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Creating Consilience

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Mark Collard

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**“BY WEAPONS MADE WORTHY”:
A DARWINIAN PERSPECTIVE
ON *BEOWULF***

Raymond Corbey and Angus Mol

Beowulf is one of the highlights of English literature. Line 3, 182 of the eleventh-century manuscript, kept at the British Museum, recount events that purportedly occurred in pre-Christian Scandinavia a few centuries earlier—a world of clan- and alliance-based chiefdoms centered on courts, of gifting and feasting, of raids and feuds. Although a work of lore, historians and archaeologists use the epic chronicle as a major resource for the study of the Anglo-Saxons. The poem has been proposed as a key to, among other things, the interpretation of early medieval grave contents, warrior accoutrements, long ships, and the spatial layout of castles and courts. The lavish, seventh century ship burial of Sutton Hoo (Suffolk, England), for example, shows great similarity to the four burials that, together with various battles, punctuate the plot (Owen-Crocker 2000).

The story develops as follows. A cannibalistic monster terrorizes the court of Hrotgar, King of the Danes, for twelve years. The Geatish retainer Beowulf arrives, defeats the monster and, subsequently, its revengeful mother in two epic battles. He is lavishly honored and rewarded by Hrotgar. Beowulf returns to the land of the Geats laden with Danish gifts, which he again presents to his uncle, the king of the Geats. Later Beowulf becomes a king himself and rules wisely for 50 years. Then a servant steals from the den of a dragon, which attacks. Old Beowulf defeats this monster, too, but dies from his wounds. The story ends with his magnificent burial, in a ship in a mound.

“Never have I seen a mightier noble, a larger man,” King Hrothgar’s coast guard exclaims upon seeing Beowulf come ashore, “than that one among you, a warrior in armor. That’s no mere retainer, so honored in weapons; may that noble bearing never belie him!” (lines 244ff. All *Beowulf* translations are taken from Chickering 2006. Hereafter cited as [*Beowulf*, line number]). Another plausible and often-used translation of the phrase *waepnum geweorðad*—“honored in weapons”—is “by weapons made worthy.” It refers to how, in the plot, and among Anglo-Saxon elites at large, the personal identity and prestige of a king’s followers—his *sibbengedryht*—changes and builds up through reciprocal exchanges between follower and liege, as will be analyzed in some detail in what follows. Weapons and valuables figure as prominently in this context as, archaeologically less visible, honors and loyalty.

In this chapter, we are more interested in the *Beowulf* as a source for and key to aspects of early medieval culture and society, and less than the other contributions to this section in the text as creative fiction (see Dancygier, this section) or the responses of listeners/readers (Carroll et al., this section). Consequently we will focus not so much on the value of evolutionary approaches to literary studies but on their bearing on mainstream ethnology. We will specifically examine and criticize two ethnological readings of reciprocal exchange in *Beowulf* from the perspective of costly signaling theory and altruism theory. We will show how these adaptationist approaches crucially add to traditional hermeneutic and culturalist understandings of basic aspects of the plot to do with the constitution of personal identity through lord-retainer exchanges. The wider relevance of this type of analysis for the way in which ethnologists usually study the germane role of exchange in sociality and identity will be discussed in terms of the distinction between ultimate and proximate explanations in biology.

ETHNOLOGICAL APPROACHES

Although the *Beowulf* plot is extremely rich ethnographically, only a few score from among the almost 3,000 scholarly publications now available on the poem deal with such matters as law, feud, boasting, riches, drinking, hoarding, kinship, the symbolism of weapons, kingship, and so on, from an ethnological perspective. The overwhelming majority is textual criticism—hermeneutic, philological, stylistic, character-oriented, structural, poststructuralist, feminist, psychological, psychoanalytical, Lacanian, and so on. Both authors whose ethnographic interpretations we will examine in the following, Jos Bazelmans and John Hill, have expressed their regret that systematic and thorough attempts at ethnographic analysis were not available to them. Matters ethnographical, such as the ones just listed, Hill laments, “have usually been discussed in relative isolation from each other, rather than receiving an ethnologically integrated viewing that would allow us to see *Beowulf* as a world that works rather than, in effect, as a partly misunderstood assortment of customs, values, and relationships the poet busily transcends” (Hill 1997, 255). Both Bazelmans, an archaeologist-ethnologist, and Hill, an ethnologically oriented *Beowulf* scholar, aim to make up for this by approaching the dense social and cultural reality the text imaginatively depicts “as an integrated world rather than seen piecemeal or as a congeries of customs, values, and institutions” (Hill 1997, 264).

