

EVOLUTION OF THE ENGLISH HERO

A hero is “any person, especially a man, admired for courage, nobility, etc.” or, in literature, “the central male character in a novel, play, etc.”¹ The classic nuance of hero is a “mythological or legendary figure, often of divine descent, who is endowed with great strength or ability, like the heroes celebrated in early epics such as . . . *Beowulf*.² Heroes are “usually illustrious warriors or adventurers” who complete “a quest” and possess “special qualities such as unusual beauty, precocity, and skills in many crafts.”³ They are given “to boasting and foolhardiness, they defy pain and death to live fully, creating a moment’s glory that survives in the memory of their descendants.”⁴ Using these rudimentary understandings of “hero” and “heroic action” as a guideline, this brief essay will highlight various traits of English / British heroes from Old English Literature (Beowulf in *Beowulf*), Medieval English Literature (Sir Gawain in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*), Neoclassical English Literature (Thomas Cardinal Wolsey in Samuel Johnson’s “The Vanity of Human Wishes”), Romantic English Literature (William Wordsworth himself in “I wandered lonely as a cloud”), Victorian English Literature

¹Michael Agnes, ed., *Webster’s New World Dictionary*, 4th ed. (New York, NY: Pocket Books, 2003), 303.

²Mark A. Stevens, ed., *Merriam-Webster’s Collegiate Encyclopedia* (Springfield, MA: Merriam-Webster, 2000), 744.

³Ibid.

⁴Ibid.

(Sir Lancelot in Alfred Tennyson’s “The Lady of Shalott”), and Modern English Literature

(Thomas Becket, of course, in Thomas Stearns Eliot’s *Murder in the Cathedral*).

Beowulf, no doubt, depicts the perfect classic epic hero. He is savior; he is king; he is champion of his people. The “superhuman” offspring of Beow and the Halfdane appears in a world of pagan names and sentiments but a world nevertheless controlled by the guiding hand of “the Lord God, Head of the Heavens and High King of the World” who is unknown to “the Lord’s outcast” led by powerful demons (a la Grendel). As they fight to protect Heorot, Hrothgar, the celebrated son of Halfdane and protector of the Shieldings, is introduced to Beowulf who has come from Geatland “to the West-Danes, to defend [them] from Grendel.” Beowulf, the hero, intends to “settle the outcome” with Grendel “in a single combat.” He is capable; he has bound beasts, killed sea brutes, and raided a troll-nest!⁵

At a pre-battle festive banquet in Heorot, the Geats and their hosts pump up Beowulf for battle with Grendel. Beowulf and his warriors make quick work of putting the monster Grendel to death. The matter is settled not by princely power and ability but through “the mighty judgment of God” or the work of “the Heavenly Shepherd” and “the God of Ages.” For his part, Beowulf receives appropriate honors for his courage and decisive action, but Grendel’s mother lurks to avenge the death of her son, and she attacks Heorot and Beowulf.⁶ Beowulf, the fine and

⁵Beowulf, in Stephen Greenblatt, ed., *The Norton Anthology of English Literature, Eighth Edition: The Major Authors* (New York, NY: W. W. Norton & Company, 2006), 35ff.

⁶Ibid., 47, 50.

noble hero, rises to the challenge. He seems to be at a disadvantage, but with help from the “holy God . . . the Lord, the Ruler of Heaven” and with the protection of his war-gear he is able to decapitate and kill the evil and vengeful monster. Beowulf then returns home as victorious conciliator and friend of the Danes.

He passes Hrunting, his trusty sword, to Unferth, addresses the warriors in Dane-land, and receives the blessing of Hrothgar, who says, “The Lord in his wisdom sent you . . . My liking for you deepens with time, dear Beowulf. What you have done is to draw two peoples, the Geat nation and us neighboring Danes, into shared peace and a pact of friendship in spite of hatreds we have harbored in the past.”⁷ In such praise, the collective history of the two peoples is passed down from generation to generation when the drama of the great hero is told again and again.

