Grief after Gladness: The Futility and Sorrow of the Honor-Based Society

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The poem *Beowulf* is set in the honor-based warrior economy of the Danes and their neighbors. In this culture, which Dr. Tom Shippey describes as a "pirate economy,"[1] kings kept the loyalty of their retainers by giving them valuable gifts such as rings, swords, and other heirlooms. The king's store of treasures would eventually become depleted and needed to be replenished to insure the faithfulness of the warband. In short, the ring-giver needed a constant supply of rings. For this reason, he must contrive excuses to loot his neighbor. If all nations were at peace the contents of kings' treasuries would remain static, no more gifts would be forthcoming, and the warriors would become restless. As Tacitus observed:

> If their native state sinks into the sloth of prolonged
> peace and repose, many of its noble youths voluntarily
> seek those tribes which are waging some war, both because
> inaction is odious to their race, and because they win renown
> more readily in the midst of peril, and cannot maintain a
> numerous following except by violence and war.[2]

The standard for "a good king" is given in the poem's prologue. The progenitor of the Danish royal house, Scyld Scefing, is described as a "robber of foemen" and his son Beow was known for distributing gifts even while his father was still alive. The poet notes that because of his proactive generosity "the people [will] stand by him when war comes."[3]

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[1] Shippey, Dr. Tom "Lecture 20: Format of the Last Section." Beowulf through Tolkien, accessed March 20, 2018 http://media.signumuniversity.org/coursepacks/LITD5304_yO6nW.

[2] Medieval Sourcebook: Tacitus: Germania, accessed March 21, 2018, https://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/source/tacitus1.html.

[3] J. R. R. Tolkien, J. R. R. Tolkien, and Christopher Tolkien, *Beowulf: A Translation and Commentary Together with Sellic Spell* (London: Harper Collins, 2016), 13.

Beow's grandson, Healfdene's son Hrothgar, eventually came to the throne, after his brother Heorgar's death. He was successful in war and it "came into his heart"[4] to build the colossal Heorot, the largest mead hall "the children of men have ever known."[5] The poet describes its grandeur and the enthusiasm with which it was built but a note of dark foreboding creeps into the tale. There is going to be a battle, the narrator warns, between Hrothgar and his son-in-law and Heorot will burn. This is one of the main themes of Beowulf: wars and feuds are inevitable, even among family members. Joy is fleeting; tragedy is always just around the corner in an honor-based society where everyone is anxious to find a reason to be offended.

There were two alternatives to war: *wergild* ("man payment") and *freothuwebbe ("*peace-weaving"). *Wergild* was the payment made for the injury or death of a person to his family or tribe while peace-weaving involved the offering — one might say the sacrifice — of the daughter of one tribe to the son of a warring tribe. As will be demonstrated, neither alternative was effective in bringing about peaceful resolution and often exacerbated the hostilities. If acquiring plunder and glory is the chief aim, outright warfare is the only satisfying solution. Any peace obtained by *wergild* or peace-weaving will be of short duration because there is little glory to be found in either. Was it the intention of the Beowulf poet to criticize, or at least demonstrate, the futility and cruelty of the Germanic culture that glorified war, feuding, and boasting over the Christian virtues of forgiveness and peace? Was the poet contrasting the Old Testament ethic of "an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth"[6] with the Christian ethic of "blessed are the peacemakers"[7] and "turn the other cheek?"[8] This paper will examine several episodes in

[4] Tolkien, *Beowulf*, 15.
[5] Ibid.
[6] Exod 21:24 KJV
[7] Mt 5:9 KJV
[8] Mt 4:39 KJV

the poem with the purpose of answering these questions.

The most famous battle of the poem — Beowulf's solo fight with Grendel — does not address the question. Heorot was under attack by a monstrous enemy and needed defending. This would have been true for any society, honor-based or not. In this case, Grendel was not willing to pay *wergild*[9] and peace-weaving was out of the question. Hrothgar did make the claim that Beowulf owed him the repayment of a debt his uncle and liege lord Hygelac owed him, and while Beowulf indulged in the typical Germanic boasting, the incident as a whole does not demonstrate the evils of endemic warfare. However, the song of the *scop*, sung in the aftermath, clearly does.

