

## HEROIC IDEAS IN BEOWULF AND LE MORTE D'ARTHUR: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF MEDIEVAL HEROISM

Scientific advisor: Eldorbek Erkin o'g'li Khamitov

A senior lecturer, Chirchik state pedagogical university

e-mail: [khamitoveldorbek@gmail.com](mailto:khamitoveldorbek@gmail.com)

Student of CSPU

Department English language and theory

Saidova Iroda Ma'rufxonovna

[saidovairodaxon95@gmail.com](mailto:saidovairodaxon95@gmail.com)

### Abstract

The figure of the Indo-European Hero is deeply multifaceted, embodying both the highest virtues and the most destructive impulses of human nature. While heroes often reflect the most admirable ideals of their societies, they also carry within them a capacity for violence that can threaten even those they are meant to protect. In *The Medieval Hero*, Dr. Connell Monette explores a broad spectrum of heroic narratives from Celtic, Persian, and Anglo-Saxon traditions, uncovering the underlying truths about heroism—its origins, defining traits, sources of power, and the principles of the Heroic Code. Demonstrating remarkable expertise in historical languages, Monette presents readers with original excerpts alongside English translations from Classical Persian, Old Irish, Old English, and Classical Greek. This work provides valuable insight into the heroic figure in ancient and medieval epics and offers readers the tools to recognize key themes in contemporary reinterpretations of the heroic genre. A comparative analysis of *Beowulf* and *Le Morte d'Arthur* reveals a clear evolution in the concept of heroism—from the pagan model focused on individual strength and battlefield glory to the medieval ideal shaped by chivalric values and communal responsibility. Whereas *Beowulf* highlights extraordinary physical power and personal bravery as the essence of a hero, *Le Morte d'Arthur* emphasizes loyalty, humility, and moral integrity as essential qualities for knights striving to uphold Arthur's vision of a

righteous and unified kingdom. Despite these differences, both works preserve fundamental heroic principles such as courage, honor, and devotion to one's people, while also exploring the influence of fate and the moral expectations of their respective societies.

**Key words:** Heroism, Medieval Hero, Heroic Code, Chivalry, Courage, Cultural Values, Strength and Morality, Epic Traditions, Anglo-Saxon Literature, Mythological Archetypes.

### **Аннотация**

Фигура индоевропейского героя глубоко многогранна, воплощающая как высшие добродетели, так и самые разрушительные порывы человеческой природы. Хотя герои часто отражают наиболее почитаемые идеалы своих обществ, в них также присутствует склонность к насилию, которая способна угрожать даже тем, кого они призваны защищать. В книге *The Medieval Hero* д-р Коннелл Монетт исследует широкий спектр героических рассказов из кельтской, персидской и англосаксонской традиций, раскрывая фундаментальные истины о героизме — его происхождении, определяющих чертах, источниках силы и принципах Геройского кодекса. Демонстрируя выдающееся владение историческими языками, Монетт представляет читателю отрывки в оригинале вместе с английскими переводами с классического персидского, древнеирландского, древнеанглийского и древнегреческого. Эта работа дает ценное понимание образа героя в древних и средневековых эпосах и предоставляет читателям инструменты для распознавания ключевых тем в современных переосмыслениях героического жанра. Сравнительный анализ *Беовульфа* и *Le Morte d'Arthur* выявляет явную эволюцию представлений о героизме — от языческой модели, сосредоточенной на индивидуальной силе и славе на поле боя, к средневекальному идеалу, формируемому рыцарскими добродетелями и общественной ответственностью. Если в *Беовульфе* основное внимание уделяется необычайной физической силе и личной храбрости как

сущности героя, то в *Le Morte d'Arthur* акцент делается на верности, смирении и нравственной целостности как необходимых качествах рыцарей, стремящихся поддерживать видение Артура о праведном и объединённом королевстве. Несмотря на эти различия, оба произведения сохраняют базовые героические принципы — мужество, честь и преданность своему народу — одновременно исследуя влияние судьбы и моральные ожидания своих обществ.

