

BEOWULF'S BOAST WORDS

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Abstract

This paper focuses on two types of “boast words” as they are used in *Beowulf*. The first type to be considered is the act of speaking we commonly associate with bragging, while the second, more important kind of boast, functions as a promise that the speaker will perform specific acts of courage. Close examination of Beowulf’s speeches in their narrative contexts shows that type one boasts, as they are defined here, help to establish Beowulf’s credibility as a man who can be trusted to do what he says he will do, while type two boasts show the degree to which he commits himself to follow through on his promises. Attention is also given to the boast words Wiglaf utters as he comes to the aid of his king, and to words spoken by J.R.R. Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings* heroes that also function, in their much later contexts, as type two, heroic promise boasts.

“Bēot” and “gylp,” along with the compounds “bēotword,” “gylpword,” “gilpcwide,” and “gylpspræc,” are the words the *Beowulf* poet uses to refer to acts of boasting. But what does it *mean* to boast? Our Modern English understanding of the verb “to boast” seems to be restricted to boasting or bragging about something a speaker has done, something he or she has inherited or otherwise acquired, or perhaps a family connection. The Old English verb “bēotian” (to boast), however, had a greater range of meaning. The purpose here is to give attention to examples that will serve to define the two kinds of “boast words” as they are used in *Beowulf*, and to suggest how they work together in their respective contexts.

John R. Clark Hall and Herbert D. Meritt begin their list of equivalents for “bēot” (a noun apparently interchangeable with “gylp”) with “boastful speech” and “boast.”¹ This meaning can be related to J.R.R. Tolkien’s and Margaret Goldsmith’s perceptions of the 24-line speech Beowulf delivers before his third monster fight. Tolkien and Goldsmith saw that speech as a “long vaunt”

and an exhibition of “disastrous pride,” perceptions that Dwight C. Conquergood, in a fairly early application of speech act theory to a literary text, relates to “misunderstandings ... colored by pejorative connotations of the Modern English word ‘boast.’”² Conquergood, in contrast, saw the Old English “bēot” as an act of *promising*.

Clark Hall and Meritt also provide “threat,” “promise,” and “vow” as equivalents for “bēot.” Threats, as John R. Searle explains in his outline of conditions that govern the performance of speech acts, promise results that Hearers do *not* wish to experience.³ I do not find instances of Beowulf uttering *threats*. *Threats* in a *Beowulf* context would seem to require Beowulf to directly address Grendel, Grendel’s mother, or the nameless dragon and promise his Hearer that he will kill him or her – and we do not see this happening. But, speaking to Hearers whose interests he proposes to serve, Beowulf *does* perform speech acts that clearly fall into the categories of *promise* or *vow*, which signifies an even stronger commitment to act. Indeed, as the examples to be considered here will show, the primary purpose of *Beowulf* boasts was to perform acts of promising. But the other kind of boasting, the kind we speakers of polite Modern English tend to look down on, can also be seen to have served positive purposes.

But let us begin as *Beowulf* begins, with the situation in the land of the Danes when Beowulf arrives. As readers will remember, all promisers do not follow through by doing what they say they will do. As Hrothgar explains to Beowulf, who has just arrived, his trusted “ōretmecgas” often promised to wait for Grendel’s attack in the meadhall.

1. *The Boasts of Hrothgar’s Warriors (ll. 480–483)*⁴

“Ful oft gebēotedon bēore druncne
ofer ealowāge ōretmecgas,
þæt hīe in bēorsele bīdan woldon
Grendles gūpe mid gryrum ecga.”

“Full often warriors, drunk with beer,
boasted over the ale-cups
that they would wait in the mead-hall
with fierce swords for Grendel’s attack.”

The Danes boasted that they would meet Grendel with their swords, but, as Hrothgar continues his account of past sorrows, we learn that they did not and could not stop the monster’s attacks.

Their failure provides part of the context for Beowulf's following speech to Hrothgar, who now functions as the "Hearer," or "promisee," to use Searle's terms, to whom the promise is addressed. The following lines can be read as an example of how Beowulf, a Speaker intent on establishing his own credibility, prepares to offer his services to Hrothgar.

