HEROISM AND FAILURE IN ANGLO-SAXON POETRY: THE
IDEAL AND THE REAL WITHIN THE COMITATUS

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This dissertation discusses the complicated relationship (known as the comitatus) of kings and followers as presented in the heroic poetry of the Anglo-Saxons. The anonymous poets of the age celebrated the ideals of their culture but consistently portrayed the real behavior of the characters within their works. Other studies have examined the ideals of the comitatus in general terms while referring to the poetry as a body of work, or they have discussed them in particular terms while referring to one or two poems in detail. This study is both broader and deeper in scope than are the earlier works. In a number of poems I have identified the heroic ideals and examined the poetic treatment of those ideals.

In order to establish the necessary background, Chapter I reviews the historical sources, such as Tacitus, Bede, the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, and the work of modern historians. Chapter II discusses such attributes of the king as wisdom, courage, and generosity. Chapter III examines the role of aristocratic women within the society. Chapter IV describes the proper behavior of followers,
primarily their loyalty in return for treasures earlier bestowed. Chapter V discusses perversions and failures of the ideal.

The dissertation concludes that, contrary to the view that Anglo-Saxon literature idealized the culture, the poets presented a reasonably realistic picture of their age. Anglo-Saxon heroic poetry celebrates ideals of behavior which, even when they can be attained, are not successful in the real world of political life.
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CHAPTER I

HISTORY BEFORE POETRY

In his Outline of History, H. G. Wells says that there were very few differences among the Angles, Saxons, Jutes, Danes, and Normans and that the Norman Conquest, which seemed of huge importance to the English, was really only one more migratory wave of the same people (648, 661). Although few scholars would agree completely with Wells, there are many similarities among these peoples of Germanic stock. In The Origins of the English Language, Thomas Pyles says:

The English were perfectly aware of their racial . . . kinship with the Scandinavians. . . . Despite the enmity and the bloodshed, then, there was a feeling among the English that when all was said and done the Northmen belonged to the same "family" as themselves. (118, 119)

In An Introduction to Anglo-Saxon England, Peter Hunter Blair says that "it should not be forgotten that the Vikings, whose very name is synonymous with piracy, themselves introduced the word 'law' into the English language" (55); in some cases, however, it is impossible to identify the tribal origin of words or customs common to the Germanic peoples living in Britain. Such a mingling of language and custom is also true of the Celtic tribes, who, although of another racial stock, shared many similarities with their
Germanic neighbors. P. H. Sawyer goes further than Pyles in From Roman Britain to Norman England to say that the Celtic and Anglo-Saxon poets wrote to appeal to the same ideals in British and English audiences (53). Moreover, Sawyer says that Celtic and Germanic society "had a common system of social values based on a principle of reciprocity" (53).

The fact that they both [British and English] accepted this principle of reciprocal obligations as the basis of honourable conduct made it possible for them to establish friendly relations as well as the more familiar hostile ones. (54)

The similarities among all the tribes living in Britain and those of Germanic background on the Continent throughout a long period of time are well enough documented to warrant looking at what Taticus wrote of the Germans in AD 70, in order to try to understand the English living between c. 500 and 1066. Tacitus so admired the heroic traits exhibited by the Germanic tribes that in many instances he compares the barbarians favorably with the Romans of his increasingly decadent day. When a young Germanic warrior had won his shield and spear, signs of adulthood, he was ready to seek out an experienced, successful king to follow (112). Since sought-after material rewards came from war, he naturally tried to fight alongside the most vigorous chieftain he could find, even if he had to leave his own tribe when it experienced a period of peace (113). Germanic kings, of course, liked having large retinues of warriors because such bands enhanced their prestige in peace and made more
likely their success during war (112). The code of conduct of both kings and warriors was demanding. Although it would be acceptable to give ground in a battle, the warriors must always return to the attack (106). The kings and their followers vied with each other in valor (113).

To leave a battle alive after their chief has fallen means lifelong infamy and shame. To defend and to protect him, and to let him get the credit for their own acts of heroism, are the most solemn obligations of their allegiance. (113)

Running away was such a disgrace that a warrior who had thrown away his shield was no longer permitted to attend tribal sacrifices or assemblies (106-07). In later centuries, too, exile was to be the most serious and painful punishment which could be exacted for the Anglo-Saxon; no one wanted to be "the clanless man, the lordless wanderer, who had no 'gold-friend or protector'" (Kennedy 9). C. C. Ferrell adds: "There was something that the Anglo-Saxon dreaded far more than the hardships of the wintry ocean. It was the separation from home and loved ones" (203). In the Germanic tribes, exile was not the only possible serious punishment; the tribal assembly could and did decide on capital offenses:

The mode of execution varies according to the offence. Traitors and deserters are hanged on trees; cowards, shirkers, and sodomites are pressed down under a wicker hurdle into the slimy mud of a bog. (Tacitus 111)
Often, when their leader died in battle, surviving warriors hanged themselves rather than face disgrace (107). Minor offenses might be atoned for by paying fines, part of which went to the king and part to the victim or his family (111), and not all disputes ended on negative notes. Families were supposed to keep up feuds, but compensation of cattle or sheep could be arranged, even for murder (119). In Anglo-Saxon society, compensation varied according to the rank of the injured party (Whitelock, Beginnings 145).

The close ties of kindred among the Germans also impressed Tacitus, who notes that wives became active partners of their husbands to share in prosperity or suffering (117), and "the sons of sisters are as highly honoured by their uncles as by their own fathers" (118). Because some tribes regarded the nephew-uncle relationship as even more sacred than that of son and father, they often preferred nephews as hostages, "thinking that this gives them a firmer grip on men's hearts and a wider hold on the family" (118). All of these customs noted by Tacitus are also present in Anglo-Saxon historical documents or literature.

One of the best and most coherent sources of information about early days in England is Bede's A History of the English Church and People, written about 731. Since his chief concern is ecclesiastical history and teaching, Bede's information about secular society is sometimes less
detailed than that about churchmen. It is, nonetheless, of great significance. Blair notes the similarities between the court life which Bede describes and the tribal behavior which Tacitus discusses:

[T]he Northumbrian witan perform[ed] one of its main functions, that of deliberative discussion, and the royal household itself [was] used as illustration of an argument. The two are surely the same and both scarcely distinguishable from the comitatus of Tacitus. (213)

In Bede's account, women played an even more important role in their husbands' lives than they had in the early Germanic tribes because Anglo-Saxon women often introduced their husbands, or fathers, to Christianity. For example, before his famous conversion, King Edwin was allowed to marry Ethelberga only if he promised not to interfere with her faith (Bede 113). Pope Boniface later wrote to Queen Ethelberga:

We have been greatly encouraged by God's goodness in granting you, through your own profession of faith, an opportunity to kindle a spark of the true religion in your husband. (120)

Concerning another area of his society, one which caused so much concern that a large number of the early laws discuss it, Bede comments on the growing custom of material compensation for wrongs, especially theft, when he quotes a letter from Pope Gregory to St. Augustine, stating "that thieves are to restore whatever they have taken from churches" (73). Although Gregory did not want churches to profit from the restitution of property (73), the earliest
English laws concerning churches begin with one regarding theft of God's property: "[W]hat is stolen must be repaid at twelve times its value" (Whitelock, Beginnings 134).

In spite of his primary interest in ecclesiastical matters, Bede recognizes that the older, pagan culture and the Christianity of his day shared such values as the protection a leader owed his followers and the loyalty those followers should give their lord. Throughout his work, Bede records many examples of trouble and treachery, but he also points out with great emphasis those instances in which men, both clergy and laymen, performed loyally and well. He notes that Bishop Lawrence had a dream in which St. Peter reprimanded and punished him for planning to abandon his flock (Bede 109-10); Bede also records that the Bishop repented of his desire to leave (110). But of some, like St. Augustine and others sent by Pope Gregory, Bede says: "They practiced what they preached, and were willing to endure any hardship, and even to die for the truth which they proclaimed" (70). It was not only the loyal behavior of Italian churchmen which draws Bede's praise; loyalty within the Anglo-Saxon secular culture also receives his approbation. He records at length an episode about an assassin sent by Cuichelm to King Edwin:

And while he was artfully delivering his pretended message, he suddenly sprang up, and drawing the dagger from beneath his clothes, attacked the king. Swift to see the king's peril, Lilla, his counselor and best friend, having no shield to
protect the king, interposed his own body to receive the blow; but even so, it was delivered with such force that it wounded the king through the body of his warrior. The assassin was immediately attacked on all sides, but killed yet another of the king's men named Fordhere in the ensuing struggle. (116)

Perhaps, by twentieth-century standards, Bede leaves something to be desired as a historian, but he tries to be accurate and always qualifies any material he believes to be doubtful. Surely his understanding of the values of his culture must be accepted as reliable. In addition, other sources also demonstrate the close relationship between fact and literature. Blair says that several sources establish the existence of Hygelac, Beowulf's king (341-42). The Bayeux Tapestry shows Harold receiving arms when he swears allegiance to William; according to N. P. Brooks in "Arms, Status and Warfare in Late-Saxon England," the tenth and eleventh centuries maintained customs mentioned in earlier sources (93). In "Anglo-Saxon Heroic Attitudes," G. N. Garmonsway says that "sixty years after the Battle of Maldon the retinue of Earl Aelfgar of East Anglia follows him into banishment" (141). Blair points out that the finds at Sutton Hoo accurately demonstrate extravagant funeral arrangements; "[i]n several other matters of lesser import archaeological evidence indicates that the poet of Beowulf drew upon the realities of his age for the setting of his work" (342).
The other great contemporary source of information about England from c. 500 to 1154 is the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, extant in several manuscripts. Like all annals, it contains entries of varying interest, ranging from bleak statements that in a certain year appeared a comet to lengthy accounts of significant political events. Many of the accounts note gift-giving, oath-swearings, hostage-taking, and great battles. Occasionally, an entry records an episode which throws a clear light on the attitudes of the time. The E-Text entry for the year 979 records the proper desire for revenge concerning the death of King Edward:

Hine nolden his eordlican magas wrecan.
ac hine hafta his heofonlic a faeder
  [swita gewrecen.
Pа eordlican banan woldon his gemynd
  on erdan adilgian.]
Ac se uplica Wrecend hafta his gemynd
  on heofenum. J on eordan to braed,
Pа be nolden aer
to his libbendum lichaman onbugan.
Pа nu eadmolice
on cneowum abugad to his dædum banum.

[His earthly kinsmen would not avenge him, but his Heavenly Father greatly avenged him. The earthly slayers wished to destroy his memory on earth, but the sublime Avenger has made broad his memory in the heavens and on the earth. Although they would not earlier bow to his living body, now they humbly bow on their knees to his dead bones.] (Plummer and Earle 123)

That Aethelred, usually called the Unready, should properly be called the Evilly-Served is clearly shown by two of the
incidents recorded for his reign in the C-Text. The first, from the year 992, tells of Aelfric's perfidy:

Pa sende se ealdorman Ælfric and het warnian done here; and þa on dæg togædere fôn sceoldan, þa sceoc he on niht fram þære fyrde him sylfum tó myclum bysmore--and se here ða ætbaerst butan án scyp þær man ofsloþ.

[Then the aldorman Aelfric sent and ordered (to be) warned the foreign army, and then on the night before they were to fight together on the (following) day, he absconded at night from the army (bringing) to himself great disgrace--and the foreign army then escaped except one ship where (the) men were slain.] (Rositzke 53)

Surely, Aelfric's behavior in 1003 disgusts the modern reader as much as it did his contemporaries:

Pa sceolde [147r] se ealdorman Ælfric lædan þa fyrde, ac he teah ða forþ his ealdan wrencas. . . . ða gebraed he hine seocne and ongan hine brecan to spiwenne and cwæd þæt he gesicled wäre, and swa þæt folc becyrde þæt he lædan sceolde.

[Then the aldorman Aelfric should have led the army, but he then drew forth his old tricks. . . . Then he pretended himself sick and began to force himself to retch with vomiting and said that he was ill, and thus betrayed the folk whom he should have led.] (56)

The Chronicle, however, records more than wicked deeds; perhaps the best example of valorous and loyal behavior appears in the entry for 755 (752) [the later date is that of the Anglo-Saxon writer; the earlier one is that of modern editors]. In that year King Cynewulf was treacherously set upon by a group led by the atheling Cyneheard. Since Cynewulf's following at the time was
small, Cyneheard and his men, with relative ease, killed the king and all his men except for one badly wounded hostage. When the rest of Cynewulf's men heard of the disaster, they attacked in force and wreaked vengeance to the same degree. After his chief enemy was slain, each leader offered the opposing men money, land, and life if they would surrender. All refused, even saying that the ties of kinship were not as strong as those of men to lord (Cassidy and Ringler 139-42). Such personal and permanent loyalty to one's lord was highly valued throughout the Anglo-Saxon period.

History and poetry, however, do not replicate each other; they highlight at least slightly different aspects of the society from which they come. Any scholar must wonder about the relationship between the history and the literature of the time, but the two certainly reflect each other. Blair says:

Maldon, . . . though concerned with an event which seems not to have been of any major importance in itself, describes a battle in which the contestants displayed the ideals of the ancient Germanic heroic code. It is a stirring poem which witnesses the enduring strength of the older poetic form and also of the qualities for which Taticus praised the Germani nearly nine centuries earlier. (349)

On the one hand, some scholars like H. M. Chadwick and Frank Stenton have rather freely used creative materials as sources in writing their histories of the period. Others, like Rosemary Woolf in "The Ideal of Men Dying with
Their Lord in the *Germania* and *The Battle of Maldon,* have objected strenuously to the idea of close ties between history, historical ideals, and the behavior of characters in creative works; Woolf thinks it particularly foolish to ignore the centuries of change between AD 70 and AD 991. Still others, like Peter Sawyer in *Roman Britain,* have looked closely at the literature but have tried not to base their judgments heavily on creative material. In writing about the similarities of the English and British societies, Sawyer says: "The poets of the seventh century presented a highly idealized view of their world." He goes on to say that both cultures valued "the aristocratic society of kings and nobles who treasured their armour, weapons and horses and whose most highly prized virtues were courage and generosity, to poets as well as to warriors" (53). The greatest twentieth-century scholar in the field, Dorothy Whitelock, in "Anglo-Saxon Poetry and the Historian," reprinted in *From Bede to Alfred,* cautions against identifying direct parallels between history and literature. She goes on, however, to discuss the value (as well as the limitations) of looking at Anglo-Saxon poetry as historical material (75). Furthermore, she asks, although Tacitus, Bede, the laws, and the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* provide valuable information about the *comitatus,* should we ever have guessed the emotional strength of the bond between lord and man if the poetry had not survived to give us laments
for the dead lord in The Wanderer or the statements of the theme "Such should a man be"? (88)

Referring to a letter sent by Aldhelm to Bishop Wilfrid's clergy and to the entry for the year 755 in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle concerning loyalty (89), Whitelock says:

It is extremely important that we should possess this confirmation from non-poetic sources, for the sentiments are so close to those attributed to the Germans of the first century by Tacitus that we might have suspected that our poems were handing on a poetic convention that no longer agreed with contemporary conditions. (90)

She points to another parallel between history and poetry concerning the boasting speeches of the followers of Bishop Wilfrid in 666 and those of the thanes in The Battle of Maldon:

[S]uch things [boasts] could have become part of the conventional machinery of a battle-piece, but we see that at least there was a time in Anglo-Saxon history when they were real, and one can bridge the gap [between 666 and 991] a little by noting that at the turn of the ninth century men still made "boasts" in formal words. (90)

Whitelock concludes her plea for the reasoned use of Anglo-Saxon poetry in looking at history by saying:

Old English poetry will not let us into the secrets of contemporary politics; . . . But if . . . it can on occasion make us look at Anglo-Saxon society through a contemporary's eyes, I submit that, even from a historian's point of view, the labour we expend on its interpretation can be justified. (94)

It is evident that a detailed study of both Anglo-Saxon history and literature must shed light on both,
particularly when one wants to examine the comitatus, its ideals and realities, its successes and its failures. The chapters to follow will examine the roles of leaders, women, and followers in Anglo-Saxon society as they fitted into the framework of the comitatus. They will also look at how the ideals met the realities of the time and how those ideals failed. They were glorious, and sometimes imperfect humanity lived up to them, but in a society which counted its time by nights instead of days and its years by winters instead of summers all knew that there was no perfection, no honorable deed without a treacherous one, no happy mead-hall without an exile, no rise to the pinnacle of success and glory without a fall. It was a society facing invasion from without and cultural change from within, and the poets saw and feared what they knew would come.
CHAPTER I: BIBLIOGRAPHY


CHAPTER II
THE HONOR OF KINGS

The comitatus tradition and its complicated, personal relationships were part and parcel of Anglo-Saxon England. The honor of the kings and other leaders who functioned within this structure required their knowledge and performance of duty. Many of them upheld gloriously the high standards expected of them.

"In no part of Anglo-Saxon England and at no time in its history is any trace to be found of a system of government knowing nothing of the rule of kings" (Blair 94). When a king died, his successor was chosen from the most suitable men available, "the most important qualification being that of royal birth" (198). It was not imperative for the new king to be the eldest son of the former king (198); instead, the man chosen was the one expected to discharge best the duties of kingship. All of Anglo-Saxon society depended on its king and his proper fulfillment of his duties. Patrick Wormald, in "Celtic and Anglo-Saxon Kingship," says that being a good king includes "the whole nexus of duties, rights, and privileges, expectations both spoken and unspoken that girt about monarchical government" (152). "It is probable that in very early times the heathen kings
had some priestly functions" (Whitelock 48), but by the time of the recording of the heroic poetry from which most of the information about Anglo-Saxon society comes, the poets' primary concerns were with the king's secular duties and virtues: a proper pride, wisdom, generosity, and the willingness and ability to protect his people. For such a leader, proper pride includes a knowledge of self-worth which remains humble and willing to accept one's fate; the knowledge that, although boasting is acceptable, one must be committed to make good the boast or flyting; a reasonable desire for glory and fame; and bravery and the encouragement of courageous behavior in others. Wisdom means prudence and moderation, reverence, and the ability to uphold peace and justice--both with other tribes or nations and within the fellowship of followers; all must be dealt with fairly. Generosity extends to all. The most important attribute of a good king, however, is his willingness and ability to protect the people under his care--to the point of whatever self-sacrifice is necessary.

Kings and war-leaders need to have a proper sense of self-worth as the first of their virtues. Beowulf, for example, is a hero who unites in an ideal manner pride with modesty, devotion to God with self-confidence, daring with caution, joie de vivre with piety, who enjoys possessions but is not greedy, who is thankful, pious, and reverent toward age. (Schücking 47)
In "The Ideal of Kingship," Schücking goes on to say that self-knowledge and self-conquest are significant virtues (48). For the Anglo-Saxons, as for modern humans, the line between proper pride and sinful pride is quite fine, and the poets speak more often in negative terms than in positive ones. Shortly before Beowulf leaves Denmark to return to the land of the Geats, Hrothgar warns against the wrong sort of pride:

"[']Wondor is tō secganne,
hū mıhtig God  manna cynne
þūr hīðe sefæn  snyttru bryttan,
eard ond eorlscipe;  hē āh ealra geweald.
Hwīlum hē on lufan  læste hworfan
monnes meōgeþoponc  mēran cynnes,
selac hīm on bple  eorban wynne
tō healdanne hlēoburn wera,
gumā hīm swā gewealdene  worolde ðælas,
sīde rīce,  þæt hē hīs selfa ne mǣg
his unsnyttrum  ende gēpencean.

. . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . .
Beowulf lœofa,
secg betsta, . . . þē þæt sēlre gecēos,
sec rādas;  oferhyĎda ne gīm,
mēre cempa![']

"A wonder it is in telling how mighty God to man-
kind in his great spirit dispenses wisdom, grants
land and rank; he has control over all. Sometimes
out of love he allows to move around (have freedom)
the mind of a man of great family, gives him the
delight of a great dwelling in (his) native land,
for guarding the stronghold, renders to him as
controlling the regions of the world until he
does not in his foolishness think of his own end.
. . . Dear Beowulf, best of mwn, choose that
better thing for yourself, eternal benefits; heed
not pride, great warrior!" (Beowulf 1724-34,
1758-61)

That the Anglo-Saxon hero recognized his obligation to
bow to fate appears in many phrases throughout the poems.
Beowulf says to Hrothgar: "[']Gæð ða wyrd swā hīo sceal[']" ["Fate goes always as she must!"] (455). Later, he says: "[']Wyrd oft nereð / unfaegne eorl, þonne his ellen dēah![']" ["Fate often protects the undoomed earl whenever his courage is strong!"] (572-73). Early in The Wanderer the narrator makes the point: "Wyrd bið ful eorðæd" [Fate is full resolute](5). Many of the poems treat Wyrd, Fate, and God in the same or similar terms; near the end of his poem, the narrator of The Seafarer speaks of submission to both when he says that "wyrd bið swīpre, / Meotud meahtigra, þonne Ænges monnes gehygd" [Fate is stronger, God mightier, than the mind of any man ](115-16).

The proper sort of pride, the kind appreciated in Anglo-Saxon society, not only allowed, but also encouraged, the hero to boast of his past deeds, about what he intends to accomplish, and to enter into a flyting, a formal, challenging boast against a specific person, although the poems contain frequent warnings against not being able to fulfill the boast and about being sure that the boast is appropriate. The narrator of The Wanderer says: "Wita sceal geþyldig, / ne sceal nō tō hātheort ne tō hrædwyrde" [A wise (man) should (be) patient, nor should he be too fierce nor too hasty of speech] (65-66). Although a man should not be too hasty of speech, he should certainly make boasts when they are called for. Beot generally meant a promise of accomplishment (Einarsson 976), and it was usually made in the
mead-hall. Whether drinking added authority to the boast or not, under whatever conditions the boast was made, "it was considered shameful not to stand by one's guns" (978).

Ideally, the hero had to know himself well; then, when he made a boast, he could meet his obligation to perform it (Schücking 48). Of the same wise man, the narrator of The Wanderer goes on to say that he should "ne næfre gielpes tō georn %f hē geare cunne" [not be too eager to boast until he can readily perform (it)] (69). The cross in The Dream of the Rood, in telling the story of its part in the crucifixion, says: "Melle ic mihte / fǣondas gefyllan, hwæfre ic fæste stōd" [I might have felled all the enemies; however, I stood fast] (37-38).

Beowulf contains many boasts. In the very first section describing Scyld, the poet boasts in recounting past glories:

HWÆT, WĒ GÄR-DENA in gēardagum, 
þæodecyninga þrym gefrūnon, 
hū dā æpelingas ellen fremedon! 
Oft Scyld Scēfing sceapena þреatum, 
monegum mǣgbum meodosetla ofteah, 
ægsoðe eorl[as], sydān ērest weard fēāsceaf funden; hē þæs frōfre gēbăd, 
wōox under wolcnum weordmyndum þah, 
of þæt him ēghwylc yṃbsittendra 
ofær hronrāde hyran scolde, 
gomban gyldan; þæt wæs gōd cyning!

[Lo, we Spear-Danes in days of yore, learned of the fame of the kings of a people, how the princes performed valor. Often, Scyld Schefing, among the troops of the enemies, terrified earls with many glorious deeds when he first had been found wretched; he waited for that good fortune, prospered under the heavens, until each of the]
neighboring peoples across the sea had to pay him tribute; that was a good king.] (1-11)

Beowulf introduces himself to Hrothgar with a boast:

"Wæs þū, Hrōthgar, hál! Ic eom Higelāces mæg ond magācēn; hæbbe ic mærtā fela ongunnen on geoġofe.[']"

["Greetings, Hrothgar! I am Hygelac's kinsman and thane; I have undertaken many glorious deeds in my youth.""] (407-09)

In the same speech, he goes on to tell how he came to hear of Grendel's evil deeds and his resolution to come to Hrothgar's aid (409-19). Then the hero says:

["Ic of searwum cwōm, fāh from feōndum, þār ic fīfe geband, yðde eotena cyn, ond on yðum slōg niceras nihtes, . . . . . . . . . . . . . . forgrand gramum; ond nú wiç Grendel sceal, wiç þām ãglēcan āna gehēgan ðing wiç þyrse.[']"

["When I came with armor bloodstained from the enemies, there I (had) bound five, destroyed the kin of giants, and (had slain) water monsters of the night on the waves. . . . I destroyed the wrathful ones; and now against Grendel, with the monster, I must contend alone."] (419-22, 424-26)

Still following the tradition of the heroic boast, Beowulf swears to accomplish what he had promised or willingly meet his death: "[']Ic gefremman sceal / eorlīc ellen, opde endedǣg / on þisse meoduhealle mīnne gebīdan!" ["I shall achieve manly deeds of war or await my deathday in this mead-hall "] (636-38). Beowulf even refuses weapons in his fight against the monster because Grendel does not use them:

["Ic wit on niht sculon / secge ofersīttan, gif hā
gesecean dear / wīg ofer wǣpen, ['"] [(B)ut we two in the night shall forego the sword, if he dares to seek war without a weapon "] (683-85). When Beowulf returns to Hygelac's court, he recounts his adventures and exploits in a long speech, detailing Grendel's depredations, the kindness with which he himself was treated, the treasures he was given, and the deeds which he accomplished (1999-2151). At the end of his long life, Beowulf speaks proudly of his proper behavior to Hygelac, his lord:

['"]Ic him þā mǣðmas, þē hē mǣ sealde, geald æt gūde, swā mǣ gifedē waes, lǣhtan sweorde;['"]

["At war, with the bright sword such as was given me, I repaid him (for) the treasures he (had) given me."] (2490-92)

Just before he dies:

Beowulf maȝelode, bēotwordum spræc nīehstan sīde: 'Ic genēðe fela gūde on geogoCfe; gūt ic wylle, frōd folces weard fæhēs sēcan, maēru fremman, gif mec se mānsceāa of eorðasele ūt gesēceā.'

[Beowulf spoke, with boasting words, for the last time: "I dared many battles in (my) youth; yet I would wish, the wise lord of the people, to seek the feud, to do glorious deeds, if the wicked ravager of the earth-hall will come out (to) me."] (2510-15)

Similar to the bēot is the flyting—a formal, challenging boast, frequently made in the mead-hall, and always part of a sort of debate about the past performance of one of the heroes or about the abilities of the heroes involved in the challenge. Although Waldere exists only in fragments, a
condition which prevents the understanding of a coherent story, a few lines from it clearly demonstrate the flyting:

Waldere maelode, wiga ellenrof, 
hæfde him on handa hildefrofre, 
gudbilla gripe, gyddode wordum: 
"Hwaet! þu huru wendest, wine Burgenda, 
þæt me Hagenan hand hilde gefremede 
and getwæmde [...]ðowiges. Feta, gyf ðu dyrre, 
æt ðus headuwerigan hare byrnan.["

[Waldere, the brave warrior, had in (his) hands a sword, a battle-sword in the grip, spoke in a tale of words: "Lo, you indeed thought, friend of the Burgundians, that the hand of Hagen would make battle for me and separate (me from) battle. Fetch if you dare thus forward the battle-weary byrnie." (2.11-17)

In Hrothgar's court, Unferth makes unflattering remarks about Beowulf and accuses him of being a coward; Beowulf in reply accuses Unferth of being drunk. The speech, which gives Beowulf an excellent opportunity to boast further (Beowulf 529-86), ends with Beowulf's saying: "[']-nō ic þæs [fela] 
gylpe--, / þēah ðu þīnum brōðrum tō banan wurde, / 
hēafodmǣgum ['"] ["I do not rejoice much about this--though you killed your brothers, near kinsmen "] (586-88). Unferth does not reply, and Beowulf certainly wins this boasting match. The best example of a flyting occurs in The Battle of Maldon when the invaders demand from Byrhtnoth tribute and treasures to make peace with his people (25-41).

Byrhtnoth's answer is clear:

Byrhtnōð mæbelode, bord hafenode, 
wand wācne æsc, wordum mǣlde 
yrre and ānæd, āgeaf him andswear: 
'Gehyrst þū sælīda hwæt þīs folc segest? 
Hī willað ēow tō qafole gāras syllan,
A love of fame and a hope of enduring heroic reputation help motivate courageous behavior. In *Kings, Beasts, and Heroes*, Gwyn Jones includes in her list of heroic virtues "a love of fame and horror of disgrace" (52). Michael D. Cherniss, in *Ingeld and Christ: Heroic Concepts and Values in Old English Poetry*, goes even further when he says:

The ultimate goal of the Germanic hero is to ensure that his glory (dom) will live on after his death by performing deeds worthy of praise (lof). (83)

In discussing *The Battle of Maldon*, in "Oswald and Byrhtnoth: A Christian Saint and a Hero Who Is Christian," J. E. Cross says that in fighting for their lord the heroes are "doing so for their own reputation" (100). *The Battle of Brunanburh* begins by telling how Aethelstan and Edmund won glory:

Here Æpelstān cyning, eorla dryhten, 
beorna bēangīfa, and his brōpor ūc, 
Ēadmund æþeling, ealdorlangne tīr 
ūgslōgon æt sæcce sweordā ecgum 
ymbæ Brunanburh

[Here Aethelstan the king, prince of men, ring-giver to men, and also his brother Edmund the prince, gained enduring glory at fighting with the edges of swords close to Brunanburh.] (1-5)
The narrator of The Seafarer speaks of the desire for glory:

Forpon þæt eorla gehwām æftercwēþendra
lof lifgendra læstworda betst,
þæt hē gewyrce ðær hē on weg scyle
fremman on foldan wiċ fēonda nīp,
dēorum dǣrdom dēofle tōgēþenes,
þæt hine æelda bearn æfter hergen
ond his lōf sippan lifge mid englum
āwa tō ealdre, ēcan līfes blǣd,
drēam mid dugeþum.

[Therefore, for every nobleman the best reputation
among the living who later speak in praise (is)
that with brave deeds he had endeavored to do
battle against the enemies, against the devil, so
that afterwards the sons of men would praise him
and (that) his fame should live among the angels
forever, the glory of eternal life, joy among the
host.] (72-80)

Speaking of Beowulf in the introductory part of the poem,
the narrator says:

him þæs Liffrēa,
wuldres Wealdend woroldāre forgeaf,
Beowulf wæs brēmē --blǣd wide sprang--
[to him for that the Lord, the ruler of heaven,
gave worldly honor; Beowulf was famous--(his)
renown sprang wide.] (16-18)

In his boast to Hrothgar concerning the upcoming fight with
Grendel, Beowulf asks for God to grant glory: "["hālig
Dryhten / mǣrōū dēme, swā him gemet þince'"
["The holy
Lord might award glory as to him might appear proper"] (636-
87). The very last word about Beowulf's virtues is that he
was of all earls "lōfgeornost" [most eager for glory] (3182).

The last element of a heroic leader's pride was his
sense of courage and his encouragement of brave behavior
among his followers. Cross says that one of the cardinal
virtues was "fortitude" (103). In his translation of Beowulf, Charles W. Kennedy says that the poem "speaks to the modern world in moving accents, of honor, of courage, and of faith" (lxv). Earlier in the introduction to his translation, Kennedy says, "The tragic glory of Beowulf's death is its illustration of that fated courage which fights to the utmost, knowing the utmost will not wholly avail, yet fighting on" (lxiv). In his History of the English Church and People, Bede speaks of the courage of St. Augustine and the others sent to Britain by Pope Gregory:

They practiced what they preached, and were willing to endure any hardship, and even to die for the truth which they proclaimed. (70)

Several examples exist of the lord's encouragement of brave behavior. Part 1 of Waldere contains such an exhortation to courage: "Ætlan ordwyga, ne læt ðin ellen nu gy[.] / gedreosan to dæge," [Atlan, the warrior, do not let your courage now fall away today'] (1.6-7). When God sends him to be a missionary, Andreas raises a few objections, and God replies:

["scealt þa foresgeferan  ond þin feorh beran in gramra gripe,  þær þe guðgewinn þurh hæðenra hildewoman,  beornum beadcraeft,  geboden wyrðed."]

["You shall then go forth and carry your life into the grasp of angry ones, where in the heathens' battle-sound the warriors' skill in battle will be endured."] (Andreas 216-19)

God also inspires Judith as she prepares for her struggle:
Then the highest Judge quickly inspired her with zeal, as he would any earth-dwellers who would seek him for help with reason and right belief.

(Judith 94-97)

After Judith has dispatched Holofernes, she shows his bloody head to her followers (161-75) and exhorts her troops to prepare to fight at dawn:

"that you quickly be ready to fight, when the Creator God, the earliest King, will send to the east a ray of light; bear forth the shield, shield for the breasts and coats of mail, shining helmets to the enemies' troop, to cut down the leaders of the people with bloodstained swords, the doomed leaders. Our enemies are doomed to death, and you (will) possess glory, glory at battle, as the mighty Lord has betokened to you through my hand."

(188-98)

When Byrhtnoth places his men in battle array, one of the things that he tells them is that they "ne forhtedon nā" [should never fear] (Maldon 21). Later in the poem, another hero speaks:

Ælfwine þā cwæđ, hǣ on ellen spræc; 'Gemunaþ þāra mæla þe wē oft æt meodo spræcon þonne wē on bence bōt ēhōfon, hæleþ on healle ymbe heard gewinn; nū mæg cunnian hwǣ cēne sǣy.'
[Aelfwine then said, he spoke about courage:  
"Remember the times when we often spoke over the mead, when we on the benches raised the boast, hero in the hall concerning hard hostility; now, he who may be keen may try it." ]  (211-15)

Still another of the thanes speaks:

Dunnere þā cwæð, daroþ ðæowehte,  
unorne ceorl ofer eall clypode,  
bæd þæt beorna gehwyłc Byrhtnoþ wræce:  
'Ne maeg nā wandian sē þe wrecan ðencæð  
frēan on folce, ne for fēore murnan.'

[Dunnere then spoke, brandished (his) spear, the humble churl called over all, bade that whichever of the earls would avenge Byrhtnoth: "May he never draw back who thinks to avenge the leader of the people, nor fear for (his) life." ]  (255-59)

The most famous of all Anglo-Saxon exhortations to courage and honor is Byrthwold's speech: "'Hige sceal þē hearðra,  
heorte þē cānre, / mōd sceal þē māre, þē ūre mægan  
lýtlaþ[']" ['The mind shall be harder, the heart keener, courage the greater as our strength dwindles.']  (312-13).

Besides exalting courage, Anglo-Saxon leaders, both laymen and churchmen, valued wisdom, which included several attributes: prudence and moderation, reverence for and obedience to God, and the ability to keep peace, within the tribe and between it and other groups of people. P. H. Sawyer says that Bede praises Bishop Aidan because he was "endowed with the grace of discretion" (9).

Schücking, in describing the virtues of the ideal king, says that he should be intelligent and should function as a teacher (42). According to Jones, wisdom included education, experience, and
an unfailing awareness of the personal, social, and national ... rights and duties, ties and acceptances which alone made life meaningful and alone could make it good. In Beowulf wisdom is the propriety [sic] of princes. (45)

Vainglory praises moderation, prudence, and humility, the virtues which contrast with the predictable evils:

Donne biff þam oprum ungelice
se þe her on eorþan eacmod leofaþ,
ond wiþ gesibbra gehwone simle healdeþ
freode on folce ond his feond lufaþ,
þeah þe he him abylgnesse oft gefremede
willum in þisse worulde.

[Then it is different with the other one, who lives humbly here on earth and with his brethren and when he always keeps peace with people and loves his enemy though he often made him angry willingly in the world.] (67-72)

Beowulf describes Hrothgar as wise and good—"fröd ond gōd"
(279). Hrothgar speaks highly of Beowulf's wisdom and excellence:

"Þæ þə wordcwýdas wigtig Drihten
on sefan sende; ne hyrde ic snotorlicor
on swá geongum feore guman þingian.
Þū eart mægenes strang, ond on möde frōd,
wis wordcwïda! Wēn ic talige,
gif þæt gegangeþ, þæt ðe gar nymeþ,
hild heorugrimme Hrêþles eaferan,
āl ðspœ ðrôn ealdor ðinne,
folces hyrde, ond þū ðin feorh hafast,
þæt þe Sæ–Geatþas sælan næbben
tō geçōsennë cyning ðennge,
hordweard hæleþa, gyf þū healdan wylt
māga rīce.'[

["The wise Lord has sent words to your heart; I never heard speak a wiser man so young in life. You are strong in might and wise in mind, wise with words! I maintain the expectation that if the battle, the grim battle-sword, sickness or iron, takes your leader, the shepherd of your folk, Hrœthel's offspring, and you have your
life, then the Sea-Geats might not choose any other better king, if you will hold the kingdom of the kinsmen.”] (1841-53)

In a society which held priests in high esteem (Blair 211), reverence for and obedience to God are great virtues. The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle records that in 959, when Edgar became king, he was well loved and held widespread support because he loved God (Whitelock, Douglas, and Tucker, 74-75). In writing of the ideal king, Schücking uses Hrothgar and Beowulf as models because they accept God's decisions (41).

The narrator in part 2 of Waldere upholds reverence for God as virtuous and valuable:

`Deah mæg sige syllan  se ðe symle byð rekon and rædfest ryð[a gehwilces.
Se ðe him to ðam halgan helpe gelifed, to gode gioce, heþær gearo findeþ.

[Nevertheless, victory may be given to him who is always quick and wise in everything right. He who believes in help from the Holy One for himself, there readily finds consolation from God.] (2.25-28)

Judith asks for God's assistance in smiting her foes (83-94), and the narrator of the poem then gives God the glory for Judith's victory (94-96). Hrothgar praises God for Beowulf's victory over Grendel:

`Bisse ansynne  Alwealdan þanc lungre gelimpel  Fela ic læbes gebåd, gryanna æt Grendel; ðæm God wyrcan wunder æfter wundre, wuldres Hyrde.'

