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Heroic Ideology and the Children's *Beowulf*

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

Heroic Ideology and the Children's *Beowulf*

Anna Smol (bio)

Viewed by British and American writers as the story of an exemplary hero who could teach boys the virtues of their race, the Anglo-Saxon poem *Beowulf* became children's literature at the turn of the century, when it

was retold in numerous adaptations. *Beowulf* accommodated well the prevailing heroic ideology evident in books such as those by G. A. Henty or boys' magazines such as *Chums* that propounded an image of an Anglo-Saxon hero as a muscular good sport unafraid of staring down the enemy in a heroic last stand (MacDonald). Such stories were designed to inspire imitation; the American writer and editor Hamilton Wright Mabie expresses a common view when he states in his introduction to *Heroes Every Child Should Know*: "The possibilities of the heroic are in almost all men. Stories of the heroes have often made other men strong and brave and true in the face of great perils and tasks, and this book is put forth in the faith that it will not only pass on the fame of the heroes of the past but help make heroes in the present" (xviii). The belief that one could make heroes in the present, that one could see in the hero the potential existing in every man and boy, characterizes these early retellings of the *Beowulf* story.

The choice of a model in *Beowulf*, "this grand primitive hero who embodies the ideal of English heroism" (Ebbutt 1), owes much to the interests of nineteenth-century scholars and general readers. The earliest retellings of *Beowulf* appeared after John Mitchell Kemble's edition in 1833 and translation into modern English in 1837 (Greenfield and Robinson 126, 130). Often included in anthologies of medieval stories with introductions outlining current theories of epic, myth, or race, these versions are difficult to categorize as exclusively for either adults or young readers; more likely, they would have appealed to the kind of broad audience Hélène A. Guerber imagines for her 1916 volume of epic stories designed "for the use of young students or of the busy general reader" (Book 6). By the early decades of the twentieth century, however, [End Page 90] we also find retellings proclaiming children as their intended readers, such as Henrietta E. Marshall's *Stories of Beowulf, Told to the Children* (1908); Thomas Cartwright's *Brave Beowulf* in the *Every Child's Library* series (1908); and John Harrington Cox's *Beowulf: The Anglo-Saxon Epic, Translated and Adapted for School Use* (1910). These adaptations illustrate Zohar Shavit's theory that the canonized children's literary "system" accepts certain stories and conventions only after they

have been approved for adults. In the case of *Beowulf*, the romantic, nationalistic emphasis of nineteenth-century medieval scholarship, popularized in the early translations, provides the foundation for an idealization of this hero in children's stories that has not often been challenged.¹

Influenced by the nationalistic aims of nineteenth-century philology, first German and then English scholars idealized a pure Teutonic hero not yet corrupted by more refined, effeminate Latin, French, and Christian influences.² The mid-nineteenth-century German scholar J. P. E. Greverus writes: "In *Beowulf* . . . the ancient Germanic national character stands rough, but pure in its colossal Nordic pagan magnificence, perhaps superficially tainted here and there with Christian dogma, but fundamentally the ancient manful pagan world sound to the core" (Stanley 34).

The conviction that *Beowulf* illustrates a national character soon pervaded the views of children's writers as well. The 1910 retelling by M. I. Ebbutt, reprinted and available in children's bookstores in 1987, states: "The figure which meets us as we enter on the study of Heroes of the British Race is one which appeals to us in a very special way, since he is the one hero in whose legend we may see the ideals of our English forefathers before they left their Continental home to settle in this island. . . . *Beowulf* stands for all that is best in manhood in an age of strife" (1). Ebbutt even envisages this exemplar of the Anglo-Saxon race as the stereotypical Aryan, a handsome young boy...

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The myth of the Anglo-Saxon oral poet, it is important for us to point out to McLuhan that the archetype limits ontogenesis.
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