



David Fritts

Warrior Heroes: Buffy the Vampire Slayer and Beowulf



[1] "I call it 'Mr. Pointy,'" says Kendra as she hands to Buffy her "lucky stake," with which she has "killed many vampires." Mr. Pointy proves useless in Buffy's fight with Angelus, though Buffy does eventually send Angel to hell with a sword that Kendra has supplied, a sword "blessed by the knight who first slew" Acatlha ("Becoming," Part I, 2021).^[1] Kendra had first appeared earlier in the season because "a very dark power [was] about to rise in Sunnydale." With her by-the-book approach to slaying, Kendra quickly wins Giles' praise and favor. Feeling somewhat jealous, Buffy directs a stream of sarcastic remarks at Kendra and even wonders whether Giles "wishes [Buffy] was more of a book geek" ("What's My Line," Part II, 2010).

[2] In the Anglo-Saxon epic *Beowulf*, as Beowulf sets out to do single battle with Grendel's mother, the Danish warrior Unferth gives him a weapon:

That hilted sword was named Hrunting
unique among ancient treasures —
its edge was iron, etched with poison-stripes,
hardened with the blood of war; it had never failed
any man who grasped it in his hands in battle,
who dared to undertake a dreadful journey
into the very home of the foe — it was not the first time
that it had to perform a work of high courage. (1457-64) ^[2]

Like Mr. Pointy, Hrunting proves useless, and Beowulf defeats the demon with a sword he finds in its cave. Like Kendra, Beowulf has traveled from afar to fight a powerful evil. Upon his arrival, Beowulf is feted in the mead hall and regarded as a potential savior by Hrothgar, the Danish king. "Sorely vexed" by Beowulf's proposed venture, Unferth, seated in an honored position at Hrothgar's feet, begins to taunt and insult Beowulf.

[3] Having been a fan of *Beowulf* for many years before I saw my first episode of *BtVS*, when Kendra handed over that stake with a name and a history to the Slayer, I was struck immediately with appreciation for the clever use of this heroic convention. Looking further into the relationship between Kendra and Buffy, we notice that the two slayers embody aspects of the warrior relationship. For example, when assessing Kendra's fighting style, Buffy praises her technique but tells her she has no imagination. As Kendra grows angry, Buffy says, "You feel it, right? How the anger gives you fire? A Slayer needs that." Buffy increases Kendra's power by inciting her anger ("Becoming," Part I, 2021). A similar moment occurs in *Beowulf* after Unferth taunts Beowulf: Beowulf insults Unferth, brags about his previous exploits, and most importantly, reaffirms his boast to cleanse the mead hall. As Buffy had done for Kendra, Unferth incites Beowulf's anger and increases his preparedness for battle. These moments between Buffy and Kendra alert us to the spirit of the Anglo-Saxon warrior hero present throughout the narrative.

[4] Buffy's connection to the traditional hero is well established. Frances Early writes that *BtVS* offers "a fresh version of the classic quest myth in Western culture" with a "personable and responsible young woman cast as hero" (paragraph 16). Laurel Bowman has shown that Buffy's story through the first six seasons follows closely the hero's journey as described by Joseph Campbell. Bowman points out that Buffy, unlike any single hero examined by Campbell, has passed through all three stages of the hero's journey. Rhonda Wilcox asserts that Campbell's monomyth, in fact, can be "found many times in the one narration of *Buffy*" ("Pain as Bright"). Similarly, Nancy Holder shows how the hero's journey can be seen in the five final episodes as well as in the seven-season narrative. Much as the hero's journey can be seen in individual episodes or groups of episodes as well as in the overall story arc of several seasons, the Beowulf-like warrior hero can be seen in individual details throughout the seven seasons, as well as in the sequence of story arcs for the entire series, but especially seasons one through five. Sometimes corresponding details may be coincidence, but the broader strokes of the series—its setting, its celebration of the warrior traits of its hero, and the evolution of its hero as she relates to her community—all make Buffy's story worthy of being sung by the *scop* in the mead hall.

