



HONOUR,
EXCHANGE
and VIOLENCE
in *Beowulf*

PETER S. BAKER

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IN *BEOWULF*

Anglo-Saxon Studies

ISSN 1475–2468

GENERAL EDITORS

John Hines and Catherine Cubitt

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Honour, Exchange and Violence in *Beowulf*

Peter S. Baker

D. S. BREWER

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First published 2013
D. S. Brewer, Cambridge

ISBN 978–1–84384–346–7

D. S. Brewer is an imprint of Boydell & Brewer Ltd
PO Box 9, Woodbridge, Suffolk IP12 3DF, UK
and of Boydell & Brewer Inc.
668 Mount Hope Ave, Rochester, NY 14620–2731, USA
website: www.boydellandbrewer.com

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A catalogue record of this publication is available
from the British Library

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Printed from camera-ready copy supplied by the author

Printed and bound in Great Britain by
CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon, CR0 4YY

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Preface

I first began thinking about the violence of *Beowulf* during the early days of the occupation of Iraq. Like many Americans, I had been bewildered by our government's efforts to persuade us that going to war was the right thing to do. Each *casus belli*—that Iraq was developing nuclear, chemical or biological weapons, that it was collaborating with Al Qaeda, that it was somehow linked to the attacks of September 11, 2001, that it was failing to co-operate with United Nations inspectors—had in its turn been discredited. Further, there had been credible predictions of excessive costs, sectarian strife, and high casualties (especially among Iraqi civilians). Yet war had been a certainty: our leaders clearly wanted it, and they were determined to have it. As I watched the predicted and entirely avoidable disaster unfold, I had no answer for the question: *why were we in Iraq?*

Thinking about the causes of the Iraq war led me to think about the violence of *Beowulf* in ways that I had never done before. I had often asked my students questions like 'why does Beowulf go to Denmark?' and 'why does he fight the dragon?' which always led to stimulating discussions; but I had never asked the same questions of such minor characters as Hengest and Thryth or addressed the broader question of what drove the violence of this violent culture.

There is an extensive scholarly literature on violence, crossing many temporal, geographical, disciplinary and theoretical boundaries. One cannot take account of it all, but must select the approaches that seem likeliest to provide answers to the questions one wants answered (see p. 2, n. 4). This study is historicist and anthropological in its approach, reading history both as story (or analogue) and as evidence for the cultural world of poet and audience, and reading anthropology to understand such concepts as honour, gift-exchange and dispute resolution in a global as well as an Anglo-Saxon context.

One aspect of this book that its methodology will not explain is its choice of words for certain key concepts—its diction or, to use an old-fashioned word, its tone. I have tried on the one hand to avoid euphemism, the use of certain words (e.g. ‘feud’, ‘tribe’, ‘booty’), common in *Beowulf* criticism, whose effect, it seems to me, is to romanticize and soften the focus on their referents. On the other hand, I have avoided language that would imply criticism of the *Beowulf* poet’s failure to share my views on war and peace. It seems undeniable that early medieval poets sometimes encourage us to view as admirable characters who would not count as good people in our world (*þæt wæs gōd cyning!*). But it seems more useful to understand than to condemn.

It is for the reader to decide whether I have succeeded in making a contribution to the understanding of this work of the distant past while declining the temptation to judge the values that inform it. I can, however, testify to the difficulty of the project. Consider: When *Beowulf* goes with Higelac to do battle in Frisia, he kills thirty men, cutting them off from past and future, robbing them of honour and dignity, turning their wives into widows and their children into orphans, abandoning their corpses on the battlefield to be devoured by wolves and ravens. And each time he bends over a bloody corpse to strip sword, helmet and corslet from what moments ago was a proud warrior, what he feels is joy, for the destruction of that man’s life is his gain. *And Beowulf is a good man*, gentle with his fellows, kindly and generous to his subordinates, great defender of his nation, God’s ally in the eternal battle against the forces of darkness. The reader who manages to bear all this in mind will understand the spirit in which I have tried to approach this work.

It is a pleasure to return to Boydell & Brewer with this project some twelve years after I first published with them; I would especially like to thank Caroline Palmer for her careful attention to the book and her calm and reasonable advice.

