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Section C

### Epic Literature of the Middle Ages

During the early Middle Ages, the main form of education for a common peasant was epic literature. For the Frankish, Germanic, and Anglo-Saxon people, the most popular pieces of epic literature were the Song of Roland, the Song of the Nibelung, and the Tale of Beowulf. From these pieces of literature, cultural values such as religion, magic, bravery, worthiness, protection, reputation, and obedience were communicated. Such lessons clearly show that epic literature of the early Middle Ages communicated cultural values.

The Song of Roland communicates cultural values such as religion, deceit, pride, and reputation. Because of the use of repetition, the song was a source of religious acclimation. In verses eighty-two to eighty-six, God is mentioned five times. Specifically, Oliver justifies his thoughts because sounding the olifant would “please God.” In verse seventy-nine of the song, the author writes propagandistically, “Pagans are wrong and Christians are right!” The claim shows that the Franks valued Christianity to the extent that it transcended other religions. As a result, religion was an essential value to the Franks. The twelfth century authors of the song had a clear propagandistic focus because the enemy of the song was changed from Christian Basques to Spanish Saracens. In addition, the author was asserting propagandistic claims because the enemy of the song, the Islamic people, did not practice paganism. It is unmistakable that the use of propaganda shows that deceit was a part of Frankish

life. Roland did not want to call for assistance because he would “lose [his] good name all through France [and] ... be shamed.” Such actions of the characters of the Song of Roland show that religion, pride, reputation, and deceit were important cultural values of the Franks.

The Song of the Nibelung also communicates several cultural values including deception, passiveness toward the king, reputation, and magic. It is clear that the song shows that deception is both present and wrong in Germanic culture because deception brought “the downfall of both Gunther and Sigfrid.” Another instance of deception is when Hagen persuades Kriemhild to mark Sigfrid’s one vulnerability in order to ‘protect’ him. In both cases, the deception leads to a negative outcome for the main characters; therefore, deception is portrayed as a negative aspect of Germanic culture. In addition, the song promotes a sense of passiveness and obedience toward the king because Sigfrid died due to his challenge with the king. Finally, the song teaches that reputation is respectable because Sigfrid was willing to stand up for his reputation by challenging the king for the recognition he deserved. The presence of magic is apparent in the song because of aspects such as Sigfrid’s “magic cloak of invisibility” and invulnerability by dragon blood. Because Germanic people believed the story, they must have believed that magic was possible, and thus, magic was a value of the society. The events of the Song of the Nibelung communicate Germanic cultural values such as the negative impact of deceit, creativity, passiveness toward the king, and reputation.

The Tale of Beowulf communicates cultural values including bravery, worthiness, and protection. One lesson of the tale comes from the bravery of

Beowulf. Even when other thanes flee in the face of danger and fear, Beowulf holds his courage steady and is Anglo-Saxon culture, truly worthy men are brave, while unworthy men are cowards. Another aspect of the Tale of Beowulf is the need of Beowulf's protection. Throughout the tale, Beowulf protects the Anglo-Saxons several times. It is clear that this aspect of the story relates to the life of Anglo-Saxons. Therefore, these people must have been under constant pressure from surrounding nations. Such aspects of the Tale of Beowulf clearly communicate cultural values of the Anglo-Saxons.

The primary values of numerous cultures can be found by analyzing a society's major works of literature. The Song of Roland, the Song of the Nibelung, and the Tale of Beowulf communicate cultural values such as religion, magic, bravery, worthiness, protection, reputation, and obedience. Understanding these values leads to a better account of the everyday life of the Frankish, Germanic, and Anglo-Saxon people.