[5] Buffy and Beowulf inhabit similar worlds, populated by supernatural demons, providing battlegrounds infused with ambiguous spiritual significance. In a pivotal 1936 lecture, J.R.R. Tolkien responded to the critical tradition that had dismissed *Beowulf* as art because the narrative focuses on monsters and a dragon: "It is just because the main foes in *Beowulf* are inhuman that the story is larger and more significant" than a story more rooted in historical fact.^[3] Tolkien continues, "It glimpses the cosmic and moves with the thought of all men concerning the fate of human life and efforts" (87). We can hear an echo of Tolkien's description in Bowman's assessment that *Buffy* "resonates with classical models" because Buffy fights "monsters, large fanged lizard-gods, trolls, demons, vampires, and the whole class of supernatural baddies traditionally found littering a classical hero's path" or, she adds, a folk hero's.

[6] The monsters faced by Beowulf pose not just a threat to the kingdom, but represent evil at work in the world, threatening to unleash chaos. Grendel has taken away control of the mead hall from Hrothgar, the place where the vital activities of the *comitatus* take place—the boasting of the warriors and the doling out of rings by the king. Being of the race of Cain, Grendel is not only marked with the stain of the Biblical first murder, but with the foulest deed an Anglo-Saxon could commit: the murder of his kinsman. His attacks disrupt the very foundation of the social order, and, worse, lead the Danes to "[offer] honor to idols / at pagan temples, [pray] aloud / that the soul slayer might offer assistance" (175-7). That is, Grendel's attacks open the door for the devil, the soul slayer. Andy Orchard summarizes the many verbal associations of Grendel with hell, for example, "fiend from hell (101) and "hellish spirit" (1274). He also notes the similarity of the mere into which Beowulf dives to fight Grendel's mother to a contemporary description of hell (39). In addition, repeated references to fire and water in the middle episode, such as the mere's description as "an awesome wonder, fire on the water" (1365-6), suggest to Orchard "apocalyptic visions of the end of the world" not usually found outside of religious writing (42). In the final episode of the poem the "ferocious hostility" of a dragon threatens the Geats. (2317). Most significantly, Beowulf's own mead hall, the "best of buildings, had burned in waves of fire / the gift-throne of the Geats" (2326-7). The destruction of Beowulf's seat of power foreshadows how, indirectly, the dragon unleashes chaotic forces that will destroy the Geat tribe.

[7] Similarly, many of the demons Buffy faces, especially those that are the focus of a season's story arc, are apocalyptic; before the fight with Glory, Giles notes that they have already faced five apocalypses ("The Gift" 5022). Many critics have noted that the demons represented on *BtVS* are metaphors for inner demons or manifestations of everyday problems. However, like Grendel and the dragon, some demons threaten to open the door to hell. In "The Harvest" (1002) Giles describes the Hellmouth, which the Master intends to open: "It's a sort of, um, portal between this reality and the next" that, Buffy

adds, will "bring the demons back." Xander concludes, "End of the world." After he is free, the Master says to Buffy, "You laugh when my hell is on earth?" ("Prophecy Girl," 1012). In Season Two Angelus intends to wake Acatlha, who will, Giles says, "with one breath . . . create a vortex, a-a kind of, um... whirlpool that will pull everything on Earth into that dimension, where any non-demon life will suffer horrible and . . . eternal torment" ("Becoming," Part I, 2021). Three seasons later, Glory's threat is essentially the same as, again, described by Giles: "The energy [of the key] ... would flow into that spot, the walls between the dimensions break down" and "all manner of hell will be unleashed on earth." He continues, "If the ritual starts, then every living creature in this and every other dimension imaginable will suffer unbearable torment and death" ("The Gift" 5022). Season seven takes the threat to the ultimate level as the First Evil plots to send an enormous army of Übevamps up through the hell mouth.