["For this sight, Almighty God, thanks may be forthcoming! Heretofore, I have experienced from the loathed one many grievous afflictions from Grendel; may God always work wonder after wonder, the God of glory."] (Beowulf 928-31)
The cross, speaking in *The Dream of the Rood*, even while boasting of its ability to defeat Christ's enemies, says of its obedience:

\[Fær \ ic \ þā \ ne \ dorste \ ofer \ Dryhtnes \ word \ būgan \ ode \ berstan, \ þā \ ic \ bifian \ geseah \ eordan \ scēatas. \ Ealle \ ic \ mihte \ fōondas \ gefyllan, \ hwædre \ ic \ fæste \ stōd.\]

[Then I dared not against the word of God bow or break, though I saw the surfaces of the earth tremble. I might have felled all the enemies; however, I stood fast.] (35-38)

Another aspect of the wisdom expected of a king or other leader in Anglo-Saxon times was the obligation to be a just ruler who kept peace with other groups of people and within the tribe. Schücking comments that there was a "strong emphasis on a prince's popularity and on good relations between a king and his people" (41). This concept seems to contradict the necessity of wars to win tribute, but Anglo-Saxon society certainly understood the concept of the "just war" and recognized that peace allowed prosperity to develop. Concerning the coronation of King Edgar in 973, Blair says:

He understood that true peace should be observed throughout the kingdom, that robberies and all other evils should be forbidden and that equity and mercy should temper all judgments. (207)

Blair further says that Edgar's coronation recognizes "the principle that the king is under obligations towards his subjects" (208). In *The Governance of Anglo-Saxon England*, Henry Royston Loyn writes of
a just king with responsibility for the proper government and administration of the people committed to his care [even if this care] was implicitly if not fully formulated or always understood. (44)

Loyn also describes one of the king's chief duties as the administration of law (126). Schücking agrees that the king's "rule should be a service in love, benevolence, [and] sympathetic care"; the king should make and keep peace (39). There should always be "good relations between a king and his people" (41). Ritchie Girvan says, "The ultimate approval is for him who had secured for his people a long reign of peace" (51). Sawyer comments on the seeming conflict between the desire for order and the reality of chaos:

The campaigns and plundering expeditions reported in our sources appear superficially to be disordered conflict in which only the fittest survived, but they were in fact regulated to a remarkable extent by a code of conduct that was probably recognized by all, if disregarded by some. (55)

That same code regulated lives within and between households or kingdoms (55). Further,

[t]here were of course breaches of the code, but the fact that some men break laws is no proof that the same laws are not regarded as binding by the majority. (55)

Hrothgar tells Beowulf that one of the happy results of the hero's disposal of the monsters is peace:

[']Hafast þū gefēred, þæt þām folcum sceal,
Geata lǣdom. ond Gār-Denum
sib gemēne, ond sacu restan,
inwitnības, þē hīe ēr druγon[']}
Certainly, the desirability of tranquility within the tribe receives more attention in the poetry than does peace between peoples. The chief disruptive force within the troop was the feud (discussed in detail in Chapter V, below). However, vengeance for wrongful death caused by an enemy is very different from the blood feud among kindred. Revenge is not only acceptable; it is expected. Speaking to comfort Hrothgar after Grendel's dam has killed Aeschere, Beowulf says, "'Ne sorga, snotor guma! Sælre bid æghwæm, / þæt hē his frēond wrece, þonne hē fela murne[']" ["Do not grieve, wise man. It is better for everyone to avenge his friend than to mourn too much"] (1384-85). Beowulf shows his qualities of leadership and magnanimity of heart in maintaining peace when he does not let the flyting or quarrel with Unferth prevent his acceptance of the loan of Hrunting, Unferth's sword, for the battle with Grendel's dam. Even when the sword fails, Beowulf does not blame it or Unferth:

Heht þā se hearda Hrunting beran 
sunu Ecglafes, heht his swerd niman, 
lēoflīc Ægen; sægde him þæs lēanes þanc, 
cwæd, hē þone güðwine gōðne tealde, 
wīgcræftigne, nales wordum lög 
mēces ecge

[Then the brave one (Beowulf) had Hrunting borne to the son of Ecglaf, commanded him (Unferth) to take his sword, the admirable iron; he said to]
him thanks for the loan, said he considered the war-friend good, strong in battle. Not at all in words did he blame the sword's edge.] (1807-12)

By so speaking, Beowulf avoided a possible feud within Hrothgar's following and possibly between the Danes and the Geats. The evil results of a feud can be seen in The Husband's Message, where both husband and wife have suffered because of some sort of quarrel: "Hine fæhpo ādrāf / of sigeþode" [The feud drove him away from the victorious nation] (19-20). Frequently the Anglo-Saxons praised a virtue by speaking vehemently against its negative; when Hrothgar pledges friendship with Beowulf, the old king tells the bitter story of Heremod, who did not keep the peace within his kingdom (see below, Chapter V). Speaking further of Beowulf's virtue as a peace-keeper, the narrator says that he "nealles druncne slōg / heorögenēatas;" [never drunkenly slew his hearth-companions] (2179-80). Contentment within his kingdom and kindred is clearly on Beowulf's mind as he is dying. In his last speech, he is greatly pleased to be able to say:

"Ic Æs ealles mæg feorhbennum sæoc gefēan habban; forðam mǣ witan ne ðearf Waldend fīra morgorbealo māga, þonne mīn sceacea lif of līc. ['']

["I, weakened by death-wounds, may take joy in this: that the Lord of men does not have cause to lay as charge on me the murder of kinsmen when the life of the body passes from me."] (2739-43)
One of the most important obligations of an Anglo-Saxon king was that of providing treasure for his people and dispensing it fairly. It is easy to specify this obligation, but it is not easy to discuss it coherently. There is more material in the heroic poetry, and consequently in the critical work about that material, concerning treasure than about any other single idea.

To begin with, a successful king had to win treasure with which to run his kingdom, reward his followers, and pay his debts, and it was by fighting that a king won wealth. "[O]ne of the main activities of these rulers [British and English] was to lead their followers on what can reasonably be described as treasure hunts" (Sawyer 62). As Barbara Raw points out, in Beowulf one of Scyld's good qualities is that his wars brought tribute to his people (86). The poetry of the time contains references to the necessity of the king's winning treasures for his people. After Judith's great victory, the poet speaks of the victors' picking up of splendid treasures out of the carnage of the battle-field:

Cirdon cynerofe,  
wiggend on wiðertrod, wælscel on innan,  
reocende hraw. Rum wages to nimanne  
londbuendum on ðam laetestan,  
hyra ealdfeondum unlyfigendum  
heolfrig herereaf, hyrsta scyne,  
bord ond bradwyrd, brune helmas,  
dyre madmas.

[The royally-brave warriors on their journey back returned (through) the carnage in among the
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reeking corpses. There was opportunity to take from the most loathed natives, their unliving ancient enemies, gory plunder, beautiful ornaments, shields and broadswords, shining helmets, precious treasures.] (311-18)

Scyld Schefing, the earliest king of whom the Beowulf poet speaks, is great because he commands tribute:

\[ \text{of þæt him æðhwylc ymbtsettendra}
\text{ofer hronræde hyran scolde,}
\text{gomban gyldan} \]

[until to him the neighboring peoples over the sea should yield tribute.] (9-11)

On the other side of the issue, it would be dishonorable to pay tribute; Byrhtnoth refuses to succumb to the Vikings' demand for tribute because it would be shameful to yield wealth without a fight (Cherniss 83). If a warrior has defeated an enemy openly and honorably, he earns the right to plunder the slain of his arms and treasure (91-93). There was for the Anglo-Saxons, and subsequently for historians and critics of the age, a considerable degree of ambivalence toward treasure in all its forms. Although the church preached disvaluing the good things of this world in favor of laying up treasures in heaven, the secular culture demanded the acquisition and distribution of wealth. Gold and land had to be gained properly; there was "heroic antipathy toward the unrighteous possession of wealth, . . . reflected in the [Beowulf] poet's portrayal of the hoard-robber" (Cherniss 89); Beowulf, on the other hand, fights openly and honorably. The dragon, according to Cherniss, is in an
unenviable position; his hoard was originally collected as burial treasure for an entire clan, and the dragon is merely doing his duty since "the natural function of Germanic dragons is to guard treasure hoards from robbers" (87). The supernatural protector tended to become greedy in his role as guardian, but it remained his duty to keep unsuitable persons from seizing his garnered possessions. Cherniss goes on:

Further, the function of the dragon in Beowulf is, at least in part, to force any potential owner of the hoard to establish his worthiness to possess the great treasure by defeating him, the dragon, in open combat. (87)

From another point of view, in The Mode and Meaning of Beowulf, Margaret E. Goldsmith notes that the meaning of treasure is ambiguous (67). Earlier in her book she says:

The treasure piled about a corpse is the most memorable of the recurrent images of treasure in the poem [Beowulf], and Beowulf's own surpassing achievements are depicted in a perspective of history which emphasizes that their beneficent results are short-lived. (13)

In "Beowulf's Three Great Fights," H. L. Rogers emphasizes the negative connotations of wealth: "In other literature, treasure may perhaps bring no good to him who possesses it; in Beowulf the treasure is positively evil" (340). Stanley B. Greenfield says, in "Gifstol and Goldhoard in Beowulf," "[w]ith its negative and positive implications of meaning, the hoard pulls in two directions at once" (113). The positive image produced by the hoard is that Beowulf
will die happier for having seen it and knowing that he has won it for his people. The negative images include the elegy for the burial of the lone survivor of the clan to whom the treasure had belonged, the unlawful plunder of the hoard by the robber, the cruel behavior of the dragon in avenging his loss, and the hoard's reburial, which prevents it from being used to benefit Beowulf's people (113). Goldsmith, too, points out that, although gift-giving shows the generosity of the giver and the worthiness of the recipient, it also demonstrates, because of man's cupidity, great potential for harm; its possession may contaminate (90). She goes on to say in praise of Beowulf, "It is noticeable that the giants' dwelling [the cave of Grendel and his dam] contains a great deal of treasure which Beowulf does not touch; he takes only the trophies of his victory" (123). Taking lawfully and bravely won trophies from the battlefield was acceptable and expected; theft is another matter altogether (see Chapter V, below).

A positive attitude toward treasure of all kinds is amply represented in the history and literature of the time. In Studies in Heroic Legend, Kemp Malone says of Gifica, the legendary founder of the house of Burgundy, that his very name means "'man whose characteristic quality is munificence'" (183). In The Structure of Beowulf, Kenneth Sisam states that kings reward active warriors, not necessarily their own sons; for example, "Hygelac gave
Hrethel's sword to Beowulf, not to his own Heardred" (42). 
Cherniss writes extensively of the lord's proper generosity 
toward his followers and notes that such magnanimity is one 
of the two most highly praised attributes of a good king 
(42). He points out the emphasis which the poet of Widsith 
places on the open-handedness of the kings whom he exalts, 
especially when they have been kind to him (13). Jones also 
marks the lavishness of good kings: "The generous gave for 
reward, in pay, to cement ties, from ostentation, and out 
of a generous heart" (45). Raw adds that generosity meant 
more than quantity; it also meant quality. The best of 
kings gave the best of treasures (32).

Because treasure represented honor as well as material 
wealth, the recipient of treasures was also expected to be 
generous; he was supposed to give to his lord the treasures 
given to him or won by him, and he was expected to be 
generous to those below him in rank or honor. In The 
Beginnings of English Society, Whitelock writes about the 
ceremonial and symbolic giving of arms and treasure, arms 
which must be protected from enemies; she says that Beowulf 
is particularly proud that, by killing Daeghrefn, he is 
able to prevent the slayer of Hygelac from taking the 
dead king's armor to the enemy lord (30-31). That the 
symbolic meaning of treasure had to do with the honor of 
both giver and receiver and with the social status of both 
is clear. Cherniss says:
A leader, whether he is a king or a thane, is measured by his readiness to acknowledge the worthiness of his followers (or leader) by giving them tokens of their worthiness in the form of rings, horses or other treasures. Hence, Hrothgar's gifts to Beowulf reflect not only the honor due to the warrior, but the honor due to the old king as well. (93)

Further, treasure-objects
give moral value to their possessors; . . . they are, in fact, the material manifestations of representations of the proven or inherent worthiness of whoever possesses them. We may define the function of treasure as that of a tangible, material symbol of the intangible, abstract qualities of virtue in a warrior. (81)

Such an attitude toward treasure makes it easy to see why warriors sought material reward and why its loss was devastating. Not only did treasures grant status to their recipient, but the status of the warrior who possessed a treasure increased the value of that object (94). The lineage of an important piece of jewelry, for example, becomes important because the history of its possessors enhances the honor of its latest owner (Cherniss 95, 96). The value of Wiglaf's sword establishes the identity of an unknown young warrior, a good illustration of how the lineage of an inanimate object enhances the worth of a character (96). It is perhaps the equating of treasures with the honor of their possessors that necessitates the burial of treasure with dead heroes:

These [burial] treasures function as symbolic of the honor and veneration which the warriors have achieved in life, and since the virtues of
these warriors have died with them (except, of course, in the minds of the living), the outward symbols of these virtues must also "die" and be buried. (85)

Yet another facet of the complicated attitude toward material goods is in the exchange of gifts. Many, perhaps all, societies recognize the obligation which accepting a gift either implies or states overtly. In The Gift: Form and Function in Archaic Societies, Marcel Mauss makes very plain the necessity of exchange involved in gift-giving and receiving:

Between vassals and chiefs, between vassals and their henchmen, the hierarchy is established by means of these gifts. To give is to show one's superiority, to show that one is something more and higher, that one is magister. To accept without returning or repaying more is to face subordination, to become a client and subservient, to become minister. (72)

In "The Exile as Uncreator," David Williams says:

Both the pagan and Christian use the idea of exchange to express a community of men engaged in a communication based on shared and common belief. The Germanic pagan model is that of the giving of gifts by the lord to the retainers. (3)

The heroes of the poems expect to be amply rewarded for their service. Greenfield says of Beowulf's attitude toward the dragon-hoard, "despite the selflessness of motivation, the heroic pattern ... calls for a reward" (109). As Whitelock puts it, "In return for their service the men expect horses and weapons, and feasting in the lord's household; they covet the place of highest honour in it"
Jones says: "Gold, weapons, mead are the recurring symbols of gift and payment, hospitality unstinted and service unto death, the full committal of lord to man and man to lord" (45). In "Arms, Status and Warfare in Late-Saxon England," Brooks says:

Certainly we find a world in which treasure and weapons are the currency of lordship and personal obligations, of kingship and the comitatus. A man received weapons when he entered service and was expected to use them on his lord's behalf during his life. (91-92)

Mauss emphasizes the sense of obligation created by the gift:

In Scandinavian and many other civilizations contracts are fulfilled and exchanges of goods are made by means of gifts. In theory such gifts are voluntary but in fact they are given and repaid under obligation. . . . [The intention is] to isolate one important set of phenomena: namely, presentations which are in theory voluntary, disinterested and spontaneous, but are in fact obligatory and interested. The form usually taken is that of the gift generously offered; but the accompanying behavior is formal pretence and social deception, while the transaction itself is based on obligation and economic self-interest.

P. H. Sawyer and I. N. Wood say: "In these societies social relationships are expressed or created by gifts, and a gift can create the obligation to make a counter-gift" (141).

In Roman Britain, however, Sawyer points out that, in both Celtic and Germanic societies, "The offering of a gift that cannot possibly be reciprocated is one way of humiliating someone" (170). In "The Distinction between Land and Moveable Wealth in Anglo-Saxon England," T. M. Charles-
Edwards makes several points about the principle of reciprocity involved in gift-exchange. First, moveable wealth was more often exchanged than was land. Second, contrary to Mauss's statement, the primary function of the exchange was to maintain friendship; economic considerations were secondary. The pattern of exchange lasted throughout the lives of the members of the relationship and could honorably involve the replacement of an exchange of evils (such as feuds) by an exchange of things of positive value (180).

Charles-Edwards agrees with Mauss that the exchange itself and the kind and value of the items exchanged helped to define the relationships of the people involved (181).

The last element of the Anglo-Saxon attitude toward wealth which is of particular concern is that toward the possession and dispersion of land. Whitelock says that the principal payment made to followers of kings in Anglo-Saxon times was land (36), but she does not go into detail. Charles-Edwards discusses at length the function of the gift of land, beginning by saying that such a gift occurred in special relationships (180). When a retainer was about twenty-five years old and ready to retire from active service attending in person on the king, he was given a grant of land; he probably married at about the same time (181). However, the relationship expressed by the gift of land and the obligation created by such a gift were quite different from the relationship
and obligation involved in the exchange of moveable wealth:

All types of friendships, whether between equals or unequals, were expressed and sustained by exchange of moveable wealth, just as they were expressed and sustained by exchange of service. Gifts of land also sustained friendship, but they were used for friendship between unequals. (187)

Earlier, Charles-Edwards states:

The gift of land is made once for all; there is no repetition of the gift. The grant is probably not hereditary, but is lifelong unless the recipient fails in his duty to serve his lord. On the other hand, the gift of service is open-handed and indefinite; the vassal can never claim that his services have now answered the gift of land and the incomplete gift of service is the basis of superiority of lord over vassal. The vassal is always in debt to his lord. (183)

In a culture in which people commonly live into their seventies and in which the most commonly held concept of land ownership is absolute (as in twentieth-century North America), it is a little difficult to remember that an Anglo-Saxon who lived beyond forty was old or that it was entirely possible to have the long-term use of land without permanent, disposable title to it. Both facts kept followers more closely and personally bound to the king than they might otherwise have been.

Besides providing treasure for his people, the most important duty of the Anglo-Saxon king was to protect them from harm. Bede mentions that Bishop Lawrence had a dream in which St. Peter admonished him for even thinking
about abandoning his flock (109-10). In another chapter Bede recounts the proverbial peace enforced by King Edwin: "a woman could carry her new-born babe across the island from sea to sea without any fear of harm" (132). Furthermore, Edwin's concern for his people caused him to have brass drinking bowls placed by springs along the roads, and his subjects respected him so much that they did not steal the vessels (132). Jones says that the chief duties of the kings in Beowulf are to be lord, leader, giver of gold, friend, and protector to their people (46). Whitelock says that, since the lord assumed the protection of his followers, he also had to produce in court any retainer accused of a crime, and perhaps pay damages for him, sometimes even for an act committed before the man joined his retinue. Such serious responsibility might easily make a king reluctant to accept the services of a lordless stranger (35, 36-37). Schücking says that Beowulf looks back at his life and decides that his chief virtue has been that he protected "his kingdom so well that no enemy dared to attack it" (36). Protection of followers was not always a simple behavior such as leading them into battle; it sometimes included protection against the supernatural. In "The Trials of the Epic Hero in Beowulf," Peter Fisher says, "Beowulf's fight is not only to revenge but also to cleanse the human habitation of an infernal influence," a statement applicable to all of the monsters that appear in the poem
(175). But "[t]he king's overall duty was to provide leadership for the free men in arms" (Loyn 164). According to Sawyer, it was war which effected the greatest changes in early British and English society (51), and "One of the main functions of a king was to lead his people in war and, as their representative, his victory or defeat was theirs" (71). Even Byrhtnoth, whose shortcomings will be discussed later, recognized what he was supposed to do:

He [Byrhtnoth] says himself that it is his purpose to defend the realm of Æthelred, the people, and the land (52-3). It was heroic for him and his men to fight to annihilation if necessary, in the attempt to destroy or hold off the invaders. (Tolkien 15)

The poem itself says:

["Messenger of the sailors, announce also, tell your people the greatly loathed saying that here stands dauntless the earl with his troop, he who wants to defend this native country, Athelred's native land, the people and soil of my prince."] (Maldon 49-54)

In Beowulf, too, occurs a reference to the duty of the king to protect. Early in the poem, the narrator says of Beowulf:

Thām eafra wæs æfter cenned
geong in geardum, ābbe God sende
folce tō frōfre; fyrenaerfe ongeat,
þē hīe ār drugon aldor(lē)ase
lange hwīle
[To this one was born an offspring afterwards, young in the household, whom God sent to the people for help; (he) perceived the dire distress which they earlier endured for a long while lordless.] (12-16)

The whole poem celebrates Beowulf's activities as protector, first against Grendel, then against Grendel's dam; as shelterer of his people throughout his long reign; and finally as their shield against the most hazardous of monsters, the dragon.