I am grateful to the University of Virginia Sesquicentennial Associateship programme for a leave of absence during which I was able to write the final chapters of this work. A number of my colleagues at UVA have made valuable contributions. It would not have been possible to write Chapter Four without the advice of colleagues in nineteenth-century literature, including Karen Chase, Jerome McGann and Herbert Tucker, who patiently listened to and commented on a lecture based on a preliminary version: Alison Booth was

especially helpful, reading an early version of the first part of Chapter Four and providing both advice and encouragement. I have enjoyed discussing a number of the topics in this book over lunches with Paul Kershaw, whose *Peaceful Kings* was an especially important source as I was finishing the project. I have consulted with Gordon Stewart and Erik Midelfort about translations from German and with Christine Schott about translations from Old Icelandic.

An anonymous reader for the press (you know who you are) read all of this book but a few pages recently added and suggested numerous improvements. A. C. Spearing, best of all possible colleagues, read much of the book in draft and offered many suggestions; his encouragement has been just as valuable, and his own books and articles have always been important influences. Michael Lapidge befriended me when I was a graduate student, more than thirty years ago, and I am still proud to call him a friend; his scholarship has always been an inspiration and a model. He read much of this work in draft and answered a number of questions on particular points. The influence on this book of my teacher and mentor, Fred C. Robinson, will be evident to all informed readers. His insistence on exacting attention to the meanings of words, exemplified by his 'Lexicography and Literary Criticism', which appeared just as I was heading off to college, has, it is fair to say, informed everything I have tried to write on the subject of Old English literature. My wife, Rosemary Gould, read nearly the entire book and offered much valuable advice. A formidable scholar of nineteenth-century literature, she was especially helpful with Chapter Four; but without her love and wise support I could not have completed this project at all.

Finally I will mention that none of the people I have thanked here has read every word of this book. All have deniability for any errors of fact or judgement that readers and reviewers may detect.

Peter S. Baker
Charlottesville, Virginia
28 October 2012

Abbreviations

ASC = Dumville and Keynes, eds., *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*

BT = Bosworth, Toller, and Campbell, *An Anglo-Saxon Dictionary*

CCSL = Corpus Christianorum Series Latina

DOE = Cameron, Amos, and Healey, *Dictionary of Old English*

EETS = Early English Text Society

HBS = Henry Bradshaw Society

HE = Bede, *Historia Ecclesiastica Gentis Anglorum*

HF = Gregory of Tours, *Historia Francorum*

MED = Kurath and S. M. Kuhn, *Middle English Dictionary*

MGH = Monumenta Germaniae Historica

OED = John Simpson, *Oxford English Dictionary Online*

PL = Migne, *Patrologiae cursus completus*

CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

THERE'S NO getting around the fact that *Beowulf* is violent. As probably hundreds of commentators have observed,¹ the poem is organized around the hero's battles with three monsters; further, the 'digressions and episodes' that frequently interrupt the action are more often than not tales of strife. It has been said that much of *Beowulf* consists of speech rather than action² and that it might more appropriately be described as an elegy than as an epic.³ There is much truth in these observations. But when the characters of *Beowulf* speak, they generally speak of fighting: they vow or elicit vows to fight, thank people for fighting or blame them for not fighting, remember or anticipate fights, offer advice about how to become a better fighter. And the elegiac content of the poem, the 'dirge' (Tolkien's word) that not only concludes it but is also woven through its rich fabric, is for those who have died violently and those who inevitably will.

¹ E.g. Baker, '*Beowulf*'. Further citations for such an obvious point would be otiose, but this seems a good place to mention several general works that I have found myself consulting over and over, though I don't often have occasion to cite them: A. Orchard, *Critical Companion*; Bjork and Niles, *A Beowulf Handbook*; Fulk and Cain, *A History of Old English Literature*; Garmonsway and Jacqueline Simpson, *Beowulf and Its Analogues*; Calder and Allen, *Sources and Analogues I*; Calder, Bjork, et al., *Sources and Analogues II*; Lapidge, Blair, et al., *Blackwell Encyclopaedia*. Among editions, I have found Mitchell and Robinson, *Beowulf* and Fulk, Bjork, and Niles, *Klaeber's Beowulf* to be especially valuable. While I have sometimes disagreed with their readings, my admiration for the editors' industry and judgement is unbounded.

² A. Orchard, *Critical Companion*, pp. 203–8.

³ J. R. R. Tolkien, '*Beowulf*: The Monsters and the Critics', p. 275.