In *By Weapons Made Worthy: Lords, Retainers and their Relationship in Beowulf*, Bazelmans—carefully weighing, and working his way through, several centuries of partly Christian reception history—interprets the goings-on in and around Anglo-Saxon courts in terms of traditional ideas and values (1999). He shows how these regulate the exchange of valuables and services that are constitutive for the development of the identities of those involved, knitting together society as a whole as primarily a moral, not so much a politico-economic, order.

Bazelmans’ strongly holistic, structuralist, and idealist approach follows on from Marcel Mauss’s *Essay on the Gift*, especially as interpreted by Louis Dumont and his school. *Idées-valeurs*, widely shared, traded from generation to generation, impose themselves on social relations. They determine how exchanges during life-cycle rituals cause such constituents as “body,” “life,” “image” and “soul”—Dumontian terminology

for which Bazelmans does provide rough but no precise Anglo-Saxon equivalents—to merge into the person of warrior-follower or king (Bazelmans 1999, 156ff.). Following Dumont, Bazelmans rejects approaches that see individuals as strategically striving for “increases of economic, socio-political or symbolic capital and enhanced authority” (Bazelmans 2000, 370) as erroneously reading modern preoccupations into nonmodern societies. Weapons for him are less related to power struggles and bloodshed than they are to the outward expression of honor and worth and, in typical Dumontian idiom, “commensurable” with persons.

Bazelmans models his sophisticated, fine-grained analysis of the constitution of Anglo-Saxon identity and sociality in *Beowulf* after a body of mainly Austronesian ethnography by the Dumont school who see every-day exchanges in villages as governed by a value-orientated matrix. This matrix, constantly renewed and reaffirmed, the Dumontians hold, is “constitutive for the persons involved, including the dead and the spirits” (Barraud et al. 1994, 105). It causes “subjects and objects [to] intertwine ceaselessly in a tissue of relations which make of exchanges the permanent locus where these societies reaffirm, again and again, their highest values” (ibid., 105). Analogously the commensurability of valuables and persons “is the most important principle that is constitutive of social order,” of early medieval “society as a whole” (Bazelmans 1999: 227–228).

John Hill in his 1995 volume *The Cultural World in Beowulf* and various other publications also employs ethnographic analysis but opts for an approach that is more functionalist, transactionalist, and individualist, and, thus, closer to the sort of biological explanations we will discuss later. Hill, too, draws upon Marcel Mauss: “[the] giving of gifts is at the heart of ethical life, of lawful and right behavior in the hall, and of continuing alliance and reciprocity among men” (Hill 1995, 86), and “[the] crucial imperative is the settling of feuds and the continuation of fruitful exchange” (Hill 1997, 265). However, he is less monotheoretical than Bazelmans, seeing “the economy of honor and gift giving as open to social complexity, competitiveness, and possibilities for manipulation” (Hill 1997, 259). Hill works bottom-up, starting with individuals, while Bazelmans interprets top-down, starting with cosmological ideas and values. For Hill “the social world depicted in the poem” (Hill 1995, 18; his italics) is one in which a revenge ethic, feuding, and violence loom as large as loyalty and peace making. For Bazelmans, who, more explicitly than Hill, is interested in the poem as a key to historical reality, *Beowulf*’s world is a quite harmonious one, despite the conflict-ridden plot. It is, with a phrase he uses time and again, “society as a whole,” which comes to the fore in the totality of exchanges.