A different kind of protection is described and celebrated in The Dream of the Rood. In ordinary terms, dying as a criminal is not an effective way to protect anyone, but the narrator believes that the death of God on the cross provided the only real protection that matters. The cross, speaking in the vision, describes Christ in heroic terms: "Geseah ic þā Frēan mancynnnes / efstan elne mycle þæt Hē mē wolde on gestīgan" [Then I saw the Lord of mankind hurry with great courage to ascend on me] (Dream 33-34). The cross explains even more clearly its attitude toward Christ's behavior:

['] Nū ic þē hāte, hæled mīn se lēofa, þæt ēg þēs gesyhāe secge mannun, onwīscē wordum þæt hit is wuldres bēam sē ðæ ælmhītig God on þrōwode for mancynnnes manegum sīnum ond Ædōmes ealdgewyrhtum. Dēad Hē þār byrigde; hwædre oft Dryhten ārās mid His mielan mihte mannun tō helpe.[']
former deeds. He there tasted death; however, thereafter the Lord arose with his great might as a help to men."} (95-102)

In Anglo-Saxon poetry Beowulf and Christ come closest to exhibiting all the positive traits of the proper warrior-king—pride, wisdom, generosity, and the willingness and ability to protect their people. Because he was human, Beowulf succeeded only for a finite time in finite ways. Christ is the eternal king.
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CHAPTER III

SERVERS OF HONOR AND PEACE-WEAVERS

Aristocratic women—there remain few records of the activities of those who were lower-class—played complicated roles in Anglo-Saxon society, as did the men whose deeds are of most concern to the heroic poets. The roles of the women, as well as those of the men, reflect the values of the complex *comitatus* and its failings as a political system. Although fewer lines of poetry are devoted to women than to men, no society can function without both, and the material from the time clearly reflects the importance of women both in Anglo-Saxon and other Germanic cultures. In *God's Handiwork: Images of Women in Early Germanic Literature*, Richard Schrader points out that Germanic literature was more sympathetic to Eve's daughters than was traditional theology. . . . The favorable portrayals may also owe something to the fact that women, a number of them well educated, formed a significant portion of the audience and were themselves authors. (ix)

In *Women in Anglo-Saxon England: And the Impact of 1066*, Christine Fell appreciates the formality of heroic poetry in examining the role of women because heroic poetry is not susceptible to rapid change and its values and attitudes can up to a point be assumed to be representative of the early culture, the culture that the Anglo-Saxons brought with them. (26)
Not only were the aristocratic women of the time well educated, they were also influential, an attribute to be examined more fully below. Some of them were rulers in their own right. Perhaps the most notable of those queens regnant was Aethelflaed, queen of Mercia from 911 to 918, described as a warrior-queen by Pauline Stafford in *Queens*, *Concubines*, and *Dowagers: The King's Wife in the Early Middle Ages* (118). In *An Introduction to Anglo-Saxon England*, Peter Hunter Blair further identifies Aethelflaed as the daughter of King Alfred and sister of Edward the Elder, who had succeeded Alfred; she assisted greatly in the campaigns against the invading Danes (80-81). Aethelflaed, as warrior-queen, "[r]eceived the spoils of war from her returning armies" (Stafford 26). Stafford speculates that *Judith* may have been written for or about Aethelflaed since the Anglo-Saxon queen shared with the Old Testament heroine many qualities such as "the warlike capacities of Judith, the renown she won in battle, . . . and the inspiration she gave to her warriors" (26).

Not surprisingly, the Anglo-Saxon attitude toward women, like the attitude toward treasure, contained several ambivalences. The status of a wife was important, and queens were usually free-born, but *Wealhtheow*, the name of the queen of the Danes in *Beowulf*, means "foreign slave" (Fell 66). Further, Fell says:
The prospect of slavery for the women of a defeated tribe is recognized in Old English and Old Norse literature, and along with this recognition there is a recurrent ambivalent attitude toward slavery. (67)

Existence as a slave obviously meant living in the lowest social status, yet those now at the bottom of the turn of fortune's wheel may have been of noble birth and careful education (67). Generally, however, the king's wife was of a status equal to his. According to Stafford:

A wife of the correct status maintained the dignity of the family. It was no empty thing, but indicated the treasure, land, and supporters she would bring with her. (37)

Helen Damico, in Beowulf's Wealhtheow and the Valkyrie Tradition, says that Hrothgar's wife is queenly, acts as a pledge of peace, has royal status and political influence, and serves as bedfellow and mother (5), an impressive list of responsibilities. Damico also says that the poet's care and deliberation in technique serve to establish Heorot's queen as a commanding figure, while her exemplary traits—bounteouness, imposing stature, dignity, and excellence of mind—render her [an] idealized queen figure. (4)

Furthermore, Wealhtheow shows traces of the complex female character types peculiar to various aristocratic heroic epics: the queen-mother prophetess, the exemplary hostess, the queen-politician, the erotic bride, and the warrior-woman. (6)

For Damico, Wealhtheow plays a highly significant role in Beowulf, a poem traditionally viewed as being male dominated:
From the moment she enters the narrative until the end of this initial episode, it is on Wealhtheow—her description, her qualities, her thought, her action—that the poet focuses his attention. In this and in her other major appearance, he makes her the prime lever of narrative action and presents both incident and character from her vantage point. (6-7)

Assuming a slightly different point of view from Damico's, Fell says of women in Anglo-Saxon heroic literature:

Neither sex nor marriage is central to Old English literature, and romance plays a small part. Heroic literature, however, reveals occasional glimpses of the role of wife, daughter or betrothed, some of them surprisingly ambivalent. (66)

Although explicit examples of the religious functions of queens do not appear in the heroic poems discussed in this paper, several critics, using historical material and prose pieces from the time, mention such functions as quite important. Schrader points out that female saints are brave, wise, and beautiful (16-17). Fell says that the word wyrd (which appears frequently in all heroic poetry), having feminine gender, may once have represented a female goddess of fate (27). One of the ambivalences concerning women arises out of the Christian attitude of the time which valued virginity while society valued the marriage of women and the rearing of many children. Stafford says:

It is the celibate, desexualized woman who is most admired, the ideal of chastity influencing the Christian mind however inappropriate it might be in practice. (26)
For example, Bede writes about a number of saintly, celibate women such as St. Hilda, Abbess of Whitby; Ethelburga, Abbess of Barking; and Ebba, Abbess of Coldingham. He reserves special praise for Queen Etheldreda, who, although she was married twice, the second time for twelve years, "preserved the glory of perpetual virginity" (238). Later, discussing the religious duties of royal women of the time, Stafford says:

The royal dead were the particular preserve of dowager queens and unmarried daughters; securing the beneficent intercession of the saints was a function of queens at all stages of life. (121)

In Beowulf, an old woman follows the hero to his funeral pyre, predicting evils to come, perhaps serving as the Geats' official mourner:

(s)Io g(eO)mOwle
(aeftet Biowulfes b)undenheordes
(song) sorgcearig, sMDde geneahhe,
þæt hIO hyre (hearmdatables) hearde (ondræ)dc, wælfylla worn, (wifgen)des egesan,
hY[n]mO (ond) h(aeftny)d.

[an old woman with her hair bound up sang repeatedly for Beowulf such a mournful song, a sorrowful song, that she greatly feared their harmful days, large numbers of slaughters, the terror of a warrior, injury and captivity.]

(3150-55)

Damico is very explicit in her explication of Wealhtheow's religious role:

Finally, the tone and tenor of her blessing of Beowulf and her quasi-prophetic references to his future fame and fortune lend an aspect to Wealththeow's behaviour that goes beyond courtly decorum and approaches the religious function of prophetess, a traditional female role in
heroic epic and, according to Tacitus and Caesar, in Germanic society as well. (6)

For Bede, as might be expected, one of the most important functions a woman might perform was that of carrying Christianity to the kingdom into which she might marry. When Edwin, king of Northumbria, wanted to marry Æthelberga, daughter of King Æthelbert of Kent, her father hesitated, fearing to send his daughter to a pagan, until Edwin gave solemn promises that she and her attendants would not be hindered in any way from practicing their religion. He also promised to examine the new religion to see whether it might be better than his own. Pope Boniface wrote to Edwin urging him to accept Christianity and to Æthelberga asking her to use her influence on her husband. Eventually, Edwin and all his people accepted Christianity (114-30).

Besides acting as arbiters in religious matters, Anglo-Saxon women also had sexual roles to play, despite the fact that sexuality is almost never mentioned in Anglo-Saxon poetry. When it is mentioned, the reference is usually veiled. The obscure, perhaps fragmentary, Wulf and Eadwacer seems to refer to an unorthodox man-woman relationship, combining pain and joy:

*Þonne hit wæs rēnig weder ond ic rēotugu sæt, ðonne mec se beaducāfa bōgum bilegde; wæs mē wyn tō þon, wæs mē hwæpre ðæc læt.*

[Then it was rainy weather and I sat sad; when the bold arms embraced me, it was joy to me then; it was, however, also loathsome to me.](10-12)
Although the poem is obscure and difficult, at its end, the narrator seems to note the fact that the relationship had never been what it should have: "\[\text{One easily tears apart that which was never joined, our song together }\] (18-19).

Damico says that Wealhtheow is important as Hrothgar's consort (5). The narrator of Beowulf says:

\[\text{Then Hrothgar took himself away with his band of warriors, the prince of the Scyldings, out of the hall; the war-chief wished to seek Wealhtheow his queen for bed-fellow.} \] (662-65)

Furthermore, "[Wealhtheow] is presented as the mother of future kings of Denmark" (Damico 6). She presents those future kings to Beowulf and asks for him to protect them: "Be to my sons, blessed one, kind in deeds "] (1226-27).

Stafford emphasizes the importance of being the mother of many children, pointing out that "[i]nfertility remained the strongest reason, as opposed to pretext, for divorce. Failure of heirs was intolerable" (86). Earlier, Stafford says that marriage provides security for women; Germanic law demanded a dowry or nuptial gift "if a union were to be a legitimate marriage" (62-63). Having many wives and many children visibly demonstrated the king's status and
wealth (72). Although it may not have been necessary for a new king to be the eldest son of his predecessor (see Chapter II, above, page 16), the continuation of the royal line was extremely important (62).

Another of the important functions of Anglo-Saxon queens was that of being chief advisor to their kings. According to Stafford, "[q]ueens were expected to counsel and aid kings" (25). She goes on to add, perhaps with tongue in cheek, that "the line between counsel and domination may be fine and difficult both in reality and in the eyes of the beholder" (25). Further, "Woman's role in marriage and the household fostered a series of favorable images, . . . The household was not only the center of government but a model for it" (28). Stafford quotes Sedulius Scottus in his *Book on Christian Rulers* as saying:

> She [the queen] is, . . . chaste and endowed with the Christian virtues, but she is also skilled, rules her households, influences and counsels her husband. (28)

Most importantly, the queen could control access to the king (99) because she was usually the most intimate royal advisor (192). A queen did not necessarily lose her power at the death of the king to whom she had been married:

> Widows could continue to be influential and active outside religion as mothers rather than wives. This was not only a possible method of survival, but a route to even greater power; many queens reach the height of their careers not as wives of royal husbands but as mothers and regents for young royal sons. (146)
Certainly a good counselor should be wise, and Damico says that Wealhtheow possesses this attribute (31); she "assumes the role of royal counselor by advising Hrothgar on political and dynastic matters" (6). Wealhtheow expresses her concern to Hrothgar, noting his intent to adopt Beowulf, fearing the displacement of her sons:

\[[1]Beo wif Gætas glæd, geofena gemyndig, nēan ond feorran þū nū hafast. Mē man sægde, þæt þū dē for sunu wolde hereri[n]c habban. Heorot is gefælsod, bēahsele beorhta; brūc þenden þū möte manigra mǣdo, ond þīnum māgum læf folc ond rīce, ðonne ðū forð scyle, metodsceaft seōn.\[

["Be kind to the Geats, mindful of the gifts, from near and far, which you now have. Someone has said to me that you want to have him, the warrior, for a son. Heorot is cleansed, the bright beer-hall; think to enjoy as long as you might the rewards of many, and leave to your kinsmen the people and kingdom when you must go forth to see death."] (Beowulf 1173-80)

The Danish queen also advises Beowulf, reminding him of the proper behavior of thanes:

\[[1]Hēr is āghwylc eorl ōprum getrywe, mōdes milde, mandrihtne hol[ā], þegnas syndon gépwēre, þēod ealgearo, druncne dryhtguman dōm swā ic bidde.\[

["Here, one earl is true to the others, kind of heart, friendly to his lord; the thanes are loyal, the people entirely ready, the wine-filled noble-men do as I ask."] (1228-31)

Besides being producers of future kings and advisors to current ones, queens exercised considerable power in their own right. Stafford speaks of two popular models of the Anglo-Saxon period:
Two Old Testament women, Judith and Esther, have a particular significance, providing the strongest types of the completely political and active woman. (25)

Because Judith, the hero of her own poem, acts entirely as a warrior, she has been discussed in Chapter II above. The other women who figure in the poetry of the time are treated here because they do not act with complete independence. Schrader says that most Anglo-Saxon literature portrays Eve as Adam's full partner (4). Fell makes several observations concerning the legal protection of women; the laws of the time "make it clear that within a marriage the finances are held to be the property of husband and wife, not of husband only" (57). As mentioned above, the husband was required to pay a bride-price, the *morgengifu* [morning-gift] (56). Men were protected from having to rear as their own someone else's child, but many of the laws and marriage agreements clearly protected women (58-59). Although a lord assumed responsibility for the past behavior of one of his followers, "a wife shall not be held guilty for any criminal activity of her husband" (59). Fell also says: "The main protection for man, woman or child in Anglo-Saxon England was their *wergild*, the fine that had to be paid if they were killed" (83). Stafford points out that tenth-century English women could and did inherit property (192). In all the scenes in the poetry from the time, when a queen gives a
warrior treasures, there is no indication that she is merely dispensing property belonging to her husband; she is making her own gift, offering what is hers to give (see below, pages 65-67). Fell says: "Thus from the beginning to the end of the period the laws recognize an element of financial independence and responsibility in the wife's status" (59). Financial independence has always been an important measure of status and power, but Wealhtheow's power is also personal.

As Damico puts it,

Wealhtheow . . . [is an] imposing [presence] at the celebratory occasions, . . . the typical queen holds secret counsel; . . . Wealhtheow exacts obedience from the dryhtguman "warrior-band" in the hall. (23)

Throughout her work, Damico emphasizes Wealhtheow's control, using words that connote as well as denote the queen's accustomed rule:

[H]er military authority within the court . . . becomes explicit at the conclusion of the thanksgiving speech addressed to Beowulf (1215-1231) when the queen states unambiguously that the warriors in the hall pay her homage and obedience. [see above, page 60] (6)

Another queen, Modthryth, used her power for evil:

Mōdrýðo wæg, fremu folces cwēn, firen' ondrysne;
neānig þæt dorste ðeor genēpan
swēsra gesiða, nefne sinfrēa,
þæt hire an dæges ēagum starede;
ac him wælbende weotode tealde
handgewripe; hraþe seobæn wæs
æfter mundgripe mēce gebinged,
þæt hit sceādenmǣl scyran mōste,
cwealmbealu cýðan. Ne biþ swylo cwēnlīc þēaw
idesc tō efnanne, þēah de hīo ðēnlicu sŷ,
[Morthryth, the notorious queen of a people, carried on a terrible crime; not one brave one of her dear retainers dared the fierce venture, except the great lord, to look with eyes at her during the day. But to him the deadly bond was reckoned, twisted by hand; quickly afterwards, after the hand-grip was the sword appointed; it, the decorated sword, had to settle, had to make known battle-evil. Such is not the queenly custom for the woman to perform, although she may be peerless, that the peace-weaver would deprive a beloved man of life after pretended insult.] (Beowulf 1931-43)

Stafford also describes a queen whose bad behavior served as a negative example for the time:

When Clothar and his followers uttered criticism of Radegund as a queen, they cited her failures in these areas. She left the care of the royal hall to others, came late to meals, and did not preside at the feasts with the nobles. (101)

Part of the power which queens exercised existed because they were the instigators of action. Damico says:

"in each of the episodes [in which Wealhtheow appears] she emerges as the precipitator of the action" (6). Further, she is in an oblique way exhorting him [Beowulf] to battle, a characteristic action of the Germanic warrior-woman who, both in historical and fictional writings, appears as an inciter and instigator of turbulent activity, whether in the court or on the battlefield. (8)

The Beowulf poet does not quote Wealhtheow's speech directly but indicates what she says to the visiting hero:

\[grētte Gēata lēod, Gode þancode wiðfaest wordum þæs ȝe hire se willa gelamp, þæt hēo on Ænigne eorl gelýfde fyrena frōfre. He þæt ful geþeah,\]
[She greeted the lord of the Geats, thanked God in wise words that her wish had been fulfilled, that she might believe in any earl for the relief of hateful deeds. He, the man fierce in battle, received the full cup from Wealhtheow and then spoke, ready for battle.] (625-30)

Her speech clearly stimulates Beowulf. In "Vows, Boasts and Taunts, and the Role of Women in Some Medieval Literature," Michael Murphy says that Wealhtheow is not quite a taunter, but it is after she speaks to Beowulf that he is "certain of his acceptance as a functionary of the Danes" (111).

Although historical material and inferences from the literature of the Anglo-Saxon period have provided most of the preceding information in this chapter concerning the behavior of aristocratic women, the heroic poetry itself speaks directly about the two most important functions of queens: that of being the generous hostess and that of being a weaver of peace between tribes and nations. Since the Anglo-Saxons highly valued the generosity of those who had wealth to share, open-handedness was a virtue among queens as well as kings. Furthermore, magnanimity included the concept of service as well as gift-giving. As might be expected, the usual recipients of such generosity were male. According to Fell:

It is also clear that this view [concerning wisdom and generosity] of a woman's role is male-centered. She is seen in relation to her lord, to her lord's
companions, his military retinue. The generosity is male-directed. (36-37)

In spite of the power that some women achieved for themselves, the entire culture remained male-dominated. However, the queen controlled the royal household, thereby allowing the king to meet his responsibilities within the comitatus. Stafford points out that the queen managed the appearance of royal dignity and, usually, the gift-giving:

Throughout the description of palace government, the giving and receiving of gifts appears as the way in which friends were made, obligations created, and the whole system of personal rule cemented. (99)

The narrator of Widsith praises Ealdhild far and wide for her generosity to him:

Ond me þa Ealhhild  oberne forgeaf, 
dryhtcwen dugupe,  dohtor Eadwines. 
Hyre lof lengde  geond londa fela, 
ponne ic be songe  seogan sceolde 
hwær ic under swegle  selast wisse 
goldhrodene cwen  giefe bryttian. 

[And then to me Ealdhild gave something else, the queen of the nobility, the daughter of Edwin. Through many lands I extended her praise when I had to tell in song wherever I went under the heavens that the best might know of the gold-adorned queen's giving gifts.] (Widsith 97-102)

Damico describes the example of the good queen: "Wealhtheow, the ideal queen, reigns over a hall resplendent with light and resounding in song" (9). As Fell puts it, "In Beowulf it is the queen herself, not a serving woman, who offers the cup to her husband and her guest" (50). The poem itself says:
Then Wealhtheow went forth, Hrothgar's queen, mindful of court usage, and greeted the gold-adorned men in the hall, and the noble wife first gave the cup to the protector of the East-Danes, bade him be joyful at the beer-drinking, the one loved by his people in joy, he partook of the feast and the hall-cup, the victorious king. The lady of the Helmingas then went round the body of the old retainers, and to each portion of the youth, gave the precious cups, until the opportunity came, for her, the ring-adorned queen, to carry the mead-cup to Beowulf.