**Ключевые слова:** Героизм, Средневековый герой, Геройский кодекс, Рыцарство, Мужество, Культурные ценности, Сила и мораль, Эпические традиции, Англосаксонская литература, Мифологические архетипы.

### Annotation

Indo-evropa qahramonining obrazi chuqur ko‘p qirrali bo‘lib, inson tabiatining eng oliy fazilatlari va eng vayronkor impulsalarini birlashtiradi. Qahramonlar ko‘pincha o‘z jamiyatlarining eng oliy idealini aks ettiradi, biroq ular bilan birga o‘z himoya qilishi kerak bo‘lganlarga ham xavf solishi mumkin bo‘lgan zo‘ravonlik moyilligini ham o‘zida mujassam etadi. The Medieval Heroasarida Dr. Connell Monette kelt, fors va anglosakson an'analaridan kelgan keng qamrovli qahramonlik rivoyatlarini o‘rganib, qahramonlikning asosiy haqiqatlarini — uning kelib chiqishi, aniqlovchi xususiyatlari, kuch manbalari va Qahramonlik kodeksining tamoyillarini ohib beradi. Tarixiy tillarga oid katta mahoratni namoyish etgan Monette o‘quvchiga klassik fors, qadimgi irland, qadimgi inglez va qadimgi yunon tillaridagi original parchalar va ularning inglez tilidagi tarjimalarini taqdim etadi. Ushbu ish qadimiy va o‘rta asr eposlaridagi qahramon obrazini yaxshiroq tushunishga yordam beradi va o‘quvchilarga zamonaviy qayta talqinlardagi asosiy mavzularni aniq aniqlash vositalarini beradi. Beowulf va *Le Morte d'Arthur* asarlarini solishtiruvchi tahlil qahramonlik tushunchasida aniq o‘zgarishni ko‘rsatadi — individual kuch va jang maydonidagi shon-sharafga qaratilgan pagan modeli va jamoaviy mas’uliyat va ritsarlik qadriyatları bilan shakllangan o‘rta asr ideali o‘rtasidagi siljish. Agar Beowulfda g‘ayrioddiy jismoniy kuch va shaxsiy jur’at qahramonning mohiyati

sifatida ta'kidlanadigan bo'lsa, *Le Morte d'Arthur*da sодиqlik, kamtarlik va axloqiy yaxlitlik — Arthurningadolatli va birlashgan qиrollik tasavvurini saqlab qolishga intilayotgan ritsarlar uchun zarur sifatlar sifatida ko'rildi. Bu farqlarga qaramay, ikkala asar ham jasorat, sharaf va o'z xalfiga sadoqat kabi asosiy qahramonlik tamoyillarini saqlab qoladi va bir vaqtning o'zida taqdirming ta'siri hamda ularning jamiyatlaridan kutiladigan axloqiy talablarni o'rganadi.

**Kalit so'zlar:** Qahramonlik, O'rtasr qahramoni, Qahramonlik kodeksi, Ritsarlik, Jasorat, Madaniy qadriyatlar, Kuch va axloq, Epik an'analar, Anglosakson adabiyoti, Mifologik arxetiplar.

## Introduction

Throughout the medieval period, ideas about heroism changed notably as European culture, beliefs, and social values evolved. Two influential literary works—*Beowulf* and *Le Morte d'Arthur*—demonstrate how different historical contexts shaped distinct models of the heroic figure. In *Beowulf*, the hero reflects the ideals of early Germanic society, where personal bravery, physical power, and the pursuit of fame in battle form the core of heroic identity. In contrast, Thomas Malory's *Le Morte d'Arthur* portrays a later vision of heroism, one grounded in chivalry, moral responsibility, loyalty, and service to the community.<sup>1</sup>

Studying these texts together helps reveal how heroic values gradually transitioned from a focus on individual might and fate-driven action to a more ethical, duty-oriented understanding shaped by Christian and chivalric principles.<sup>2</sup> This comparison highlights not only the shared themes of courage, honor, and devotion found in both works, but also the ways in which medieval writers adapted the heroic ideal to fit the expectations of their time. Ultimately, such analysis offers insight into how medieval literature expresses changing worldviews while continuing to question what it truly means to be a hero.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Malory, Thomas. *Le Morte d'Arthur*. Edited by William Caxton, 1485.