Bazelmans in particular, and less emphatically Hill, interpret what happens in terms of ideas and the values the characters act by. In this sense their approach is hermeneutical or interpretive, and, as such, comparable to most of the extensive nonethnological secondary literature on *Beowulf*. Their culturalist stance, emphasizing the importance of culture in determining individual behavior and the way in which society functions, is typical of contemporary ethnography. Both the European Durkheimian/Maussian tradition and the American Boasian tradition see humans as moral subjects, as having entered a different order of existence: the intellectually, spiritually, and morally superior world of society, language, and culture (Carrithers 1996; Corbey 2005). We will now offer a different, adaptationist reading of exchange and identity in the world of *Beowulf*.

SHOWING OFF

Biological approaches to human social and cultural behavior are based on the presupposition that the behavior of all species, including the human one, are to be studied in the same manner: in the light of evolution, analyzing how individuals maximize their reproductive success and inclusive fitness in the context of optimal foraging, dispersal patterns, mating tactics, life history strategies, and the like. This presupposition is diametrically opposed to that of many, if not most, present-day ethnographers, in particular the two aforementioned traditions.

“Ethnological observations can increase the depth of our understanding and illuminate the social and dramatic coherence of the poem” (Hill 1995, 20), John Hill holds, speaking for Bazelmans as well. We think that just as ethnology adds to literary criticism, evolutionary biology can, analogously, add to both ethnology and literary criticism. It can deepen our understanding not just, specifically, of Anglo-Saxon sociality and identity in *Beowulf*, but also, more generally, of reciprocity and exchange as studied in by ethnologists. Both authors analyze how the “distribution, sharing, and bestowal of [...] treasures” in *Beowulf* creates “a social economy of honor, worth, status and loyalties” (Hill 1997: 106). In line with recent work under the heading of “biopoetics” (Cooke & Turner 1999) or “literary Darwinism” by, among others, Brian Boyd, Joseph Carroll, and Jonathan Gotschall (see their contributions to this volume) we will now try and show how that economy of honor connects to costly signalling and altruism as studied by biologists.

The term “costly signaling” was coined by Michael Spence (1973), an economist. It is also known as the “handicap principle” (Zahavi and Zahavi 1997; Grafen 1990a, 1990b). Costly signaling theory was inspired by an explanation for “conspicuous consumption” by the sociologist Thorstein Veblen, published in 1899 (Veblen 2007). “Costly signaling” refers to traits that, all else being equal, would lower the relative fitness of the bearer, but, at first sight paradoxically, continue to be selected for—because expending in an ostensibly superfluous manner makes qualities visible, which would otherwise be difficult to observe. Such behaviors convey information about underlying fitness.

An example of a costly trait is the long, brightly colored feathers of certain bird of paradise species that make them easier to catch for predators but also signal to potential mates that their genes are so good that they can get away with it. Evolutionary anthropologists have explained human big-game hunting, which is pursued even though it would be more efficient to gather plant resources and hunt small game, as a costly behavior, a “hunting handicap” (Alden Smith et al. 2003; Bliege Bird et al. 2000; Hildebrandt and McGuire 2002). The key idea here is that a costly signal is an honest indicator of an individual’s quality because a lower-quality individual would be unable to perform the signal.

Beowulf’s arrival on Danish shores and, subsequently, at the court of Danish King Hrotgar figures prominently in Bazelmans’s and Hill’s readings (Hill 2008). When *Beowulf* arrives with his Geatish followers, unsolicited and unannounced, he is fully armed. Although Geats and Danes are on good terms, in appearance the troop of Geats does not look very differently from a raiding party, so a warm welcome is not obvious. Hrotgar’s coast warden is suspicious and starts to question the Geats. However, when his eye falls on *Beowulf*, his tone changes considerably. Although *Beowulf* has not yet

explained who he is and what he wants, his weapons already signal his worthiness. He states his intent—aiding Hrotgar against the monster—and the warden allows passage to Heorot, the golden-roofed “mead hall” where King Hrotgar holds court.