2. *Beowulf's Self-introduction (ll. 415–426a)*

“þā mē þæt gelærdon leode mīne,
 þā sēlestan, snotetre ceorlas,
 þeoden Hrōðgār, þæt ic þē sōthe,
 forþan hīe mægenes cræft minne cūþon;
 selfe ofersāwon, ðā ic of searwum cwōm,
 fāh from feondum, þær ic fife geband,
 yðde eotena cyn, ond on yðum slōg
 niceras nihtes, nearoþearfe drēah,
 wræc Wedera nīð – wēan āhsodon –
 forgrand gramum; ond nū wið Grendel sceal,
 wið þam āglæcan āna gehēgan
 ðing wið yrse....”

“Then the best men of my people,
 wise men, advised me, King Hrothgar,
 that I should seek you, because they know
 the power of my strength, saw it themselves
 when I came, bloodied by enemies,
 from combat, where I bound five, destroyed
 a tribe of giants, and in the waves
 slew water-monsters by night. I endured
 dire distress, avenged wrongs to the Geats,
 crushed the hostile ones; and now I alone
 with Grendel, with the monster, shall hold
 a meeting with the demon....”

Beowulf's reference to wise men's recognition of his strength can be taken as "boasting" in our familiar sense of the word. Beowulf is not simply asserting that he is strong and capable. He is claiming that "þā sēlestan, snotere ceorlas," the best men, the wise men capable of making sound judgments, the men who know about his triumph over the sea monsters, know his strength and have confidence that it will enable him to help Hrothgar in his present need. And this bragging, or type one boast, can be taken as strong support for his type two, promising boast to defend Hrothgar's hall.

As he continues to speak, Beowulf acknowledges the possibility of failure. In doing so he asks Hrothgar to send his “beaduscruða betst” (453, best of war-garments) to King Higelac if he should die at the hands of Grendel. But even this request, which carries a realistic acknowledgement of the possibility of failure, functions as a claim of his worthiness to fight the fearful adversary. The “hrægla sēlest” (454, best of corslets) Beowulf wishes to have sent home is a work of the master craftsman Weland handed down to him from his grandfather Hreðel, king of the Geats.

Two outcomes are possible, as Beowulf acknowledges, and the decision of who will live and who will die, as we see in ll. 440b–44, is up to God.

3. *The Possibility of Failure (ll. 440b–444, 455)*

“ðær gelyfan sceal
 Dryhtnes dōme sē þe hine dēað nimeð.
 Wēn’ ic þæt hē wille, gif hē wealdan mōt,
 in þæm gūðsele Gēotena lēode
 etan unforhte, swā hē oft dyde.”

“There the one death takes must
 trust in the judgment of God. I expect that
 [Grendel], if he is allowed to rule
 in the battle-hall, will feed without fear,
 as he often has, on people of the Geats.”

This speech includes Beowulf’s request that Hrothgar send his war-garment or corslet to Hygelac if Grendel wins their battle, and concludes with the words,

“Gæð ā wyrd swā hīo scel!”

“Fate goes always as it must.”

The hero can win the battle and live, or he can lose and die. What he sees before him is a double either-or possibility, and he can understand and *accept* this double possibility – and herein lies one of the defining qualities of Beowulf’s boast word promises.

As the scene in the hall plays itself out, Beowulf successfully defends his honor as a performer of brave deeds in response to Unferth’s challenge; and Wealhtheow, Hrothgar’s queen, greets him, expresses

her joy that he has come, and offers him a cup of mead. The following lines present Beowulf's response to her courtesy, and can be taken as an example of the basic either-or structure of the heroic, type two boast.

4. *The Basic Either-or of Beowulf's Promise-boast (ll. 632–638)*

”Ic þæt hogode, þā ic on holm gestāh,
 sǣbāt gesæt mid mīnra secga gedriht,
 þæt ic ānunga ēowra lēoda
 willan geworhte, oþðe on wæl crunge
 feondgrāpum fæst. Ic gefremman sceal
 eorlic ellen, oþðe endedæg
 on þisse meoduhalle mīnne gebīdan!”