<sup>2</sup> Bullough, Donald A. *Anglo-Saxon Heroic Ideals*. University of Toronto Press, 1970.

<sup>3</sup> Winchester Manuscript of *Le Morte d'Arthur*. Winchester College Library, 1934.

## **National Champion**

The Hero of the national epic has several key traits by which we can identify him.

He is an aristocrat, a member of the warrior elite that is personally sworn to the sovereign. In both the Irish and Iranian stories, the Hero is the descendant of a powerful aristocratic family but is not in line for the throne of the nation, albeit he has lordship of a border territory: Murtheimne for Cúchulainn, and Zabolestan for Rostam. Cúchulainn's aristocratic roots are twofold: his mother is the sister of the King of Ulster (Conchobar), and his supernatural father (Lugh) is a king of the Áes Síd.

This quality of royal blood sets both heroes above the other 'common' aristocracy, and may be a reason for their special closeness (or familiarity?) to the respective sovereigns they serve. As a pair, Cúchulainn and Rostam are members of the landed aristocracy: they have a vested interest in protecting their own territory, and by extension the larger kingdoms that their lands are a part of. They are by no means unique in this respect: the Táin and Shahnameh are filled with a host of other warrior aristocrats, heroes who (most if not all) hold lands elsewhere in the kingdom and are accountable to the sovereign in times of war, entertain him in times of peace, and provide some sort of fiscal support throughout the year. Both epics have episodes where we find many of these warrior aristocrats assembled for feasting or for competition, for counsel with the king, or for war muster.

## **Beowulf**

Despite being one of the most iconic stories of English literature, little is known about the origin of the old English epic poem Beowulf. Unlike the still elusive date of its composition, which is to this day a matter of contention among scholars, there is considerably more certainty in regard to the original manuscript containing the entire poem. Known as the Nowell Codex, it is believed to have been composed somewhere between 975 and 1025 AD. It was for some time in the possession of Sir Robert Bruce Cotton, a member of the English parliament from 1601 to 1629 but more importantly an antiquarian gathering medieval manuscripts. After surviving the terrible fire in 1731

in Ashburn House in London, the manuscript now rests in the British library with visible marks of its past adventures.<sup>4</sup>

Even though it is currently almost impossible to date the poem with confidence and precision, the text itself yields evidence of its author's efforts to situate the story into the tradition much older than his own. Its incorporation of the episode that retells events of the Battle of Finnsburg, and the act of relating one of the main monsters in origin to the Biblical character of Cain, is more than indicative of these intentions.<sup>5</sup>

Most of the events of the poem take place in Denmark. After a brief account of the lineage of the Danish kings, the story begins with Hrothgar, who like his ancestors is an exemplary king<sup>6</sup>. To celebrate his successful reign, he builds a great mead hall named Heorot. However, the large feast held after the completion of the building attracts Grendel, the monster tormented by the revelry of the celebrations. He attacks the hall, causing bloodshed, and thus keeps the mead hall silent for twelve years. Much to his later dismay, the news of Hrothgar's precarious situation reaches the Geats and, more specifically, Beowulf who decides to sail to Denmark with his most trusted warriors to help Hrothgar in his struggle against the monster. The help is welcomed and upon the arrival of the Geats, a feast is held to honour the guests. Later that night Grendel is lured into Heorot and thinking everyone is sound asleep he manages to kill one of the Geats. However, after feigning sleep, Beowulf is able to engage the monster in a fight, using only his own bare hands to prove his equality to Grendel. The monster is then defeated when Beowulf tears Grendel's arm off. Fleeing to his lair the monster dies. The next night after the celebration of the victory another monster attacks the hall. In this case, it is Grendel's mother avenging her son's death. Beowulf is not present in this incident, but he is later able to track the monster to a lake and achieve victory again. Afterwards, Beowulf returns home and becomes the king of his people.<sup>7</sup> Fifty years after his adventures in Denmark, where he virtually single-handedly warded off

<sup>4</sup> Heaney, Seamus, translator. *Beowulf*. W.W. Norton & Company, 2000.

