

The heroic values of beowulf

[Literature](#), [British Literature](#)



EN245 November 16th 2011 This essay will document research performed on three respective sources concerning the heroic values of Beowulf, and how those heroic values ultimately contribute to Beowulf's behaviour. The three sources used in this essay consist of an excerpt from a book titled ' Heroic Identity in the World of Beowulf' by Scott Gwara, a journal article titled ' Friends and friendship in heroic epics: with a focus on Beowulf, Chanson de Roland, the Nibelungenlied, and Njal's Saga' by Albrecht Classen, and an online essay titled " Beowulf and Anglo-Saxon Values".

Gwara's book contributes an exploration of Beowulf's character and conduct through a second hand perspective; that is, perspectives offered by the poem's secondary characters and those beneath the status of Beowulf, rather than the direct viewpoint that readers are so commonly exposed to. This unique perspective creates an alternative point of understanding to how a hero like Beowulf could be interpreted by the poem's audience. Classen's article discusses the importance of simple friendship in a hostile and disastrous world where humans are extremely vulnerable to hazard and death. Although seemingly general in content, Classen intertwines key sub-topics of friendship that will be focused on, respectively, in this paper — boasting, fellowship, and revenge. Finally, ' Beowulf and Anglo-Saxon Values' addresses the importance of reputation and credibility within the poem, specifically contrasting Beowulf's outlandish boasts (particularly with his confidence in his ability to slay Grendel when so many other have failed, despite knowing little about the beast) with his tremendous outcome of success, and how building his reputation in such a presumptuous manner stands as the primary credit to his legendary status. The first value that

Beowulf is known to incorporate directly in to his behaviour is boasting. In modern day interaction, boasting is generally frowned upon. It is seen as an inflated sense of self-worth; an element of smugness that others interpret as distasteful and obnoxious. However in the early medieval period, boasting was widely accepted and encouraged — practically considered an art of the subject and ultimately essential to an individual's status and credibility amongst peers. One of the earliest and most prominent boasts by Beowulf is to the Danes regarding Grendel. Claiming that he can slay Grendel without hesitation, Gwara notes that Beowulf " does not know for certain" what Grendel is like, since he has never seen him first hand (Gwara 40). In actuality, Beowulf is oblivious to the fact that Grendel cannot be cut by swords, indicating that his bare-handed, armour-less encounter seems even more reckless. Since Beowulf does not know anything about Grendel's physicality, his boast comes off as arrogant and offensive. Regardless, by his own admission, Beowulf has confronted monsters before. It is from this experience that he is in fact quite possibly qualified to fight Grendel after all. These points are all legitimate argumentative material presented by Gwara as a unique alternative perspective on how Beowulf - although ignorant of his match - comes out victorious and, as a result, is respected immensely for achieving success from such an absurdly demanding task. By contrast, boasting in its simplest and most discreet form can be analyzed through the introduction of soldiers and heroes between one another — most commonly addressed as the " son of". For example, " Beowulf, son of Ecgþeow" automatically establishes Beowulf's credibility to those who are not familiar with him. There is a reliance on the achievements of a man's father to

establish who that man is, what his origins are, and what can be expected of him. This tradition of paternal inheritance helps to establish relationships between individuals regardless of how familiar the parties may initially be with one another. Hrothgar instantly accredits Beowulf as strong and virtuous, for Hrothgar and Ecgþeow had been allies at an earlier point in time. As discussed in Classen's article, the strategic use of friendship and relationships stands out as one of the cornerstones to all political alliances and particularly of strategies to gain influence on a ruler (Classen 132). Classen makes valid points regarding the extended purpose of friendship amongst leaders. Establishing familiarity between two separate parties creates a unification of power, resources, and knowledge that each party may benefit from. The second value of critical importance to Beowulf's behaviour is companionship. The epic is presented in a fashion whereby, as the hero ages, he becomes increasingly reliant on the assistance of others. Mentioned earlier, Beowulf's ability to effortlessly establish an alliance with Hrothgar by simply introducing both him and the paternal line that he descends from grants him with the support of both Hrothgar and his soldiers. Gwara makes a point of saying that 'friendship may have been a social institution (loosely defined) in which peers took on risks and responsibilities for each other as sacred obligations.' (Gwara 111). This argument, although helpful, is somewhat misleading: Beowulf's association with Hrothgar is based more on material compensation than it is for, let's say, defensive support in battle. Beowulf has been summoned to rid Hrothgar's magnificent heorot of the being that terrorizes its existence, but we do not see Hrothgar battle for a cause in the same way that Beowulf does. Hrothgar, although