The song was the telling of the episode at Finnesburg. To summarize, a Danish warband, led by Hnæf, paid a visit to Finn in the Frisian stronghold of Finnesburg. Hnæf's sister Hildeburg was married to Finn and they had a son who is not named in the poem. (It is possible that the son had been fostered in Denmark by Hnæf.) Finn, and possibly some Jutes who were staying with him, treacherously attacked their Danish guests who were encamped in the mead hall. The battle raged for several days and Hnæf was killed. Finn and Hildeburg's son was also killed. It is not clear whether the son fought for the Danes or the Frisians. There was a funeral pyre and Hnæf and the son were cremated together. Hildeburg sang a lamentation. A truce was struck and the two sides passed an uneasy winter in each other's company. Hengest, who was Hnæf's retainer, was now the leader of the Danes and appeared to be brooding over the truce which had him dishonorably serving the killer of his leader Hnæf. A sword, possibly Hnæf's, was laid in Hengest's lap which seems to have stoked the fires of revenge and the battle resumed, resulting in Finn's death. His widow Hildeburg was taken back to Denmark along with considerable loot.

It is apparent that the Danes and the Frisians were at odds with each other from the beginning

[9] Tolkien, *Beowulf*, 17.

but the reason is not given. It is probable that Hildeburg was married to Finn in a peace-weaving effort. If Finn's unnamed son was being fostered by his uncle Hnæf, as Tolkien speculates, this may have been another attempt at peaceful reconciliation. Yet it all went horribly wrong. When the two groups met, hostilities were rekindled and the battle was joined. Hildeburg, who appeared to be a pawn in this story, lost her brother and her son. Hengest was now bound by oath to serve Finn and Finn was bound by oath to be a gift-giver to the Danes. When the sword, possibly the one belonging to his former lord, was shown to Hengest he had to decide which oath to obey, that of his old lord or that of his new lord. Faced with this conundrum he chose to attack the Frisians and now Hildeburg experienced another tragedy when her husband Finn was killed. She was carried off to Denmark, with or without her consent. Who was the winner in this tale? Not the Danes, who have lost their leader Hnæf. Surely not the Frisians, who have lost their leader Finn, his heir, and their queen as well as the Frisian treasure trove. It was blood and ashes all around.

Why did the Heorot *scop* choose to tell this particular tale, especially at this time when all of Heorot was rejoicing? Beowulf, who was not a Dane, had just rescued the Danes from Grendel's depredations and while Hrothgar's people were grateful, they probably couldn't help but feel a bit dispirited that they were shown up by a foreigner. At first glance, it seems that the *scop* was telling a story about heroic Danes to boost the hall's morale. However, he may have had another motive in mind — or at least, the poet had another motive. The *scop* was not clairvoyant but the poet uses his song to foreshadow a coming catastrophe: the Freawaru/ Ingeld wedding disaster which is recounted later in the poem.

After defeating Grendel's mother, Beowulf and his party sailed back to Geatland where he gave an account of his adventures in Denmark to his uncle Hygelac. He spent what seems to be

an inordinate amount of time speculating about the fate of Hrothgar and Queen Wealhtheow's daughter Freawaru, who is going to be married as a peace-weaver to Ingeld, king of the hostile Heathobards. This attempt was an utter failure, resulting in warfare and the eventual destruction of Heorot. Years earlier, the Danes had defeated the Heathobards in battle. Beowulf told Hygelac that he could imagine a wedding scenario where a proud Danish thane would, out of arrogance, bring a looted Heathobard heirloom to the gathering and the son of the heirloom's original owner, upon recognizing the precious object and upon being egged on by an old warrior, would be honor-bound to get revenge. The Heorot *scop* could not see into the future and predict the catastrophic outcome of Freawaru's marriage but the poet, by means of foreshadowing, used his song to demonstrate the futility of peace-weaving. Obsession with honor, driven by hypersensitivity, will lead to violence. In the Ingeld episode, Freawaru, an innocent woman, was victimized as was Hildeburg in the Finnesburg tale.