The story of Beowulf’s adventure and exploits also is recounted for the King’s sake, for the Geats, and for their posterity (i.e., collective memory). The retelling relates “the truth of their friendship and the trustworthiness of their alliance with the Danes.”⁸ The retelling is graphic, as it should be—it is epic! And the hero’s final challenge is at hand. After Beowulf rules “the wide kingdom” of the Geats for “fifty winters” and grows “old and wise as warden of the land,” a venom-filled, serpent-like dragon is “on the prowl.”⁹ As life (and death) goes, even for good

⁷Ibid., 70.

⁸Ibid., 74. In strict context, this was said of the Heatho-Bards, possibly a branch of the Langobards, but by extension also applicable to relations between the Geats and the Danes.

⁹Ibid., 77. It is no problem for epic-time to move across fifty years of history in a moment.

kings and noble heroes, Beowulf must meet his fate. With Wiglaf's help, he attacks and slays the serpent, but he succumbs to a fatal bite that poisons his body and his soul. But before "his soul [flees] from his breast to its destined place among the steadfast ones," the hero gives thanks "to the everlasting Lord of all, to the King of Glory" for his life and his legacy to his people. The hero's memorial includes a massive funeral pyre and a mound, built over ten days, "that sailors could see from far away." Beowulf's work is done, but the concern for Wiglaf and the Geats is that "this vicious feud"—"bad blood" between them and "the Swedes"—might start up once again now that their famous hero is dead.¹⁰

Sir Gawain, one of the knights at King Arthur's Camelot, continues the classical tradition of noble hero. But strong elements of Christian faith ooze from the narrative, as "covenant" and "oath" guard and condition the relationship between Knight and King and make the appearance of a fashionable Green Knight at Christmastide more than just a game.¹¹ Soon Gawain with his faithful steed, Gringolet, sets out on his quest to fulfill his mission. He is the virtuous knight who does good works, who honors God humbly, who is commended to Christ. But he is apprehensive of the journey and the task: he says his prayers "with sighs"; he laments "his misdeed"; he calls out to Christ "in his great need." Gawain is good, but he is not perfect. He is mortal and on his way needs the hospitality of a providentially situated castle. In the name of

¹⁰Ibid., 89ff.

¹¹*Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, in Greenblatt, ed., *The Norton Anthology of English Literature, Eighth Edition: The Major Authors*, 117ff.

“Jesus and Saint Julian,” Gawain accepts lavish accommodations. But it is proper, and it is right. Besides, it is Christmastide again and time to remember “that God’s son was sent down to suffer our death.”¹² As Gawain enjoys his time of rest, he still is apprehensive and bargains with his host for another “covenant” or “pledge”—winnings for earnings whether empty or better! He is a good knight, and thus a good hero, but he is not perfect.

The medieval Arthurian saga continues as the bard tells how Gawain and host pass their time between Christmas and New Years Eve. There is sumptuous eating, merrymaking, restful slumber, and three days of hunting by the host and his “hundred brave huntsmen.” But Sir Gawain remains in his guest chamber and, for three straight days, is visited and tempted by the host’s wife with the lure of intimate pleasures (i.e., “my body is here at hand, your each wish to fulfill; your servant to command I am, and shall be still”). Gawain takes away from the temptress a kiss, two kisses, and, on the third day, a girdle or belt with magical powers (having refused her offer of a rich, gold ring). Each of these Gawain exchanges for the huntsmen’s catch of the day as per the host’s and Gawain’s original bargain, with the exception of the girdle that the “good knight” hides from his host.¹³

The narrative moves quickly, back and forth, from hunting scene to bedroom scene. The storytelling is lively and vivid. The goal of the “good knight” remains the focus—the journey to the Green Chapel of the Green Knight. Gawain soon will achieve his destination, threatening

¹²Ibid., 127ff.