(Beowulf 612-24)

At the feasting after the death of Grendel, Wealhtheow again acts as gracious queen, kind hostess, and giver of gifts:

She moved about the benches where her sons were, Hrethric and Hrothmund and the young warriors together; there the good (one) sat, Beowulf of the Geats between the two brothers. To him the cup was carried and friendship offered with words, and beaten gold presented with good will, two arm ornaments, corslet and rings, the best of neck-rings of which I have ever heard on earth.

(1188-96)
Wealhtheow is not the only gracious queen in Beowulf; Hygd, Hygelac's queen, also performs her duties well on Beowulf's return:

_Bold wæs betlīc, bregorōf cyning, hēā[h on] healle, Hygd swīðe geong, wīs wēlpungen, þēah ē sce wintra līt under burhlocan gebiden hǣbbe, Hērēpes dohtor; naēs hīo hånāh swā þēah, nē tō gnēaċ gifā Gēata lēodum, māpmgestrēona._

[The building was splendid, the king noble, high in the hall; Hygd (though) very young, (was) wise, excellent, although few winters she had dwelt in the castle-enclosure, Haerethes' daughter; she was not niggardly, however, nor stingy with gifts or treasures for the Geatish people.] (1925-31)

The last, and most important, function of the aristocratic Anglo-Saxon woman was to be a peace-weaver. Several historians and critics of the age discuss this role. Fell notes that the word _wif_, modern English _wife_, may be connected with weaving (39). She goes on to say that grave goods indicate "a strong link in the culture between women and cloth-production" (40); it is not much of a metaphorical leap to move from the weaving of cloth to the weaving of relationships. Sawyer says that one "way in which alliances were expressed, and formed, was by marriage" (Roman Britain 35); moreover, marriages "were also a means of patching up quarrels" (36). Stafford explains:

Marriages were matters of allies, claims, lands, treasure, and prestige; they bound peace negotiations and marked transitions in royal life. . . . They were an instrument of policy rather than passion. (34)
Later, she adds:

In the sixth and seventh centuries royal widows were married by incoming kings or usurpers to secure through them a claim to the throne, to gain the support of their allies. (49)

Beowulf speaks of Hrothgar's daughter, Freawaru, as just such a pledge of peace as he describes her proper service to the warriors in the hall:

"At times the famous queen, a bond of peace to the nations, moved all around the hall, urged on the young ones; often she gave a circlet to a man before she went to her seat. At times before the troop the daughter of Hrothgar endlessly carried the ale-cup to the earls, then I heard the hall-sitters call her Freawaru; there she gave studded treasure to warriors. She, the gold-adorned, is pledged to go to the gracious son of Froda; it has seemed good to the wise friend of the Scyldings, the guardian of the kingdom, and he considers that good counsel, that he by means of a wife, might settle a goodly portion of quarrels, of deadly feuds." (Beowulf 2016-29)

Ealdhild, in Widsith, is described as a "fælre freopwebban" [very beloved peace-weaver] (6).

As usual, however, the Anglo-Saxon poets were aware of the realities of the world about which they wrote. They knew
that the pawn sent as keeper of the peace existed in a precarious position. Fell says:

Heroic poetry in particular is much concerned with the vulnerability of the woman cast in the role of frœðwebbe "peace-weaver," where it is hoped that a peace-settlement between two hostile tribes or families may be made firmer by a marriage bond. (37)

The operative word is hoped. Fell also says that a woman given as peace-weaver endures great isolation (37). Damico points out that even

Wealhtheow faces the dilemma of divided loyalties that plagues so many of the heroines of Nordic heroic poetry, the pull of opposing familial obligations. (8)

Immediately following his praise of Freawaru as hostess and his explanation that she is to be sent as a bride to weave peace, Beowulf warns: "[']Oft seldan hwær / æfter lēodhryre lytle hwīle / bongār būgeð, þēah sēo brýð dugei[']" ["Often seldom anywhere after a deadly fight does the deadly spear rest for a little while, though the bride be good!"] (Beowulf 2029-31).

Examples exist which demonstrate that the fears, both for the women and for the peace arrangements, were well founded. Stafford says:

Wives whose marriages are designed to cement peace between peoples bring discord and suspicion into the royal household. As in-marriages and outsiders, wives are often objects of suspicion in [sic] the family hearth, especially when domestic tragedy strikes. (29)
She goes on to say that the person of the queen herself was often in danger, noting that, because of the importance of a marital alliance,

Political revolutions became palace revolts to replace the influence [of the queen] on the king's person and the removal of the queen herself--the key piece on the chessboard--[was] paramount. (43)

Stafford understands well the society she is describing when she continues:

The violence of battles and murders is rarely far below the surface of such marriages. When women sealed alliances made by the sword, they became forcible reminders of defeat... In theory these women were peacemakers and peace bringers, a powerful ideal. In practice, however, their presence at a foreign court generated tensions that could end in tragedy. (44)

She concludes her comments about the dual role of these women by saying:

Where a woman's family had suffered defeat and death, she rarely forgot her fate and might change from peacemaker to vengeance-wreaker. (45)

After reminding the wife of the promises she and her husband had earlier made, the narrator of The Husband's Message, purporting to be the message itself speaking aloud, comments on the feud which had driven the two apart: "Hine fæhpo Ædræf / of sigþæode": [The feud drove him away from the victorious nation] (19-20). Apparently, victory was not enough to ensure the peaceful continuance of a marriage. The entire body of The Wife's Lament mourns some sort of separation of two people even though the circumstances are
obscure. One section of the poem, however, is clear about the interference of the man's kindred:

Ongunnon þæt þæs monnes māgas hygcan þurh myrne gehōht, þæt hū tōdāiden unc þæt wīt gewīdost in woruldrice lifdon læðlicost— ond mec longade.

[Then began the kinsmen of the man to plan through hidden thought, to separate us so that we two would live most loathsomely, farthest apart in the kingdom of the world—I was longing in myself.] (11-14)

In the Finnsburh episode of Beowulf, Hildeburh suffers the fate of living in a court where she is surrounded by enemies. The scop says early in his song:

Nē hūru Hildeburh herian þorfte Eotena trēowe; unsynnum weard beloren lēofum sæt þām līndplegan bearnum ond brōrum; hīe on ēbyrd hruron ɡāre wunde; þæt wās geōmuru ildes!

[Indeed, Hildeburh did not have good cause to praise the good faith of the Jutes; blameless, she became bereft of her loved ones at the battle; sons and brothers; they fell to fate, wounded by the spear. That was a sad woman!] (1071-75)

In the spring-time, her kinsmen took revenge and returned to their homeland with both Hildeburh and treasure:

Dā wās heal roden fōonda fēorum, swilce Fin slægen, cyning on corþre, ond sēo cwēn numen. Scēotend Scyldinga tō scypon feredon eal ingestead ēorōcyninges, swylice hīe sæt Finnes hām findan meahton sigla searōgimma. Hīe on sælāde drihtlice wīf tō Denum feredon, læddon tō læodum.

[Then was the hall reddened, with the lives of the enemies, likewise was Finn slain, the king with his host, and the queen taken. The warriors of the Scyldings carried to their ships all the]
Aristocratic Anglo-Saxon women, like the men of their class, had an important part to play in the traditions that held their society together. Ideally, they demonstrated generosity and loyalty; humanly, they sometimes brought disturbance instead of peace. Their lives were complicated and demanding; none of these ladies had an easy time of it, but then, not many did in Anglo-Saxon times, either in history or poetry. The very languages of the Germanic tradition expressed an important cultural ambivalence toward women and marriage (see OED); the Anglo-Saxon word for marriage is gift (Sawyer 71), and although this meaning dropped out in English, the Scandinavian languages have kept it. From Old High German, the meaning of the word took a very different course; in modern German, it means both gift and poison.
CHAPTER III: BIBLIOGRAPHY


Anglo-Saxon thanes who served their lords as warriors had very complicated roles to play in meeting the demands of their society. Insofar as they were leaders of men within the larger troop, they had the same obligations as the kings: to demonstrate proper pride, to be wise, to be generous to their followers, and to protect those under their command. Besides these obligations (discussed in full in Chapter II, above), however, the followers had the often dangerous obligation to be completely loyal in their service to their lord. The word loyalty, useful as it is as an umbrella term for the followers' responsibilities within the comitatus, expresses several concepts. The loyalty which the Anglo-Saxon followers owed was in response to gifts given, was personal and not national, was sworn and took preeminence over all other obligations, included such respectful behavior as giving gifts to their leaders, returning war-gear to a lord at the time of a warrior's death (the heriot), and, most important, personal service in battle, including the taking of vengeance and the willingness to die.
In The Beginnings of English Society, Dorothy Whitelock says that the companions of the king who share in the "hall-joy" should expect to pay for it with their lives in war if necessary (29); "even hostages were expected to repay the host's hospitality with service in time of war" (34).

Another writer on the period, Barbara C. Raw, in The Art and Background of Old English Poetry, commenting on Beowulf, says:

Quite near the beginning . . . the poet comments, in connection with Beowulf the Dane, that a man should be generous in youth so that companions may stand by him in age. (34)

Later, she adds that, ideally, courage and generosity should breed loyalty (96). The fragmentary poem The Fight at Finnsburg has a clear reference to the proper behavior of warriors in repaying formerly given mead:

Ne gefrægn ic næfre wyrblícorn æt wera hilde sixtig sigebeorna sēl gebræran, nē nēfre swānne hwītne medo sēl forgyldan, ðonne Hnaefæ guldan his hægstealdas.

[I have never heard of worthier men at battle, of sixty warriors conducting themselves better, nor warriors repaying better the sweet mead than did his young ones repaying Hnaef.] (37-40)

The whole of Beowulf emphasizes loyalty in response to the generosity of a king, but several references are specific. Beowulf speaks of his service to Hygelac, noting that he has repaid with his bright sword the treasures given him (2490-93). He goes on to say that his service kept his king from having to buy mercenaries:
"He gave me land, an estate with home joys. There was no need for him to go to the Gifthas, nor to the Spear-Danes, nor into Sweden to seek worse warriors to have to buy; I would always go before him with the troop, alone at the fore."} (2492-98)

Sharing his lord's concept of loyalty, Wiglaf, Beowulf's man to the last, exhorts the other followers to remember their promises:

Wīglāf maegelode, wordrihta fela
sægde gesēdum --him wæs sefa geōmor--:
'Íc ðæt mæl geman, þær wē među þēgum,
bonne wē geheðon  ússum hlāforde
in biorsele,  ðē ùs dās bēagas geaf,
þæt wē him dā gūdgetāwa gylđan woldon,
gif him þyslicu þēarfd gelumpe,
helmas ond heard sweord.'[

[Wiglaf spoke, said to the retainers many right words--his spirit was sad: "I remember the time when we received mead, when we promised to our lord, in the beer-hall, to him who gave us rings, that we would repay him for the war-gear, helmets and hard swords, if such need came to him." ] (2631-38)

A number of historians and literary scholars of the period discuss the fact that for the Anglo-Saxons loyalty was to a person, not to some abstract and often vague idea of a nation. The warriors knew their leaders personally; they lived together, eating, drinking, fighting, and often dying together. In The World of Bede, Peter Hunter Blair says:
The strength of the personal bond between a man and his lord, whose meaning was often as much human as material, the value attached to personal allegiance, and the resultant attitudes towards the virtue of loyalty and the infamy of treachery are recurrent themes of Anglo-Saxon history and literature. (33)

In "Anglo-Saxon Heroic Attitudes," G. N. Garmonsway mentions a historical occasion which demonstrates this high degree of personal loyalty, noting that the entire retinue of Earl Aelfgar (one of the Anglo-Saxons who fought at Maldon) follows him into exile (141). In Beowulf and the Seventh Century, Ritchie Girvan says that, when a king died, his retainers did not automatically shift their allegiance to the new king, a fact implying the need for personal loyalty and the new king's ability to inspire fealty (45). In another important work, An Introduction to Anglo-Saxon England, Blair comments that it was the personality of the king, not his office, which elicited courage and loyalty (211). Responding to the inspiring personality of his own king, Beowulf is the prime example of the loyal follower; speaking of him, in The Structure of Beowulf, Kenneth Sisam says: "From his first appearance we are never allowed to forget that Beowulf is Hygelac's man" (14). In "Hygelac: A Centripetal Force in Beowulf," Lawrence E. Fast makes several comments about Beowulf's personal loyalty to his king. He says that Beowulf and Hygelac share a mutual trust (95) and affection, noting especially Beowulf's lifelong love for Hygelac: "Fifty years or more have neither dimmed
nor dampened the affection for his former lord" (96). Fast also points out that king and follower benefited in reputation from each other's proper behavior; Hygelac is shown "as a noble king and valiant warrior . . . [and he] shines in the reflected glory of his best warrior and dearest kinsman" (94). The system worked both ways because while a thane's valor was imputed to his lord, the lord's reputation was lent to his thane; having the poet mention Hygelac's name with Beowulf's was complimentary to the younger man (94, 95). Beowulf, the ideal hero, demonstrates his loyalty to Hygelac even beyond the death of the older man; as Gwyn Jones says in Kings, Beasts, and Heroes, he is also faithful to Hygelac's son, serving him as he had his father (44). Following the death of Hygelac, Beowulf says:

bear him Hygd gebead hord ond rice,
bægas ond bregostöl; bearne ne truwoðe,
ræt hæ wic ælfylcum æbelstólæ
healdan cūde, ðā wæs Hygelac dæd.
Nō ðū ðær fǣsceafte findan meahton
æt ðæm æþelinge ænige fīninga,
ræt hæ Heardrēde hlæford wēre,
ocðæ þone cynedōm cīosan wolde;
hwæðre hæ hīng on folce frēondlārum hēold,
ǣstum mid āre, of ðæt hæ yldra weart,
Weder-Gēatum wēold.

[There Hygd proffered him riches and the kingdom, rings and the throne; she did not believe that her son knew how to hold the ancestral thrones against foreign peoples now that Hygelac was dead. Yet in no way could the destitute ones (the Geats) find in the aetheling anything (hinting) that he would be lord to Heardred or that he would choose the kingdom; yet he held him in friendly council with the people, with
good will and with honor until he became older, and ruled the Weder-Geats.] (2369-79)

In his work on *Beowulf*, Girvan says that the bond between thane and lord should be stronger than all other bonds (45). In *The Beginnings of English Society*, Whitelock, perhaps the most noted scholar in the field, has several things to say about the preeminence of the oath of a man to his lord. With the Christianization of England, the church added its blessing to the oath of loyalty taken by Anglo-Saxon followers. Moreover, the church regarded the commission of homicide at the lord's command as not very important, about the same as killing at war. Society "considered the lord's command a greater extenuation of homicide than the desire to avenge even a close kinsman" (37). Whitelock continues:

Moreover, when the claims of the lord clashed with those of the kindred, the idea becomes established during the centuries after the conversion that the duty to the lord should come first. . . . This [idea] was expressly stated by the followers of King Cynewulf . . . for they declared unequivocally that "no kinsman was dearer to them than their lord" and were willing to run the risk of kindred murder in order to avenge the king's death. (37-38)

She suggests that in reality conflicts in loyalty caused men to defend kinsmen against their lord, but notes:

The laws of King Alfred allow a man to fight, without becoming liable to a vendetta, in defense of a wrongfully attacked kinsman, but not if this involves fighting against his lord: "that we do not permit." (38)
In "The Ethic of War in Old English," J. E. Cross points out that (besides the acceptance of homicide at the lord's command) even in an unjust war it is acceptable for a warrior to obey his lord, citing as his example Beowulf's support of Hygelac in his unjust war against the Frisians (278-79).

In "Beowulf and Hygelac: Problems for Fiction in History," John McNamara mentions in passing another important behavior of a follower properly loyal to his lord: that of giving gifts to the lord, especially out of treasures given to him (the follower) by others (56). The complicated Anglo-Saxon attitude toward treasure and gift-exchange is discussed in detail in Chapter II, above, but here is the appropriate place to give examples from the poetry of those followers who gave to their lords. Widsith, the poet/narrator of the poem by that name, tells not only of a spectacular gift made to him, but of his giving it to his lord:

Ond ic wæs mid Eormanrice ealle þrage, | þær me Gotena cyning gode dohte; 
þæt me beag forgeaf, burgwarena fruma, 
on þam siex hund wæs smætes goldes, 
gescyred sceatta scillingrime; 
þone ic Eadgilsæ on æht sealde, 
minum hleodryhtne, þa ic to ham bicwom.

[And I was with Eormanric all the times, where the king of the Goths gave good things to me; he, the chief of the citizens, gave me a collar in which was pure gold to the count of six hundred shilling pieces; I gave possession of that ring to Eadgils, my lord, when I arrived home.] (88-94)
As men have done in honor of their human lords, followers of Christ have given to God the gold and gems adorning the cross in The Dream of the Rood:

Geseah ic wuldres trêow
wäðum geweorðode wynnum scînan,
gegyred mid golde; gimmas hæfdon
bewrigene weordlice Wealdendes trêow.

[I saw a tree of glory, honored with clothes, shining with glory, adorned with gold; gems had covered gloriously the Ruler's tree.]

(14-17)

Beowulf demonstrates in several places the custom of giving gifts to the lord. After Wealhtheow has given a wonderful collar to Beowulf, he in turn gives it to Hygelac, who is wearing it when he dies in Friesland (1202-09). When Beowulf kills Grendel's dam, he uses an ancient sword found in the cave; the blade dissolves in the gore, but the hilt survives. This he brings back with him to give to King Hrothgar (1677-79). And later, when Beowulf leaves the Danes and returns home, he cheerfully gives Hygelac the treasures which Hrothgar had given to him (2146-49). Following Beowulf's list of treasures and war-gear which he presents to Hygelac is a description of the horses that he has brought (2163-65). Beowulf does not neglect Hygd, the queen, in his gift-giving, giving her a beautiful collar and three horses with their trappings (2172-76). In a battle between the Swedes and the Geats, when Ongentheow is killed, his slayer takes the war-gear as treasure to Hygelac:
Meanwhile one man plundered the other, took from Ongentheow the iron byrnie, the hard-hilted sword, together with his helmet; the ornaments of the old one he bore to Hygelac.

Perhaps the most poignant example of a hero's desire to award gifts to the king occurs when Beowulf is preparing to follow Grendel's dam to the mere; he asks that Hrothgar protect his men and that the king should send his treasure back to Hygelac if he should be killed in the struggle.

Beowulf says to Hrothgar:

"Be you the protector of my men, my hand-warriors, if the battle should take me; likewise send to Hygelac the treasures which you gave me, dear Hrothgar."

