When Men Cry: Male Demonstrations of Grief in Beowulf, The Song of Roland, and Sir Orfeo

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Date of Graduation
5-2011

Document Type
Thesis

Degree Name
Master of Arts in English (MA)

Degree Level
Graduate

Department
English

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Keywords
Beowulf, France, Male, Medieval, Mourning, Sir Orfeo, The Song of Roland

Abstract
Frequently in medieval texts, writers make mention of men who cry, wail, and faint. However, in modern scholarship, these records of men who cry are often overlooked, and masculine mourning is a largely neglected feature. My purpose in this thesis is to explore some of the reasons for male tears and displays of grief in three works of medieval literature. While male mourning appears in hundreds of medieval texts and is a topic worthy of extensive exploration, I have narrowed my focus to three works: Beowulf, The Song of Roland, and Sir Orfeo. Although the three tales are written in different languages and centuries, every narrative includes central male protagonists who mourn. Namely, each story includes a weeping king, masses of weeping subjects, and a hero who learns to experience and display grief throughout the course of the tale. The kings Hrothgar, Charlemagne, and Orfeo emerge in the tales as figures embodying and bearing the grief of their entire people.
Rather than being criticized as weak or effeminate rulers, all three of these sorrowful kings are honored by the poets and by their subjects. The mourning of the rulers is shown to be a clear portrayal of their commitment and care for their people and kingdoms. In response to the grief of the kings, the thanes, knights, and subjects publicly weep, demonstrating their loyalty by suffering with their sovereigns. In contrast, the heroic figures—Beowulf, Roland, and Orfeo—initially stand apart emotionally from the kings and other subjects in the texts. They maintain a focus on gaining glory through deeds of prowess, and their concept of suffering only acknowledges physical pain, disregarding emotional pain. However, the three heroes undergo a transformation as they personally encounter suffering and loss. By the end of each poem, the heroes display empathy by mourning, joining their sorrow with that of grief-filled kings and weeping subjects. In these three poems, male demonstrations of grief serve essential social and political roles and are affirmed rather than being demeaned.

Recommended Citation
https://scholarworks.uark.edu/etd/91

When Orfeo heard these tidings sad, more grief than ever in life he had; and swiftly with ten knights he sped to bower, and stood before her bed, and looking on her ruefully, 'Dear life,' he said, 'what troubles thee, who ever quiet hast been and sweet, why dost thou now so shrilly greet? Thy body that peerless white was born is now by cruel nails all torn. Thus came Sir Orfeo out of care. God grant that well we all may fare!' Translated by Tolkien from a mediaeval manuscript. 'Sir Orfeo is found in three manuscripts of which the earliest gives very much the best text; this is the Auchinleck manuscript, a large miscellany made about 1330, probably in London, and now in the Advocates' Library in Edinburgh.' © by owner. provided at no charge for educational purposes. Read more →. Masculine identity in The Song of Roland is grounded in emotional experience. From knights on the battlefield to King Charlemagne, men throughout the poem frequently weep or faint because of the in... Contrary to expectations of medieval gender roles, male expressions of grief in The Song of Roland are crucial in defining and constructing acceptable forms of manhood. Performances of strong emotion during times of war are central to the male-dominated feuding culture—these descriptions provide a model of honorable conduct for knighthood and a method of legitimizing political acts of violence.