
ARTS & LETTERS

When Heroes Were True to Their Word

"Boasting in Anglo-Saxon England: Performance and the Heroic Ethos" by Dwight Conquergood, in *Literature in Performance* (Apr. 1981), Dept. of Speech Communication, University of Arizona, Tucson, Ariz. 85721.

Nowadays, the "strong, silent type" is often considered the ideal hero. Not so in England during the Dark Ages, writes Conquergood, a Northwestern University professor of English. There, boasting of courageous deeds was not only commonplace; it bound warriors to lives of heroic sacrifice.

Modern critics (including J.R.R. Tolkien) have dismissed the boasting of Beowulf and other Old English epic heroes as vainglorious pomp, clear evidence of a character's excessive pride. But Anglo-Saxons in the eighth century, when *Beowulf* was probably composed, saw things differently. Boasts (*beots* or *gilps* in Old English) were made by only the noblest figures, such as Beowulf himself. Silence was a hallmark of villains—such as Grendel, Beowulf's demonic foe.

Boasting required an audience; it occurred in public places, such as the meadhall. In that haven of "warmth, strength, and order erected against a terror-haunted darkness," warrior after warrior would rise and boast to steel his courage and to commit himself to dangerous



The boasts of Beowulf and other Old English heroes strike the modern reader as conceited. Instead, they may have been somber and inviolable pledges to sacrifice in battle for King and country.

From *Walhall, Germanische Götter und Heldensagen*, edited by Felix and Thense Dahm. © 1903 Breitkopf & Härtel.

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deeds. Characters began their boasts by elaborately recounting noble lineages and past heroics. ("I came from battle [where I] destroyed a race of giants," declared Beowulf.) Brandishing of weapons and other theatrical gestures added emphasis. Yet, Conquergood argues, boasts were "future-oriented." "I did" was invariably followed by "I must continue to do." And boasts were made only in preparation for crises, never after them.

The audience played a key role in boasting. To win praise and acceptance, public utterances had to reflect society's ideals—in the Anglo-Saxons' case, the warrior virtues of valor and loyalty, not pragmatism or caution. A boaster would never have said, "I weighed the alternatives" or "I know when I'm beaten." Boasts thus subjected heroes to the most pressing demands of their countrymen. Public shame, or even exile, faced the soldier who broke his vows. As Beowulf's companion Wiglaf warned, "Death is better for any man than a disgraced life."

For Anglo-Saxon heroes, the need for peer respect outweighed "the brute urge to survive." Their boasting was a way to gain recognition for the risks they took and inner peace when their courage proved fatal.

Subversive Art in the Ancien Régime

"Fallen Fathers: Images of Authority in Pre-Revolutionary French Art" by Carol Duncan, in *Art History* (June 1981), Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd., Broadway House, Newton Rd., Henley-on-Thames, Oxfordshire, R69 1EN, United Kingdom.

The French Revolution of 1789 was an uprising not only against Louis XVI and the *ancien régime* but also against patriarchy in general, whether the authority figure was *père de famille* or king. French artists in the decades immediately preceding the revolution captured the mounting distaste for traditional authority, writes Duncan, a Ramapo College (New Jersey) art historian.

After 1750, rapid population growth and rising unemployment in France strained familial and social discipline and spawned deep resentment of both. It was about this time that French painters became obsessed with old men. Often such figures were shown struggling against the assault of disobedient subordinates—especially sons. Yet many were objects of pity and sympathy, not powerful, fearsome tyrants.

Artists' growing ambivalence was typified by Jean-Baptiste Greuze, probably the most popular French painter of the 1760s and '70s. Greuze was a maverick who drew family scenes in defiance of the Royal Academy's edict to paint only historical and mythological episodes. His *The Father's Curse* (1778) and *The Son Punished* (1779) are strange endorsements of filial loyalty. They portray a rebellious son who abandons his family to join the army and returns home just after his father's death, too late for forgiveness. The stark generational hostility, argues Duncan, invites the viewer "to identify secretly with the criminal while consciously condemning him."

As the Revolution approached, these feelings surfaced even in ap-