“I resolved, when I set forth on the sea,
 sat in the sea-boat with my band of men,
 that I alone would carry out your people's
 will or fall in battle, held fast in the grasp
 of the fiend. I must perform
 this manly deed, or live to see
 my end-day in this meadhall.”

With past tense verbs Beowulf tells how he *resolved* when he *went*, or *set forth* on the sea, and *sat* in his sea-boat with his band of men, that he alone would carry out the will of Wealhtheow's people; and then, in classic either-or form, he utters his heroic promise: “I must perform [this] manly deed, or live to see my end-day in this hall,” which carries the underlying meaning of this structure of opposition: “I must succeed and live – or fail and die.”

The lines that introduce the next example establish the time and place for the speech to follow. The celebration in the hall is over, and “se gōða” (the good one) utters “gylpworda sum” (675, certain boastwords) “æf hē on bed stige” (before he goes to bed) on the night that Grendel comes.

5. *Beowulf's Bedtime Boastwords (ll. 677–687)*

”Nō ic mē an herewæsmun hnāgran talige
 gūþgeweorca, þonne Grendel hine;
 forþan ic hine sweorde swebban nelle,
 aldre beneotan, þeah ic eal mæge;
 nāt hē þāra gōða, þæt hē mē ongēan slea,
 rand gehēawe, þeah ðe hē rōf sie
 niþgeweorca; ac wit on niht sculon
 secge ofersittan, gif hē gesecēan dear
 wīg ofer wæpen, ond sibðan wītig God

on swā hwæþere hond hālig Dryhten
mærdō dēme, swā him gemet þince.”

“I do not consider my capability for
battle-work to be less than Grendel judges
his fighting strength to be. I will therefore not
kill him, deprive him of life with a sword,
though I could. Though he is brave in night-work
he does not ‘know’ that art-how to strike me
cut my shield to pieces. But *we-two* must forswear
the sword if in the night he dares to seek
war without a weapon, and afterwards
wise God, the holy Lord, will determine whose
hand is worthy of glory, as it seems fitting to Him.”

A sense almost of *noblesse oblige*, which we might hardly expect to find in an Old English poem, informs the opening words of this speech as Beowulf says that since Grendel does not have the ability to use weapons he will forswear the use of a sword; but here again, as in “Gæð ā wyrd swā hīo scel,” the gnomic utterance with which his earlier speech to Hrothgar ended, Beowulf expresses his willingness to accept whatever happens.

And now, in ll. 758–761, the poet asserts that his hero, facing Grendel, who has once again entered the hall in the night, *remembers* what he promised to do.

6. *Bedtime Boastwords Remembered (ll. 758–761)*

Gemunde þā se gōda, mæg Higelāces,
æfenspræce, uplang āstōd
and him fæste wiðfēng; fingras burston;
eoten wæs útweard, eorl furþur stōp....

Then the good man, the kinsman of Higelac,
remembered his evening-speech, stood upright
and firmly laid hold on [Grendel]. Fingers burst;
the monster moved outward, the noble one advanced....

The hero remembers his promise, he proceeds to follow through, and he succeeds in his mission. Things could have gone otherwise, but he triumphs and lives.

People gather from far and near the next day to see the arm of Grendel mounted below the roof of Hrothgar’s hall. The word for boasting now is “gylpspræc,” which I take to refer to boasting of the bragging kind, and Unferth, who challenged Beowulf when he first entered the hall, is said to be “more silent” in “boasting,” which can be

taken as a litotes for he *is* silent. But this is the scene as the *Beowulf* poet describes it.

7. *A Scene of Celebration (ll. 980–990)*

Ðā wæs swīgra secg, sunu Ecglāfes,
 on gylpspræce gūðgeweorca,
 siþðan æþelingas eorles cræfte
 ofer hēanne hrōf hand scēawedon,
 fēondes fingras; foran āghwylc wæs,
 stiðra nægla gehwylc stýle gelicost;
 hǣþenes handsporu hilderinces
 eglu unhēoru; āghwylc gecwæð,
 þæt him heardra nān hrīnan wolde
 iren ærgōd, þæt ðæs āhlæcan
 blōdige beadufolme onberan wolde.

