

The following student description was submitted in response to this prompt:

Stephen Pollington, in a recent book (The Mead-Hall: Feasting in Anglo-Saxon England), argues that the role of the hall is central to an understanding of a poem like Beowulf or "The Wanderer," for "these halls served as the focal points of the communities" (17). The worlds of the hall in Beowulf and of the court in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, Malory, and Marie de France clearly share certain characteristics, but a comparison of these two communities (the Anglo-Saxon hall and the later medieval court) also highlights meaningful distinctions. Write an essay in which you describe the values and dynamics of each society as they are revealed by the qualities represented by the hall and the court in these poems.

Tentative Topic Description:

I plan right now to take a chronological approach in my paper, describing the Old English hall as seen in *Beowulf* and then the Anglo-Norman court as observed in *Lanval*. I was intrigued by the way each was a place of honor and glory but also of internal conflict, so that the poems reflect an awareness on the poet's part of the vulnerabilities of the society being represented and addressed by each text.

I will first describe Heorot, highlighting the way the poem emphasizes its former glory and contrasts that to its current destruction. Then I will describe the behavior of the retainers within the hall, using the example of Unferth's challenge to Beowulf's claims to greatness and the way Hrothgar is guided by his wife's advice, which shows her understanding of the affiliation with Beowulf as a potential threat to the inheritance of her sons.

Then I will describe Arthur's court as we see it in *Lanval*, with much less emphasis on the glory it represents (which maybe the audience would already be familiar with) and more on the inner tensions, as seen in Arthur's forgetting to reward the excellent knight Lanval, and Guinevere's inappropriate and dangerous propositioning of him. The response of Arthur's people to Guinevere's character will also be part of this section of the paper.

At this point I think I'll be showing similarities in the way the two poems show the underside of the usually glorified warrior or knightly community as we see it within the hall, in these two sample texts.

Temporary Thesis:

Both Anglo-Saxon and later medieval society can be better understood through an analysis of the representation of the hall in narrative poems from each period. In Marie de France's twelfth-century *Lanval* and in the Old English *Beowulf*, the hall reflects the glory of the leader (King Arthur and King Hrothgar, respectively) that is revealed through his warriors; however, the hall is also a place of conflict and danger, where reputations are at risk and total loyalty is rare.

Works Cited

Beowulf. Trans. Chris Toller. NY: Smith Publishing, 1995.

Marie de France. *Lanval. The Lais of Marie de France*. Trans. Robert Hanning and Joan Ferrante. Durham, NC: The Labyrinth Press, 1978. 105-23.