As Beowulf and his followers enter the outer perimeter of the mead-hall, their physical appearance is highlighted once more: “Bright their war-mail, hardened, hand-linked; glistening iron rings sang in their battle-shirts as they came marching straight to that hall, fearful in war-gear [...] That iron-fast troop was honored in weapons” (*Beowulf*, 321ff.). At the doorstep Beowulf and his men are stopped and questioned once more, this time by the “haughty” Wulfgar, doorkeeper and advisor to the king. Wulfgar, too, even before Beowulf can reply, reacts favorably upon seeing the visitors’ “gold-trimmed shields,” “iron-gray corselets,” and “grim mask-helmets.” “I expect in pride, scarcely in exile, out of high courage you have come to Hrotgar,” he speaks to the guests, and counsels his king to “choose among answers, but give no refusal, [...] in battle-dress, weapons, they appear worthy of nobles’ esteem” (*ibid.*, 321ff.). Hrotgar, who already knows Beowulf’s background, then allows him and his troop of Geats access to the mead hall, the sociopolitical heart of his kingdom.

We agree with Bazelmans and Hill that warrior accoutrements are a central means of displaying status in early medieval Anglo-Saxon society, but see this pattern of behavior as not just an expression of local ideas and values, but also of an underlying biological mechanism that is at play in all human societies, and other species, too. When Geatish individuals, Beowulf in particular, flaunt their lavishly adorned weapons and armor they are expending in an ostensibly superfluous manner. They advertise qualities to do with their fitness that would be difficult to observe otherwise. If Beowulf has been “honored in weapons” by his Geatish king, this shows that he has borne the cost of fitness inhibiting acts—such as risking injury and death for his king—in the past and that he will very probably be able to do so in the future.

Both in terms of functionality and in terms of costliness, the intricately decorated weapons in *Beowulf*, similar to those found by archaeologists on scores of sites from this period, not least in graves, are analogous to stag antlers. Although antlers do not have a perfect shape for inflicting injury, they are functional when used in battles between males in the mating season. At the same time, as large and conspicuous as they are, they constitute a liability, limiting mobility in dense forests and requiring a large investment of energy to grow (Zahavi and Zahavi 1997, 87–88). Similarly, the heavy weapons of elites in the uncertain so-called Migration Period demanded physically strong and adroit individuals to be functional in battle. Their elaborate and refined appearance required a large investment in terms of production costs.

Beowulf, in front of Hrotgar on his throne, has to convince the king that he is able to take control of the mead hall and to engage Grendel. Although Beowulf’s appearance bodes well, Hrotgar doubts whether Beowulf will succeed where others have failed. In the course of all those years, many of his own men have boasted that they could handle the problem but have lost their lives in the attempt, leaving him with ever-fewer followers. He sees an uninvited, relative stranger before him to whom he would have to temporarily surrender control of the court. Adding to the effects of his appearance, Beowulf then announces that, if he is allowed to give it a try, he will kill Grendel on his own and with his bare hands. Hrotgar postpones reacting to this boast, and orders that a feast be

prepared for the Geatish guests. During the feast Beowulf is challenged by Unferth, another advisor to the king (on Unferth’s position at the court, see Orchard 2003, 247–250).

Unferth argues against Beowulf’s plan, claiming that this visitor is not all that he claims to be and has a penchant for bluffing. He brings up a boast Beowulf has made in the past but was unable to fulfill: to win a swimming match against Breca of the tribe of the Heathoreamas. This poses a serious threat for Beowulf, because it puts his present ostentation in an unfavorable light. He adroitly averts damage by Unferth’s slur by recounting what actually happened during the swimming contest. Breca only won because Beowulf was attacked by a throng of sea-monsters, all of which he killed, a much more heroic accomplishment than winning a swimming match. Beowulf adds that Unferth is in a poor position to pass judgment since he was responsible for his own brother’s death. “Never would Grendel have done so much harm,” Beowulf adds to this successful rebuttal of Unferth’s provocation, if the “heart and intention” of Hrotgar’s retainers “were as sharp as [their] words” (*Beowulf*, 593–559).