Then [Unferth] son of Ecglaf was more silent
 in boasting speech of battle-work
 after nobles saw the hand, the fingers of the fiend,
 the proof of [Beowulf's] strength
 above the high roof. At the tip
 of each of the heathen's fingers
 was a steel-like handspur, horrible and
 monstrous. Everyone said then
 that no sword, no matter how well tested
 by earlier battle, could harm the
 bloody hand of the monster.

Unferth does not brag, and neither does Beowulf utter a type one, or bragging boast, at this point of the story. He has accomplished his mission and there is no need to demand credit for what he has done. Everyone can see the arm of Grendel above the door of Heorot, evidence that Beowulf has faced a most formidable adversary, an enemy who could not be harmed by man-made weapons, and defeated him.

As we know, the threat to Hrothgar's hall does not end with the defeat of Grendel. Grendel's mother comes in the night, and Beowulf prepares to seek out this new threat to the Danes. As he did before, Beowulf acknowledges the possibility of defeat and death by asking that possessions, which now include the generous gifts Hrothgar has given him, be sent home to his king Higelac, and that his sword be given to Unferth if he does not survive the coming confrontation. And then he utters a promise-boast that places the possible outcomes of the second monster fight in perfect balance:

8. *Beowulf's Promise to Confront Grendel's Mother* (ll.1490b–1491)

“ic mē mid Hruntinge
dōm gewyrce, oþðe mec deað nimeð.”

“I will earn glory for myself
with Hrunting, or death will take me.”

He will achieve glory with his sword Hrunting and live, or he will fail and die. There is no middle ground.

Fifty years later, Beowulf, now King of the Geats, recalls his earlier defeats of Grendel and Grendel's mother as he prepares to meet the dragon, and once again recollection of past success prepares for a promise to serve, and to save his own people from a threat of fiery destruction.

The poet calls attention to the significance of Beowulf's final declaration of heroic intention as he introduces his speech. Beowulf speaks “bēotwordum” (with boastwords) for the “nīehstan siðe” (the last time). Beowulf survived many battles when he was young, and his words can now be taken, like those of his earlier speech about his triumph over the sea monsters that threatened him and his young friend Breca, as support for his credibility as defender of a people. Now, as an old guardian of the Geats, whom he has long served as king, he will fight again if the evil-doer comes from his earth-hall to seek him out.

Beowulf says that he would not bear a sword – just as he did not bear a sword against Grendel – if he knew how he could otherwise face the fire of the dragon, but he will now carry a shield and be protected by a coat of mail.

9. *Preparation for the Dragon Fight* (ll. 2510–2515; 2535b–2537)

Bēowulf maðelode, bēotwordum spræc
nīehstan siðe: “Ic genēðde fela
gūða on geogoðe; gýt ic wylle,
frōd folces weard fæðe sēcan,
mærgðu fremman, gif mec se mǎnsceaða
of eorðsele ūt gesēceð.

.....
Ic mid elne sceall
gold gegangan, oððe gūð nimeð
feorhbealu frēcne frēan ēowerne!”

Beowulf spoke formally, uttered boastwords
for the last time: “I survived many battles
in my youth. I still, as the old guardian

of the people, wish to seek battle,
 perform a glorious deed, if the evil-doer
 seeks me out from his earth hall

 I shall through courage
 gain gold, or battle, fierce mortal wound,
 will take your king!"

Here the verbs "gegangan" and "nimeð" carry the surface structure meaning of the heroic promise. Beowulf will *gain* or *win* the gold that the dragon holds in his hoard under the earth, or the dragon will *seize* him. The dragon will have his possessions taken from him, that is, he will be defeated; or Beowulf will lose his life.

In her criticism of what seemed to her to be Beowulf's excessive pride, Margaret Goldsmith pointed out that the gold Beowulf gained from the dragon was buried with him, but I do not think that the importance of gold, as far as Beowulf's intention is concerned, should be overemphasized. The basic double opposition is still win and live, or lose and die, and a further either-or balance is involved. It is not just Beowulf's life at risk. The life and security of his people are also at stake.