Closely allied to the desire of heroes to give treasures to their lords is the custom, widely practiced, of protecting the war-gear, heriot, and returning it to the lord at the death of the follower. Either it was the original equipment given by the lord to the thane, or it represented that original gift, and was usually returned as war-gear rather than gold. Whitelock explains the heriot:

The lord's gift of armour and horses to the man who entered his service developed into the legal due called "heriot", which means literally "war-gear", and which was paid to the lord on the
death of his man, representing originally the return on the follower's death of the lord's gift. This payment was remitted when the man fell "before his lord" on a campaign. To the end of the period it tended to be paid in kind, a fact which suggests that it was felt to have symbolic significance. (Beginnings 35)

The reputations of the warrior and of his weapons enhanced each other. Wiglaf, the young warrior who supports Beowulf in the final battle, is relatively unknown, but the narrator's account of the provenance of his weapons helps to establish his worth:

Wiglaf wæs hāten, Wēoxstānes sunu, lēoflic lindwiga, lēod Scylfinga, mēg Ælfheres; geseah his mondryhten under heregrīman hāt þrōwian.

ne mihte dā forhabban, hond rōnd gefēng, geolwe linde, gomel swyrd getēah;

[He was called Wiglaf, Wēoxtan's son, an admired shield-warrior, a man of the Scylfings, a kinsman of Aelfhere; he saw his liege lord under the war-mask suffering the heat. . . . Then he could not forbear, but seized in his hand the boss of his shield, the yellow linden, drew the ancient sword which was among men the heirloom of Eanmund.] (2620-05, 2609-11)

And certainly the loss of such personal equipment was regarded as shameful. Toward the end of his life, one of Beowulf's most important boasts is that, when Hygelac fell in battle, his slayer was not able to take away his armor. Continuing his account of having fought at the fore with Hygelac, Beowulf goes on:

[']ond swā tō aidre sceall sæcce fremman, þenden þis sweord polað,

pæt mec hr ond síð oft gelēste,
In The Beginnings of English Society, Whitelock says that
"the heriot might represent in concrete form a man's sense of obligation to his lord" (36). N. P. Brooks also discusses the heriot and the importance of the exchange of arms themselves in "Arms, Status and Warfare in Late-Saxon England," noting that money was frequently accepted as the heriot in the Danelaw, but the return of weapons was usual in Wessex (81). Later, he says that gifts of weapons were exchanged (91), and he points out that the Bayeux Tapestry shows Harold the Saxon receiving arms when he swore allegiance to William of Normandy (93). Even though Harold's oath was sworn under duress and with deceit (the chest of relics hidden by a cover), his own people would have recognized as perfidy the repayment of war-gear with warfare against the lord to whom loyalty had been sworn.

The two most important elements of the loyalty expected of followers to their lords were included in their service at war: the duty of revenge if the lord were slain or of dying with him if they could not exact vengeance. In "The
"Ideal of Kingship in Beowulf," Levin L. Schücking says that "the duty of revenge . . . [was] equal to loyalty of the vassal and heroic death" (37). Whitelock points out that The relationship of lord and follower involved the duty of vengeance by the survivor if either were slain—or, at the very least, the exaction of a compensation high enough to do honor to the slain man. (Beginnings 31)

In his article on Hygelac, Fast says that Beowulf avenges Hygelac's death by killing the slayer of the king and by preventing the capture of the king's armor. He then escapes with thirty suits of enemy armor (97) and by so doing exacts a high honor-price. In a sense, Wiglaf also exacts a high price for Beowulf's death. Together the young and old warriors kill the dragon, and in taking all the hoard Wiglaf finds more than honorable compensation for the death of his lord. Beowulf and The Battle of Maldon, the two most fully heroic poems from the period, both speak of the virtue of vengeance. When Hrothgar mourns the death of his closest friend, Aeschere, at the hand of Grendel's dam, Beowulf advises revenge:

Beowulf amaelde, bearn Ecgthowes: 'Ne sorga, snotor gumal Sæire biht hælwm, pæt hæ his fréond wrecce, þonne hæ fela murne.[']

[Beowulf spoke, the son of Ecgtheow: "Do not sorrow, wise man! It is better for everyone to avenge his friend than to mourn greatly."] (1383-85)

In The Battle of Maldon, just before Byrhtnoth is killed, proper revenge is taken for a death:
Forlæt þæ drenga sum darof of handa
flægan of folman þæt sē to ford gewæt
þær ðone æpelan Æþelrēdes þegen.
Him be healfe stōd hyse unweaxen,
onht on gecampe, sē full cæflice
bræd of þám beorne blōdigne gār,
Wulfstānes bearn, Wulfmær se geonga,
forlæt forheardne faran eft ongēan;
ord in gewōd þæt sē on eorðan læg
þe his þeoden mēr þearle gerēhte.

[A certain one of the warriors released a spear from his hand so that it went through the noble thane of Æthelred. With him by his side at the battle stood a young man; he very boldly pulled out of the man the bloody spear; the son of Wulfstan, the young Wulfmaer, let go again against the warrior a very hard spear; the point penetrated so that he lay on the earth, he who had earlier excessively reached his (Wulfmaer's) prince.] (149-58)

Very closely related to the facet of loyalty which demanded that a follower (or lord) avenge the death of the other party to the oath of service is the idea that, if a retainer cannot prevent the death of the lord or avenge it if he falls in battle, it is necessary to die with him. In Chapter I, above (pages 6-7), appears in detail the account of the proper behavior of Lilla, counselor to King Edwin of Northumbria, in interposing his own body between that of his king and an assassin's knife (Bede 116). Of that incident Sawyer says that Edwin was saved from death by the self-sacrificing loyalty of one of his companions, and when the king recovered from his wound he took revenge on those responsible, a good example of what overlordship could mean. (27)

In "Anglo-Saxon Poetry and the Historian," Whitelock notes that the churchman Aldhelm writing to Bishop Wilfrid
indicates that the church held the same ideal of loyalty as did secular society (89). Another historical example, also mentioned in Chapter I, above, is that recorded in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle for the year 755 (modern editorial dating). When Cynewulf and a small band of followers were treacherously set upon and killed, the main body of his troop attacked and killed the slayers, thus avenging the death of their lord. The text is confusing, but it is clear that the men on both sides of the quarrel were true to their own leaders, refusing to abandon them when offered treasure and land. The editors, Frederic Cassidy and Richard Ringler, say this about the entry:

[Anglo-Saxon readers] would have known that a man's loyalty to his lord is everything; that he must sacrifice his life for him if need be, and avenge his death at any cost—even at the cost of the other cardinal loyalty of the Germanic world, loyalty to one's kin. The two protagonists of this story are related by blood; so are many of their supporters. (138)

Concerning this fierce loyalty, Garmonsway says: "The Beowulf poet, more than any other Anglo-Saxon, keeps us in mind of the universal acceptance of such standards" (141). For a warrior to die for his lord, or a lord to die for his people, is the kind of loyalty most highly praised in the poem. In his old age, Beowulf has the service of one young retainer who lives up to his own standard—Wiglaf, who, as Kenneth Sisam says in The Structure of Beowulf, would rather die than "leave his lord to die alone, and his
desperate courage turns the scale" (15) in their battle against the dragon. In *Kings, Beasts, and Heroes*, Jones puts it just a little differently when she says that Wiglaf would rather die than live without having supported his lord (44-45). Speaking to his fellow warriors who have withdrawn from the fray, Wiglaf says:

> [']Nū is sē ēg cumen,
> þæt ūre mandryhten mægenes behøfæt,
> gōdra gūðrincan; wutun gongan tō,
> holpan hīldfruman, þenden hyt sū,
> glǣdegesa grim! God wāt on mec,
> þæt mē is niclē lēōfre, þæt mīnne līcúmero
> mid mīnne goldgyfan glǣd fæ拘mē.[']

"Now the day has come that our lord has need of men, of better warriors; let us go forward to help the war-chief while the fire-terror yet lasts. God knows this of me: that it is much dearer that my body would embrace the fire with my gold-giver." (2646-52)

Although no one can deny the power and beauty of *Beowulf*, many critics agree that the best expression of the premier ideal of the comitatus, loyalty even to death, occurs in *The Battle of Maldon*. In contrasting it with *The Battle of Brunanburh*, Blair says that *Maldon*,

though concerned with an event which seems not to have been of any major importance in itself, describes a battle in which the contestants displayed the ideals of the ancient Germanic heroic code. It is a stirring poem which witnesses the enduring strength of the older poetic form and also of the qualities for which Tacitus praised the *Germani* nearly nine centuries earlier. (Anglo-Saxon England 349)

In "Oswald and Byrhtnoth," J. E. Cross praises *Maldon*, saying that it "has uttered the spirit and essence of the
Northern heroic literature in its reserved and simple story and its invincible profession of 'heroic faith'" (109). According to Warren A. Samouce, "[s]ociologists have noted that Maldon contains 'perhaps the most concrete poetic expression of comitatus loyalty'" (129). The noted scholar J. R. R. Tolkien says: "Their [the followers'] duty was unimpaired by the error of their master, ... It is the heroism of obedience and love not of pride or wilfulness that is the most heroic and most moving" (16). Maldon tells of many warriors who behaved well, Eadric being the first one praised:

Also Eadric wished to obey him, his prince, his lord in battle; he began then to carry forth the spear to battle. He had a good thought while he held with his hands the shield and broad sword; he carried out his boast when he had to fight before his lord.] (11-16)

Three warriors hold the causeway as long as they can:

[There stood with Wulfstan men unafraid, Aelfhere and Maccus, the brave two who would not take flight at the ford, but they steadfastly defended against the enemy while they might wield their weapons.] (79-83)
When Wulfmaer dies, Byrhtnoth is quick to try to avenge his follower, but he, too, is killed:

$1$ Byrhtnod" bræd bill of sceææ
bræd and brûneccg and on þæ byrnan slōh.
Tō rape hine gelette lidmanna sum
þæ hē þæs eorles earm ðmyrde;
feoll þæ tō foldan fealohilte swurd,
ne mihte hē gehealdan heordne mēce,
wǣpnes wealdan.

[Then Byrthnoth pulled the sword from its sheath, broad and bright-edged, and smote (the attacker) on his byrnie. Too quickly one of the sailors hindered him when he wounded the arm of the earl; then the yellow-hilted sword fell to the ground; he could not hold the hard sword, wield a weapon.] (162-68)

Byrhtnoth makes a speech before he dies, exhorting his men to keep up the struggle and asking God to guard his soul on its passage to heaven (168-80). Beside him, two of his warriors act as they should:

Þā hine hōwon hēoene scealcas,
and bēgen þā beornas þe him big stōdon,
Ælfnoth and Wulmār bōgen lágon,
ðā onemn hyra frāan feorh gesealdon.

[Then the heathen warriors hewed him, and both the men who stood beside him. Aelfnoth and Wulmaer both died, then gave up their lives close by their lord.] (181-84)

Although traitors abandon the battle, many of Byrhtnoth's men stay:

Þā wearā ðēfāllen þæs folces ealdor,
Æpelrēdes eorl. Ealle gesāwon
heordgēntas þæt hyra heorra læg.
Þā tār wendon forf wlanċe þeganas,
uneargē men ēfston georne:
hī woldon þā ealle ðēr twēga,
lif forlǣstan ōdē lēofne gewrecan.
Then was fallen the leader of the people, Aethelred’s earl. All the retainers saw that their lord lay dead. Then the proud thanes went forth; the brave men hurried eagerly: they all then wanted one of two things, to leave life or to avenge the loved one.] (202-08)

Several of the earls speak out, urging revenge or death, and then go out to the battle and die; the first of them is Aelfwine:

'Gemunaþ þæra mæla þæ wē oft æt meodo spræcon þonne wē on bence þēot ēhōfon, hæleð on healle ymbe heard gewinn; nū mæg cunnian hwā cēne sēy.'[

"Remember the times when we often spoke at the mead, when we raised up the boast on the bench, heroes in the hall concerning hard hostility; now he who may be brave may try it."] (212-15)

After Aelfwine’s next attack on the enemy, another thane, Offa, speaks in agreement:

'Hwæt þū Ælfwine, hafast ealle gemanode þegonas tō þearfe; nū ūre þēoden læþ eorl on eordan, ūs is eallum þearf þæt ūre æghwylc ðiþerne bylde wigan tō wīge þā hwīle þē ēh wēpen mæge hæban and healdān, heardne māce, gār and gōd swurd.'[

"Lo, Aelfwine, you have admonished all the thanes at need; now our prince lies dead our leader on the earth it is necessary that each of us encourage the warrior to battle while he may have and hold a weapon, hard sword, spear, and good sword."'] (231-37)

Leofsun speaks next, before rejoining the battle, demonstrating that these men perform their boasts:

'Ic þæt gehāte, þæt ic heonan nelle flōsōn fōtes trym, ac wille furðor gān, wrecan on gewinne mīnne winedryhten. Ne þurfon mē embe Stūrmere stæðfæste hælāð wordum ætwītan, nū mīn wine gecranc,'
"This I promise, that I will not hence flee for the space of a foot, but will go further, avenge in battle my wine-friend. The stalwart heroes around Sturmere shall have no cause to reproach me with words, now that my lord has fallen, that I, lordless, should journey home, turn away from the battle, but sharp weapons shall take me, point and iron." He moved very angrily, fought steadfastly; he despised flight."

Tolkien says of the most famous speech:

The words of Beorhtwold have been held to be the finest expression of the northern heroic spirit, Norse or English[,] the clearest statement of the doctrine of uttermost endurance in the service of indomitable will. (13)

That speech is surely the most succinct and moving utterance of the Anglo-Saxon ideal of loyalty to one's lord:

[Byrhtwold spoke, raised up his shield (he was an old retainer), brandished his spear, and he very boldly informed the thanes: "The mind shall be harder, the heart keener, the courage shall be the greater, as our strength dwindles. Here lies our leader all slaughtered, the good one in the dust; he who from this war-play thinks to depart would always have to mourn. I am old in life; I will not leave, but I myself intend to be beside..."
my lord, to lie beside the dearly loved man."] (309-19)

These men uphold the high standard of conduct which their society respected. Their loyalty must be admired now as it was then.
CHAPTER IV: BIBLIOGRAPHY


CHAPTER V

PERVERSIONS AND FAILURES

By providing superhuman foes to fight and conquer, the monsters in Beowulf play a significant role, but perhaps an even more important function is to illustrate perversions of heroic behavior. Different as they are from each other, the monsters share an evil habit: they attack, not as warriors would, but at night, covertly. They also are solitary, unlike their human foes. Grendel could never have a place within society; he is a descendent of Cain, the brother-murderer, exiled by God. The poet puts it thus, telling of horror come to Heorot:

Swā ðæs drihtgumaman drēamum lifdôn,  
ðædiglice, od fæt æn ongan  
fyrene fre(m)man fēond on helle;  
wæs se grimma grêst Grendel hēten,  
mêre mearcatapa, sē þe mōras hēold,  
fen ond fæsten; fīfēlcynnes eard  
wonsêlī wer weardode hwīle,  
sibðan him Scyppend forschrifen hæfde  
in Câines cynne-- þone cwealm gewræc  
ēce Drīhten, þæs þe hē ābel slēg;  
ne gefeah hē þære fēndē, ac hē hine feor forwræc,  
Mētōd for þy māne mancynne fram.

[Thus the retainers lived happily in joy, until a certain one, a fierce fiend from hell, began a wicked deed to do; he was the grim spirit called Grendel, the notorious marsh stalker, he who held the moors, the fen and fastness; the unhappy creature inhabited for a while the dwelling place of monsters because the Creator had proscribed the race of Cain; for that death the eternal Lord]
punished him because he slew Abel; he did not rejoice in that hostile act, but God banished him far away from mankind because of the crime.]

(99-110)

The monster hears the sounds of revelry in Heorot, the proper sounds of heroes rejoicing with their lord, and comes, wanting to see what the humans are doing:

Gewät da nēosian, sypdan niht becōm,  
heån hūses, hū hit Hring-Dene  
after bēorgege gebün hæfðon.

[He went then seeking, when it became night, the high house, (to see) how the Ring-Danes had settled in after beer-drinking.] (115-17)

He does not rejoice at the right of the hall-joys; he reacts savagely:

Wiht unhaelo,  
grim ond grēdgig, gearo sōna wæs,  
rēoc ond rēbe, ond on ræeste genam  
þrītig þegna; þanon eft gewät  
hūde hrēmig tō hām faran,  
mid þære wælfylle wīca nēosan.

[The evil creature, grim and greedy, was immediately ready, savage and fierce, and seized from their rest thirty thanes; thence he took himself back, exultant in the spoil going home, with an abundance of slaughter, seeking his dwelling.] (120-25)

Grendel not only lives in isolation and attacks underhandedly at night without warning; he is also isolated from the tradition of gift-giving. The narrator says:

Swā fela fyrena fēond mancynnnes,  
atol ārgeoea oft gefremede,  
heardra hūnda; Heorot eardode,  
sincfage sel sweartum nihtum;—  
nō hē þone gifstōl grōtan mōste,  
māftum for Metode.
(So many crimes the enemy of mankind, the horrible solitary one often did, many dire injuries; he inhabited Heorot, the richly-decorated hall, in the dark nights; he could not approach the throne or the treasures because of God.) (164-69)

Stanley Greenfield, in "Gifstol and Goldhoard in Beowulf," notes that all the monsters disrupt Hrothgar's and Beowulf's abilities to dispense gifts (110).

Although Grendel is evil and disruptive, he is less fearsome than his mother. Helen Damico, whose work on Wealhtheow is discussed above in Chapter III, says this of the troll-wife:

the sea-wife, an exemplar of savage, corrupt womanhood (as evidenced by her half-bestial, half-human physical form), inhabits a dank, forbidding underwater cave. (9)

Contrasting the monster woman and Queen Wealhtheow, Damico speaks of

the sweeping intrusion into the hall by Grendel's mother and the measured stately progress of Wealhtheow. Whereas one woman attacks, the other welcomes; one kills a chosen champion, and the other bestows honor on another. (9)

Richard Schrader, in God's Handiwork, says of the behavior of Grendel's dam:

It is the ideal world turned upside down, for she embodies the distortions and inconsistencies that can result from an unswerving pursuit of revenge. She forsakes the natural role of woman as peace-weaver and sacrifices all other human traits to prey like a monster in the deep. (41-42)

The critics who comment on the troll-wife's horrific behavior do not discuss the fact that she is, in fact, behaving
exactly as the dictates of Anglo-Saxon culture demand; she is avenging the death of her son. The narrator, horrified as he is, uses some of the traditional, honorific terms to describe her behavior, yet her monstrousness overwhelms any positive view of her actions:

[It became evident, widely known to men, that an avenger lived after the loathed one, a long time after war-care; Grendel's mother, the monster-woman, thought of (her) misery, she who had to inhabit the water-terror, the cold streams, since Cain turned into the slayer with the sword of his only brother, his kinsman; . . . And his (Grendel's) mother then yet ravenous and gloomy wished to go the sorrowful journey to avenge the death of her son.] (Beowulf 1255-63, 1276-78)

The real perversion is that she is so monstrous a creature that her human antagonists cannot recognize in her any of their own values. Schrader makes a perceptive comment; he says that she is "not an external agent of evil but the inner corruption that impels much of the poem's action" (42).