king of the Danes, is more or less helpless and desperately in need of Beowulf's unmatched strength and courage. On the flip side, Beowulf encounters another companion much later in his life. In the third act of the play we are introduced to Wiglaf as a significant secondary character. Wiglaf plays a vital role in protecting and assisting Beowulf after all the other soldiers have fled in terror of the dragon. Wiglaf's immense display of nobility, bravery, strength, and dedication to his King are contrast greatly against the limitations of Hrothgar's impotence. Beowulf's third critical value is vengeance. It is a dominant theme throughout the entirety of the epic, and arguably the most important to the identity and behaviour of Beowulf. Ann Park Lanpher argues that ' from all accounts, the capacity in which he [Beowulf] gains the most praise and fame through the poem as avenger' (Lanpher 57). Lanpher makes an excellent assessment of Beowulf: from this perspective, it is arguable that Beowulf is a sort of ' hit man' — a cleanser of the land. He is repeatedly called upon to slay vicious beasts and resolve grave issues that would otherwise wreak havoc and destruction on Dane and Geat settlements. Vengeance is, arguably, the device that drives Beowulf's status as a celebrity to such a pseudo-mythical level. A quote from Gwara's book compliments this theory: " In the Grendel fight Beowulf has himself to be potentially ambitious and callous, eager for glory, and scornful of the ordinary man's abilities against an inhuman adversary" (Gwara 135). His quests of revenge on Cain's descendants are glorified and inflated to such an extent that when Beowulf finally returns home to inherit the throne as King of the Geats, we " do not hear much more of him than that he ruled wisely and well for fifty winters" (Lanpher 57). Lanpher describes this as a "

seemingly stock description for a king" (Lanpher 57); which, when compared to all the tales of glory, violence, killing, and adventure of his youth, proves quite true. Each of the three sources discussed in this paper criticize a specific value that Beowulf incorporates and builds on through the progression of this epic poem. Boasting, as mentioned earlier, is critical to the success of Beowulf as an authoritative, dominant, and powerful individual amongst common men. Upon arrival at Hrothgar's kingdom, Beowulf gives a speech in the Heorot: " This was my determination in taking to the ocean, benched in the ship among my band of fellows, that I should once and for all accomplish the wishes of your adopted people, or pass to the slaughter, viced in my foe's grip. This vow I shall accomplish, a deed worthy of an earl; decided otherwise here in this mead-hall to meet my ending-day! " (632 - 638) Arguably one of the boldest boasts made by any character in the epic, Beowulf confidently addresses the Danes and promises them that, after swearing on his life, he will eliminate the threat of Grendel from the Heorot or die trying. When challenged with the legitimacy of his power and doubts of whether or not the Dane's should hold such faith in a man of such fanatical confidence, Beowulf counters the doubt of skeptics by sharing tales of his previous achievements. Obsessed with the concepts of pride and renown, Beowulf believed that vengeance was necessary for an individual to fully overcome a death or loss of something significant. " Bear your grief, wise one! It is better for a man to avenge his friend than to refresh his sorrow. As we must all expect to leave our life on this earth, we must earn some renown, if we can, before death; daring is the thing for a fighting man to be remembered by. " (1383 - 1388) This is an excellent quote from the

main text illustrating Beowulf's adoration for vengeance, pride, and renown. He believes that no man should live or die without some credibility or compromise for the events of their life. To some extent, it seems as though Beowulf encourages an externalization of one's soul through pride and purity; that one must be 'cleansed' before their soul can fully be at rest. As such a powerful figure Beowulf was undeniably idolized among soldiers of both Geat and Dane culture. However, when faced with the Dragon Guardian in the poem's final climactic scene, Beowulf's entire command, excluding one named Wiglaf; flee in fear from the third embodiment of Cain. Wiglaf and Beowulf, left alone to fend against the Dragon, achieve victory at the cost of Beowulf's life. Wiglaf who returns to his companions in shame and disgust for their cowardly actions; he confronts the soldiers: "A man who should speak the truth may say with justice that a lord of men who allowed you those treasures, who bestowed on you the trappings that you stand there in — as, at the ale-bench, he would often give to those who sat in hall both helmet and mail-shirt as a lord to his thanes, and things of the most worth that he was able to find anywhere in the world — that he had quite thrown away and wasted cruelly all that battle-harness when the battle came upon him. "

(2861 - 2869) Wiglaf, disgusted with the actions of his fellow soldiers, places emphasis on reminding the thanes of their honour and allegiance with their King, Beowulf. Wiglaf takes note of their dress, weaponry, and armour; stating how it had been gifted to each of them by Beowulf, and by accepting it each soldier had also accepted service to their King. This ironic point made my Wiglaf shows Beowulf in a virtuous light after his death. We are left with Wiglaf's final statement that Beowulf is in fact viewed as a good king for his

generosity, protection, and bravery. Works Cited “ Damrosch, David, and Kevin J. H. Dettmar. “ Beowulf”. The Anthology Of British Literature, The Middle Ages Through The Eighteenth Century. 4th ed. 1. Longman, 2011. Print. Gwara, Scott. Heroic Identity in the World of Beowulf. 2. Leiden: Brill, 2008. Print. Classen, Albrecht. " Friends and friendship in heroic epics: with a focus on Beowulf, Chanson de Roland, the Nibelungenlied, and Njal's Saga." Neohelicon. 38. 1 (2011): 121-139. Web. 16 Nov. 2011. . Lanpher, Ann Park. " The Problem of Revenge in Medieval Literature: Beowulf, The Canterbury Tales, and Ljǫsvetninga Saga." (2010): 53-57. Web. 16 Nov. 2011. .