From the perspective of costly signaling theory, the Danes are faced with the problem of whether Beowulf’s signals are honest. Do they truly represent his capacities and underlying fitness, or is he pretending to be something he is not? Unferth, who may feel his position threatened by Beowulf, is further assessing his fitness and is ready to punish cheaters, which would add a costly signal on Unferth’s behalf to the benefit of himself. Beowulf may indeed be a “freerider” who tries to gain from the cooperation of others. He might be keen on taking over throne treasures, possibly with violence, not an unusual happening in those days as the text itself hints at and even describes in detail—witness the Finnsburh episode (*Beowulf*, 1068ff.; see also Orchard 2003, 174–178). Even temporary control of the highly prestigious mead hall, of great symbolic value, and temporary quasi-kingly status would bring enormous benefits.

Interactions such as this confrontation have been proposed as a foundational element of social behavior in humans (Flesch 2007; Gintis et al. 2005; Henrich and Boyd 2001). In social interaction, it is difficult to be sure of another’s disposition to either cooperate or defect, because free riders will always try to defect and take advantage of those who choose to cooperate. Individuals who test and “altruistically” punish free riders safeguard group cooperation at a possible cost to themselves, thus, arguably, giving off a costly signal.

Unfortunately for Unferth, Beowulf defends himself well against the claim that he is a free rider and a dishonest signaler. In a reversal of fortune Beowulf uses Unferth’s own ploy against him and exposes Unferth as a cheater who is responsible for the death of a sibling and is all dishonest words but no honest deeds. Hrotgar, who has, of course, closely followed these interactions, agrees with Beowulf and decides to let him take on the monster. Beowulf’s ensuing battle with Grendel and his mother is successful, but also conspicuously risky, even more so because he declines to use weapons or armor against Grendel. Together with the valuables and honors he receives afterward, this adds substantially to his reputation.

Culturalist approaches leave in the dark why Beowulf would boast in the first place. That costly signaling theory can deepen Bazelmans’ and Hill’s rich but exclusively ethnologically informed interpretations of the Migration Period warrior ethic is also clear from the confusion around *oferhygd*, roughly translatable as “immoderation,”

“arrogance” or “overconfidence,” which the text emphatically ascribes to its hero. The way Beowulf combines brave exploits and noble intentions with boasts and acts of derring-do have left many a reader with uncomfortable feelings of ambivalence toward the protagonist. The most common reaction to this conundrum is to stress one and ignore the other aspect, thus either vilifying or idealizing him. Is he either an ethical person, whose actions are steered by what is morally just, or just a self-aggrandizing, arrogant, reckless individual striving for glory? Scott Gwara, for example, recently devoted a whole monograph to Beowulf’s *oferhygd*. In a convoluted argument he struggles to make sense of the protagonist’s ambiguity in terms of his identity as a foreign fighter who learns more prudence while he seeks glory abroad (Gwara 2008).

However, within the framework of costly signaling theory it makes perfect sense that king Beowulf, as the last lines of the poem have it, was at the same time *mannum mildust*, “kindest to his men” and *lof-geornost*, “most eager for fame.” We suggest that, as the foregoing analysis of the constitution of warrior identity clearly implies, *oferhygd* is costly signaling behavior and does not detract from but is a logical concomitant to a man’s worth. Thus, we do not agree with Howell Chickering that “[whether] Beowulf is an ideal king or flawed by his heroic quest for fame remains a question that disturbs every full interpretation of the poem’s philosophy” (Chickering 2006, 269). We also do not agree with Bazelmans when he criticizes several interpretations for stressing the provocative, boastful stance Beowulf takes in his first interaction with King Hrotgar. From his structuralist position, he argues that provocative, competitive exchanges would not be possible between a young warrior and a mighty king, for they are “individuals [...] in structurally different positions” (Bazelmans 1999, 225, cf. 227). Here again Bazelmans underplays conflict and exaggerates contractual aspects of the complex conflict/contract dynamic the poem describes. From a costly signaling viewpoint, however, Beowulf’s arrogance is perfectly understandable.

