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The Semantic and Cultural Functions of Anthroponyms in "Beowulf"

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Abstract: This article discusses anthroponyms in Beowulf, one of the earliest Old English epics. Anthroponyms embody cultural values, heroic ideals, and symbolic worldviews that shaped Anglo-Saxon society. The study of names in this poem is therefore significant for understanding how language reflects collective identity, mythology, and social hierarchy. By analyzing the semantic and etymological structure of anthroponyms such as Beowulf, Hrothgar, Grendel, Hygelac, and Unferth, the research sheds light on the cultural memory preserved in Anglo-Saxon naming practices. The research employs a combined historical-linguistic and semantic approach. Selected anthroponyms are examined through etymological reconstruction, tracing their roots from Old English to Proto-Germanic and related Germanic languages. Lexical analysis is supplemented by contextual interpretation within the poem, with attention given to how names correspond to character traits, moral functions, and narrative symbolism. Comparative parallels with Indo-European naming traditions are also considered to situate the findings within a broader linguistic framework.

Keys words: Beowulf; anthroponyms; Old English; etymology; cultural identity; heroic tradition; Anglo-Saxon literature; genealogy

Introduction. Anthroponyms—the proper names of individuals—are an essential component of epic poetry, functioning not only as labels for characters but also as carriers of cultural and symbolic meaning. In the Old English epic *Beowulf*, anthroponyms reflect the heroic ethos, social structures, and mythological imagination of the Anglo-Saxon world. Names in the poem are not arbitrary; rather, they are carefully constructed, semantically transparent, and often compound in form, encoding significant cultural concepts such as bravery, lineage, divine fate, or destructive power. For instance, the central hero *Beowulf* embodies his identity through a name that resonates with strength and animal symbolism, while kings such as *Hrothgar* legitimize their authority through names that emphasize glory and martial skill. Even antagonists like *Grendel* carry names that linguistically mirror their monstrous role within the narrative.

The study of anthroponyms in *Beowulf* is especially important because the poem, as one of the earliest and most complete Old English literary works, provides unique evidence of naming traditions that predate the Norman Conquest. These anthroponyms preserve traces of Old English and Proto-Germanic lexical elements, allowing modern scholars to reconstruct aspects of the language, cultural worldview, and symbolic practices of early medieval England. Moreover, names in *Beowulf* serve literary purposes by foreshadowing character destinies, emphasizing thematic oppositions such as harmony versus conflict, and strengthening the poem's allegorical dimensions. Despite the centrality of names in the epic, the semantic and etymological layers of anthroponyms are often overlooked in literary analysis,

which tends to prioritize heroic deeds and narrative structure. This study aims to fill that gap by providing a systematic examination of the etymology, structure, and symbolic meaning of selected anthroponyms. By focusing on names such as *Beowulf*, *Hrothgar*, *Grendel*, *Hygelac*, and *Unferth*, the research highlights how anthroponyms serve as linguistic keys to understanding the values, social order, and cosmological beliefs embedded in the poem.

Literature review. The study of anthroponyms in Beowulf has attracted attention from scholars in linguistics, philology, and literary studies for more than a century. Early editors such as Frederick Klaeber (1922; revised eds. 1950, 2008) emphasized the importance of names in clarifying genealogies and dynastic relations within the poem. Klaeber's annotations demonstrated that anthroponyms often provide narrative cohesion and serve as signposts for understanding kinship structures. From a linguistic perspective, the work of Bosworth and Toller (An Anglo-Saxon Dictionary, 1898) and the Oxford English Dictionary (OED) has been foundational for etymological analysis. These sources provide lexical evidence for Old English compounds, many of which are preserved in the names of Beowulf's characters. Later philologists such as Bruce Mitchell and Fred C. Robinson (1992) further highlighted how Old English morphology and semantics inform the interpretation of proper names. In the field of onomastics, scholars such as A. H. Smith and Peter Kitson have argued that Anglo-Saxon personal names often function as "mini-texts" encoding symbolic or moral values. This view has influenced more recent analyses, which see anthroponyms as integral to the poem's thematic design rather than incidental details. Similarly, scholars of Germanic literature, including R. W. Chambers (1959) and Kemp Malone (1962), have pointed out parallels between Beowulf anthroponyms and naming traditions in other Germanic epics, such as The Song of the Nibelungs. More recent studies adopt an interdisciplinary approach, combining linguistic, literary, and cultural perspectives. For example, Leonard Neidorf (2015) emphasizes the role of names in preserving oral tradition and cultural memory, while scholars of Old English poetics argue that anthroponyms operate as kennings, enriching the figurative dimension of the poem. Collectively, this scholarship confirms that anthroponyms in Beowulf are essential not only for linguistic reconstruction but also for understanding the cultural identity and symbolic imagination of the Anglo-Saxon world.