The third monster to play a part in the action of Beowulf is the dragon. Whereas Grendel and his mother, monstrous as they are, are descended from a human being,
the dragon is totally alien to the values of Anglo-Saxon society. It may be true in folklore that the common behavior of dragons is to find hoards of treasure and sit on them, but hoarding is harmful to society, and humans who commit such behavior are always regarded as evil. True to the custom of epic poetry, the dragon episode in Beowulf does not begin with the accumulation of the hoard; it begins with an account of the dragon's depredations. The entire episode, however, revolves around failures of the ideals of Anglo-Saxon society; the treasure is gathered by a dying tribe and guarded by a lone survivor whose lordlessness is just as sad as that of any other sort of exile; the dragon who takes over the hoard and guards it for three hundred years is greedy; although two brave men kill the dragon, the warriors who accompany them are cowardly, and the treasure is still not used to benefit society. The human failures will be discussed later, but a study of the dragon's behavior belongs with that of the other monsters in the poem. When the narrator tells of how the dragon began his vigil, he says:

Hordwynne fond

eald òhtsceæda ðe opene standan,
sè ðæ byrnende biorgas sæces,
nacod niudracæ, nihtes flæges
fyre befangen; hyne foldbænd
(swlice ondræ)da(ð). Hē gesæcean sceall
(ho)r(d on) hrūsan, ðær hē hæfæn gold
waræ wintrum frōð; ne byð him wihtæ ċy sēl.
Swā se ðæodsceæda þrēo hund wintra
hēold on hrūsan hordærna sum
The old night-marauder found the hoard-joy standing open, he who seeks barrows, the naked, malicious dragon, flies at night, encircled by fire; men very much fear him. He must seek a hoard in the earth, where he, old in years, guards the heathen gold; nor is there one whit (of good) to him by this. Thus for three hundred winters the people's foe held in the ground a huge treasure house until one man angered him in his mind.] (2270-81)

In response to the theft of a single cup, the dragon behaves as did the other monsters; he raids at night. The narrator continues:

[(H)owever (he) rejoiced in warfare, in fighting deeds; at times he went around the mound, sought the treasure; he soon found that some man had tampered with the gold, the splendid treasures. The hoard-guardian waited impatiently, until evening would come; the barrow-keeper was engorged with anger, the hateful one wanted to repay with fire the precious cup. . . . Then the (evil) spirit began to spew flames, to burn the splendid houses, the gleam of fire appeared to men in vexation; the loathsome air-flier did not wish to leave anything living.] (2298-2306, 2312-15)
Harmful as are the despoilings of the monsters in Beowulf, more harmful still to the ideals of Anglo-Saxon society are the failures of the human beings whose deeds are recounted in the poetry. The entire poem Vainglory preaches against the evils of which men are capable: drunkenness, pride, deception, boasting, and treachery. One passage refers to most of these evils:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Bide pæst æfponca} & \quad \text{eal gefylled} \\
\text{feondes fligepilum, facensearwum;} & \\
\text{broedæt he ond bælceð, boð his sylfes} & \\
\text{swilpor micle } & \quad \text{bonne se sella mon,} \\
\text{þeneceþ pæst his wise welhwam þince} & \quad \text{eal unforcup.} \\
\end{align*}
\]

[That one (the evil man) is entirely filled up by evil thoughts, with the enemy's arrows, with treacheries; he broods and vociferates, he boasts about himself much more than (does) a better man, he thinks that his behavior will seem entirely honorable to everyone else.] (26-31)

The narrator goes on immediately to speak of deception:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Bip pæs ocer swice,} & \\
\text{þonne he pæs facnes } & \quad \text{fintan sceaw æþ.} \\
\text{Wrenceþ he ond blenceþ, } & \quad \text{worn gebenceþ} \\
\text{hinderhoca, hygegar leteræ,} & \\
\text{scurum sceoteþ.} & \\
\end{align*}
\]

[That is another deception, when he discovers the consequence of this wickedness. He twists and deceives, thinks much of ensnarements, sends mental arrows, shoots (them) in showers.] (31-35)

Other poems, of course, speak as bitterly as does Vainglory of behavior that goes against the ideals of the culture. Although the Anglo-Saxons approved of the conviviality of the mead-hall, the narrator of Judith speaks harshly of the drunkenness of Holofernes and his men:
[They then went to sit at the feast, all his companions in crime, high-spirited with wine-drinking, the bold, mailed warriors. . . . Thus the malicious one (did) throughout the entire day, the lord, drunk with wine, the arrogant treasure-dispenser, until he lay in a stupor, all his following (was) drenched, as though they were slain by death, drained of each good.] (15-17, 28-32)

The narrator further describes Holofernes as "nicta geblonden" [corrupted by evils] (34). The Beowulf poet also speaks against drunkenness; when Beowulf arrives at Heorot and boasts of his plans to cleanse the hall of the monster, Unferth taunts him, and Beowulf responds, at first with irony, in calling him good friend; then he speaks plainly, saying that the Dane, in addition to being a fratricide (587-89), has had too much to drink (530-31). Near the end of the poem, the narrator praises Beowulf for several good qualities, among them that "nealles druncne slög / heorðgenēatas;" [(He) never drunkenly slew his hearth-companions] (2179-80).

As well as disliking drunkenness, the Anglo-Saxons distrusted excessive pride. Although they valued the proper self-respect of a warrior proud of his honor and
his deeds, they understood that an overbearing pride is evil and dangerous, and their poetry contains warnings against it. In the part of *Beowulf* known as Hrothgar's sermon, the old king twice warns the young hero against letting pride beguile him into thinking that he is in control of his life. Margaret Goldsmith, in *The Mode and Meaning of Beowulf*, speaks of pride as being the sin of Cain (118) and notes Beowulf's temptation to forget his dependence on God and to trust too much in his own strength (200). Furthermore, she says:

> The Dragon does not suffocate or devour [Beowulf], which would signify that he was swallowed into hell. Instead he suffers a wound in the neck—a part of the body often associated with pride—and from this the slow poison spreads through him. (238)

J. R. R. Tolkien says simply that Byrhtnoth's "act of pride and misplaced chivalry proved fatal" (1). He also comments on the fault in character which destroys many brave men:

> [T]his element of pride, in the form of the desire for honour and glory, in life and after death, tends to grow, to become a chief motive, driving a man beyond the bleak heroic necessity to excess. (14)

Besides drunkenness and pride, two other human failings of the Anglo-Saxons arose out of the excessive love of treasure: greed and theft. In "*Gifstol and Goldhoard in Beowulf*," Greenfield writes that the *Beowulf* poet "has vilified the hoarding of wealth: he has praised the practice of its antithesis" (113). He adds: "Hrothgar's sermon is
not directed against gold as such, only against an unremitting accumulation of it" (113). Toward the end of the sermon, Hrothgar says of the evil-minded man:

"It seems to him too little, that which he has held a long time; angry-minded, he covets, not at all honorably gives up ornamented rings, and he then forgets the after-life and is unmindful of that which the God of glory gave to him earlier, a portion of honors." (1748-52)

In addition to his other sins, Heremod does not perform his duty to be generous. Hrothgar says of him: "He gave no rings to the Danes for glory." (1717-20). In addition to the warnings against greed in Hrothgar's sermon and the frequent passages praising generosity throughout the poem, the entire dragon episode (described by Barbara Raw as depicting the sin of avarice [34]) concerns the cruel consequences of hoarding treasure rather than using it. Goldsmith says of the dragon himself that "the great adversary is compounded of cupidity and malice" (141).

The evil twin to greed is theft. Dorothy Whitelock discusses the early English attitude toward theft in several places in The Beginnings of English Society. Theft is the act most often discussed in the law codes (146). It was illegal to defend a thief (82), and there was no
recompense for open theft (143). "A thief caught in the act" was executed (usually by hanging [144]), but, if convicted by ordeal, he was executed only if he had been frequently accused (143). The reader does not know whether the thief in Beowulf is ultimately executed, but clearly his deed injures many people and brings little good to himself. As usual, the narrator tells the story in a roundabout fashion, but he begins about the thief by saying:

\[\text{Fær on innan glong} \]
\[\text{nīn[č]a nāthwylc, (sē þe nē)h gefe(al)g} \]
\[\text{hāðum horde, hond (wēge nam),} \]
\[\text{(sīd,) since fāh; nē hē þæt syðran (bemār),} \]
\[\text{þ(e hē) sīlōpende besyre(d wur)dē} \]
\[\text{þēofes crafte.} \]

[There a certain one of men went in, one who merely chanced upon the heathen hoard, he took a flagon in his hand, large, treasure-adorned; he did not conceal the thing, because he (the dragon) (was) sleeping (and was) tricked by the craft of the thief.] (2214-19)

Michael Cherniss speaks of the seriousness of stealing from the dragon:

The robbery by stealth is an offence against the honor of the dragon ... [he] is therefore justified in seeking to humiliate those people whom he believes to be responsible for dishonoring him. (88)

Quickly, the neighboring people begin to suffer the wrath of the dragon. The narrator makes some excuses for the thief's behavior, but still describes him in very negative terms:

\[\text{Nealles mid gewealdum wyrhmord ābræsc,} \]
\[\text{sylfes willum, sē þe him sāre geseōd,} \]
\[\text{ac for þrēanēdlan þ(eow) nāthwylces} \]
[Not at all out of his own accord did he break into the worm-hoard, not of his own will, he who grievously injured him (the dragon), but for sore distress a certain servant of the sons of warriors fled hostile blows, bereft of a house, and entered therein, the sin-busy man.]

Whatever theft may earn a man in Anglo-Saxon society, it brings him no joy.

Another failure, particular to kings and other leaders, is the failure to protect their people. In An Introduction to Anglo-Saxon England, Peter Hunter Blair contrasts the behavior of a protective king with one who is not:

Superficially the most striking contrast is that between the prompt resolution with which Alfred and his successors met and overcame the earlier attacks and the feeble hesitancy and treachery which seemed to contemporaries to characterize the handling of military affairs by Aethelred and his counselors, a contrast epitomized in the nickname by which Aethelred came to be known.

Eormanric, a historic king of the Goths who is praised by Widsith for being generous to the poet, is also described by that poet as "wræpes wærlogan" [a cruel oath-breaker] (Widsith 9). A passing reference in Beowulf to the same king also describes him as cruel when the narrator tells that Hama "searonåpas flǣah / Eormenrīces," [fled the treacherous quarrels of Eormanric] (1200-01). The narrator of Judith says that Holofernes has been so cruel to his men that they are afraid of him:
Nevertheless, none of the earls dared awaken their warrior or investigate how the leader had acted with the holy maiden, the woman of the Lord. (257-61)

Another cruel king is Heremod, mentioned in Hrothgar's sermon as a bad example. He is not only ungenerous, he is actively wicked to his people. Hrothgar cautions Beowulf, telling him to be a solace to his people:

"Heremod was not thus to the offspring of Ecgwela, the Ar-Scyldings; he did not develop in anything as they wished, only in slaughter and destruction for the Danish people; enraged, he cut down his table-companions, his shoulder-companions, until the famous leader turned solitary away from the joys of life among men, ... nevertheless his heart grew bloodthirsty." (1709-15 1718-19)

A failure to protect his people might not be the fault of a king. Perhaps the saddest example of one who is unable to stop the destruction of his troop is Hrothgar himself; for all the efforts of his young warriors and the advice of his counselors, he cannot stop the depredations of Grendel (120-23). Instead of being a place of feasting and
joy long into the dark of the cold winter nights, Heorot cannot fulfill its intended purpose but instead stands dark and empty during the twelve-year feud.

Wæs sēo hwīl micel;
twelf wintra tīd torn gebolode
wine Scylcinga, wēana gehwelcne,
sīdra sorga

[It was for a long time; for twelve winters the friend of the Scyldings endured the trouble, every one of the afflictions, the great sorrows.] (146-49)

Hrothgar admits to Beowulf his grief and embarrassment concerning his inability to stop the monster:

[']Sorh is mē tō seccanne on sefan mīnum gumena āngum, hwæt mē Grendel hafað
hynmc on Heorote mid his hetebancum,
færniða gefremed; is min fletwerod,
wīghēap gewanod; hīe wyrd forswēop
on Grendles gryre.[']

["A grief it is to me in my heart to tell to any man, what humiliations Grendel has done to me in Heorot with his thoughts of hate, what sudden attacks he has performed; my hall-troop, the band of retainers, is diminished; fate swept them away in Grendel's horror."] (473-78)

Hrothgar has been a good king for so long that his people still respect, love, and are loyal to him even in his years of grief; the narrator is not being ironic in calling the king the protector when he speaks to Beowulf after Grendel's mother has attacked Heorot:

Hrōðgār mapelode, helm Scylcinga:
'Ne frīn þū æfter sēlum! Sorh is genīwod
Dūngēal lēodum. Dēad is ūscere,
Yrmenlāces yldra brōþor,
mīn rūnwita ond mīn fædbora,
eaxlgestealla, ēonne wē on orlege
hafelan wereodon, ēonne hniton fēpan,
eоforas cnysedan. Swylc scolde eorl wesan, [æþeling] ærgōd, swylc Æschere wæs![']

[Hrothgar spoke, the protector of the Scyldings: "Do not you ask about joys! Sorrow is renewed for the people of the Danes. Aeschere is dead, Yrmenlaf's elder brother, my trusted counselor and my advisor, my shoulder-companion when we protected our heads in battle, when the troops clashed, the boar-figures struck. Thus should an earl be, a very good noble, as Aeschere was!"]

(1321-29)

Again, Hrothgar has not been able to prevent the destruction of one of his men; this time, the anguish is even clearer than it is when he tells of the years of loss.

The Battle of Maldon not only provides a shocking example of overbearing pride, it also demonstrates the consequences of that pride. This most striking example of a leader's failure to protect his men is caused by Byrhtnoth's decision to allow the Viking army to cross the causeway to wage battle with his troops. First comes the challenge from the invaders:

Pa hī paet ongēaton and georne gesāwon
paet hī þæt bricgweardas bitere fundon,
ongunnon lytegian pa læte gystas,
bædon paet hī ðægand āgan mōston,
ofer þone ford faran, fēpan lædan.

[When they perceived and clearly saw that they (the Vikings) found the bridge-guards there fierce, the loathsome guests began to dissemble, asked that they might have access, go over the ford, lead their troops.] (84-88)

Byrhtnoth, unable to resist an appeal to his honor as a fighting man, allows them to cross unmolested and taunts them:
Then the earl began, because of his excessive pride, to allow too much land to the hateful people; Byrhtelm's son began to call to them over the cold water (the warriors listened):

"Now it is opened to you, come quickly to us, men to battle. God alone knows who might rule the corpse-field." (89-95)

It is not possible to tell from the text of Maldon the exact impetus which causes Byrhtnoth to make such a drastic error in judgment, but F. J. Battaglia believes that he may have been responding to a taunt of cowardice (48).

Whatever the reason, Byrhtnoth destroys his followers and fails to help his king. Tolkien says:

He [Byrhtnoth] says himself that it is his purpose to defend the realm of Aethelred, the people, and the land. . . . It was heroic for him and his men to fight, to annihilation if necessary, in the attempt to destroy or hold off the invaders. It was wholly unfitting that he should treat a desperate battle with this sole real object as a sporting match, to the ruin of his purpose and duty. (15)

Furthermore, Tolkien says that

Beorhtnoth was chivalrous rather than strictly heroic. Honour was in itself a motive, and he sought it at the risk of his heofnwerod, all the men most dear to him, in a truly heroic situation, which they could only redeem by death. (15)

It matters very little that the battle itself was not particularly significant; nothing short of a miraculous change in Aethelred's character could have redeemed his reign.
The point is that neither the king nor his earl met the primary obligation of saving his people.

One kind of failure within Anglo-Saxon culture involves losing one's place in it, being cast into exile. In a society which valued a close, personal relationship between lord and followers, the ultimate punishment for a man was to be cast outside the warmth of companionship. In the article "Old Germanic Life in the Anglo-Saxon Wanderer and Seafarer," C. C. Ferrell says, "There was something that the Anglo-Saxons dreaded far more than the hardships of the wintry ocean. It was the separation from home and loved ones" (203). Charles W. Kennedy puts it:

The place of the individual in such a society ranged between two polar limits. At one extreme stood the head of a powerful clan clothed with an individualism symbolic of the utmost in authority and splendor; at the other extreme, the clanless man, the lordless wanderer, who had no "gold-friend or protector." (Old English Elegies 9)

The Anglo-Saxon attitude toward exile is complicated, rather like the attitude toward treasure, and treasure and exile are intertwined with each other. David Williams, in "The Exile as Uncreator," has written a thorough and intriguing article concerning the complexities of exile. He discusses the Latin etymology of the word exile and its relationship to the word council; both arise (with prefixes--con and ex) from the root salire, "to leap," and clearly express opposites (1). Williams treats specifically the Anglo-Saxon period rather than ancient history, but he implies that the
Hebrew nomadic culture and the Roman civil culture shared with the Germanic cultures a value system in which each person understands exactly where he or she stands within the social framework. He says that usually exile as a legal punishment was reserved for the most serious crime against the community: murder, but "[i]n addition, the traitor and the immoral ruler as direct dangers to the ideological system might also be exiled" (7). He describes the exile as "an unubber, an undoer, and an uncreator" of his society (9).

The exile is one who . . . is seen as tearing asunder the social bond of love which, since this bond was believed grounded in nature itself, is also considered as an undoing of nature. The Exile in the Middle Ages is consequently depicted . . . as a hater of life itself, unnatural, bestial, and an enemy of creation. (5)

To a medieval audience it would have seemed especially appropriate that Cain's punishment was exile because he violently attacked the values of his society; he "comes to be seen as having degenerated socially to the level of beast as he had previously acted on the moral level of the beast" (6). Grendel, the descendent of Cain, also attacks the social order (10). Williams describes Anglo-Saxon society in images of the human body. Because of such symbolism,

exile is naturally seen as a kind of amputation, the cutting off of a sick and infectious member who poses a menace to the body and the ideological system that holds it together. (3)
He also notes the significance of calling a man a "shoulder-companion" and a man's sons his "shoulders" (2); therefore, it is doubly appropriate that Grendel's arm is pulled out of his shoulder; he loses his greatest help, eventually dying because of its loss, that loss signifying his own separation from society (12). For the exile, the two greatest losses are the separation from dialogue by which he is "rendered speechless, a characteristic associating the exile with the beast which lacks the gift of speech" (4), and the isolation by which he is "barred from the assembly of kinsmen, and prevented from sharing gifts with his brothers" (3). It is the loss of a place in the feasting and gift-giving which serves as the most powerful symbol of the pains of exile. In The Beginnings of English Society, Whitelock says:

The bond between lord and retainer went deeper than material benefits on either side. The giving of arms and treasure, which was ceremoniously performed, had a symbolic significance, and it is not mere material loss that inspires the . . . lament for a dead lord contained in a poem generally known as The Wanderer. (30-31)

In her article "Anglo-Saxon Poetry and the Historian," she says, "We do not need the poems to tell us that the lot of the lordless, kinless man was unenviable" (91). But the poems speak vividly of the pains of the outcast.