¹³Ibid., 138-139.

villain and rough terrain notwithstanding. On New Years Day, “by the Lord’s decree,” Gawain moves ever closer to “what may befall through Fortune’s will or whim” and resigns, “God’s will be done, amen! I commend me to his keeping.” As the knight approaches the Green Chapel, he hears the sharpening of the Green Knight’s ax, and then they stand “face to face.” The Green Knight tries to repay Gawain with the stroke of death, but by gracious and merciful action, Gawain is spared the ax of death and only suffers harm (i.e., “a scratch on one side, that severed the skin”). Gawain amazingly presumes on the Green Knight’s graciousness and asserts his prerogative by virtue of the original covenant. He tells the Green Knight: “Have done with your hacking—harry me no more! I have borne, as behooved, one blow in this place; if you make another move I shall meet it midway and promptly, I promise you, pay back each blow with brand. One stroke acquits me here; so did our covenant stand in Arthur’s court last year—wherefore, sir, hold your hand!” Here the test for Gawain, the hero of this saga, ends. He receives full explanation of the ordeal from his host and tester, Bertilak de Hautdesert. The admixture of biblical and magical elements props up the lesson for Gawain and all good medieval knights—the lesson of humility. Gawain is a good knight; he is a hero; but he needs divine and human help, because he is not perfect.¹⁴

The evolution of the English hero matures in post-medieval literature. But the vision of a noble, faultless and greater-than-life character deteriorates. Realism of a more modern time sinks in and unravels the classical past. Humanism of the Renaissance and Enlightenment eras, along

¹⁴Ibid., 154ff.

with disruption of Roman Catholicism's grip on peasants and priests by Protestant reformers and antagonists, destroys the naivete and innocence of a more "golden" and "pre-critical" classical and medieval time. This shift is noted clearly in Samuel Johnson's "The Vanity of Human Wishes" and his satirical portrayal of Thomas Wolsey, the Lord Chancellor of England and favorite of Henry VIII in the early sixteenth century. Cardinal Wolsey tries to appease the king in his endeavors to circumvent papal rule in the matter of Henry's divorce from Catherine of Aragon, but he fails and gets the worse of the situation. He "falls from his grace (i.e., the king)"; he loses his clerical and secular power; he concedes much of his property and considerable juridical authority.¹⁵

Johnson, writing in the mid-eighteenth century, in neoclassical style imitates Juvenal, the great Roman satirist, and hammers away at Wolsey's foibles and failures. It is invective; it is irony; it is sardonic satire. And it is all-encompassing, that is, the highest of the highest are not immune from the harsh "impeachment" and the "restless fire" of Vengeance and Fate. "Let observation, with extensive view, survey mankind, from China to Peru . . . then say how hope and fear, desire and hate o'erspread with snares the clouded maze of fate," Johnson begins. He acknowledges, "The knowing and the bold fall in the general massacre of gold . . . and crowds with crimes the records of mankind." Of course, Wolsey and many more are perfect examples.¹⁶

¹⁵"Wolsey, Thomas," in F. L. Cross and E. A. Livingstone, eds., *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, 2nd ed. (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1974), 1496.

¹⁶"The Vanity of Human Wishes," in Greenblatt, ed., *The Norton Anthology of English Literature, Eighth Edition: The Major Authors*, 1212ff.

From “full-blown dignity” and “law in his voice and fortune in his hand,” the powerful and ambitious Cardinal sinks to the greatest depths of ignoble folly. Despite his rise to “new heights” and a position where “power advances power,” Wolsey loses “the golden canopy, the glittering plate, the regal palace, the luxurious board”; he loses “the pride of awful state”; he becomes the fallen hero who seeks “the refuge of monastic rest” and “his last sighs reproach the faith of kings.” He is to be shunned and avoided. His misfortune is a lesson well learned. And he has sunk “beneath misfortune’s blow with louder ruin to the gulfs below.” There will be no return to fame and fortune; there will be no reprise, no reversal, no future glory. This is the harsh reality of a cruel but sovereign Heaven to which each and every “supplicating voice” must yield “the measure and the choice.” So now, in the post-medieval but albeit neoclassical world view, the hero as well as every man must count “death kind Nature’s signal of retreat: these goods for man the laws of Heaven ordain, these goods he grants, who grants the power to gain.”¹⁷ Johnson’s neoclassical hero has been knocked off the proverbial pedestal and has become like, or even worse off than, everyone else.