“SIBBENGEDRYHT”

After a prosperous 50-year reign as king, Beowulf is faced with a monster once more. The lands of the Geats are ravaged by a fearsome dragon, its fury awakened by the theft of a golden cup from its hoard. Although Beowulf could field the whole Geatish army against the dragon, he opts to engage the dragon himself with the support of only twelve trusted warriors. In all likelihood, these followers are key members of his *sibbengedryht*. In Old English, *sibbe* means “kinship,” “relationship,” “amity,” and *gedryht* means “troop.” The phenomenon closely resembles the Germanic *comitatus* as described in some detail by Tacitus in his *Germania* (Benario 1999): a strongly reciprocal relationship between a chief and his retainers whose loyalty and military efforts he rewards with gifts and honors. Although there is a gap of several centuries between the worlds depicted in *Germania* and in *Beowulf*, we find this concept clearly elucidated in the opening passage of *Beowulf*: “So ought a [young] man, in his father’s household, treasure up the future, by his goods and goodness, by splendid bestowals, so that later in life his chosen men stand by him in turn, his retainers serve him when war comes” (*Beowulf*, 20ff.). Beowulf has collected men around him whose worthiness he has enhanced with lavish gifts made during public feasts, similar to those thrown in his own honor after his victory over Grendel and

Grendel's mother. These men are honor-bound to defend him in this moment of danger.

The monster turns out to be a fearsome opponent. Although Beowulf claims to forego boasting, he insists that his men keep back to await the outcome of the clash. When he announces his intention to fight the dragon alone he is probably acting out of a sense of duty and concern for his men, but also, our biological heuristic suggests, showing off. Perhaps some of his followers are kin, in which case he may be altruistically motivated. However, he is not able to wound the dragon and, instead, incurs horrible injuries himself. At this point the men who have followed him into this fight are faced with a difficult decision: should they come to the aid of their liege and risk being killed, or should they avoid the fight and survive, but then face shame and dishonor? The majority of the warriors opt for the latter alternative, their decision somewhat eased by the fact that Beowulf has ordered them to stand back.

Of course, the specific goings-on the poem describes so beautifully may be partly or even entirely fictitious, but it is not so much the historical details of one particular event as the type of social interaction that shows how an adaptationist approach can complement or deepen ethnological analysis. In such relationships between chief and follower reciprocal altruism looms large, next to loyalty to kin and solidarity with group members. Reciprocal altruism is a *quid pro quo* one between non-relatives in the sense this concept has been used in a substantial body of literature inaugurated by the groundbreaking article by Trivers (1971).

However, the followers do not hold up to their part of the exchange, and they defect. They let their interests as individuals outweigh their loyalty to liege and group, maximizing their own inclusive fitness, and thereby forsake the possibility of showing off. Faced with a classic dilemma between egoistic and altruistic courses of action, they behave as free riders. Altruistic punishment theory (Flesch 2007, West et al. 2007) predicts harsh repercussions for such behavior, and the defectors are indeed ostracized in the aftermath of the battle. However, they survive. The only follower who does not flee is Beowulf's young and inexperienced nephew Wiglaf. When, during the fight, the tables turn in favor of the dragon, Wiglaf urges the other warriors to help Beowulf. They refuse, and Wiglaf charges into battle to help his uncle, in accordance with "kin selection" theory (Hamilton 1964a, 1964b), which shows how helping relatives indirectly serves one's own genes (partly shared with relatives) and fitness.

In Wiglaf's case, kinship forges even stronger bonds and altruistic motivation than two other forms of altruism do in the case of the defecting followers, who are probably not or less closely related to Beowulf. Instead, reciprocal altruism, in principle between non-kin, and group altruism characterize their relation to Beowulf. In addition, Wiglaf's heroic behavior may constitute yet another costly signal. For the other retainers, the costs of reciprocating are too high, but "[nothing] can ever hold back kinship in a right-thinking man" (*Beowulf*, 2600ff.), as the poem underlines repeatedly. Beowulf and Wiglaf together manage to defeat the dragon, but Beowulf is mortally wounded. After Beowulf's death and magnificent burial, Wiglaf becomes the leader of the Geats.