This book starts from the position that the violence of *Beowulf* is a worthy object of study, and that one way to approach it (there are others, just as valid⁴) is as an element in the complex of social practices depicted in the poem. Violence as social practice has been treated in wider-ranging literary studies, especially those by John M. Hill (to which I owe a particular debt). But the most extensive scholarly literature on violence in the early Middle Ages has been produced by historians,⁵ who have for many years been in fruitful dialogue with anthropologists working in the same area.⁶ In attempting to understand the social context for the violence of *Beowulf* I have gratefully relied upon work in these disciplines as well as a wide variety of primary sources—other heroic poems, sagas, histories, chronicles, charters, homilies, saints' lives and more.

The unwelcome guest

Violence in Old English studies is a bit like the eccentric relation whom one can't get away with not inviting to the family reunion—the one who keeps

⁴ For the material culture of violence, see e.g. Davidson, *The Sword in Anglo-Saxon England*; Brooks, 'Weapons and Armour'; and Leslie Webster's appendix 'Archaeology and *Beowulf*' in Mitchell and Robinson, *Beowulf*. There are numerous histories of medieval warfare; these rarely address the kinds of questions explored here: see e.g. Contamine, *War in the Middle Ages*; Keen, *Medieval Warfare: A History* and Nicholson, *Medieval Warfare*. Under the heading 'cultural studies' we find not one, but a range of approaches, including the Lacanian in Thormann, 'Enjoyment of Violence' and the Girardian in E. Wilson, 'Blood Wrought Peace'. Important theoretical studies include Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*; Scarry, *The Body in Pain* and Žižek, *Violence*. That I have found little occasion to cite such works should not be read as a rejection of the approaches they take.

⁵ See especially the collections by Davies and Fouracre, *Settlement of Disputes*; Halsall, *Violence and Society*; Brown and Górecki, *Conflict in Medieval Europe*; Drake, *Violence in Late Antiquity* and Tuten and Billado, *Feud, Violence and Practice*. See also the book-length studies Halsall, *Warfare and Society* and Hyams, *Rancor & Reconciliation in Medieval England*.

⁶ For the anthropological literature on disputes, see e.g. Roberts, *Order and Dispute* and the essays in Caplan, *Understanding Disputes*. For a survey of some anthropological literature addressed to historians, see Roberts, 'The Study of Dispute: Anthropological Perspectives'.

bringing up topics of conversation that no one else wants to talk about. In a recent essay aimed primarily at students, Andy Orchard addresses the question, 'Is violence what Old English literature is about?'⁷ His answer is a wise and worthwhile meditation on the value of Anglo-Saxon culture; but what strikes one first about the essay is the way it starts off in a defensive crouch. The field of Old English (synonymous in the popular imagination with *Beowulf* studies) has long been haunted by the opinion of some that there is nothing much in it aside from 'hairy men beating each other up'⁸ and that today's sophisticated readers 'regard tales of feasting, feuding and dragon-slaying as irrelevant'.⁹ In response, or perhaps just in keeping with the tenor of the times, a prominent strain of contemporary literary criticism sees in *Beowulf* not so much a celebration as a critique of the violent way of life it depicts; and much criticism promotes Anglo-Saxon culture as literate, cultivated and evolved well beyond ancient barbarities.

The Anglo-Saxons were far from primitive: every advance in our knowledge of them (for example, the recent discovery of the Staffordshire Hoard) increases our appreciation for the sophistication of their culture. But sophistication and violence are not incompatible: in Anglo-Saxon England, as in other medieval cultures, early and late, the highest levels of society were organized around war-making. The nobility of this period was a warrior elite whose male members zealously cultivated and jealously defended their warlike reputations and whose women participated in the bellicosity in their own way. While the accomplishments of kings who promoted learning and the arts were celebrated, the most admired kings were those who were best at waging war. The obituary of Alfred the Great in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* says that *se wæs cyning ofer eall Ongelcyn būtan ðæm dæle þe under Dena onwalde wæs* 'he was king over all the English na-

⁷ A. Orchard, 'Beowulf and Other Battlers'. To be fair I must mention, as another contributor to the volume in which this essay appears, that the questions heading each essay were supplied by the editors.