The English hero, if but for a moment though, regains some of his former glory in both Romantic and Victorian English Literature. This can be illustrated by William Wordsworth’s incarnation of himself as “hero” in his “I wandered lonely as a cloud.” While strains of the more modern and “lesser” vision of the hero are to be noted in other writings from the time, this poem by Wordsworth captures the imagination, the emotion, and even the innocence of a noble and

¹⁷Ibid., 1214ff.

duly honored person. But the “modern” feature of “hero definition” is to be observed in Wordsworth’s personification of self as grandiose enough to be included in the ranks of those so noted as “heroes.”¹⁸

While wandering about alone, the poet takes his place with the clouds and observes “golden daffodils” like “stars that shine and twinkle” and “waves” along a bay that danced beside the flowers. He “could not but be gay, in such a jocund company.” This gives him “wealth” and “the bliss of solitude”; he experiences great pleasure from this encounter; he inevitably “dances with the daffodils.” Here is the hero alone and happy—something unthinkable and negative for the classical hero. But he “floats on high” and encounters “a crowd, a host” of Nature, and this takes him away to “the milky way”! He is not really alone; he is bolstered in his “vacant or pensive mood” by “ten thousand” or legions from on high (but only in his imagination).¹⁹ In other words, he is heroic and worthy of the attention, consolation, and companionship of nature’s realm. In this mythological, imaginary world of the Romantic poet, the hero, and even self as hero, takes on lost meanings of substantial glory. The drudgery of post-medieval reality, if only for a brief moment, succumbs to a classical vision of grandeur and hope.

This somewhat mystic, romantic vision of the world comes back down to earth in the matter-of-fact, take-care-of-business Victorian world. But it is not impossible for Victorians, for

¹⁸It is likely that Wordsworth did not intend for his poem to be taken as portraying self as “hero” in any classical sense and, perhaps, in any sense at all.

¹⁹“I wandered lonely as a cloud,” in Greenblatt, ed., *The Norton Anthology of English Literature, Eighth Edition: The Major Authors*, 1537-1538.

their own unique reasons, to resurrect classical notions of the English hero from the past. This seems to be the case with Alfred Tennyson's use of Camelot and Sir Lancelot in his "The Lady of Shalott." The "bold Sir Lancelot" is the noble hero of old. He has all the traits of the classic knight—a shield that sparkles, a bridle with gems and bells, a "blazoned baldric" and a "mighty silver bugle." He is respectful; he is honorable; he is dignified; he is impressive! "His broad clear brow in sunlight glowed; on burnished hooves his war horse trode; from underneath his helmet flowed his coal-black curls as on he rode, as he rode down to Camelot." This Lancelot is the epitome of the heroic knight. And, for Tennyson, rightly so, since Lancelot is his rock-solid, unshakeable, immovable and stalwart character to contrast sharply with the musing and somewhat unsettled and uncertain Lady of Shalott.²⁰

From her lonely world of a weaver's seclusion, the Lady catches glimpses of the activities of the "real world" in her mirror. She longs to engage the real world, to live, to breathe. "I am half sick of shadows," she laments. And then—"the sun came dazzling through the leaves, and flamed upon the brazen greaves of bold Sir Lancelot." Lancelot is noble; he embodies the real world; he is strong, beautiful, and perfect. To the Lady, he is desirable! So she ventures out from the "sickness" of her [Victorian²¹] seclusion. And even though her final outcome is left open and unresolved, she at least gets a fair nod from the noble Lancelot. He muses "a little

²⁰"The Lady of Shalott," in Greenblatt, ed., *The Norton Anthology of English Literature, Eighth Edition: The Major Authors*, 1953ff.