[8] These hellish forces define the perilous world of the heroes. The rhythm of Anglo-Saxon life reflected in heroic poetry like *Beowulf* is the alternation of joy and sorrow, characterized by the formulaic line: "Sorrow is renewed" (1322). This view of life may explain Tolkien's characterization of *Beowulf* as "heroic-elegiac poem," a long prelude to the dirge that ends the poem—"one of the most moving ever written" (85). For me, *BtVS* is similarly elegiac; through the first five seasons, the narrative moves steadily toward Buffy's inevitable death. Each triumph is followed by a new threat; evil is never vanquished, only subdued. New vampires arise every night. The idea that life on the Hellmouth will never have a happy ending is signaled in the first season as Buffy, Xander, and Willow sit outside the high school, commiserating over their failures at love. Buffy says, "Let's face it, none of us are ever gonna have a happy, normal relationship." Xander adds, "We're doomed." They laugh briefly, and the episode ends as their faces turn somber ("I, Robot—You, Jane," 1008). Like so much in *Buffy*, this moment focused on teen love speaks to the most serious depths of the show. So when Buffy dies, it is the fulfillment of the inevitable for the hero who puts herself in danger. Even when Buffy returns from death and defeats the First Evil, destroying Sunnydale and closing the Hellmouth, Giles is there to remind us that "There's another one in Cleveland" and that they have "a lot of work ahead" of them ("Chosen" 7022). In the uncertain worlds of *Beowulf* and *Buffy*, all moments of joy—and sorrow—will pass.

[9] Each successive enemy poses a greater challenge for the two heroes. *Beowulf* first defeats Grendel in a fight without weapons that takes place in Heorot. Grendel arrives expecting the usual easy pickings, but is completely surprised by *Beowulf*'s strength and immediately seeks to escape. While his defeat is not easy, Grendel turns out not to pose much of a threat to *Beowulf*. Next, however, defeating Grendel's mother requires a fight with weapons in her own cave under the water. She makes no move to run from *Beowulf* as Grendel had. In fact, she immediately gives him "requital," grasping him and causing him to fall to the ground. Then "she set upon her hall-guest and drew her knife." He survives only because of the strength of his "linked corselet" (1541-52). Edward B. Irving, Jr., suggests, "The greater difficulty and increased savagery of *Beowulf*'s fight with the female monster are really indications of the greater moral complexities of the second conflict" because Grendel's mother is fighting to avenge her offspring. He continues, "Here we no longer have whitest white against blackest black but something ethically grayer and less absolute" (113-4). Jane Chance points to the "unnatural" quality of a female as avenger to explain the more horrible nature of this fight for *Beowulf* (101).^[4] Finally, in his last battle an extremely aged *Beowulf* is forced to go to the dragon's cave to face "the heat of battle flames there / steam and venom" (2522-3), using weapons that prove useless to him. The dragon successfully penetrates *Beowulf*'s corselet, dealing a fatal blow before *Beowulf* dispatches him.

[10] Similarly, *Buffy* faces an ever-increasing threat over seven television seasons. *Buffy*'s fights to end each of the first two seasons closely parallel *Beowulf*'s first two fights. Her defeat of the Master is accomplished without a weapon. She fights him on the roof of the library and dispatches him with relative ease after catching him off guard when she comes back from death. The fight with Angelus in Season Two requires fighting with

swords in his mansion. At one point, Buffy falls and Angelus stands over her with his sword, mirroring Beowulf's near death at the hands of Grendel's mother. In addition, as Beowulf's second fight may have been complicated by "personal" motivations, Buffy's is made more difficult because of her love for Angel. In the third season Buffy defeats the ascended mayor, who resembles very much the fire-breathing, 50-foot "loathsome serpent" that Beowulf fights (3039). In Season Five, Buffy fights a god, and finally, like Beowulf, gives her own life in order to save the world. In the final season Buffy faces the First Evil's vast army, which she can defeat only by calling on the power of all potential slayers.