⁸ Janie Steen, quoted in *The Guardian* for 20 March 2001 (<http://www.guardian.co.uk/education/2001/mar/20/highereducation.english>), describing her fears on beginning compulsory Old English at Oxford. These fears proved unfounded (happily for Old English studies, as shown by Steen, *Verse and Virtuosity*).

⁹ *The Daily Telegraph* for 22 June 1999, quoted by Lee, *Whither Old English?*

tion except the part that was under Danish control' (*ASC* A 900).¹⁰ What most impressed the chronicler was not Alfred's educational programme, but rather his expansionist military policy.

To the modern way of thinking, a violent act is a severe disturbance of the social order. While we can resolve many kinds of disputes through private negotiation, those that become violent always draw the attention of the authorities (or are supposed to do so). By contrast, up until the end of the Middle Ages, and even beyond, violence had a recognized place in the social order, whether in international relations or in household affairs. The moment in *Das Nibelungenlied* where Kriemhild tells Hagen how Siegfried has punished her for insulting Brunhild brings us up short:

'Daz hât mich sît gerouwen,' sprach daz edel wîp.
'ouch hât er sô zerblouwen dar umbe mînen lîp.
daz ich ie beswârte ir mit rede den muot,
daz hât vil wol errochen der helt küene unde guot.'¹¹

'I have since come to regret that', said the noble lady,
'and he has beaten me within an inch of my life;
that brave and good hero has very well avenged
my ever having troubled her mind with my talk.'

What shocks is not so much the statement that Siegfried has beaten his wife nearly to death (such things sometimes happen even in our own enlightened times) as that Kriemhild seems to approve of her own beating and expects Hagen to do so as well. The eruption into visibility (in a passage omitted from one popular translation¹²) of what Slavoj Žižek calls

¹⁰ Quotations from the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* (abbreviated *ASC* followed by manuscript sigil and year) are from Dumville and Keynes, *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle: A Collaborative Edition*. With this *Chronicle* entry compare a poem commemorating Æthelstan's donation of a gospel book to Christ Church, Canterbury; it praises his piety and generosity, but opens by noting that God made him king *ut ualeat reges rex ipse feroces / uincere bellipotens, colla superba terens* 'so that this king himself, mighty in war, might be able to conquer other fierce kings, treading down their proud necks' (Lapidge, 'Some Latin Poems', pp. 95–6).

¹¹ Hennig, *Das Nibelungenlied*, p. 141.

¹² Pretzel, *Das Nibelungenlied*, pp. 134–5; the suppressed stanza would have been numbered 837.

‘objective violence’—that which is inherent in the organization of society and normally hidden—forcibly reminds us that the line separating such violence from the ‘subjective’, which is seen as out of the ordinary and often aberrant and blameworthy, has, since the thirteenth century, been erased and redrawn in quite a different place.¹³

The principals in *Das Nibelungenlied* are at the top of the hierarchy of status and power: there are no authorities who can impose peace upon them and bring an end to their disputes. But medieval states were not often able to impose peace upon persons of lower status either, and their efforts to regulate certain kinds of violence, such as that directed against wives and slaves, seems to have been nominal. Max Weber’s famous definition of the state as that entity which claims a monopoly on the use of physical violence does not apply here.¹⁴

The state could react with extreme violence, on the other hand, to offenses it cared about and was able to regulate. Mutilation was a common punishment for crimes such as theft, slander and rape;¹⁵ to judge from frequent references to *hēafodstoccas* ‘head-stakes’ in the boundary clauses of charters, these grisly reminders of the penalty for evildoing must have been a common sight throughout the country.¹⁶ A law from an (unfortunately

¹³ The distinction of objective, subjective and symbolic violence is fundamental to Žižek, *Violence*; for definitions, see pp. 1–2.

¹⁴ As Weber himself recognized (‘Politik als Beruf’, http://de.wikisource.org/wiki/Politik_als_Beruf). For the decline of private violence and private methods of dispute resolution along with the emergence of the modern Weberian state, see especially Ruff, *Violence in Early Modern Europe* and Pinker, *The Better Angels of Our Nature: Why Violence Has Declined*, who assembles much statistical evidence for the decline of both warfare and homicide. On legal regulation of violence against wives, see e.g. Hawkes, ‘“Reasonable” Laws’. On punishment of slaves, see Pelteret, *Slavery in Early Medieval England from the Reign of Alfred until the Twelfth Century*, pp. 87, 101, 104.