The Finnesburg tale was inserted in the poem right at the height of the people's exuberance in reclaiming Heorot from Grendel. Yet the tale must have cast a pall on certain members of the company, especially Queen Wealhtheow, who knew her daughter could meet the same woeful fate as Hildeburg. The tale glorified the Danes but no Germanic story has a happy ending, it seems.

Grendel's mother held to the same honor-based ethic as the Danes. Her son and only child was killed and his death must be avenged. Her behavior was in perfect alignment with the standards of the day and both Hrothgar and Beowulf seemed to understand her attack as motivated by revenge, a rationale they themselves understood very well. Beowulf's decision to counter-attack was predictable. Revenge, once set into motion, is a chain that is difficult to break.

After the Finnesburg story is concluded, Queen Wealhtheow delivered a speech. No doubt she had been affected by the sad story of Hildeburg who had lost so many family members. She directed her remarks to Hrothgar. Did he really mean to adopt Beowulf as his son? What about his own sons? And what about the nephew Hrothulf, who, the poet notes ominously, is "still" on good terms with the family at that time? Beowulf did a masterful job killing Grendel; load him down with treasure and send him back to Geatland. The Queen had just heard a song about violent treachery and cannot be faulted for worrying about the fate of her own sons. She asked her nephew Hrothulf to be gracious to them, reminding him how kindly he had been treated by Hrothgar. Many believe that her worst fears were realized and that he did betray his adoptive family and usurped the Danish throne.[10]

Beowulf was a man of his times and no pacifist but he was not especially predatory. While Hrothgar seemed to have adopted him — at least, Queen Wealhtheow believed this is what happened —rather than staying in Denmark and assuming lordship over the world's most impressive mead hall he cheerfully took his leave and returned to Geatland. Upon Hygelac's untimely death, he was offered the kingship by the widowed Queen Hygd. He declined and instead, selflessly oversaw the kingship of his young, inexperienced nephew. He was rewarded, one might say, by a long fifty-year reign. Beowulf enjoyed proving his physical bravery but he did not use his great strength to usurp thrones that were free for the taking.

After the night of feasting, song, gift-giving and speeches at Heorot, the Danes felt safe to sleep in their hall once again, only to be attacked by Grendel's mother, who, as has been noted, was motivated by the same cultural ethic that guided them all: revenge. This episode concluded

[10] William Cooke, "Hrothulf: A Richard III, or an Alfred the Great?" Studies in Philology, April 18, 2007, accessed March 22, 2018, https://muse.jhu.edu/article/213581.

with an underwater solo battle from which Beowulf again emerged victorious, followed by another round of gift-giving and speeches. Before the Geats departed, Hrothgar delivered a sermon where he related the sad story of King Heremod who killed his own companions and withheld treasure from his retainers. "Learn thou from this, and understand what generous virtue is!"[11] he preached. For Hrothgar, virtue was defined by loyalty to one's family and the distribution of treasure. Yet he added the typical Germanic coda that there is always "grief after gladness."[12]

Back in Geatland, Beowulf generously gave most of his treasure to Hygelac and remained a loyal retainer. One gift that was of particular significance was a torc, which Wealhtheow had given to Beowulf. Again, the poet engaged in foreshadowing: this was the same torc Beowulf's lord Hygelac will be wearing when he is killed in a future raid against the Franks. In this culture, every triumph is tainted with tragedy.

After Hygelac was killed during the raid on the Franks, his young son become king with no interference from Beowulf and when the son was killed, Beowulf avenged his death and ruled Geatland for the next fifty years.