[11] To fight these demons, Buffy's choice of weapons almost always resembles the choices that Beowulf has.^[5] She often fights, like Beowulf, "hand-to-hand" (*Beowulf* 2137). When Beowulf arrives at Heorot, he announces his intention to fight Grendel alone without weapons because he knows that Grendel does not use them. Buffy defeats the Master without weapons, and fights Angelus with a sword. She fights Faith with a knife, which then figures prominently in defeating the ascended mayor. And she uses a troll's hammer against Glory—somewhat like Beowulf's using the monster's sword he finds in the cave to defeat Grendel's mother. In the final battle with the First, she again uses a weapon taken from an enemy—the Slayer's "scythe," which resembles a medieval bardiche, a variety of long-handled axe, sometimes having an elongated and hooked head. This choice of weapons places Buffy in an almost ancient milieu, one requiring fair fights on equal terms, pitting individual strength against strength—situations requiring a warrior hero.

[12] Into this medieval milieu, Buffy brings the skills of the Anglo-Saxon hero: enormous physical strength, resolve, and courage in the face of the hopeless fight.

[13] The superhuman strength of the two heroes is their most obvious similarity. Beowulf "has thirty / men's strength, strong in battle, / in his handgrip" (379-381). He slays Grendel's mother with a sword "greater than any other man / might even bear into the play of battle" (1560-1561). Similarly, when Anya suggests that Buffy use the troll's hammer to fight Glory, Spike says, "Uh, nah, that thing's too heavy to-." He stops in mid-sentence as Buffy picks the hammer up and weighs it easily with one hand ("The Gift" 5022).

[14] More significant than this outer strength is the inner strength it represents. In *Beowulf*, the hero seeks out and resolutely pursues the hopeless battle as a chance to prove his prowess. Tolkien suggests that "the theory of courage . . . is the great contribution of early Northern literature" (70). Before both battles in Denmark, Beowulf shows a clear understanding of his possible—even likely—death. Graphically, before the fight with Grendel, he tells Hrothgar and the Danes that if he fails in battle there will be no body to bury, because Grendel will have devoured him. As the Geats bed down in Heorot, "None of them thought that he should thence / ever again seek his own dear homeland / his tribe or the town in which he was raised" (691-3). In the second battle, the Geats wait at the mere's edge, but once the ferocity of Beowulf's struggles with Grendel's mother become evident in the blood-stained water, they "did not hope, that they would / see their lord himself" (1603-4).

[15] In the first two seasons of *BtVS*, like the Anglo-Saxon warrior, Buffy embraces the hopeless battle when she faces first the Master and then Angelus. Unlike Beowulf, Buffy is somewhat reluctant in both instances, in the first case because her own death has been prophesied, and in the second, because she must kill Angel even after Willow has succeeded in restoring his soul. These complications, while putting a modern spin on the story lines, serve to emphasize her resolve. When the world needs to be saved, Buffy does what needs to be done. She knows she will die in her battle with the Master, but she goes forward anyway. In the final episode of Season Two ("Becoming," Part II, 2022), as she fights Angelus, Spike expresses the certainty of her death when he says matter of factly, "He's going to kill her." But Buffy prevails by virtue of her own strength.

[16] Strong and resolute, the warriors stand above others, but they rise to the level

of heroes in the degree to which their courage allows them to control their own destiny in an uncertain world. Beowulf says, "Wyrð often spares / an undoomed man, when his courage endures!" (572-3). Wyrð is a formidable force; it has "swept . . . away" Hrothgar's warriors (477) and in the end fails to grant victory to Beowulf against the dragon (2574-5). As Beowulf says, "Wyrð always goes as it must" (455). Wyrð is often translated as "fate," but Beowulf's ability to overcome it with courage suggests that it does not carry the sense of inevitability that such a translation implies. T. A. Shippey offers a helpful definition of *wyrðs*: "an acceptable translation is often 'what becomes, what comes to pass, the course of events,' not a supernatural and willful Power, but more simply, the flow of Time" (40). All men are "doomed" to die in the course of time, but the hero can defy death—for a time.

