

**VOWS, BOASTS AND TAUNTS,
AND
THE ROLE OF WOMEN
IN
SOME MEDIEVAL LITERATURE**

by

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Vows, Boasts and Taunts, and the Role of Women in some Medieval Literature

In a paper entitled 'The Taunter in Ancient Epic' Thalia Feldman points out with skill and perception the useful function of taunters in epic tales as far apart in time and space as the *Iliad* of Greece and the Anglo-Saxon *Beowulf*. Men like Drances, Thersites and Unferth fulfill a special need in such societies, namely to probe the qualifications of an unknown 'hero', or to provoke the known hero into the kind of heroic act that the society needs at a given time.¹

In medieval literature at least, this provocation by 'official' taunters is only one way in which established or would-be heroes are prevailed upon to do great deeds, and here I should like to look at some of these related ways of accomplishing the same end. I also want to extend the discussion into later medieval literature (especially English literature), and to consider the role that unofficial taunters, particularly women, play in this practice in both heroic and romance literature.

The institution of vow-making and boast-making is just such a method as I have mentioned; and here it will be sensible to explain the distinction I make between *vow* and *boast*, a distinction I think useful, perhaps essential. The boast refers to the past, the vow to the future. Editors, and some commentators have been in the habit of classing both activities under one word, generally *vow* or *brag*, and their failure to distinguish is understandable, because the activities are closely related, and because Old English words like *gilp* and *beot* and their derivatives are not distinguished with the precision we would like.² The man who vowed to do a certain heroic deed was often the man who could and did boast about heroic deeds

¹ Thalia Feldman, 'The Taunter in Ancient Epic: *The Iliad, Odyssey, Aeneid, and Beowulf*', in *Papers in Language and Literature* 15 (1979), 8-16.

² There are however, three articles in English which discuss some of the distinctions. One deals with OE and ON: Stefan Einarsson, 'OE *beot* and 0. Icelandic *heitstrenging*'. *PMLA* 49 (1934) 975-93. The two more recent ones confine themselves to OE, one of them to *Beowulf*: B. Nolan and M. Bloomfield, '*Beotword. Gilpcwidas, and the Gilphlaeden Scop of Beowulf*', *JEGP* 79 (1980), 499-516; Dwight Conquergood, 'Boasting in Anglo-Saxon England: Performance and the Heroic Ethos' *Literature in Performance* 1(1981), 24-35. Conquergood especially, makes at some length and with great clarity many valuable points about boasting and vowing, especially their intimate connection and their importance as performance. Tantalisingly, however, he does not make the verbal distinction between boasting and vowing even when his article seems most to call for it; he uses the term *boast* for the often dual activity.

already achieved; the man who boasted about deeds performed could be expected to perform heroically again.

A warrior's recitation of his past achievements — his *boast* — did two things, then: it established his credentials for a given task, and it served, generally on a different occasion, to remind him and others that he had something to live up to. Early in *Beowulf*, for example, the hero gives two boastful accounts of his earlier exploits. One is uttered to King Hrothgar immediately on Beowulf's appearance in the Danish court, as the hero asks the king's leave to grapple with the monster Grendel (line 407 *ff.*). The second follows almost immediately, in response to Unferth's probing taunt (499 *ff.*). Both of these boasts of past achievement serve to establish his capacity to take on the task he claims. They constitute the presentation of his credentials.

At the end of the poem, just before his final battle with the dragon, the boastful reminiscence by the aged hero of his youthful greatness is a reminder of what he must now once again live up to (2490). Ancestry boasts serve a somewhat similar function. (See e.g. *Maldon* 216-23, and *Alliterative Morte*, 1688, 2595.)

As the *boast* refers to the past, the *vow* is a promise to do something in the future, generally something noble or daring: to die fighting rather than surrender, for example. The making of such promises is frequently associated with drinking bouts where caution is seriously diminished, if not entirely absent. But what is mere drunken bravado looked at from one angle, from another shows itself to have a genuine purpose in a heroic society, and the convention was 'valued and deeply meaningful to an Anglo-Saxon audience' (Conquergood, p. 26). The practice was meant to keep at a premium the loyalty and pride in martial prowess essential to the survival of tribe or nation in such a world. When the time to fight came, men remembered (or were reminded of) their brave words spoken in the beer hall which had now to be matched with equally brave deeds. That some would-be heroes were better at vowing than at fighting is clear from *Maldon* and *Beowulf*: the three sons of Odda run from the field at Maldon (185 *if.*) while the loyal retainers renew their vows (213, 246, 274, 289-90). Similarly Wiglaf's companions cannot muster the courage to help Beowulf in his hour of greatest need, beer-hall vows notwithstanding (2631 *if.*).