<sup>5</sup> Morey, Robert. *The Hero in Anglo-Saxon Society*. Cambridge University Press, 1990.

<sup>6</sup> Green, Thomas A. *Chivalry and the Medieval Hero*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2011.

<sup>7</sup> Miller, J. *The Evolution of the Medieval Hero*. Oxford University Press, 2003.

the threats of vicious monsters, similar prospects of menace are approaching his country. A slave steals some of the treasure guarded by a terrible dragon who, enraged by this incident, wreaks havoc upon the Geats and burns everything in sight. Beowulf decides to fight with the dragon alone but when he is outmatched and the prospects of defeating the monster are low, he receives help only from one of his warriors, for others are petrified with fear. The dragon is defeated and Beowulf mortally wounded dies too.<sup>8</sup>

### Le Morte d'Arthur

Unlike Beowulf, the authorship of *Le Morte d'Arthur* is firmly established. Although the work was printed around 1485 by William Caxton, the compilation and writing of the epic were done by Sir Thomas Malory. Malory gathered, adapted, and expanded a wide body of French and English legendary material, shaping it into a unified narrative about the lives and deeds of famous knights. For a long time—until 1934—scholars assumed that Caxton's 1485 printed edition represented the earliest and most authoritative version of the text. This belief shifted with the discovery of the Winchester Manuscript in the library of Winchester College, which is thought to more closely reflect Malory's original composition. The differences between the two versions suggest that Caxton likely acted as more than just a printer, possibly altering or reorganizing the text.

Some of these changes are relatively minor—for instance, Malory initially structured *Le Morte d'Arthur* into eight books, whereas Caxton divided the printed version into twenty-one. There are also variations in the length of certain passages. Despite these discrepancies, the fundamental narrative remains consistent across both versions: the rise and eventual collapse of the ideals embodied by King Arthur, his knights, and the Round Table.

Even though the title highlights King Arthur, *Le Morte d'Arthur* does not focus exclusively on him, unlike *Beowulf*, which centers firmly on its hero. While Arthur is

<sup>8</sup> Caxton, William. *Introduction to Le Morte d'Arthur*. 1485 Edition.

an essential figure, the narrative shifts frequently, presenting the exploits of numerous knights. In Malory's epic, the central hero functions more as an anchor for the recurring themes of chivalry, loyalty, and moral struggle than as a constant focal point of the story.

### **Heroic Traits**

At the core of Beowulf lies a deeply rooted code of honor. In a world constantly disrupted by feuds and warfare, these values function as a framework for survival within tribal societies. Tribal communities and their leaders place the highest regard on heroic warriors, whose loyalty to this code helps protect the group from external threats. The poem presents heroism as closely tied to these traditional ideals, as Beowulf defeats his foes on the path toward renown. Throughout his journey, he gradually embodies the perfect heroic archetype, eventually achieving legendary status. As Robert Morey observes, "Within his own society, Beowulf's wisdom and combat skill establish him as an exemplary figure of masculinity."

Beowulf's heroism is a combination of multiple qualities, none of which can be singled out as the most important. The hero consistently demonstrates a well-rounded blend of traits, including bravery, generosity, and loyalty, all of which are essential components in defining a great hero. The epic does not prioritize one virtue over another; rather, it portrays heroism as the harmonious integration of these values.