¹⁵ See O’Brien O’Keeffe, ‘Body and Law’, especially p. 215, for a summary of punishments commonly in use and changes in legal custom over time. Reynolds, *Anglo-Saxon Deviant Burial Customs* (see also his ‘Crime and Punishment’) contains a comprehensive survey of the evidence for such punishments as leave traces in the archaeological record (especially hanging, decapitation and dismemberment), and burial of criminals and other ‘social deviants’ in ‘execution cemeteries’ and elsewhere.

¹⁶ By a search in the *DOE Corpus* (<http://tapor.library.utoronto.ca/doecorpus/>), various forms of the word *hēafodstoc* occur in nineteen charters; see also Reynolds, *Anglo-Saxon*

lost) law code of Eadgar is reported to have dictated that a thief or robber taken anywhere in the country

caecatis luminibus, truncatis manibus, auulsis auribus, incicis naribus, et subtractis pedibus excrucietur diutius; et sic demum decoriata pelle capitis cum crinibus, per omnia pene membra mortuus relinqueretur in agris, deuorandus a feris et auibus atque nocturnicanibus.

would be tortured at length by having his eyes put out, his hands cut off, his ears torn off, his nostrils carved open and his feet removed; and finally, with the skin and hair of his head flayed off, he would be abandoned in the open fields, dead in respect of nearly all his limbs, to be devoured by wild beasts and birds and hounds of the night.¹⁷

The spirit if not the letter of this law seems to be confirmed by later laws prescribing similar penalties for theft.¹⁸ Yet one may doubt how often the state was able both to apprehend and punish such criminals: the law of this period not only predicted how the state might act, but also licensed local groups to act on their own behalf, as when (to take a famous instance) the laws of Wihtried permitted communities to regard as a thief any outsider who seemed to be acting stealthily and either kill or set him free, as they judged best.¹⁹ To the modern eye, Anglo-Saxon law enforcement looks disconcertingly informal.

Medieval levels of violence seem unsustainable to us. It seems obvious that a state that takes so little action against violent behaviour must be too chaotic to survive, and one in which royal succession is frequently decided by combat and murder must be anarchic and on the point of collapse. In response, perhaps, to this intuition, some critics have looked at the society depicted in *Beowulf* and declared that it contains the seeds of its own destruction.²⁰ Perhaps so; but if the society of *Beowulf* bears any relation to that of Anglo-Saxon England—say, as a reflection of the values of much

Deviant Burial Customs, pp. 273–4.

¹⁷ Lantfred's *Translatio et miracula S. Swithuni*, ed. and trans. Lapidge, *The Cult of St Swithun*, pp. 310–13.

¹⁸ For comment see, in addition to O'Keeffe, Wormald, *Making of English Law*, pp. 125–7.

¹⁹ Wihtried 28 (Liebermann, *Gesetze der Angelsachsen*, i. 14); Ine 20 (*ibid.* i. 98).

²⁰ See e.g. Berger and Leicester, 'Social Structure as Doom'.

of its audience—then those seeds are surely of the slow-germinating kind. After all, the Anglo-Saxons managed to muddle through some six tumultuous centuries.

Methods for handling violent disputes were broadly similar across much of early medieval Europe, both when codified in law and when governed less formally by what Patrick Geary calls ‘a complex of shared values and implicit rules’ (quoted below, p. 175), both where the state was strong (e.g. Carolingian Francia) and where it was all but nonexistent (e.g. Iceland). These methods succeeded in maintaining reasonably stable societies, though with levels of violence that most modern readers of *Beowulf* would find unacceptable.

The violence of *Beowulf*, if an unwelcome topic, is nevertheless an important aspect of the poem. We will find that this violence is not a simple matter of ‘hairy men beating each other up’; rather, it is a complex phenomenon, the understanding of which constitutes much of this book’s project. The following sections will introduce some of the concepts that inform the remainder of this book.