Even *flyting* could be put to 'military' use in the heroic society. Most of us are familiar with *flyting* as a late medieval or Renaissance game especially prominent in the poetry of Dunbar, but it is possible, I suppose, that it was originally rather more functional. It certainly combines boasting, vowing and taunting all in one as we see it

in the exchange between the Viking messenger and the English leader in *Maldon*, where it is used for the purpose of mutual intimidation and the working up of each side's own resolve. At the other end of the medieval time scale we have it once more in the *Alliterative Morte Arthure* where similar battle taunts are to be found throughout. (See especially lines 1058 ff., 1650 ff., 2530 ff, 2773 ff., 3773 ff.). A much more elaborate series of *flytings* occurs in Malory's *Morte D 'Arthur* between two of the major characters of the story, Gawain and Lancelot, where the exchange of taunts becomes, among other things, a way of depicting character. ('The Vengeance of Sir Gawain'.)

The tradition of vowing and boasting by warriors is not peculiar to English or to medieval literature. In the *Iliad* (book 20) we are told that Aeneas made threats and vows 'over the wine when he promised the princes of Troy to fight Achilles man to man'. The custom is also common in O.French, O.Irish and O.Norse. One of the best-known examples is in the Saga of the *Jomsvikings* where King Sweinn tricks the Jomsvikings during a drinking bout into making a series of extravagant vows (ON 'Heitstrenging'). Their leader vows that he will ravage Norway and kill Earl Hakon; the others vow to stand by him, and one adds that he will in addition rape Thorkill's daughter. Here the vows shade rather obviously into what we might call a boast, but they are still pledges of *future* action. The vows made by Arthur's knights in the *Alliterative Morte Arthure* (lines 296 if.) resemble those of the Jomsvikings in their ferocity, in the boastful quality of the promises, and in the fact that they seem to be meant to be taken straight, although the *heitstrenging* of the Jomsvikings is slyly introduced by King Sweinn as a sport.

But the convention was not always taken seriously by writers of romance, even from an early stage. In the *Pelerinage de Charlemagne* (c. 1115), for example, the emperor and his twelve peers indulge in a series of *gabs* or outrageously boastful vows which are certainly meant to be comic. The vowing of Arthur and his knights in the English *Avowing of Arthur* is definitely rather frivolous. In one scene of the French Prose *Lancelot* while none of the vows of the knights is couched in the preposterous language of Charlemagne's Peers, it is clear that they are meant to be comic enough. Asked by the young woman who has entertained them at a feast what reward they will give her, the knights respond with a queer mixture of chivalry, savagery and gaucherie. Most of them, in a wry twist to a romance convention, vow to send her the results of their conquests: swords, shields, knights' heads, and so forth romantically. One of them is tactless enough to vow that he will seek out and send her the fairest of all damsels. Another, offering to send her the spoils of his conquests, vows to do his knighterrantry in drag, 'clothed in nothing by my sweetheart's chemise

with her veil about my neck'.³ Huizinga's summary comment is apt: 'Thus a blase aristocracy laughs at its own ideals'.⁴

The tradition ends in total burlesque. Chaucer's Sir Thopas vows — on ale and bread — to kill the giant, both before and after he has run away from him. The *Tournament of Tottenham* (early fifteenth century) portrays a bevy of London tradesmen vowing to fight each other for Tyb, the reeve's daughter, and they come to the fray helmeted in pots and pans, armed with rakes and flails, and riding on nags. The *Oxford English Dictionary* provides evidence for the last touch. It records the folk etymology devised to explain the color 'isabella'. Isabella of Castile, it is said, vowed not to change her shift until Ostend was taken. The siege lasted from 1601 to 1604; hence anything of a dirty greyish-yellow color is isabella or isabelline.

