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“Behavior that’s admired,” Beowulf’s narrator asserts, “is the path to power among people everywhere.” (24-25) In the Danish-Geat world of Beowulf and his compatriots, that path to power is an inherently ableist one. As illustrated by the descriptive language surrounding heroic figures in *Beowulf* and the nature of the praise heaped upon these heroes by others in the text, their society places an extreme emphasis on extensive physical might and mobility. However, *Beowulf* also depicts a society within which impulsivity, sensory-seeking behavior[[1]](#footnote-1), and similar neuro-psychological inclinations are largely admired and celebrated, whereas our societies today widely regard such unchosen proclivities as problematic, “lesser,” and/or symptomatic of ability deficits or “disabilities.”

*Beowulf*’s author(s) paint supreme might, complete physical mobility, and near-fearlessness as characteristics of the powerful, which fundamentally marginalizes those who do not or cannot exhibit them. From the very start of the poem, we are fed a narrative that explicitly ties power and worth to courage and might: “[T]he kings who ruled [the Spear-Danes] had courage and greatness. […] There was Shield Sheafson, a wrecker of mead-benches, rampaging among foes. This terror of the hall-troops had come far. […] [H]is power waxed and his worth was proved.” (2, 4-6, 8-9) This *in media res* introduction immediately ties power and courage to a willingness and winning capacity to fight. Later, once Beowulf docks his ship after sailing to help the Spear-Danes—which in and of itself requires an extensive physical mobility of every crew member—Unferth tries to insult Beowulf’s strength and worthiness with an anecdote about losing a swim race. Beowulf counters by sharing that he actually defeated nine formidable sea monsters while swimming, and thus lost the race on account of his unthinkable battle victories. He then continues with an attack on Unferth:

Now I cannot recall / any fight you entered, Unferth, that bears comparison. I don’t boast when I say / that neither you nor Breca were ever much celebrated for swordsmanship / or for facing danger on the brink of battle. […] For all your cleverness and quick tongue, you will suffer damnation[.] (582-589)

The author thus raises physical might and battle prowess over “cleverness” and communicative capacity in terms of worth and value. In Beowulf’s fight with Grendel, the author writes that Beowulf’s strength was unlike that of any creature Grendel had encountered previously—“the monster back-tracking, the man overpowering.” (760) This pattern continues throughout *Beowulf*; his might and physicality allow him to conquer monsters, and thus best equip him for power. Individuals without those physical abilities—Unferth, for example—are viewed as unworthy in comparison to those with them.

Even Beowulf himself suffers ableist discrimination prior to his epic battles with Grendel and its mother. The author shares that the legendary warrior-king “had been poorly regarded for a long time, was taken by the Geats for less than he was worth […] [t]hey firmly believes that he lacked force, that the prince was a weakling[.]” (2183-8) Here, “worth” operates within an ableist definition, so the work’s titular hero isn’t seen to be anything remotely admirable or heroic until he demonstrates the exceptional physical faculty that aligns with the Spear-Danes’ and Geats’ concept of “worthiness.”

Notably, though, that concept also entails abilities and ability characteristics which our own society today considers unworthy or symptomatic of being “disabled.” For example, before fighting Grendel, Beowulf is described as “a daunting man, dangerous in action and eager for it always” (629-30), which reads as markedly sensory-seeking. Many sensory-seeking individuals today find psychological comfort and happiness in contact sports, but otherwise end up either medicated or imprisoned due to latent psychological cravings for adrenaline and action. Their bodies and brains function best when physically engaged, and today’s inactive, digitized, sit-down-stay-quiet-and-tap-away-on-a-computer society inherently excludes these individuals. Furthermore, Beowulf is frequently described as “impatient” (1493, 1804), and his voyage to Herot is later revealed to have been an impulsive one when his king condescendingly asks him, “How did you fare on your foreign voyage, dear Beowulf, when you abruptly decided to sail away across the salt water and fight at Herot?” (1986-90) The Geat hero also embodies the stereotype of the “mad” individual, or the notion that uncontrollable dangerousness/craziness and disability go hand-in-hand. He even self-ascribes to this notion in a retelling of his battle with Grendel. “[Defeat] was not to be I got to my feet in a blind fury.” (2092) However, Beowulf spins the “mad” individual narrative into a positive one in that his fury and quick action are what fuel his exploits and lead him to greatness. While this impulsivity ultimately leads to his death, it also fueled his greatness. There doesn’t seem to be any logical explanation for an elderly king to take on a dragon single-handedly without having left any direction/succession plan, but he did so regardless and was honored for it.

Thus, while *Beowulf* does depict an explicitly ableist society, it also provides a refreshing take on the arbitrary nature of (dis)ability by giving us an impulsive hero whose otherwise-modernly-perceived disabilities fuel his greatness in the Geats’ eyes. Members of our own “disabled” population – marginalized for their unchosen diversion from other-abled individuals’ exclusionary mold – might very well be respected or even exalted for their “(dis)abilities” within differently-ableist societies like that of *Beowulf*. For the Spear-Danes and the Geats, today’s “disabled” population is societally favored over today’s “able” population. In a sense, then, the ableism evident in *Beowulf* can be used to highlight the unjust, exclusionary, and ultimately arbitrary basis for “ability” versus “disability” by turning the tables on modern society’s concept of “(dis)ability.”

1. That is, behavior prompted by heavy internal desires for physical stimulation, contact, and adrenaline. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)