[17] Similar to Beowulf, Buffy asserts some control over her destiny through her courageous acts. Giles' words from the first episode identify her destiny as the "chosen one." By series end, of course, she will defy her destiny as the "one" in the most obvious of ways when her plan to defeat the First empowers all of the potential slayers. But as she grows through the first five years of the series, Buffy fights evil on her own terms, not out of a sense of destiny. Buffy's decision to fight the Master in Season One, despite the Codex prophecy, reframes Beowulf's statement: "Wyrð often spares / an undoomed [wo]man, when [her] courage endures!" In one sense, the prophecy is fulfilled just as Giles had summarized: "Tomorrow night Buffy will face the Master, and she will die." But Buffy chooses to face the Master after talking with Willow about her dead friends. She then defies Giles, and deliberately takes the hand of the Anointed One to be led "to hell." The earlier portion of Giles' conversation with Angel suggest to some extent Beowulf's relationship to *wyrð*: Before suggesting that the Codex is infallible, he points out that prophecies can be "a bit dodgy" and "mutable." In fact, "Buffy herself has, has thwarted them time and time again" ("Prophecy Girl," 1012). As she battles each successive "Big Bad," she continues to defy authority and convention, noted especially in her unorthodox plans for fighting the mayor and the First. In Season Five, she defies Giles' insistence that they stop Glory at any cost, refusing to consider harming Dawn, leaving, which finally leaves Buffy with only one choice. We may recall that Beowulf, too, defied advice in choosing to fight Grendel and the dragon.

[18] In addition to strength of body and spirit, the identities of both warrior heroes are defined in part by their intellect. For Shippey, the hero "pre-eminently" possesses sense and forethought, "for it is these virtues that help the hero to perceive the inevitable changes of time and to prepare for them" (39-40). The verbal abilities of the two heroes, while not similar on the surface, reveal their sense and forethought and connect each to a social skill that grounds their superhuman strength in the real world. Both also use humor to maintain a distance from the violence that they inflict and receive. In addition to establishing a distance from the violence, as Joseph Campbell writes, "Humor is the touchstone of the truly mythological as distinct from the more literal-minded and sentimental theological mood" (180).

[19] Those whom Beowulf encounters recognize his greatness in his speech. When he arrives in Denmark, he is asked to make his case in speech three times: to the coast guard, to the herald, Wulfgar, and to Hrothgar himself. After Beowulf "unlocked his word-hoard" (259) to him, the Danish coast guard says, "A sharp shield-warrior / must be a judge of both things, / words and deeds, if he would think well" (287-9). Impressed, the coast guard sends him on to the Danish hall, where, Beowulf speaks more formally, signaled by the use of the verb "*mathelian*." Frederick Klaeber describes speeches thus introduced as "characterized by eloquence and ceremonial dignity" (lv). Beowulf's strength in council speech emphasizes that he understands how to behave properly and that he is able to reason, to approach the problems of a situation from an intellectual perspective. As Beowulf prepares to leave Denmark, vowing to return if needed, Hrothgar says to him,

The wise Lord has sent those words
into your heart; I have never heard

a shrewder speech from such a young man.

You are strong in might and sound in mind,

prudent in speech! (1841-5)

[20] Buffy's use of language has been frequently associated with her power. Holly Chandler writes, "Not only Buffy's physical power, but also her verbal power banishes fear of the undead." Karen Ellen Overbey and Lahney Preston-Matto identify Buffy's language play as "tied to Slayage" and so "not a role that that just anyone can fill" (75). Probably the most obvious way to see the association of language with Buffy's power is to see how words fail Buffy when she is powerless. After she has tricked Kralik into drinking holy water in "Helpless" (3012), she comments, "If I was at full Slayer power, I'd be punning right about now." When Jonathan's augmentation spell causes Buffy to take a secondary role in dealing with demons, her relative powerlessness is symbolized in a confrontation with Spike, in which, after he calls her Betty, she sputters out, "It's Buffy, you big bleached . . . stupid guy" ("Superstar," 4017). Sophie Levy points out the unusual silence with which Buffy responds to Angelus' insulting "I'll call you" in the episode "Innocence" because "Buffy is a woman of wit as well as action."