In an exclusively culturalist perspective on reciprocity in the context of *sibbengedyht*, it remains unclear what prompts the inexperienced Wiglaf, who is not even honored by

gifts from his king yet, to risk his own life by helping Beowulf. Although such actions at first sight would seem to be disinterestedly heroic and noble, basically, from an adaptationist perspective, Wiglaf is defending his own kin. Or is he driven by youthful recklessness and poor judgment? Again, we will never know exactly. In the present context, we do not so much aim at a definitive, precise interpretation of the behaviors under consideration as at the general point that evolutionary perspectives crucially add to the Maussian analysis of the constitution of social order and cultural identity through reciprocal exchanges.

DISCUSSION: BEYOND POWER?

“Evidence for the relationship between kinship ties and *sibbenedryht* ties and how they affect feud and exchange needs to be evaluated in some analytical way,” Hill writes, adding that “[at] present our understanding of these matters is vague, rather than particular and focused” (Hill 1995, 15). This point is well taken, and we have shown that, although it may not entirely be what Hill had in mind, an evolutionary perspective can be of considerable help here, deepening textual criticism and ethnologically informed interpretation. To philology and textual criticism, Hill and Bazelmans add comparative ethnology; to intercultural comparative ethnology we add comparative behavioral biology. The latter sort of analysis can easily be extended to, for example, the so-called Finnsburh digression, the obstruction by queen Wealtheow of Beowulf’s adoption by Hrotgar, or, more generally, the role of women and patterns of violence and vengeance in the poem.

Bazelmans presented the gist of the argument of his monograph *By Weapons Made Worthy* again in a book chapter entitled “Beyond Power: Ceremonial Exchanges in Beowulf” (Bazelmans 2000). It is ironic that, under these two headings, he hardly deals with real weapons and real power plays in the conflict-ridden Anglo-Saxon world the poem describes. Our plea is not to do away with culturalist, interpretive analysis in terms of meanings and values but rather to “vertically integrate” (Tooby and Cosmides 1992; Slingerland 2008) such interpretations by supplementing them with analyses in terms of utility and power. In terms of a distinction germane to evolutionary biology (Tinbergen 1963) but not heeded by Bazelmans, Hill, or, indeed, most ethnographers: Although proximally men may fight because of Dumontian, cultural *idées/valeurs* and immediate, perceived benefits, ultimately, from a biological perspective, they fight because of genes. When early medieval Anglo-Saxon elite males negotiated and articulated their status in terms of exchanged and displayed swords, helmets, and other warrior accoutrements, this ultimately was an evolutionary strategy.

On this deeper, causally more fundamental, level the harmony that looms so large in Bazelmans’ holistic and idealist reconstruction of the world of Beowulf would seem to be an overstatement of historical reality. Honor, loyalty, and reciprocity are inextricably intertwined with free riding, egoism, and violence, and altruism is, ultimately, self-serving. Because culturalist interpretations operate with culturally specific native meanings and values, they fail to identify much of the ultimate causality that reaches beyond and below culturally specific life-world categories and even beyond the human species. In the end, the latter type of causality has explanatory priority.

It should not be forgotten that Marcel Mauss, upon whom Bazelmans and Hill build, himself saw reciprocal exchange as a *fait social total*, a *phénomène de totalité* with many interconnected aspects—normative, economic, legal, biological, religious, and so on (Mauss 1990, 4). We “hardly ever find man divided into several faculties,” he wrote in 1924 in his *Essai sur le don*; we “always come across the whole human body and mentality, given totally and at the same time, and basically, body, soul, society, everything is entangled here” (Mauss, 1995, 303). Mauss did not live up to this heuristic himself entirely, though, because of his dualistic view of humans.

“Societies have progressed,” he argues in connection with exchange, “in so far as they themselves, their subgroups, and, lastly, the individuals in them, have succeeded in stabilizing relationships, giving, receiving, and finally, giving in return. To trade, the first condition was to be able to lay aside the spear. From then onward, they succeeded in exchanging goods and persons [...] Only then did people learn how to create mutual interests, giving mutual satisfaction, and, in the end, to defend themselves without having to resort to arms” (Mauss 1990, 82). In this way, by “opposing reason to emotion,” a Hobbesian “natural state” (*état naturel*) of “war, isolation and stagnation” gives way to sociality as seen by Bazelmans and other Dumontians: a moral order of “alliances, gift and commerce” (Mauss 1990, 65).