Methods. The present study adopts an interdisciplinary approach, combining methods from historical linguistics, comparative philology, and literary analysis. The primary material consists of anthroponyms found in the Old English epic *Beowulf*. Special attention is given to the names of central characters—*Beowulf*, *Hrothgar*, *Grendel*, *Hygelac*, and *Unferth*—as well as to genealogical names such as *Scyld*, *Healfdene*, and *Ecgtheow*. The research procedure involves three steps. First, a **lexical-structural analysis** was conducted to examine the morphological composition of each anthroponym. Old English elements were identified and broken down into roots, prefixes, and suffixes in order to reveal their semantic transparency. Second, **etymological reconstruction** was carried out by tracing the origins of these lexical elements to Proto-Germanic and, where relevant, to Proto-Indo-European roots. For this purpose, standard etymological dictionaries and previous philological studies were consulted. Third, a **contextual-literary analysis** was applied to investigate how each name functions within the poem: whether it reflects heroic attributes, legitimizes dynastic continuity, expresses moral or symbolic values, or contributes to narrative foreshadowing. In addition, the study employs **comparative analysis** with anthroponymic traditions in related Germanic epics (such as *The Song of the Nibelungs*) to identify broader naming patterns. This methodological framework allows for a comprehensive understanding of how anthroponyms in *Beowulf* operate simultaneously as linguistic artifacts, literary devices, and cultural symbols.

Results. The analysis of anthroponyms in *Beowulf* demonstrates that most personal names in the poem are semantically motivated and reflect the values, worldview, and social structures of Anglo-Saxon culture. Several recurring patterns were identified. First, a significant group of names consists of **compound formations** built from transparent Old English lexical elements. The central hero *Beowulf* (*bēo* "bee" + *wulf* "wolf") produces the kenning "bee-wolf," commonly interpreted as "bear." This metaphor encapsulates heroic qualities such as physical strength, endurance, and protective power.

Similarly, *Hrothgar* (*hrōð* "glory, fame" + *gār* "spear") signifies "glorious spear," an epithet befitting a warrior-king whose authority rests on martial skill and fame. *Hygelac* (*hug* "mind, courage" + *lāc* "gift, offering") reflects mental strength and generosity, reinforcing the image of a noble leader. Second, some names display **negative or ironic semantic structures.** *Unferth* (*un-* "not, lack of" + *frið* "peace, harmony") means "lack of peace," a suitable name for a character who embodies jealousy, discord, and moral weakness. Likewise, *Grendel* is less etymologically transparent, but it is plausibly derived from Old English *grindan* ("to grind, crush"), symbolizing destructive violence and monstrous power. Third, the analysis of genealogical names reveals their function in emphasizing **dynastic continuity and legitimacy.** *Scyld* (from *scyld* "shield") highlights protection and kingship, while *Healfdene* ("half-Dane") indicates ethnic affiliation and transitional identity. *Ecgtheow* (*ecg* "edge, sword-blade" + *þēow* "servant") may denote "servant of the sword," underscoring martial lineage. These names reinforce kinship networks that frame the epic's narrative structure.

Overall, the findings suggest that anthroponyms in *Beowulf* serve multiple functions: (1) symbolizing heroic or monstrous qualities, (2) encoding moral judgments, and (3) legitimizing genealogical succession. The semantic richness of these names illustrates that Anglo-Saxon naming practices were closely tied to social identity, moral values, and poetic imagery.

Discussion. The findings of this study demonstrate that anthroponyms in *Beowulf* are far more than personal designations: they function as cultural symbols, literary devices, and vehicles of collective memory. The semantic transparency of many names indicates that Anglo-Saxon society attached great importance to the meaning of personal names, using them to encode values such as strength, fame, loyalty, and courage. In this way, anthroponyms become "mini-narratives" that foreshadow character roles and reflect their moral or symbolic essence. For example, *Beowulf*'s name prefigures his role as a bear-like warrior who protects his people, while *Unferth*'s name encapsulates his envy and inner conflict. Another important aspect is the role of anthroponyms in **legitimizing social and genealogical structures**. Names such as *Scyld*, *Healfdene*, and *Ecgtheow* not only identify individuals but also situate them within dynastic continuity, thereby reinforcing the political and cultural authority of lineages. This pattern reflects a broader Germanic tradition in which names functioned as markers of ancestry and tribal affiliation, ensuring that oral audiences recognized the legitimacy of rulers and warriors.

The negative and monstrous anthroponyms, such as *Grendel*, further emphasize the moral and symbolic dimension of naming. Even when etymology is uncertain, the phonological form and narrative context of the name contribute to its characterization. *Grendel*, with its harsh consonant cluster and possible link to destruction (*grindan*), immediately evokes dread and hostility, aligning the character with chaos and anti-social forces. This contrast between noble and monstrous names reflects the duality central to the epic: the struggle between order and disorder, heroism and destruction.

Finally, the discussion highlights that anthroponyms in *Beowulf* also served as **poetic tools.** Their compound forms, kennings, and symbolic resonances enriched the oral performance of the poem, allowing audiences to grasp layers of meaning through the mere utterance of a name. Thus, the study of anthroponyms reveals how language, culture, and literature intersect in Old English epic tradition. Far from being arbitrary, names in *Beowulf* are integral to the poem's thematic design, reinforcing its exploration of heroism, fate, and cultural identity

Conclusion. The study of anthroponyms in *Beowulf* reveals that personal names in the poem are not random identifiers but meaningful linguistic and cultural constructs. Through etymological reconstruction and contextual interpretation, it has been shown that anthroponyms encode heroic ideals (*Beowulf* as the "bee-wolf" or bear, symbolizing strength), dynastic legitimacy (*Hrothgar* as the "glorious spear," affirming royal power), and moral evaluation (*Unferth* as the embodiment of discord). Even the names of antagonists, such as *Grendel*, reinforce the symbolic opposition between order and chaos, good and evil, which underpins the epic's narrative structure

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