Violence as social practice

Violence is a social practice, and every violent act is a social transaction. Like all social practices, this one is governed by custom and law. In a valuable survey of scholarship on early medieval violence, the historian Guy Halsall writes, ‘Violent relationships can often be seen as a discourse, structured around shared norms.’²¹ This short statement has many implications, which Halsall develops throughout his survey and his other scholarship. For our purposes, the insistence on the importance of norms will be essential. Halsall again:

To read the intentions or significance of violence, to know what kinds of reply are deemed ‘correct’, or to try to anticipate the responses of opponents or third parties, requires mutual acceptance of norms, especially those governing the legitimacy of these actions. Such norms are often founded on

²¹ Halsall, *Violence and Society*, p. 16.

religious belief and spiritual sanction, and this is especially true in considering the ritual side of violence. Where the actions of one side are not based upon these norms, as was obviously the case with pagan Vikings, the other will not be able to understand them, put them into perspective, or know how to respond. Regardless of how the perpetrators see them, their actions will always seem to break the rules, and, in short, to be extreme, unfettered violence. This lack of comprehension surely generated the ninth-century terror of the Vikings and the effects which this in turn produced, and helps us to reconcile this terror and its consequences with the fact that, from an abstracted viewpoint, Viking warfare encompassed the same types of action, fought for the same purposes, as western European Christian warfare.²²

The practices and warlike values of pagan Scandinavians and Christian Anglo-Saxons were similar enough to justify my citing pagan Scandinavian sources to illuminate *Beowulf*. But the differences could be significant. Christian armies secured their victories by requiring oaths (along with hostages) from vanquished foes. But oaths meant different things to pagans and Christians:

Because of their blithe contempt for the wrath of the Christian God, the pagan Northmen appeared untrustworthy in the extreme to the English. Just as the Romans had found the Celts of Spain shocking in their lack of *fides*, the English were confounded by a foe to whom oaths seemed mere words, to be honored or broken as the situation required.²³

An early attempt by Alfred the Great to deal with this problem, discussed by Abels (*ibid.*), is nearly comic. In 876, after Alfred and some vikings had fought to a stalemate, the two armies agreed to exchange hostages and oaths, the vikings swearing *on þām hālgan bēage* 'on the holy ring' (*ASC* A 876) rather than, say, on a relic. But the hope that pagans could be bound by an oath that merely exchanged a Christian for a pagan object was disappointed when the viking army stole away to Exeter, where they

²² Halsall, *Violence and Society*, pp. 11–12.

²³ Abels, *Lordship and Military Obligation*, pp. 85–6.

made more trouble. For Asser, this was yet another tiresome instance of the *fallacia* 'deceitfulness' of the vikings.²⁴

The problem of groups in conflict failing to understand each other's 'language' is familiar in the 'asymmetric warfare' of the modern world. Opponents may not only practise different religions (Jewish vs. Muslim or Christian vs. Muslim). They may also differ in their access to war-making technologies (one side having tanks and unmanned planes while the other has AK-47 rifles and hand-launched rockets), and such imbalances can force significant tactical differences. In the Iraq war, bad feelings and exaggerated fears were all but inevitable when American forces relied heavily on air power, which often killed innocent civilians, while insurgents resorted to suicide bombings and roadside IEDs (improvised explosive devices).

To return to *Beowulf*: it would be jarring, but not inappropriate, to call the conflict between Grendel and the Danes an instance of asymmetric warfare. In addition to what one might describe as a difference of faith (Grendel and his mother, descended from Cain, are God's enemies, while the Danes, though pagan, somehow are not), Grendel's equipment and tactics are radically unlike those of the Danes: he fights without weapons, relying instead on his claws, teeth and massive strength, which enable him to kill thirty warriors at a time. Apparently too tough to be harmed by a sword (987–90), Grendel leaves the Danes confused and unable to contend with such an alien and uncanny foe.²⁵ The evil of Grendel is reflected not only in the rhetoric of damnation that is attached to him, but also in his fighting style.

Unlike the Danes, Beowulf knows how to speak monster. He is a match for Grendel in strength, killing thirty men in a single battle (2361–2), and in tactics, putting aside weapons and fighting with his hands (435–40, 2501–8). He can also prevail in the more conventional battle against Grendel's mother, once he has located a sword that will cut her preter-

²⁴ Asser's *Vita Alfredi* ch. 49 (Stevenson, *Asser's Life of King Alfred*, pp. 36–8; Keynes and Lapidge, *Alfred the Great*, pp. 82–3). For commentary see, in addition to Abels, the notes by Keynes and Lapidge, *Alfred the Great*, 245–6.

