

**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,” “gylpcwide,” and “gylpsprēc,” 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.’” Conquergood, in contrast, saw the Old English “bœot” as an act of promising.

Clark Hall and Meritt also provide “threat,” “promise,” and “vow” as equivalents for “bœot.” Threats, as John R. Searle explains in his outline of conditions that govern the performance of speech acts, promise results that Hearer do not wish to experience. 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 Hearer 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 “ọretmeegas” often promised to wait for Grendel’s attack in the meadhall.

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

“Ful oft gebœotedon bœore druncene
ofe eaþwæþe ọretmeegas,
þet hie in bœorse bidan woldon
Grendes güpe 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.