Exchange pacifies, the Hobbesian war of all against all gives way to Maussian exchange of all with all, or, at least, many with many. This is a basic theme in Mauss’ essay on the gift (Corbey 2006). Unfortunately, this sort of dualistic thinking is not just typical for an influential French and British, Maussian/neo-Durkheimian conception of the disciplinary identity of ethnology, but also for much of American cultural anthropology. A major intellectual root in both cases, explaining their convergence in this respect and contributing to the present humanities/science gap (Slingerland 2008), is nineteenth-century French and German neo-Kantianism, emphatically dualist and antinaturalist, and close to universally human folk perceptions (see Slingerland, this volume).

A culturalist *locus classicus* of the North-American Boasian *homo symbolicus* spirit, as antifunctionalist and as much of French *ethnologie*, is Sahlins’s critique of (socio) biological approaches to human culture: “[While] the human world depends on [...] organic characteristics supplied by biological evolution...its freedom from biology consists in just the capacity to give these their own sense. [...] In the symbolic event, a radical discontinuity is introduced between culture and nature. [...] The symbolic system of culture is not just an expression of human nature, but [...] an invention in nature” (Sahlins 1976; in the same spirit, Sahlins 2008). Cases in point are the well-known controversies around, for example, the research of Margaret Mead in Samoa and Napoleon Chagnon in Amazonia, as well as discussions on the traditional “four fields” of anthropology since the early 1990s (Corbey 2005).

The intellectual background of Bazelmans is brought out clearly by the mission statement implied by the title of the *Revue du M.A.U.S.S.* of the French Maussians: “Revue du Mouvement Anti-Utilitariste en Sciences Sociales” (since 1981). In 2008, in line with this program, this periodical came up with a special entitled *Contr’Hobbes*, criticizing the “identification of life and nature with utility and functionality,” deploring “the narrow rhetorics of suspicion which characterizes the gaze of science and of utilitarian dogmatism”

and arguing for “the irreducibility of [...] sympathy or empathy to self-interest” (*Revue du Mauss* 2008, Introduction: 12, 26ff.).

CONCLUSION

We are well aware that what we engage in the foregoing tends toward what many biologists would frown upon as not very rigorous, “adaptationist storytelling,” based on scarce and ambiguous, even fictitious, data. In most cases alternative or complementary explanations are possible. We probably analyze too readily and too broadly as if individuals would optimize their fitness continuously in all settings, including highly idiosyncratic ones, which is obviously not the level that evolutionary theory aims at. We also concede that we have left understudied adaptational aspects of the cultural traditions steering the behaviors we have looked at.

Yet we feel the point we aim at is germane: interpretive approaches to sociality and identity in *Beowulf* and, in particular, the real cultural world reflected by the poem are much too dualist and thus unrealistic, and can profit considerably from complementary evolutionary readings. This goes in particular for the ethnological analysis, in a Maussian vein, of how all sorts of exchanges are constitutive of social order and personal identity, in the Anglo-Saxon world and beyond. There is a deep irony in the fact that there are two longstanding, sophisticated, bodies of theory regarding cooperation and reciprocity—one Maussian, the other Darwinian—with so little mutual interaction, or even knowledge of the basics of the other angle.

In this chapter, we have updated Mauss’s programmatic heuristic of *l’homme total* and exchange as “total social fact,” taking this heuristic more seriously than the master himself and, in particular, his followers. The “fundamental motives for human action: emulation between individuals of the same sex, that <basic imperialism of human beings>” (Mauss 1990, 65), we have argued against Mauss, are *not* transcended to make sociality feasible as a presumedly harmonious moral order, beyond conflicts and tensions. The view of sociality, morality, and identity presented here is a much more Darwinian and, therefore, much more Hobbesian one. Beyond power? No!

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