The last event in Beowulf's life was his battle with the dragon who, true to cultural norm, was avenging his stolen goblet. Beowulf did not originally seek out the dragon's loot-filled barrow, rather he was brought into the fray because the dragon was on a vengeful rampage, destroying the countryside, including Beowulf's own mead hall. Echoing his solo battles with Grendel and Grendel's mother, he chose to engage the beast all by himself although this time he took the precautions of wearing fire-proof armor. The dragon was too strong; Beowulf could not defeat

[11] Tolkien, *Beowulf*, 63.
[12] Ibid.64.

him on his own. His retainers, those "laggards in battle,"[13] ran away and hid in the woods, all except Wiglaf, who helped him defeat the fiery creature. The poet has Beowulf waxing very philosophical about his impending death yet oddly to modern readers; he wanted to see some of the treasure before he died. This materialism seems out of sync with Beowulf's character but the modern reader must not project modern sensibilities upon a pagan hero. Wiglaf, upon entering the dragon's barrow, seemed to temporarily forget about his dying lord as he gawked at the gold and jewels. He recovered his senses and returned to his lord who was at the point of death. Beowulf gave the kingdom to Wiglaf who was so disgusted by the cowardice of the retainers that he decreed that the dragon's treasure, which appeared to be under some kind of curse, would not be distributed but buried with Beowulf. It would be mistaken to expect the Christian virtue of non-materialism to be part of Beowulf's character, yet ultimately the Christian poet gives his opinion on the value of the loot by having it all destroyed, with the comment "…abandoning the treasure of mighty men to earth to keep, gold to the ground where yet it dwells as profitless to men as it prove of old."[14]

Wiglaf predicted a grim, war-filled future for the Geats and the women, in agreement, sang fearful lamentations. Without Beowulf, who had the strength of thirty men in his hands to protect them, the Geats were sitting ducks for their aggressive, treasure-hungry neighbors and in fact, they were eventually conquered by the Swedes. Beowulf's fifty years of good kingship counted for little in this age of opportunistic warfare. As he noted to Hygelac after concluding his prognostications about the Ingeld/ Freawaru peace-weaving plan, "Oft do we see that seldom in any place, even for the briefest time, when a prince falleth, doth the murderous spear relent, good

[13] Ibid. 96.
[14] Ibid. 105.

though the bride may be."[15] This observation may be the most important quote of the poem.

The three "monster" battles seem different in tone from the digressive episodes. While Beowulf did boast in the accepted style of the day, on the whole his behavior was selfless. He seemed to prefer single combat against non-human foes. The digressions, on the other hand, appear to be cautionary tales where the poet appears to be critical of the honor-based "pirate economy." This is apparent in the stories of Finnesburg and Freawaru/ Ingeld and in other, shorter episodes. One example is the case of King Hrethel's sons Herebeald and Haethcyn. One brother accidentally killed the other by means of a wayward arrow and as his death could not be properly avenged, the king, who happened to be Hygelac's brother, died of sorrow. As Beowulf told this tragic tale it is obvious that he had sympathy for Hrethel who felt as a father who lost his son to the gallows would have felt. Yet Haethcyn was not killed at this time; he was killed battle by Swedish King Ongentheow, in revenge for Haethcyn's kidnapping of Ongentheow's wife.

It is generally assumed that the events of *Beowulf* took place in pagan times. Denmark was not Christianized until the tenth century.[16] The Danes appealed to their pagan gods when Grendel was attacking and the three funerals are all pagan cremations. Yet the poet himself was a Christian, as Dr. Larry D. Benson wrote in his article about paganism in *Beowulf* : "…critics today generally agree that the poem is a unified work of a Christian author."[17] Dr. Benson notes the Dane's religious inconsistency: Grendel was aroused to anger when he heard the Danes praising God for His creation yet later we read that they "knew nothing of God" and were

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[15] Ibid. 72.

[16] "Christianity Comes to Denmark," National Museum of Denmark, , accessed March 22, 2018, https://en.natmus.dk/historical-knowledge/denmark/prehistoric-period-until-1050-ad/the-viking-age/religion-magic-death-and-rituals/christianity-comes-to-denmark/.