In contrast, Le Morte d'Arthur reflects the evolution of the heroic ideal into the figure of the knight, or the "hero on horseback" (Miller 11). <sup>9</sup>The narrative is guided by the chivalric code, which establishes the ethical standards for King Arthur and his knights of the Round Table. Every hero in the tale is expected to remain loyal to their leader and peers, to show mercy toward defeated opponents, and to refrain from unjust violence. Additionally, they are charged with protecting women and avoiding conflicts that cannot be morally justified. A key element of this code is the emphasis on adventure: each knight embarks on quests that test their courage, moral integrity, and

<sup>9</sup> Monette, Connell. *The Medieval Hero: Celtic, Persian, and Anglo-Saxon Traditions*. Routledge, 2015.

adherence to the principles of chivalry. *Le Morte d'Arthur* is essentially a collection of these interwoven episodes, which together illustrate the ideals and conduct expected of a knightly hero.

### **Defining an Identity**

One of the primary ways in which many well-known heroes are immediately recognized is through their distinctive appearance, which sets them apart from other characters in their stories. Descriptions of a hero's posture, attire, or facial features often provide the audience with the first clues about their character and qualities. In *Beowulf*, as the hero sets out to assist King Hrothgar in confronting the fearsome monster Grendel, he brings along fourteen of his most loyal warriors. When they arrive by boat in the territory of the Scyldings, their full suits of armor make them instantly noticeable to the watchman tasked with guarding the shore.<sup>10</sup>

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, heroism, despite its evolving forms over the centuries, retains certain universal qualities. As an ideal of exemplary human conduct, it is upheld by the most admirable figures within any society. A comparison of *Beowulf* and *Le Morte d'Arthur* demonstrates how the foundational values established by the Anglo-Saxons are echoed in the later Christian chivalric tradition. Guided by his society's principles, *Beowulf* embodies in the Old English epic the virtues that later appear in Malory's narratives. Both the thanes of *Beowulf* and the knights of the Round Table are expected to prove themselves through deeds rather than rely on social status or noble lineage. Even with his reputation and standing, *Beowulf* must actively demonstrate his strength and courage; his victory over Grendel, achieved without weapons, confirms the truth of his claims and showcases his sense of fairness, bravery, and prowess.

The heroes of *Le Morte d'Arthur* similarly rely on their actions to define themselves, often going so far as to eschew identification by family or lineage in favor

<sup>10</sup> Tolkien, J.R.R. *Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics*. Oxford University Press, 1936.

of recognition through their deeds. As in Beowulf, courage and skill in combat are essential, while cowardice is condemned, often leading to treachery or betrayal, as illustrated by the thanes who abandon Beowulf in his moment of peril. Villains in Malory's epic likewise display cowardice, hiding behind authority rather than confronting challenges themselves. However, while individual heroism dominates Beowulf, Malory integrates collaboration into the ideal of the hero. King Arthur, unlike Beowulf, survives many threats by relying on the assistance of others, demonstrating wisdom and foresight necessary for larger-scale success. Beyond the battlefield, both epics emphasize loyalty as a central element of heroism. Heroes owe respect to their leaders while pursuing glory not solely for themselves but also for the sake of their kings. Rulers, in turn, must honor and reward their brave warriors to secure their continued allegiance. Yet, *Le Morte d'Arthur* introduces additional complexity through courtly love, which at times conflicts with a knight's loyalty to his lord. Despite these challenges, the epic celebrates gentler qualities in its heroes, aspects less prominent in Beowulf.

Although Beowulf's humility may seem modest compared to the standards of later chivalric heroes, it remains an important aspect of his character. His spirituality, though different from that of the Round Table knights, underscores the enduring significance of faith in the heroic ideal. One of the most notable developments between the two works is the elevation of spiritual devotion in Malory's epic. While Beowulf's fame is secured through strength and valor, the most revered knights in *Le Morte d'Arthur* achieve greatness by transcending earthly desires and the mere pursuit of glory, highlighting the moral and spiritual dimensions of heroism in the later medieval tradition.

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