²¹This must be Tennyson's point!

space” and says, “She has a lovely face; God in his mercy lend her grace, The Lady of Shalott.”²² Lancelot, ever the gentleman knight and consummate hero, wavers not in bravery, courtesy, and honor. For both hero and manhood, he embraces and personifies without hesitation the ethos and mores from a far distant, classical past. But he does not criticize the Lady’s noble attempt to break free from the shackles of domestic servitude imposed by Victorian values on women and commoners. He wholesomely acknowledges her efforts and wishes the blessing of God on such. This meaning of hero as accepting an evolving and increasing role for women in society is itself a nineteenth-century twist to the English hero as developed by Tennyson and others.

Finally, the English hero takes on a modern, twentieth-century characterization in Thomas Stearns Eliot’s *Murder in the Cathedral*. Here the classic notions of heroic engagement, by any sense of traditional Christian or even Renaissance and Enlightenment standards, become convoluted beyond measure. In Eliot’s phenomenal reading of Thomas Becket’s life and death, the passionate, princely prelate becomes truly papist but cannot pacify his former bosom buddy, King Henry II.²³ Eliot’s Becket-hero, not the same as the historical figure, is resolute, proud, and stubborn. He without question is cocksure of himself. No doubt, this was what he was like when he was right-hand-man to his King, and Eliot leaves little doubt about Becket’s consistent approach to life and attitude about himself and others over time. But there is one important

²²Ibid.

²³For a brief biographical sketch, see “Becket, St. Thomas,” in Cross and Livingstone, eds., *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, 2nd ed., 148-149.

exception—Becket-hero is now nemesis, traitor, and mortal enemy, as well as quasi-spiritual Romanist enemy, to the King. He no longer enjoys the support and unconditional license of Henry!

In the spirit of the Russian revolutionary leaders Nikolai Chernyshevsky²⁴ and Vladimir Ilich Lenin,²⁵ Eliot's Becket-hero chants to his last tempter, "But what is there to do? What is left to be done? Is there no enduring crown to be won?"²⁶ Eliot could not have been unaware of these writings by notable Russian revolutionaries from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. His Becket-hero is a revolutionary figure. He is legendary, yes! But he is modern. He can not and will not submit to proper civil authority. He will prop up himself as sole authority; he will appease the masses to maintain and forward his position; he will be the civil and quasi-religious power. And if he cannot do this, he will die the death of a martyr—so be it; it is ordained; it is his mission; it is his fate.

While Eliot keeps the audience guessing about the sincerity and sanity of the returned-from-exile and inevitable-to-be martyr/hero, a close reading of *Murder* indicates the extreme arrogance of Becket. He remembers: "I was the King . . ." He blames: "Go to the pope . . . it was he who condemned them." He admits: "I do not deny that this was done through me." He

²⁴What Is To Be Done? (original 1863).

²⁵What Is To Be Done? (original 1902).

²⁶T. S. Eliot, *Murder in the Cathedral*, 4th ed. (1938; reprint, Orlando, FL: Harcourt, 1963), 39.

resolves: “I give my life . . .”²⁷ Becket is the revolutionary-hero who, when he cannot overcome the power that thwarts his vision and his objective, will lay down his life in order to continue to influence the masses and carry on “what is to be done.” In this way, the revolutionary-hero can maintain his pride, his integrity as an extreme figure, and guide the masses with his “spiritual” presence.

This modern estimate of the English hero simply turns the idea of heroic on its head. What to medieval and post-medieval authors would have been unthinkable and dubious, unless it came about by fate in the natural course of a hero’s activities and duties, becomes an accepted and readily embraced means-to-an-end. The use of “propaganda of the deed” or assassination as a legitimate means-to-an-end by the modern revolutionary-hero, whether acted out on others or self imposed (as in the case of Eliot’s Becket-hero), marks a shift in the basic nature of the English hero from noble to ignoble. Not even the “fall from grace” hero of Neoclassicist Johnson can compare! With Eliot’s Becket-hero, the meaning of the English hero comes full circle.

²⁷Ibid., 30, 64, 74.

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