[17] Benson, Larry D. "The Pagan Coloring of Beowulf," *The Beowulf Reader*, ed. Peter S. Baker (2000) https://classroom.google.com/u/1/o/NTg2NjY3NjI4MVpa.

sacrificing to their idols. Without quoting scripture or mentioning Christ, the poet nevertheless points out the futility of the Old Testament-style "eye for an eye, tooth for a tooth" ethic of revenge and retaliation that prevailed in Germanic culture of that time. With the continual need to acquire loot and the ease with which men took offense, there was no honorable way out of a dispute apart from violent action. As Adrien Bonjour wrote in *The Digressions in Beowulf*, "The irresistible force of tribal enmity sooner or later sweeps aside with its imperative all human attempts at compromise."[18] There was no mechanism for forgiveness and the concept of "turning the other cheek" was quite alien. Christianity offered a way out of the endless cycle of revenge but even when Christianity arrived, the populations did not consistently embrace the gentle teachings of the Beatitudes.

The story is told that St. Ufilas, "Apostle to the Goths," translated the Old and New Testaments into the Gothic language but because of the war-loving nature of the Gothic people, he omitted the book of Kings on the grounds that its stories were too bellicose.[19] Even into the Age of Chivalry the knights were so prone to violence that the Church instituted several "no-violence" days each week, such as the Truce of God and the Peace of God. The Truce of God was an eleventh century agreement, urged by the Catholic Church, as a means to reduce violence and warfare. It decreed that there should be no warfare from sunset each Wednesday until sunrise the following Monday.[20] The Peace of God attempted to protect non-combatants, such as peasants and monks, from violence. The Crusades were effective in redirecting the energies of restless warrior knights away from European lands and towards *Outrémer*. The Christianization

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[18] Bonjour, Adrien, "The Digressions in Beowulf," quoted in Camargo, Martin, "The Finn Episode and the Tragedy of Revenge in Beowulf," *Studies in Philogy* 78, no. 5 (1981): 120-34. http://www.jstory.org/stable/417401.
[19] "Ulfilas," CATHOLIC ENCYCLOPEDIA: Ulfilas, , accessed March 21, 2018, http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/15120c.htm.
[20] Edward Potts Cheyney, *A Short History of England* (Boston: Ginn, 1960), 91.

of northern Europe and the establishment of centralized government ended, for the most part, the endemic warfare between local chieftains and their war bands. Of course, this was not the end of warfare between nations.

To summarize, the poem describes events that probably took place in the sixth century, when Denmark and Geatland were pagan and the culture was based on preserving one's honor and collecting enough treasure, through violent means, to keep one's warband satisfied. The poet, on the other hand, was a Christian and had as a goal demonstrating the hopelessness and the misery caused by a culture of perpetual warfare and looting. As a Christian, the poet would have believed in the New Testament Christian ideal of forgiveness and love for one's neighbor and the dangers of materialism. Christ taught to "… lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust doth corrupt, and where thieves do not break through nor steal…"[21] and the Apostle Paul cautioned Timothy that "The love of money is the root of all kinds of evil."[22] He makes this clear when he described the treasures in the dragon's hoard as rusty and ultimately worthless. He does not present Beowulf as a non-materialist pacifist but he does present him as a very good man for the times he lived in. Beowulf demonstrated personal courage when fighting the monsters yet he was not free from the Christian sin of vainglory. He was not personally ambitious for power. The poet shows him as the best a man could be while still ignorant of the Gospel message. The sections of the poem that describe the honor-based system in full flower, such as the Finnesburg episode and the Ingeld/ Freawaru disaster, are saturated with a sense of hopelessness. *Wergild* and peace-weaving are ineffective: the shaky peace they offered was temporary because they lacked sufficient glory. A completely new philosophy was needed to provide a basis for forgiveness and peace such as is inherent in

[21] Mt. 6:20 KJV.
[22] I Tim. 6:10 KJV.

Christianity. The poet's Christian ideals are not consistent and his hero Beowulf is not perfect, but they both suggest a better way, from "an eye for an eye" to "blessed are the peacemakers."[23]

[23] Mt. 5:9 KJV

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