So, at the waning of the Middle Ages and even before, the vow/boast scene had degenerated in the hands of some writers from a purposeful ritual to become the subject of parody or of something sharper. Bartlett J. Whiting has plausibly maintained, for example, that the *Voeux de Heron* (The Vows of the Heron), a fourteenth-century French poem presenting just such a scene, is a 'grimly satirical document' and a 'bitter burlesque' of would-be chivalric vowing scenes.⁵ This poem is, on the surface, 'romantic' enough, and none of the promised violence is to be done for real necessity or for the sake of the nation or family. The deeds of valor are to be done in a war with France unprovoked except by the taunt of a disaffected Frenchman. There is something primitive in the presence of this taunter who can provoke men to war with a jibe, just as the unnamed old warrior did in the Heathobard episode in *Beowulf*. But the primitive quality is perhaps even more marked in the nature of some of the vows in *Heron*: one nobleman promises, for example, that he will spare 'neither church nor altar, pregnant woman nor child, relative nor friend' (Whiting, 263). There is nothing remotely necessary, let alone chivalric in this, and 'grimly satirical' does not seem too strong a phrase to apply to it.

The case of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is, predictably, subtler. The Green Knight barges, unsubtly enough, to be sure, into the court of a king who

³ John R. Reinhard, 'Some Illustrations of the Medieval *Gab*'. *Essays and Studies in English and Comparative Literature* 8 (Ann Arbor: U. of Michigan, 1932), p. 46.

⁴ J. Huizinga, *The Waning of the Middle Ages* (New York: Doubleday, 1954), p. 93.

⁵ B. J. Whiting, 'The Vows of the Heron', *Speculum* 20 (1945), 278.

likes to hear *yelping* (from OE *gilpan*), and who has a binding custom (a vow?) that he will not sit down to eat until he has seen or heard some *aventurus thing*. The strange man openly taunts the knights of the Round Table to perform an unfamiliar, but superficially safe, act of bloodletting. There is no obvious parody in this scene, but again we must notice the marked change from the taunting / vowing / boasting scenes in OE or classical or most ON tales. The feasting and strong drink associated with the Teutonic stories are still there, but a game element is now predominant. The king's promise or vow is puerile not virile. Gone is any sense of family or national need for that vow, or for the taunt. But, however trivialized the motivation, the challenge has to be taken up, apparently, for the 'honor' of Arthur and the Round Table is at stake as fully, it seems, as that of King Beowulf when he is challenged by the fiery dragon that is devastating the land of his people. While the game atmosphere replaces an air of serious purpose, the tension remains and there is no sense of the burlesque in the *SGGK* scene. The taunt and the consequent promise made as part of the jest do not mock, in any readily perceptible way, the convention of taunt and vow. Yet (though it would be difficult to insist on this) it is quite possible to detect here a questioning of the value of promises made for frivolous purposes. For we are warned that such games, like all games, have unpredictable results. In this case, moreover, the stake is not trivial and the benefits are nonexistent:

This hanselle has Arthur of adventures on first
 In young year, for he yearned yelping to hear.
 Though him words were wane when they to seat wenten,
 Now are they stoken of sturn work, stafful her hand.
 Gawayn was glad to begin those games in hall,
 But though the end be heavy, have ye no wonder;
 For though men been merry in mind when they have mayne drink,
 A year yirnes full yerne and yields never like;
 The form to the finishment foldes full seldom. (II, 49 1-9)

The tone of this is more monitory and elegiac than satiric, for the end is not to be tragic, and the regret is for foolishness and triviality, not for vice.⁶

⁶ I use John Burrow's normalized edition (further modified) of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (Baltimore: Penguin, 1972). Contrast with the two scenes in *SGGK* the beheading scene in the *Jomsvikingasaga*, a direct result of the vows in that story. In action and in tone it provides as vivid a contrast between the outcome of 'games' as one could find.

Look, moreover, at the way in which Gawain claims the task of facing the monster. Can it be taken straight, as the speech of Courtesy personified? It is certainly at the opposite end of the scale from Beowulf's claiming speech in Heorot, though we never think of Beowulf as uncourtly in his conduct. Gawain's excessive modesty is even more striking in its way than the 'egotistical' boasting of Beowulf:

I am the weakest, I wot, and of wit feeblest,
 And least lur of my life, who laytes the sooth.
 But for as much as ye are mine eme, I am only to praise,
 No bounty but your blood I in my body know. (lines 354-7)