[21] In contrast to Beowulf, however, Buffy is apparently not eloquent in formal speeches, even those before battle. When she decides to face the Master in Season One and knocks out Giles to keep him from being involved, she tells Jenny Calendar, "Think of something cool, tell him I said it" ("Prophecy Girl," 1012). Before they go off to face Glory, Buffy's blunt directions are characterized by Spike as "not exactly the Saint Crispin's Day Speech" ("The Gift," 5022). According to Andrew in Season Seven her "motivating speeches" to the potentials "tend to get a little long," so much so that they bore even Willow ("Storyteller," 7016).

[22] However, on occasion, her speeches at critical moments reveal a simple dignity equal to Beowulf's at similar times, most notably in her words to Dawn in "The Gift." Immediately before her death, Buffy says to Dawn, her only surviving blood, "You have to take care of them now. You have to take care of each other. You have to be strong. Dawn, the hardest thing in this world . . . is to live in it. Be brave. Live. For me" ("The Gift" 5022). Beowulf shares similar thoughts with Wiglaf, whom he calls "the last survivor of our lineage" (2813): "Now that I have sold my old lifespan / for this hoard of treasures, they will attend / to the needs of the people; I can stay no longer" (2799-2801). Their imminent deaths crystallize their words, to the one who must live and carry on, into what is essential: each other/the needs of the people.

[23] Beowulf's speeches are marked not only by their dignity, but also by their detached humor. E. L. Ridsden says that "Beowulf's more obvious instances of humor involve irony and wordplay" (71). In particular, Anglo-Saxon heroic poetry makes frequent use of litotes, understatement expressed through a negative assertion. George Clark says that "Beowulf jokes cheerfully" in describing the gruesome result if Grendel should win (278), a description that begins and ends with an instance of litotes:

You'll have no need
to cover my head—he will have done so
gory, bloodstained, if death bears me away;
he will take his kill, think to taste me,
will dine alone without remorse
stain his lair in the moor; no need to linger
in sorrow over disposing of my body! (445-51)

Irving, who discusses at some length Beowulf's use of humor, calls this a "ghoulish

situation totally controlled by humor" (66). He sees "the same boisterous kind of heroic humor" when Beowulf answers Unferth's insults (66). In that speech Beowulf demonstrates "the keenly sardonic wit that is in itself evidence of rational and detached control" (70). Beowulf "has the strength and control of the situation to joke in the face of death" (66).

[24] This last statement by Irving echoes a great deal of the commentary on *BtVS* that addresses Buffy's use of humor. Much noted is Willow's comment at the beginning of Season Three that "the Slayer always says a pun or-or a witty play on words, and I think it throws the vampires off, and, and it makes them frightened because I'm wisecracking." This statement follows Xander's sarcasm about Willow's own lame attempt to banter with a vampire ("Anne" 3001). The fact that Buffy chooses punning and wordplay as her battlefield voice suggests control and detachment. Gwyn Symonds calls Buffy's wordplay "liberating," without which she "would appear more brutal." Symonds continues, "We are given the distance to consider what the violence is being used to do or reveal or tell."

[25] In addition to establishing the heroes' rational distance from the fighting, their verbal skill and humor help to associate the warriors' power with their role in the community. Joseph Campbell says that the hero's journey is complete only when the boon attained by the hero "may redound to the renewing of the community, the nation, the planet, or the ten thousand worlds" (193). Both Beowulf and Buffy act not for individual glory but for something larger than themselves. Kemp Malone suggests that for the *Beowulf* poet, "Beowulf would not have been a hero if he had not had a people to die for" (153). The overarching structure of each hero narrative demonstrates the growth of the hero in relation to his/her community.