As the story of the third great monster fight continues, we learn that Beowulf's sword fails, and that the "goldwine Geata" (2584, the gold-friend or generous prince of the Geats) has no reason to "gealp" (2583, boast or rejoice) in victory. But Beowulf's nephew Wiglaf advances through the "wærlrec" (2661, the "deadly fumes" spewed forth by the dragon) to encourage his king and to pledge his support, and with our last *Beowulf* example, we hear Wiglaf utter his boast, his promise to serve his king.

10. *Wiglaf's Heroic Speech (ll. 2663–2668)*

"Lēofa Bīowulf, lǣst eall tela
 swā ðū on geoguðfēore geāra gecwæde,
 þæt ðū ne alǣte be ðē lifigendum
 dōm gedrēosan; scealt nū dǣdum rōf,
 æðeling anhȳdig, ealle mægene
 feorh ealgian; ic ðē fullǣstu."

"Beloved Beowulf, perform all well, just as
 you said in the days of your youth that
 you would never, as long as you lived, allow
 your determination to fail. You shall now,
 noble and renowned for your deeds in the past,
 defend your life with all your strength. I will support you."

Wiglaf does not speak of his own past success.⁵ He recalls *Beowulf's* illustrious deeds. His preceding reprimand to the troops that stand aside as Beowulf fights alone (an echo of Hrothgar's reference to men who did not follow through on their boasts) nevertheless shows his awareness of the underlying either-or, and of the possible consequences of the choice he makes as he advances to the side of his king.

Reversing the life-or-death order of Beowulf's promises to death-or-life, Wiglaf first says that for him it is "micle lēofre" (2651, much better) for fire to consume his body along with that of his gold-giver, and *then* presents what he sees as the unacceptable alternative. It does not seem to him to be "gerysne" (2653, proper) that he and his fellows should ever bear shields again *unless* they have first fought with their king against the dragon. The possibilities now, as Wiglaf clearly sees them, are fight at the side of Beowulf and live, or fight at the side of Beowulf and die. For him there is no alternative. He cannot stand aside and fail to support his king. Wiglaf, then, whether or not he uses precisely the same either-or structure of the promise boast that we have seen in the boasts uttered by Beowulf, knows the commitment he makes when he prepares to face the dragon's fire.

Wiglaf fights at the side of Beowulf and lives, but now, with Beowulf's death, the former either-or of the boast word as *promise* is seen to be an insufficient predictor of possible outcomes. Beowulf, with the help of Wiglaf, defeats the dragon and *dies*. It is the memory of his courage and dedication to his people that lives on in the lines of a poem that has itself endured the test of fire.

Turning now, or fast-forwarding, to the language of our time, I would like to conclude with three speeches from Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* trilogy. Tolkien may have been critical of the speech with which Beowulf prepared to fight the dragon, but there can be little doubt that his heroes spoke with the same sense of commitment that characterizes the boast word speeches of Beowulf and Wiglaf.

The immediately following passage is taken from *The Fellowship of the Ring* Book II: Chapter 2: The Council of Elrond.⁶

No one answered. The noon-bell rang. Still no one spoke. Frodo glanced at all the faces, but they were not turned to him. All the Council sat with downcast eyes, as if in deep thought. A great dread fell on him, as if he was awaiting the pronouncement of some doom that he had long foreseen and vainly hoped might after all never be spoken. An overwhelming longing to rest and remain at peace by Bilbo's side in Rivendell filled all his heart. At last with an effort he spoke, and wondered to hear his own words, as if some other will was using his small voice. "I will take the Ring," he said, "though I do not know the way." (354)

It would certainly be an understatement to say that this is no “long vaunting speech,” but Frodo’s “I will take the Ring” nevertheless functions as a boast word promise, even as the dependent clause that follows makes no claim – and even seems to deny – that he is qualified to take on the task he accepts.

It is also clear from Elrond’s following address to the men, elves, dwarves, and hobbits who have gathered in Rivendell to decide what must be done with “the one Ring that binds them all” that he understands that Frodo has uttered boast words, and that in doing so has assumed a responsibility to destroy the Ring. The others, he says, are not under the same obligation.