Here we still have the verbal ritual we associate with the vowing scene (see Conquergood, p. 33), but now the hero claims the heroic task because, he says, he is the *weakest* and *most dispensable!* Nor is this the only thing that has changed from the heroic days: the king, the protector of his people, hands over his 'responsibility' to one of his subordinates with very little urging, though he has none of the excuse of Hrothgar, who was old and feeble. Even as an old man, King Beowulf absolutely refuses to delegate his responsibility to face the monster threatening his people. Of course, the monsters of *Beowulf* are not especially playful, but the Green Knight is playful mostly in the sense that his challenge has no real point; the outcome for the one picking up the challenge may be just as fatal. Pointless displays of gallantry, futile gestures with fatal results have replaced genuine martial endeavor for a cause. Criticism of the cost of Gawain's non-cause is put in the mouths of members of the court itself:

All that sey that semly syked in heart,
 And sayd sothly all same segges til other,
 Carande for that comely: 'By Christ, hit is scathe
 That thou, lede, shall be lost, that art of life noble.
 To find his fere upon folde in faith is not ethe
 Wareloker to have wrought had more wit been

And had dight yonder dere a duk to have worthed.
 A lowande leder of ledes in londe him well seems,
 And so had better have been then brittended to nought,
 Headed with an alvisch man for angardes pride.
 Who knew ever any king such counsel to take
 As knightes in cavelatiouns on Christmasse games!’
 (lines 672-83)

They could accept his loss more readily, it is implied, if it were in a good cause. But what is a good cause in Romance? The rescue of an adulterous queen? The right to cross a stream where one wants? The destruction of a marauding dragon so that one can marry the king’s daughter? Is any of these any better than the cause into which Gawain has been dragged by a taunt and in which he is likely to die without perceptible benefit to anyone? It does not seem absurd to suggest that the chivalric world and some of its values are here being looked at in a subtly sardonic way well before Cervantes.

If, as I suggest, *SGGK* mocks the convention of vowing and taunting, it does so gently and subtly, unlike some of the other poems I have mentioned. The Isabelline joke (see above) none too subtly, strikes the death blow of the vow as a literary device. It reduces the content of the vow from what had been by turns valorous, preposterous, and romantically foolish, to the totally banal; and it puts this vow in the mouth of a noble woman. Participation by noble women in chivalric scenes was not by any means totally unknown in earlier literature. One of the most notable things about the *Voeux de Heron*, mentioned earlier, is the part played in it by women. The poem expressly says that the nobles make their vows moved by strong wine and the kerchief-covered necks and smiling eyes of the ladies (Whiting, p. 264). Even more strikingly, the women actually take part in the vowing. One of them vows, romantically enough, never to take a husband until the Earl of Salisbury shall have accomplished *his* vow never to open his right eye until, not so romantically, he has devastated France. The pregnant queen herself vows, with even less charm, that unless the king takes her to France to fulfill *his* vow, she will kill herself and her child with a large knife.

There is nothing historical about the events of this poem, which is a derivative of the slightly older French poem *Les Voeux de Paon* (early 14c), itself the kind of thing that Whiting says the *Voeux de Heron* mocks. In *Voeux de Paon* which seems to have been very popular, and which was translated into Scottish English,

a number of knights take vows on a peacock (Paon). Here, somewhat as in the scene in the prose *Lancelot*, the vowing is done under the pressure, albeit gentle pressure, of a young lady. Elyses, a young woman, has the peacock carried to each knight in turn. She kneels first before the old man and suggests that he make a vow to 'discharge his obligations to arms and love and chivalry' (Reinhard p. 48). Next she 'takes by the hand' another knight, gently flatters him and awaits his boast or vow. For the next knight, Elyses 'looks at him and beseeches him sweetly' (p. 48). Porrus the prisoner of war is reluctant to vow precisely because he is a prisoner, but she 'urges and incites' him, and he concedes. Oddly enough, it seems, the prize of the peacock is given to Ariste, who is adjudged the bravest of the brave although his vow has been perhaps the least boastful of all, and even mentioned reconciliation between the combatants.