The lone survivor of Beowulf, he who gathers together and buries the hoard which becomes the dragon's prized
possession, suffers the misery of solitude through no fault of his own. He survives all the other members of his clan and mourns their departure. After grieving for the coming decay of the beautiful things which he must consign to earth, he says:

"The coat of ring-mail may not (now) go far and wide after the war-chiefs, to be a help to the warriors. Now there is no joy of the harp, no mirth of the glee-wood, no good hawk swings round the hall, the swift mare beats not round the castle courts. Baleful death has sent forth many of the race of men!" Thus gloomy-minded he related with sorrow, alone after all the others unhappily he moved about day and night, until death's whelm touched at his heart. (2260-70)

After lamenting several kinds of losses, the poet-narrator of Deor mourns his own expulsion from favor:

[I performed good duty many winters, was loyal to my lord, until now Heorrend, the song-crafty man, received the estate which the protector of earls had earlier given to me.] (38-41)

Here, clearly the loss of the gift of land represents the loss of the poet's place in society.
The narrator of *The Seafarer* may be telling of a real, icy voyage, or he may be using the image of a bitterly cold journey to symbolize the exile he laments. He begins by saying:

```
Mæg ic be mǣ sylfum sōdgied wrecan,  
sības secgan, hū ic geswincdāgum  
earfoðhīlē oft prōwade,  
bitre brēostceare gebiden hæbbe,  
gecūnnað in þēoλe cearselda fēla,  
atol yþa gewealc, þære mec oft bigeat  
nearo nihtwaco æt nacan stefnan  
þonne hē be clifum cnossaǣ.
```

[I may according to myself reckon a true tale, recount the journeys, how I often suffered in days of torment, in a troubled time, have endured bitter heart-care, have tested in a ship many a sorrowful place, terrible welling waves, where the anxious night-watch often held me at the prow of the ship when it strikes by the cliffs.] (1-8)

He goes on to speak of being deprived of his wine-friend (14-16). No longer having the company of men, he must make do with what joy he can find, poor substitutes for the delights of the mead-hall:

```
hwīlum ylfete song  
dyde ic mǣ tō gomene,  
ganetes hlēopor  
ond huilpan swēg  fore hleahtor wera,  
mǣw singende  fore medodrince.
```

[At times the swan's song served me as entertainment, with the gannet's sound and the curlew's song where before was the laughter of men, the sea-gull's singing where before was mead.] (19-22)

He laments the absence of all kinsmen (25-26) and sums up the attitude of the exile by saying that he always has longings but no thoughts except about the tossing waves (44-47). Another lament by an exile (following the death of his lord) appears in *The Wanderer*. The poem begins with the reminder that God's kindness remains even with the solitary one, but it quickly speaks of the bitterly cold sea (6-7). Following the death
of his protector, the narrator unsuccessfully seeks a new place (25-29). His dreams of past joys do not sweeten his bitter waking:

[It seems to him in his mind that he could clasp and kiss his lord, and on his knee lay hands and head, as he earlier in days of yore used to enjoy the gift-seats. Then the lordless man again awakes, sees before him the fallow ways, the bathing sea-birds, the spreading of feathers, the falling frost and snow, mixed with hail. Then the injury of the heart is thereby heavier, painful after pleasure.] (41-50)

There is no hope for the solitary man, the one left lordless.

Several kinds of failure could and did occur within a king's following. The first, the giving of a treacherous gift, may occur in Beowulf, although the reader cannot be certain of the giver's intent. Marcel Mauss says:

The theme of the fateful gift, the present or possession that turns into poison, is fundamental in Germanic folklore. The Rhine Gold is fatal to the man who wins it, the Cup of Hagen is disastrous to the hero who drinks of it; numerous tales and legends of this kind, Germanic and Celtic, still haunt our imagination. (62)

In Beowulf the question arises concerning whether Unferth suspects that his sword will fail against Grendel's dam. The description first given of the sword, Hrunting, is very positive:
[That was not then the least of powerful helps, which the dýle of Hrothgar loaned to him in difficulties; the name of the hilted sword was Hrunting; it was the fragment of ancient treasures; the edge was iron, decorated with poison twigs, hardened by battle-blood; it had never failed at war any man who had grasped it with the hands, he who dared to undertake perilous expeditions, on the battle-field of the foes; nor was that the first time it was supposed to perform a deed of valor.] (1455-64)

In spite of Hrunting's provenance and glorious past history, it fails Beowulf in his desperate fight with the troll-wife (1522-25). There is no direct indication in the poem that Unferth knows that Hrunting will fail or that the monster is invulnerable and must be killed with a magical sword. There is no adequate translation for dýle, a term twice used to describe Unferth, but his rude and arrogant behavior to Beowulf does not indicate a kindly attitude toward the young man. Nor does Unferth deny Beowulf's charges against him of fratricide.

Within the fellowship a far more common difficulty than treacherous gifts was feuds, which were most likely to erupt over the unjust killing of a man, that is, a death in circumstances other than war; the clan of the victim was
then almost certain to demand some sort of compensation. The spread of Christianity encouraged the substitution of money compensation for blood, but during the Anglo-Saxon period, both payment and violent retribution were common.

P. H. Sawyer says:

The kin appear most dramatically when pursuing a feud. Many clauses in the law-codes are about regulation of feuds and the procedures to facilitate the payment of wergeld, thus reducing the threat of violence. (Roman Britain 174)

T. M. Charles-Edwards points out that long-lived friendships and feuds seem to have been inherited, as well as land (184). Sawyer mentions one historical feud which lasted from the Anglo-Saxon period into the time of William the Conqueror. There is no way of knowing how many lives were lost during this one:

The murder of Earl Uhtred by a noble called Thurbrand began a chain of killings which ended in 1073 when Uhtred's great-grandson, Earl Waltheof, killed many of Thurbrand's descendents at Settrington, not far from York. . . . The feud might well have continued but Waltheof was himself executed by William in 1076. (177)

One cannot consider the issue of the feud without also considering the concept of wergeld, or "man-price." According to Kemp Malone, after a homicide the killer was frequently banished (110), but exile was not the only punishment. Since every person in the culture had some measurable value, compensation was common. Values varied, of course, with the area and time. Even slaves had lives
worthy of compensation. Sawyer says, "The unfree were, by definition, under the lordship of someone for whom they had a value; if a slave were injured or killed compensation was due to his owner" (168). The _wergeld_ functioned most frequently as the value of a man at his death, but it also served as the material measure of the value of his oath. Sawyer treats the subject very early in his work:

Free society was hierarchical, the higher the status of the noble being expressed in a higher value or price. . . . This determined not only the value of a man's oath and the scale of compensation due to him for injury or loss, but was also the sum that had to be paid to his family if he were killed. (51)

According to Frank Stenton, the fact that the free peasant was truly free was indicated by what happened concerning his _wergeld_; compensation for his loss was paid directly to the king and to his family, not to an intermediate lord (174-75). _Wergeld_ was literally the "sum with which a feud could be averted" (Sawyer 168). As usual with the Anglo-Saxons, money had more than just a literal meaning; in conjunction with the _wergeld_, it also represented a man's worth, his place in society. According to Cherniss, a murderer took as his debt

the intangible, unmeasurable worth of the man whom he slew. Also, . . . when the slayer surrenders a part of his material wealth, he surrenders at the same time a part of his own reputation. (85)
Feuds (and similar disruptions) and their consequences appear in several places in *Beowulf*. In passing Beowulf mentions the evil behavior of Unferth, saying that he has never done any brave deed but only evil ones, like killing his brothers (587-88), the most dreadful of deeds. When Beowulf returns to Geatland, he tells of evils to come concerning Freawaru, daughter of Hrothgar. She is lovely and her father has pledged her in marriage to settle old feuds (2028-29), but Beowulf does not expect the peace to last. Beowulf actually spends a fairly large part of his speech to Hygelac talking of probable feuds (2032-2069). He describes how the old man, seeing the foreign bride, nags again and again about old injuries, until he is able to make the young warriors forget their oaths and break their promises of loyalty:

["Thus he admonishes and reminds time after time with grievous words, until the opportunity comes, that the thane of the maiden because of the deeds of his father, after the cut of the sword dies blood-stained, forfeit of life."] (2057-61)

One feud, however, serves a good purpose in the poem; Beowulf's father, Ecgtheow, once came to Hrothgar's court fleeing such a conflict. Hrothgar greets Beowulf, saying:

["Geslēh bīn fānder fēhe mæste, wearp hē Heabolāfē tō handbonan mid Wilfingum; da hine ðēdora cyn"]
Still another failing within the following, closely related to the troubles associated with the feud, is the misery occasioned by an unavengable death. Whitelock says that situations which disallow revenge include that of a man legally executed, either when caught in the act, or after legal action has been taken. The kindred were forbidden to avenge him, and they had to swear that they would not do so. ("Beowulf: 2444-2471" 203)

Another unredeemable situation occurred when murder was done within the clan:

Homicide within the kindred could not be fitted into the framework of the rules of the vendetta, for the same persons could not be both receivers and payers of wergeld, or performers and sufferers of the feud. (199)

In his old age Beowulf describes two incidents concerning unavengable death, one from his family and one hypothetical. It is the necessary constraint, besides the loss itself, of course, which causes the misery Beowulf describes:

["Your father caused the greatest feud by killing; he was the hand-slayer of Heatholaf among the Wylfings; then the kin of the Weders because of the terror of war could not have him. Thence he sought the South-Danish people, the Ar-Scyldings, over the rolling waves."] (459-64)
A murder-bed was spread unfittingly for the eldest through the deeds of his kinsmen when Haethcyn struck his relative with an arrow from his horn-bow, missed the mark and shot his kinsman, one brother the other with a bloody arrow. That fight was recompenseless, wickedly sinned, mind-wearying to the heart; nevertheless, thus the unavenged aetheling had to part with his life."

Whitelock notes that it is not the accidental nature of the slaying which saves the killer from enduring the usual penalties of homicide ("Beowulf: 2444-2471" 198-99). She goes on to say that usually vengeance could not be taken for a slaying within the kindred. . . . Hence Hrethel was obliged to let his dead son remain unavenged and unatoned for. . . . Such a situation would be considered a dishonouring of the dead man and a great addition to the grief of the survivors. (199)

Beowulf compares Hrethel's misery to that of an old man whose son has been hanged in a legal execution:

"Thus is sad the ancient freeman, suffering that his son should swing on the gallows; then he would tell his tale, the mournful song, when his son hangs for the benefit of ravens, and he, old and wise, may be no help to him, (not) able to perform anything. Every morning the death of his offspring is recalled." (2444-51)
The suffering caused by feuds was not the most terrible misery Anglo-Saxons had to endure; the disgrace of dishonor was far more dreadful. The most heinous of all the crimes a follower could commit was to be treacherous or to fail to serve his lord in battle. Treachery always received blame. Henry Loyn says that in King Alfred's laws, only treachery to one's lord was not treated mercifully (The Governance of Anglo-Saxon England 64). Furthermore, he says:

Desertion from the army when the king himself was present was subject to the most severe penalties, the offender to be placed in peril of his life and the loss of wergeld or all his property. (164)

Sawyer points out that "many of the conflicts of the seventh century were caused by breaches of this code of honour" (54). Treachery sometimes meant betrayal by a peer rather than the disloyalty of a follower. Bede reports two notable betrayals, one averted, the other not. While still a prince, King Edwin had sought refuge in the court of King Redwald, who decided to murder him at the urging of Ethelfrid, Edwin's predecessor. When a friend of Edwin's offered to lead him to safety, the prince refused to leave, saying that he could not break his agreement with Redwald, who had done him no harm (122-24). Fortunately, Redwald's queen persuaded the king not to carry out such a horrible deed. The same friend reported Redwald's change of heart to Edwin:
"For when he privately told the queen of his intention to deal with you as I warned, she dissuaded him, saying that it was unworthy in a great king to sell his best friend in the hour of need for gold, and worse still to sacrifice his royal honour, the most valuable of all possessions, for love of money." (125)

The other incident has no happy ending. After Oswin disbanded his outnumbered army, he and a friend took refuge in the house of Hunwald, whom he regarded as his greatest friend. Alas, it was far otherwise: for Hunwald betrayed Oswin and his man to Oswy, who amid universal disgust ordered his commander Ethelwin to put them both to death. (164)

The other sort of treachery, that of the failure of men to follow their lord in battle, also occurs in the literature of the Anglo-Saxons. In Judith when Holofernes' men find him beheaded, they repay his cruelty with desertion:

\[
\text{Hi ða hreowigmode wurpon hyra weepen of dune, gewitan him wergferhæ on fleam sceacan.}
\]

[Sad of heart, they hurled down their weapons from the hill; weary-hearted, they departed from him to hasten in flight.] (289-91)

Although Holofernes' men may have been justified in feeling that they owed no allegiance to such an evil man, there is no excuse for the actions of the brothers Godric, Godwin, and Godwig in The Battle of Maldon; they violate all the ethics of Anglo-Saxon society when they not only run away from a fight, but also steal their earl's horse.

\[
\text{Hī bugon þa fram beadwewe þē þær bēon noldon: þær wurdon Oddan bearn ærest on flēame, Godric fram güpe, and þone gōdan forlēt}
\]
[They turned away from the battle where they did not wish to be: there were Odda’s sons first in flight, Godric ran from the battle and abandoned his good (lord), who very many times had given him horses. He leapt upon the horse which his lord possessed, onto the trappings when it was not right, and both his brothers ran away with him; Godwin and Godwig did not care for the battle, but went from the fight and sought the forest, fled to the fastness and saved their lives, and (had) more sins than anyone with honor could have if they had remembered all of the favors which he had done for them as an honor.] (185-97)

Cherniss points out that "The crime of cowardice in battle [Maldon] is especially reprehensible here because the cowards take with them treasure to which they are not entitled" (90).

The most shameful betrayal of all occurs in Beowulf when his young followers do not help the hero at need. It does not matter that he told them to stay back; when they see that he is in difficulty, they are obligated to come to his aid. Wiglaf speaks bitterly to his fellows when he sees Beowulf's peril and his peers' reluctance to help their king:

'Ic ðæt mæl geman, þær wē medu þegun, þonne wē gehēton ðussum hlāforde in bīorsele, þǣr ūs mās bēagas geaf, þæt wē him þā gūgetāwa gyldan woldon,
gif him þyslicu þearf gelumpe, helmas ond heard sweord.[']

"I remember the time when we received mead, when we promised our lord in the beer-hall, when he gave us rings, that we would repay him for the war-gear, helmets and hard swords, if such trouble ever came to him." [2633-38]

A little later in the speech, he says:

[']Ne þynceð mē gerysne, þæt wē rondas beren eft tō earde, nemne wē æror mægen fāne gefyllan, feorh ealgian Wedra ēgodnes.[']

"It does not seem to be becoming that we should carry our shields back home unless we may first kill the foe, protect the life of the leader of the Weders." [2653-56]

The young warrior rebukes those who have not repaid Beowulf's gifts, and paints a bitter picture of the future lives of the men dishonored by desertion. After the fight with the dragon, Wiglaf again speaks to his former comrades:

'Pæt, lā, mæg secgan sē de wyle sōð specan, þæt se mondryhten, sē ēow dā mādmas gefā, sōredgeatwe, þē gē þær on standað,-- bonne hē on ealubence oft gesælde healssittendum helm ond byrnan, þēoden his þegnum, swylce hē þrydlīcost ōwer feor cōðṁ neān findan meahте--, þæt hē gēnumga gūdægweðu wrāde forwurpe, dā hyne wīg beget. Nealles folccyning fyrdgesteallum gylpan þorfte;


Mū sceal sincbeγo ond swyrdgifu, eall ēgelwyn eowrum cynne, lufen ōlicgean; iondrihtes mōt þære mǣgburge monna Æghwylc ēdel hweorfan, sydgan ædelingas feorran gefricgean flām ēowerne, dūnleasan dǣ. Ðēaf bīþ sēlīa eorla gehwylcum þonne edwītlīf!'
"That indeed one may say to you, who wishes to speak truth, that the lord, who gave you treasures, war-like equipment, in which you stand there—when he often at the ale-bench gave the hall-sitters helmet and byrnie, the chief to his people, such as the most splendid, far and near, he might find anywhere—that he would straightway, grievously, throw away the war-armor when war got him. Not at all did the folk-king have cause to boast of his war-comrades; . . . Now shall the receiving of treasure and sword-giving, all enjoyment of home and kin fail to give comfort; every man of our race must move about, deprived of land right, when aethelings afar might learn of your flight, the inglorious deed. Death is better for each earl than a life of disgrace!" (2864-74, 2884-91)

The failure of the best of the Geats, hand-picked by their lord, leaves nothing but despair for them to face.

The entire ethic of the Anglo-Saxon culture demonstrates the values the people held: rightful pride, wisdom, generosity, protection, and loyalty. The reality of their lives, however, both historically and poetically, demonstrates the failure of those ideals. Pride too easily becomes overbearing. Wisdom is not enough. Generosity is balanced by greed in a society whose earliest laws treat harshly with theft. Even the best of kings, Hrothgar, cannot protect his people from the depredations of monsters. Loyalty degenerates into treachery, or comes too little and too late. Even Christianity, ordinarily regarded as bringing positive changes to pagan cultures, disrupts Anglo-Saxon society; Blair points out that

The influence of the Church was the most important factor tending to direct the royal household away
from the ideals governing the comitatus and
towards more sophisticated ways. (211)

It is the nature of the world that an ideal system cannot
overcome reality, and the Anglo-Saxon poets knew it.
According to Kennedy:

The poetic mood of grave dignity and melancholy
... is something [deep and profound], firmly
rooted in character and in a continuous awareness
of Fact and Necessity as unescapable, shaping
forces in the lives of men. In this world one
does what one can, and what one must. What one
can may not be enough. What one must may lead
to disaster. (Earliest English Poetry 21)

True, the poets' artistic work holds up the ideal for all to
admire and try to follow, but that same work shows what
really happens. Beowulf dies to save his people, sacrifices
his life to provide wealth which will sustain them. The
wealth, however, dies with him:

Hi on beorg dydon bēg ond siglu,
eall swylce hyrsta, swylce on horde ær
nāðēðige men genumen hæfdon,
forlētōn eorla gestrēon eordan healdan,
gold on grēote, þēr hit nū gēn lifað,
eldum swā unnyt, swā hi(t æro)r wæs.

[Here in the barrow were placed the treasure and
jewels, and all such armor, as earlier from the
hoard the brave-minded men had taken away; the
earth was allowed to hold the wealth of earls,
gold in the earth, where it now yet lies, as
useless to men as it was before.] (3163-68)

Beowulf performs his last act of courage and honor, and
Wiglaf behaves as he should. But one loyal retainer, one
honorable man, out of an entire culture is not enough.

Beowulf and the other poems of the period show the inevitable
juxtaposition and conflict of the ideal and the real. As Paul Zweig puts it:

The two parts of Beowulf are bound together tragically. In the style of archaic Greece, they signify that the triumph of the human is also a defeat. (42)

It is entirely fitting that The Battle of Maldon ends abruptly with lines about a brave Godric, not the cowardly one:

Swā hī Ēþelgāres bearn ealle bylde,
Godric tō guþe; oft hē gār forlēt,
wælspere windan on þā wīcingas
swā hē on þām folce fyrmest eode,
hēow and hynde, oþ þæt hē on hilde gecranc.
Næs þæt nā se Godric þe ēa gūþe forbēah.

[Thus Aethelgar's son encouraged them all, Godric at the fight; often he threw the spear, flung the spear at the Vikings, thus he went at the front of the people, hewed and harmed, until he fell in the battle. That was certainly not the Godric who fled from the fight.] (320-25)

But the brave Godric fell; the battle was lost. The Vikings were left to enjoy their victory and plunder the dead.

Historically, the Anglo-Saxons were much like all other people. They had good leaders and bad. They honored the ideals of wisdom, justice, generosity, courage, and loyalty; sometimes they were able to meet the standards of their society, and sometimes they could not. Sometimes their queens brought peace and sometimes warfare. They came into a country peopled by a race rather different from themselves and conquered most of it; by the time most of the poems dealt with here were written, they were facing invasion by
a cousin-race which regarded itself as superior and which would strive to destroy Anglo-Saxon society. They were learning to live with Christianity, one of the most significant forces of change ever to move west out of the Middle East. The pressure from within pushed them toward a different, if only slightly so, value system, and the pressure from without forced them into a new political system which was growing toward nationalism and away from personal commitment to a particular leader. The poets present a realistic picture of their people and times, showing the best and the worst, not with the starkness of those who kept census records or land deeds or with the objectivity of the modern historian, but with the sensitivity and painful insight of the artist who sees things as they are and as they ought to be. They recognized that even when the best of the Anglo-Saxons, the heroes, did everything right, they were, in the end, only human; they could only fail. In so doing, however, their glory lives on, a fate which would surely have greatly pleased them.
CHAPTER V: BIBLIOGRAPHY


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