“... This is my last word ... The Ring-bearer is setting out on the Quest of Mount Doom. On him alone is any charge laid ... The others go with him as free companions, to help him on his way. You may tarry, or come back, or turn aside into other paths, as chance allows. The further you go, the less easy will it be to withdraw; yet no oath or bond is laid on you to go further than you will. For you do not yet know the strength of your hearts, and you cannot foresee what each may meet upon the road.” (367)

Here, by saying that others do not have the obligation that Frodo has taken upon himself, Elrond underscores the significance of his promise. He, and he alone, must, do or die, destroy the Ring.

The following speech from *The Two Towers*,⁷ though it functions as a promise *not* to do something rather than a vow to fulfill a promise (Faramir will not *touch* the Ring that Frodo must carry to its destruction), nevertheless attests to the seriousness with which his people take boast words:

“... We are truth speakers, we men of Gondor. We boast seldom, and then perform, or die in the attempt. *Not if I found it on the highway would I take it I said.* Even if I were such a man as to desire this thing, and even though I knew not clearly what this thing was when I spoke, still I should take those words as a vow, and be held by them.” (367)

Positive or negative, the boast that the Speaker utters is still binding.

And finally, in a brief concluding example from *The Return of the King*,⁸ the most formal speech I have found in Tolkien’s trilogy, Pippin swears his loyalty to Denethor with the language of balanced oppositions:

“Here do I swear fealty and service to Gondor, and to the Lord and Steward of the realm, to speak and to be silent, to do and to let be, to come and to go, in need or plenty, in peace or war, in living or dying, from this hour henceforth,

until my lord release me, or death take me, or the world end. So say I, Peregrin son of Paladin of the Shire of the Halflings.” (31)

Tolkien’s Speakers, men and halflings, do not preface their promises with references to past success as Beowulf did, but they do accept their responsibilities with full knowledge of the life or death consequences their acts of speaking entail. And thus we see the survival of the promise, the more significant kind of “bēotwōrd” or “gylpspræc,” in the fiction of J.R.R. Tolkien. We know from Tolkien’s “*Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics*,”⁹ an essay Bruce Mitchell and Fred C. Robinson identify in the bibliography that accompanies their recently published edition of *Beowulf* as the “One Essential Essay,”¹⁰ that Tolkien read and taught the poem for the story it told, not for what critics could make of it. If we read Tolkien’s fiction for the story it tells, I think we can see the heroic characters of his *Lord of the Rings*, at least with reference to the promises they make and keep, as Beowulf’s descendants.

Notes

1. *A Concise Anglo-Saxon Dictionary* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1969).
2. “Boasting in Anglo-Saxon England: Performance and the Heroic Ethos,” *Literature in Performance* Vol. I (1981): 24–35. See also J.R.R. Tolkien’s note on “ofermod,” appended to “The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth Beorhthelm’s Son,” *The Tolkien Reader* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1966), which first appeared in *Essays and Studies*, 6 (London: John Murray, 1953), and Margaret E. Goldsmith, “The Christian Perspective in *Beowulf*,” *Studies in Old English Literature in Honor of Arthur G. Brodeur*, ed. Stanley B. Greenfield (Eugene, Oregon: University of Oregon Books, 1963) 71–90.
3. *Speech Acts: An Essay in the Philosophy of Language* (1969; London and New York: Cambridge UP, 1977) 34–64, lays out the ground rules for acts of threatening and promising.
4. Examples are from *Beowulf and the Fight at Finnsburg*, ed. FR. Klaeber (1922; Boston: D.C. Heath, 1950).
5. I should perhaps note, however, that the *poet* gives attention to Wiglaf’s family connections (ll. 2602b–2604a, he is the son of Wēohstān, and, as Klaeber [xliv] points out, thus a member of a noble family) and to the shield and sword he bears, and to the sword he carries, all of which carry the honor of having been possessed by noble predecessors.
6. New York: Ballantine Books, 1965.
7. New York: Ballantine Books, 1969.
8. New York: Ballantine Books, 1968.
9. *Proceedings of the British Academy*, 22 (1936), 245–295.
10. *Beowulf: an edition with relevant shorter texts* (Oxford UK and Malden, Massachusetts, USA: Blackwell, 1998) 235–236.