This scene in the *Voeux de Paon* may or may not have been intended to be comic or satiric. In any case the notable thing from our point of view, is the participation of women at the vowing of warriors. Not only is the 'taunter' a woman, but the other ladies present are invited to take vows. They do so, though the vows have nothing to do with arms, but in two out three cases with love or marriage.⁷

A different, though allied form of taunting is shown in some of the great Icelandic family sagas. Here again, the taunters are not poets or official *thyles*, like those mentioned by Feldman, but women like the 'taunters' of the romances I have mentioned. Like the official taunters they do not themselves participate physically in the frequently savage fighting and feuding of the sagas which they often cause in a very direct and deliberate way by goading their men into courses

⁷ The Scottish version of the *Voeux de Paon* is called *The Buik of Alexander*, first published in Edinburgh about 1580. It has been edited for the Scottish Text Society by R. L. Graeme Ritchie (1921). The nineteenth-century Irish painter Daniel Maclise probably got the idea for his large romantic painting 'The Chivalric Vows of the Ladies and the Peacock' not from this Scottish text but from the more contemporary writings of Kenelm Henry Digby or the French scholar Ste. Palaye. There is a fine reproduction of part of this painting in Mark Girouard's book *The Return to Camelot* (New Haven: Yale U.P., 1981), plate VIII.

of action sometimes very much against those men's good judgement and mutual friendship.⁸ These women do not provoke action on frivolous pretexts nor yet on behalf of the tribe or nation, for there is very little sense of nation in Old Icelandic literature. The violent action is on behalf of the *family*, of blood relations, the closest and most basic of all ties. The verbal ritual which is such a large part of both serious and comic vowing of heroic story and romance, is notably absent here.

The strong-willed and forceful women of the sagas have been much written about, for they are strikingly different from the women in most other medieval literature. Nevertheless, we can see traces of such female influence even in a poem as unfeminine as *Beowulf*. Queen Waltheow plays a small if very dignified part in this epic, for she seems to achieve a significant amount in her brief appearances at the feasts where Beowulf is honored. It would be extending the facts too far to say that in her first appearance she functions as a 'taunter', but it is noticeable that only after she has spoken publicly to Beowulf and he has vowed to her publicly is the hero certain of his acceptance as a functionary of the Danes. Beowulf has come into the hall asking permission to grapple with Grendel on the basis of his self-announced past achievements. King Hrothgar is politely diplomatic after this boast recital. At this point Unferth steps in and provokes from Beowulf another long recital of great achievements, ending with a vow to face and kill Grendel. This almost seems to settle matters, for we are told:

Da waes on salum	sinces brytta
gamolfeax and guðhrof;	geoce gelyfde
brego Beorht-Dena,	gehyrde on Beowulfe
folces hyrde	faestraedne geðoht. (608-10).

Then the distributor of treasure, grey haired and battle-renowned, was joyful;

⁸ In his study *Die Literarische Darstellung der Frau in der Islandersagas* (Halle, 1958), Heft 2, p. 154 Rolf Heller notes over forty examples of women in 29 family sagas who incite men to vengeance, *Laxdale* and *Njal* leading the list of frequency of instances. His word for these women is *hetzerinnen*, female inciters.

Outside of the sagas a particularly striking example of female incitement is to be found in the Eddic poem *Hambismal* where Guþrun taunts her two sons into taking revenge for their sister, an adventure they all know will be fatal, and which the sons agree to only with bitterness. Along the way they murder their bastard half-brother at the tempting of some monstrous female 'flagþ'.

The taunt to Gunnar and Hogni at the beginning of *Atlakviða*, another Guþrum poem, delivered by a messenger from Atli, is somewhat like the taunt of the Green Knight in that, as the dialogue of the poem makes clear, there is absolutely no good reason for the brothers to accept the invitation.

the lord of the Bright-Danes, the shepherd of his people was confident of help when he heard Beowulf's firm resolve.

Still there is no formal word from the King. It is at this point that Queen Waltheow steps forth, decked with gold. She offers the hall goblet to each warrior in turn until she comes to Beowulf to whom she makes a little speech. In response the hero confirms his vow:

Ic gefremman sceal
 eorlic ellen oððe endedaeg
 on ðisse meoduhealle minne gebidan. (636-8)

I shall accomplish this great deed, or else see my last day in this meadhall.

Pleased with this boastful vow (*gilpcwide*), we are told, the queen goes to sit by her lord. Only now, it seems, is the matter finally settled, for the guardianship of the hall is shortly thereafter handed over to Beowulf. The commitment that had been provoked by Unferth is now finally confirmed by Waltheow.

It is, in every respect, a long way from Waltheow to Isabella. Not the least ironic of the contrasts between their two positions is the real possibility of female influence in the predominantly male world of the Epic, and the joke that such an idea has become in the 'feminized' world of Romance.