sigurðr, in *Völsunga saga*, both fight alone. According to Sigurðr, there is the scene of the lone fight against a dragon, as the episode is also included in *Beowulf*.¹³ Sigurðr makes a surprise attack on the dragon and thus he slays it easily. His deed seems to be an unfair attack, but still to slay a dragon alone is an abnormal thing. However, when fighting human beings, Beowulf and Sigurðr both fight alongside other warriors. In *Beowulf*, Beowulf assists Hygelac's side when the king advances in Frisia and dies there;

No þæt læsest wæs
 hondgemota, þær mon Hygelac sloh,
 syððan Geata cyning guðe ræsum,
 freawine folca Freslondum on,
 Hreðles eafora hiorodryncum swealt,
 bille gebeaten. þonan Biowulf com
 sylfes cræfte, sundnytte dreah;
 (One of his cruellest
 Hand-to-hand encounters had happened
 When Hygelac, King of the Geats, was killed

⁸ *Beowulf*, ll. 2532-35.

⁹ *Beowulf*, ll. 2596-99.

¹⁰ C. M. Bowra, *Heroic Poetry* (London: Macmillan, 1952), p. 91.

¹¹ *Grettir's Saga*, trans. by Denton Fox and Hermann Pálsson (Toronto, University Toronto Press, 1974), p. 136 (Chapter 64).

¹² *Grettir's Saga*, p. 137 (Chapter 64).

¹³ *Völsunga Saga; or, The Saga of the Volsungs*, ed. and trans. by R. G. Finch (London: Nelson, 1965), p. 20 (Chapter 20) and *Beowulf*, ll. 874-97.

In Friesland: the people's friend and lord,
 Hrethel's son, slaked a sword blade's
 Thirst for blood. But Beowulf's prodigious
 Gifts as a swimmer guaranteed his safety;)¹⁴

On the other hand, Sigurðr, in the Icelandic saga, is provided for a large force in order to avenge his father's death against the king Lyngvi.¹⁵ Therefore, their superhuman strength seems to be shown in their lone fights rather than in wars with many warriors.

Heroes have to gain the superhuman strength in order to fight equally against their opponents. In Beowulf's fight against Grendel's mother, the poem states that he can gain the victory for the sake of God;

Hæfde ða forsiðod sunu Ecgþeowes
 under gynne grund, Geata cempa,
 nemne him heaðobyrne helpe gefremede,
 herenet hearde, ond halig god
 geweold wigsigor; witig drihten,
 rodera rædend, hit on ryht gesced
 yðelice, syþðan he eft astod.
 (The son of Ecgtheow would have surely perished
 And the Geats lost their warrior under the wide earth
 Had the strong links and locks of his war-gear
 Not helped to save him: holy God
 Decided the victory. It was easy for the Lord,
 The Ruler of Heaven, to redress the balance
 Once Beowulf got back up on his feet.)¹⁶

Even though he is not alone in the fight, he is given superhuman strength by God to put him against the monster. The subject is only Beowulf in the scene, and he actually defeats the monster by the power. The superhuman strength must be one of the reasons that he chooses to fight alone with monsters.

4. Heroism – to acquire a reputation

Heroic poetry is 'the generic term for a tradition of narrative poetry in many ancient, medieval and modern cultures, which celebrates the mighty deeds of heroes, whose socially determined code of honour is tested in circumstances commonly involving physical risk'.¹⁷ Heroic deeds may arise from the acquisition of reputations among the hero's people. In the poem *Beowulf*, Beowulf also aims to gain his personal reputation by his lone fights against the monsters. In order to acquire such a reputation, heroes must take on the hard task, which may cause their death in their fighting, by themselves. Beowulf is determined to take a great risk and to fight against Grendel;

Onsend Higelace, gif mec hild nime,

¹⁴ Beowulf, ll. 2354-60.

¹⁵ *Völsunga Saga*, p. 29-30 (Chapter 17).

¹⁶ Beowulf, ll. 1550-56.