[26] The first two stories demonstrate Beowulf's greatness as a warrior serving his king, while the final episode shows him as a model king of the Geats. Similarly, Buffy evolves from a rebellious agent of the Watchers' Council to the leader of a team of demon fighters. The connection of each hero to his/her community is best represented by their relationship with a supporting band of retainers. Even though Beowulf has vowed to fight Grendel alone, his band of warriors bed down with him in Heorot to wait for Grendel. Grendel kills one of his men immediately, but the other thirteen attack Grendel with their swords to try to aid Beowulf. These same thirteen stand watch at the mere where Beowulf fights Grendel's mother. The loyal Geats stand in contrast to the Danes who leave dejected when they see the water roiling with blood—seemingly clear evidence that Beowulf is dead. This firmness of the *comitatus* is every bit as important to the survival of the tribe as Beowulf's heroics, as will be shown by the end of the poem.

[27] Similarly, Buffy repeatedly asserts that, as "the chosen one," she has to deal with the evil. However, the Scooby gang is always there to back her up. Much has been written about community giving Buffy her special strength, for example, by Rhonda Wilcox in *Fighting the Forces* (4-9). Each of Buffy's victories requires the help of one or more of the Scooby Gang. They are the research team and her fellow warriors. As time goes on, the Scoobies become more and more integral, their roles symbolized in Season Four's defeat of Adam. In fact, the end of Season Four is famously indicative of the importance of her community. Spike nearly splits the gang up; when they realize what has occurred, they join forces in the most literal sense of the entire series history, combining their individual strengths to channel the First Slayer and defeat Adam. When Buffy fights the mayor in Season Three, she requires back-up from her entire high school class, who had recently recognized her as "Class Protector." In every fight, we see in Buffy the surest signs of a good leader in Anglo-Saxon tradition, the ability to recognize those who will serve valiantly and inspire loyalty in them. For example, she befriends Willow and Xander on her first day at Sunnydale High, despite the social pressure not to. Later in the fights with Glory and The First, she recognizes Spike's value to her cause despite Giles' and the others' opposition. These three allies consistently provide the kind of support that a warrior counts on from a "right hand man."

[28] In the climactic battles in which the heroes sacrifice themselves, the role of the retainers is even more important. Beowulf does not get support from the warriors he has

brought with him. Only one does not run for safety. But this one is almost enough. Wiglaf fights valiantly and deals a weakening blow to the dragon. In contrast, in the fight with Glory Buffy is backed up again by her loyal Scooby gang. Xander hits Glory with a wrecking ball at a most propitious moment, giving Buffy a chance to regroup—just as Wiglaf's effort renews Beowulf's strength. Spike, Giles, and Willow all play vital roles.

[29] Neither of the two heroes is aware of what really will be the result of their deaths. Beowulf, unaware that all of his retainers but Wiglaf have run for safety when they feared the dragon would defeat him, thanks God that he has been "able to acquire such wealth / for my people before my death day" (2797-8). He thinks the dragon's treasure will buy security for the Geats. We don't see the aftermath of Beowulf's death, but the future of the Geats is forecast three times: by Wiglaf, by a messenger, and by a woman who sings at Beowulf's funeral pyre. Wiglaf tells the cowardly retainers,

Empty-handed

will go every man among your tribe,
deprived of his land-rights, when noblemen learn
far and wide of your flight,
your inglorious deed. (2886-2890)

The messenger reports back to the Geat people and foresees "a time of trouble" (2911), identifying all of the tribes who have feuds with the Geats. He concludes,

That is the feud and the fierce enmity,
savage hatred among men, that I expect now,
when the Swedish people seek us out
after they have learned that our lord
has perished. (2999-3003)

Finally, the Geat woman laments "the hard days ahead, / the times of slaughter, the host's terror, / harm and captivity" (3153-55).

