

# Armor, reputation and chivalry in beowulf and sir gawain and the green knight

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In the Old English poem *Beowulf*, the warrior culture is centered upon the heroic codes. Those who are members of Hrothgar's court are ranked based upon the identities and reputations of their ancestors. It can be said that the armor of these warriors, as it has travelled from generation to generation and warrior to warrior, is emblematic of the very reputations these warriors consider most important. In *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, too, armor plays an important role. It is representative of the virtues Sir Gawain is challenged to uphold, and, on a larger scale, is also symbolic of the test to which the entire chivalric system is put. Thus, the two poems, although different in plot and some general cultural characteristics, contain a motif of armor that opens up the doors to themes regarding the importance of ancestry and reputation as well as the themes of knightly chivalry and Christian morality, respectively. As *Beowulf* is fundamentally a record of heroic deeds, the identities and reputations of those who have performed and will perform these acts are clearly central to the interpretation and understanding of the poem. In the opening passages, the reader steps into a world in which every male figure is known as the son of his father.

Characters constantly refer to lineage when identifying themselves and discussing their backgrounds. The presence of this prominent concern with ancestry in the Geatish and Danish warrior cultures can be attributed to the poem's central focus upon the bonds of kinship. Men take pride in ancestors who have acted courageously and obtained a praiseworthy status among their kin. Furthermore, these men are provided with a set of standards to live up to that are based upon the performance of the aforementioned ancestors. Upon further examination of the values of the warrior culture in *Beowulf*, it is

evident that armor provides a historical link that is analogous to the ancestry of these men. In a way, the history of a warrior's armor parallels and reflects the history of the warrior himself – not only in the details of its craftsmanship, but in the results of its performance. Simply put, "...the troops themselves were as good as their weapons" (40). Hence, the historical aspects associated with armor in Beowulf directly correspond to the theme of the importance of a warrior's reputation. With armor comes the history of its performance from generation to generation, and this history opens up the theme of the reputation of he who owns the armor. While the heritage of a warrior does provide models of heroic and noble behavior and helps one to establish their identity among kin, it is shown through the text that a good reputation is the key to solidifying one's identity. As the narrator so astutely remarks in the poem's prologue, "behavior that's admired is the path to power among people everywhere" (34). Beowulf boasts of himself as a great warrior and then backs up his claims by defeating Grendel; he is then celebrated and received among the warriors as a hero. Unferth, in comparison, boasts emptily, ultimately proving himself unwilling to fight the monsters. Thus, although boasts of heroic capabilities are important in the overall construction of warrior culture, it is a hero's actions that define his reputation. Take, for example, Shield Sheafson. Orphaned at a young age and thus without a father to contribute to the establishment of his identity and warrior reputation, he is left to form his own identity by performing numerous valiant deeds for which he will gain fame and be remembered. He uses his outstanding performance to contribute to the formation of his reputation, and ultimately becomes the originator of the Danish royal line. It

is also important to note the weaponry in relation to its aesthetic details. Right from the beginning, the reader is shown the importance of armor through the detailed descriptions provided by the poet. When the Danish watchman finally offers to lead the Geats to Heorot, the reader is shown the “ boar-shapes” that “ flashed/ above their cheek-guards, the brightly forged/ work of goldsmiths, watching over/ those stern-faced men” (40). The boars that are embossed on the helmets give the warriors an additional form of protection, and it is almost as if the animal is with him as he marches into battle. Additionally, when the warriors arrive at Heorot, they are introduced as seemingly worthy of attention, since “ from their arms and appointment, they appear well born/ and worthy of respect” (41). The role of armor in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight is somewhat similar, although it works to bring about the theme of knightly chivalry more than the themes of reputation and heritage. However, it could be said that adherence to knightly ideals contributes to the establishment of one’s overall identity and reputation. In this poem, Gawain’s shield is without a doubt the most important piece of armor that has been introduced thus far. The center of his protective gear, the shield is the perfect symbol of the virtues and ideals Gawain aspires to: generosity, courtesy, friendship, chastity, and piety. The pentangle on Gawain’s shield represents the formation of the endless knot. The side of the shield that faces towards Gawain when he wears it has the face of Mary, another important aesthetic aspect. The shield thus represents not only the profound heavenly protection of Christianity that was central to knightly culture, but also the protection from earthly harm via the security of Mary, a maternal figure whose womb signifies a place of security. While it is clear

that Gawain's adherence to these virtues is tested throughout the poem, it is quite possible that there is more under examination than simply his personal virtue. Ultimately, Gawain's shield is symbolic not only of the test he personally endures, but a test of the chivalric system as a whole. King Arthur's court depends heavily on the code of chivalry, which seems to value appearance and symbols more than actual legitimacy. Arthur is introduced as the "most courteous of all," a clear indication that people in this court are ranked according to their obedience of a particular code of behavior (163). The first time the values of this chivalric code are brought into question is when the Green Knight challenges the court, ridiculing its knights for being so apprehensive of mere words. This suggests that perhaps words and aesthetics hold too much power over the knights of King Arthur's court. On his quest for the Green Chapel, Gawain travels from Camelot, land of the one chivalric code he has ever known, into the wilderness – a place where he is forced to abandon these familiar codes of chivalry in order to find the means of physical comfort that are necessary for his survival. Once Sir Gawain prays (to Mary, notably) for help, he is immediately rewarded with the sudden appearance of a magnificent castle. Upon entering this new and heavily fortified castle, Sir Gawain learns about a new form of chivalry, one that is based more firmly upon the values of truth and reality. The people that comprise Bertilak's court are firmly connected to nature, as is visible in the way Gawain is greeted by servants who kneel on the "naked earth" (179). The importance of this, then, is to note that the people in this castle center their chivalrous ideals upon the reality of the natural world. It is important to keep in mind how different this chivalric code is in comparison to that of

Camelot and King Arthur's court. When Gawain is subjected to this different kind of chivalric code, his virtues are challenged in ways he has not experienced before. Through these tests, he learns that although chivalry does provide a good set of ideals towards which to strive, he should remember that he is ultimately a human, and thus needs to remember his own capability for error and weakness. His shield, then, is a gateway to this revelation. In sum, the motif that works to give way to the themes of reputation and ancestral significance in *Beowulf*, and to open up on to the theme of knightly chivalry in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, is that of armor. In *Beowulf*, armor helps to shed light upon the history of its owners, who define themselves based not only on their own actions, but also upon the performance and reputations of their ancestors. In *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, armor serves to aid Gawain in discovering that while it is important for him to strive for knightly ideals, he must keep in mind that he is a human and therefore capable of failure. Works Cited " *Beowulf*." *The Norton Anthology of English Literature: The Middle Ages*. 8th ed. Ed. Stephen Greenblatt. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2006. 29-100. " *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*." *The Norton Anthology of English Literature: The Middle Ages*. 8th ed. Ed. Stephen Greenblatt. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2006. 160-213.