¹⁷ *The Blackwell Encyclopaedia of Anglo-Saxon England*, ed. by Michael Lapidge and others (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999), p. 236.

beaduscruda betst, þæt mine breost wereð,
 hrægla selest; þæt is Hrædlan laf,
 Welandes geweorc. Gæð a wyrd swa hio scel.
 (If the battle takes me, send back
 This breast-webbing that Weland fashioned
 And Hrethel gave me, to Lord Hygelac.
 Fate goes ever as fate must.)¹⁸

This emphasises his heroism. In so doing, his goal is to gain a reputation. After he comes back to Denmark, he is warmly welcomed by the king Hygelac and Beowulf speaks of his success;

Biowulf maðelode, bearn Ecgðioes:
 “þæt is undyrne, dryhten Higelac,
 micel gemeting, monegum fira,
 hwylc orleghwil uncer Grendles
 wearð on ðam wange, þær he worna fela
 Sigescyldingum sorge gefremede,
 yrmðe to aldre. Ic ðæt eall gewræc,
 swa begylpan ne þearf Grendes maga
 ænig ofer eorðan uhthlem þone,
 se ðe lengest leofað laðan cynnes,
 facne bifongen. Ic ðær furðum cwom
 to ðam hringsele Hroðgar gretan;
 sona me se mæra mago Healfdenes,
 syððan he modsefan minne cuðe,
 wið his sylfes sunu setl getæhte.
 Weorod wæs on wynne; ne seah ic widan feorh
 under heofones hwealf healsittendra
 medudream maran.
 (Beowulf, son of Ecgtheow, spoke:
 “What happened, Lord Hygelac, is hardly a secret
 Any more among men in this world –
 Myself and Grendel coming to grips
 On the very spot where he visited destruction
 On the Victory-Shieldings and violated
 Life and limb, losses I avenged
 So no earthly offspring of Grendel’s
 Need ever boast of that bout before dawn,
 No matter how long the last of his evil
 Family survives. When I first landed
 I hastened to the ring-hall and saluted Hrothgar
 Once he discovered why I had come
 The son of Halfdane sent me immediately
 To sit with his own sons on the bench.
 It was a happy seen gathering. In my whole life
 I have never seen mead enjoyed more

¹⁸ *Beowulf*, ll. 452-55.

In any hall on earth.)¹⁹

Heroes seem to need reputations in their own kingdom, particularly distinguishing themselves in marvelous exploits in battle. Thus, in order to establish heroic characters, fighting against ogres would be the most fitting. The extermination of Grendel is Beowulf's voluntary task, and Beowulf can take advantage of the very situation to earn a great reputation for himself. The reputation he gains from his competing with monsters must be more admirable than that from his fight against human warrior troops as a member of them. Famous warriors aim to achieve a lasting reputation.²⁰ Beowulf's determination of fighting alone against the monsters must be the manifestation for building up his own reputation.

In *Grettis saga*, Bjorn accuses Grettir falsely and says that Grettir wants to win fame by his lone fight against a fierce bear.²¹ Afterwards, Grettir defeats the bear admirably and he is praised by his company. In that case, even though he does not intend to acquire such fame as Bjorn says, he must be anxious to show his mettle by fighting alone against the savage bear. The situation seems to yield Grettir's wish to get his personal reputation to some degree. The scene is often compared with that of the dialogue between Beowulf and Unferth, because the characteristics of Bjorn are similar to those of Unferth.²² If the scene in *Grettis Saga* is a parallel to Beowulf's encounter with Unferth, we may infer that Grettir must be as concerned to preserve his reputation from Bjorn's speech as Beowulf regards Unferth's. Accordingly, the poem which Grettir recites can be seen as a parallel to Beowulf's answer to Unferth.²³ Grettir's poem is his counterargument to Bjorn, and therefore he does not wish to fail his reputation on his success in the fight. Hero may be afraid to lose a reputation.