[30] When Season Six of *BtVS* opens, despite the Scoobies' best efforts to maintain order, Sunnydale descends into chaos without Buffy. Giles warns, "We, we need the, the world and the underworld to believe that Buffy is alive and well" ("Becoming," Part I, 6001). When the truth gets out that the Slayer is only a robot, Sunnydale comes under attack by marauding Biker demons. Spike identifies them as "Road Pirates" who raid "any place they think is vulnerable" ("Becoming," Part II, 6002). The collapse of the community that each warrior has protected demonstrates their importance to it.

[31] One apparent difference in the two heroes, motivation, resolves into their most profound connection, reflecting their respective importance to their community. Beowulf seeks out the hopeless battle in a desire for fame. Buffy is a reluctant hero much of the time and works under the cover of a "secret identity." In the end for both heroes, the evidence of greatness comes in how they are remembered. At the end of *Beowulf*, a barrow is built and filled with treasure in recognition of Beowulf's greatness. The poet's last words are that Beowulf "was of all kings of the world / the mildest of men and the most gentle, / the kindest to his folk and the most eager for fame" (3180-3182). To some, this statement comes as a surprise, that the end of a poem marked by violent battles would emphasize the hero's gentleness and kindness. But, of course, the poem has consistently focused on Beowulf's proper behavior and concern for his people, and the poem is, in fact, dominated by speeches that demonstrate that behavior and concern. Similarly, Season Five of *BtVS* ends with a shot of Buffy's modest headstone on which are the words

Buffy Anne Summers

1981-2001

Beloved Sister

Devoted Friend

She Saved the World

A Lot.

The understated simplicity of this epitaph matches that of the last lines of *Beowulf*. First is emphasized the human, social, non-warrior traits, punctuated by the simple statement of warrior greatness.

[32] In history class, I learned that tribes like *Beowulf*'s were "barbarians" that overran Rome. As I came to know *Beowulf*, I learned that in fact a model of noble and upright behavior underlies the violence. Like *Buffy*, *Beowulf* defies expectations based on appearances. Like the use of "Mr. Pointy" for the name of Kendra's weapon, in which the epic tradition is almost completely disguised as a joke, a laughable ironic distance exists between the punning California slayer and the boasting Anglo-Saxon warrior king. But the two heroic narratives hold up to us heroes whose deeds and words suggest a model of the best that can be achieved in a dangerous world: a model of behavior for anyone, providing a light of hope in a world in which the darkness of chaos seems to constantly threaten. In the words of Kemp Malone, "The hero is he who, like *Beowulf*, faces the worst without flinching and dies that others might live" (154).

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Notes

[1] All quotations from *Buffy* have been taken from or verified by the Episode Guide at *The Angel vs Buffy Website* (<www.buffy-vs-angel.com/guide.shtml>). I have reproduced the qualities of speech (stuttering, pauses) reflected at that site.

[2] All quotations from *Beowulf* are from the R. M. Liuzza's translation.

[3] Tolkien's lecture marks a shift in critical approaches to *Beowulf*. Rather than being appreciated only for its historical or archeological insights, the poem becomes recognized as a work of art worthy of literary analysis. Because many find it hard to take *BtVS* seriously for the same reasons literary scholars used to dismiss *Beowulf*, I find Tolkien's discussion particularly appropriate and poignant.

[4] Chance's analysis of the middle episode of *Beowulf* is, for me, definitive in defining how the fight with Grendel fits in the narrative structure. Of interest to *Buffy* fans in comparing this fight to the one with Angelus is her discussion of how "the poet exploits the basic resemblance between sexual intercourse and battle" (102).

[5] One of the few times that Buffy resorts to a modern weapon, using a rocket launcher against the judge, comes about because "no weapon forged can kill" The Judge ("Surprise" 2013). This notion is echoed in *Beowulf* when the poet tells us "that no sword / not the best of iron anywhere in the world, / could even touch that evil sinner [Grendel] / for he had worked a curse on weapons, / every sort of blade" (801-802).

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