Moreover, Beowulf may regard his fair fighting against his opponent as significant. He makes up his mind to fight against Grendel without his weapon;

Ic þæt þonne forhicge swa me Higelac sie,
min mondrihten, modes bliðe,
þæt ic sweord bere oþðe sidne scyld,
geolorand to guþe, ac ic mid grape sceal
fon wið feonde ond ymb feorh sacan,
lað wið laþum; ðær gelyfan sceal
dryhtnes dome se þe hine deað nimeð.
(Therefore, to heightened Hygelac's fame
And gladden his heart, I hereby renounce
Sword and the shelter of the broad shield,
The heavy war-board: hand-to-hand
Is how it will be, a life-and death
Fight with the fiend. Whichever one death fells
Must deem it a just judgement by God.)²⁴

This wish, as a result, is not fulfilled, as his followers attack Grendel with their sword in the course of his fighting;

¹⁹ *Beowulf*, ll. 1999-2016.

²⁰ Katherine O'Brien O'Keefe, 'Heroic values and Christian ethics', in *The Cambridge Companion to Old English Literature*, ed. by Malcolm Godden and Michael Lapidge (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), p. 108.

²¹ *Grettir's Saga*, p. 48 (Chapter 21).

²² Andy Orchard, *Pride and Prodigies: Studies in the Monsters of the Beowulf-Manuscript* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1995), p. 147-48.

²³ *Grettir's Saga*, p. 49 (Chapter 21).

²⁴ *Beowulf*, ll. 435-41.

eorl Beowulfes	þær genehost brægd
wolde freadrihtnes	ealde lafe,
mæres þeodnes,	feorh ealgian,
Hie þæt ne wiston,	ðær hie meahton swa.
heardhicgende	þa hie gewin drugin,
ond on healfa gehwone	hildemecgas,
sawle secan,	heawan þohton,
ænig ofer eorþan	þone synscaðan
guðbilla nan,	ireнна cyst,
ac he sigewæpnum	gretan nolde,
ecga gehwylcre.	forsworen hæfde,

(Time and again
 Beowulf's warriors worked to defend
 Their lord's life, laying about them
 As best they could with their ancestral blades.
 Stalwart in action, they kept striking out
 On every side, seeking to cut
 Straight to the soul. When they joined the struggle
 There was something they could not have known at the time,
 That no blade on earth, no blacksmith's art
 Could ever damage their demon opponent.
 He had conjectured the harm from cutting edge
 Of every weapon.)²⁵

But, Beowulf himself fights against Grendel without weapons from beginning to end in the battle, and moreover the poet tells us that swords are no help to cut the monster as all his followers fail to inflict a wound.²⁶

Afterwards, Unferth, who rebuked Beowulf before the fighting against Grendel, has no choice but to accept the success of Beowulf's undertaking.²⁷ To defeat the monster makes him hero and gives him a reputation. It may be heroes' virtue that is the both sides are on even ground with each other in battle. Beowulf, at least, has the spirit whenever he fights, for, in the fight against Grendel's mother in the den and the final one against a dragon, he makes his decision to challenge the monsters by himself, though he will consequently receive his follower's support in the battle with the dragon. In spite of the support of his follower, Beowulf himself has the determined volition to fight against the monster alone, and it is the spirit that heroes must be equipped with. Heroes tend to fight alone against the strong opponents in order to gain their personal reputation.

5. Display of strong loyalty to superiors or followers

It is common that heroes pay the painful price for their loyalty to their superiors or followers. Thus they usually run the risk of losing their lives for their duties. This conception, which is the principle of personal allegiance between individual warriors, seems to be de-

²⁵ *Beowulf*, ll. 798-803.

²⁶ *Beowulf*, ll. 804-805.

²⁷ *Beowulf*, ll. 980-84.

picted as the Germanic social identity.²⁸ In Old English poems, there are many descriptions about the relationship. In *The Battle of Maldon*, After Byrhtnoth is killed by the Vikings, some warriors resolve to fight for their lord in the battle, only to die.²⁹ Some of his followers show loyalty to the dead king, but others flee from the field, forsaking their lord.³⁰ Moreover, in *The Wanderer*, which is categorised into the elegiac poetry, we can also find that warriors always seek for the lord-retainer relationship.³¹ Beowulf, of course, has his intense loyalty too.³² However, as he is an outstanding hero, different from other warriors, he may be an exception. He seems to have to make up for an unreasonable demand and misarrangement by his superiors or followers in terms of his absolute loyalty for them;

	Ic þæs Hroðgar mæg
þurh rumne sefan	ræd gelæran,
hu he frod ond god	feond oferswyðeþ,
...	
“Ne sorga, snotor guma;	selre bið æghwæm
þæt he his freond wrece,	þonne he fela murne.
Ure æghwylc sceal	ende gebidan
worolde lifes;	wyrce se þe mote
domes ær deape;	þæt bið drihtguman
unlifgendum	æfter selest.
Aris, rices weard,	uton raþe feran
Grendles magan	gang sceawigan.
(I can show the wise Hrothgar a way To defeat his enemy and find respite	
...	
“Wise sir, do not grieve. It is always better To avenge dear ones than to indulge in mourning. For every one of us, living in this world Means waiting for our end. Let whoever can Win glory before death. When a warrior is gone, That will be his best and only bulwark. So arise, my lord, and let us immediately Set forth on the trail of this troll-dam.) ³³	

He has to tackle the difficult problems to show the greatest loyalty for his people as a great hero. The result is his determination of the sole fight against the monsters. Particularly, in the scene of his fight against the dragon, Beowulf recognises the root cause of the disaster, which is given rise to by the slave of his retainer, but nevertheless, he is resolved to clean up the mess which the slave creates by himself;

Nealles mid gewealdum	wyrmhord abræc
sylfes willum,	se ðe him sare gesceod,
ac for þreanedlan	þeow nathwylces

²⁸ Michael D. Cherniss, *Ingeld and Christ* (The Hague: Mouton, 1972), p. 30.

²⁹ *The Battle of Maldon*, ll. 202-28.

³⁰ *The Battle of Maldon*, ll. 185-97.

³¹ *The Wanderer*, ll. 26-29.

³² *Beowulf*, ll.407-18.

³³ *Beowulf*, ll. 277-79, 1384-91.

hæleða bearna heteswengeas fleah,
 ærnes þearfa, ond ðær inne fealh,
 secg synbysig, sona onfunde
 þæt þær ðam gyste gryrebroga stod;
 (The intruder who broached the dragon's treasure
 And moved him to wrath had never meant to.
 It was desperation on the part of a slave
 Fleeting the heavy hand of some master,
 Guilt-ridden and on the run,
 Going to ground. But he soon began
 To shake with terror;)³⁴

He seems to have stronger solidarity with his people after he acceded to the throne of the Geats than before. His motivation for the fighting is derived from the loyalty when he fights against Grendel and his mother for Hrothgar.³⁵ Beowulf is well qualified to be called a hero, because he can show his loyalty to anyone whatever may happen. Single combats with monsters are the very chances where heroes can show their loyalty for their people. According to Beowulf's fight against the dragon, he finally received Wiglaf's help to destroy it. However, it is important for heroes to make his decision to fight alone in advance and to fight actually by himself, but not to accept others' help. He must not have wished the assistance at least in the early stage of the fight. Wiglaf, who may not be a hero in the true sense, is also a warrior showing loyalty to his king according to Germanic identity. Heroes, who have stronger loyalties for their people, may be inclined to fight alone in order to accomplish the duties.

6. Conclusion

Though Beowulf never fights alone against any opponent, He always makes a decision to fight alone before his fighting. It must be most important for a hero, like Beowulf, to show his mettle in the face of the battle, even though he actually does not fight alone. In particular, it seems that a hero gives full play to his ability in fighting against monsters. In order to fight against monsters, a hero must be provided with superhuman strength in opposition to the extraordinary strength of the monsters. Moreover, fighting against monsters must be the best chance for a hero to acquire a reputation. And then, the fight is often demanded by the people who need to settle their problem. In *Beowulf*, he shows great loyalty for the kings and his people. Beowulf's resolution to fight alone against the monsters must be brought by the harmony of the three elements: his supernatural strength, a reputation and loyalty. Therefore, it seems to be natural that he performs heroic deeds in the fights against the monsters because of his ability and situation, and Germanic identity. He certainly owns all of the elements as a hero in the Germanic poetry.

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³⁴ *Beowulf*, ll. 2221-26.

³⁵ *Beowulf*, ll. 1384-91.

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