²⁵ The Danes are not weak in conventional military terms, and Hrothgar is not to be considered a weak king (862–3): one of their most notable victories, the destruction of the Heathobards, is still in the future (*Widsith* 45–9).

naturally tough flesh, and he can do so in a terrifyingly alien environment: the *nīðsele* 'hostile hall' at the bottom of the monster-infested *mere*.

Beowulf's strength, courage and adaptability have their limits: he cannot breathe flame and he is not fireproof. Yet the dragon's way of fighting probably should not be described in terms of norms. The dragon is represented as a beast, as has often been pointed out: it cannot be expected to conform to human practices or condemned for failing to do so. In a sense, Beowulf's death in the dragon fight may more closely resemble Carloman's reputedly being killed by a boar (*ASC* A 885) than it does his early monster fights. Of course, this battle has greater significance than any hunting accident could have; but the fact that the soulless dragon does not challenge the rules that govern violence in the human realm may explain why, unlike the Grendelkin, it is described largely without rancour.

The poet's treatment of the Heathobards, Swedes, Franks and Frisians, human enemies of the Geats and Danes, is also surprisingly without rancour: both the poet and his characters avoid the rhetoric of damnation that is routinely applied to the Grendelkin. One possible explanation is that all these nations are imagined as subscribing to the same norms. The human battles of *Beowulf* are fought according to a set of rules that is well understood by all the parties: no one is seen as 'fighting dirty'; everyone understands what is going on. Another explanation, though, is that these battles are not motivated primarily by enmity. Halsall, again, points out that '[t]he victims' of early medieval aggression 'were in some ways incidental, though the choice of target was usually justified by some real or alleged insult or wrong'. The true motivation for aggression often lay in the relationship between 'the ruler or lord and his followers or magnates'.²⁶ In early medieval societies, a man's value was determined by his prowess as a warrior, and everything worth having—status and the things that came with it: wealth, land, a desirable wife—depended on his lord's recognition of this prowess.²⁷ The king of a nation at peace could not deliver these

²⁶ Halsall, *Violence and Society*, p. 19.

²⁷ Helen Nicholson outlines the warrior's motivations at the beginning of her study of medieval warfare: 'Individual warriors became involved in war partly because they had no choice: their employer or superior demanded that they fight. On the other hand, they also fought in order to win glory and honour and so raise their prestige in society.'

things to his people, and the results could be dire.²⁸ Halsall alludes to a story in Gregory of Tours's *Historia Francorum* in which, when the Frankish king Theuderic refuses to join his brothers Lothar and Childebert in an attack against Burgundy, his men threaten to desert him, whereupon he promises them as much loot as they want if they will follow him instead to Clermont. This they do, and the army *totam regionem deuastat et proterit* 'devastates and subjugates the entire region'.²⁹ Theuderic's Franks are after glory and loot, and they don't care much where they get it. Gregory does not even bother to mention their justification (if they have one) for the attack.

The major battles of *Beowulf* have their causes: monsters have attacked, insults and injuries must be repaid. But as motivators of violence, friendly relationships within groups are at least as important as hostile relationships between enemies. An essential feature of these battles is that someone makes good, coming away from them with treasure and favour. Each of Beowulf's early monster fights is concluded with a round of gift-giving (1020–49, 1866–9), and Beowulf receives wealth and enhanced status on his return to the Geats (2190–5). Hengest carries all of Finn's belongings, including his queen, away from the battle of Finnesburh (1154–9), Beowulf carries thirty sets of battle gear away from the battle in which Higelac has fallen (2361–2), Weohstan is well rewarded for the killing of Eanmund (2616–8), and Eofor and Wulf are even more richly rewarded for the death of Ongentheow at Ravenswood (2989–98). Even the dragon fight can be read in this way, as Chapter Seven will argue: though dying, Beowulf ends

They might win wealth (land or money or other property), both from booty taken during war and from gifts from their grateful employer or lord. They would win the admiration of others, and might be able thereby to attract the attention of desirable partners, so increasing the possibility of marriage and leaving children to carry on their line. Brave deeds could be recorded in poetry or in written history, ensuring fame after one's death; likewise a marriage with many children ensured a different sort of continuation after death' (Nicholson, *Medieval Warfare*, p. 2). It should be noted that Nicholson is discussing not the early Middle Ages alone, but the period 300–1500.

²⁸ See Reuter, 'The End of Carolingian Military Expansion'.

²⁹ Levison and Krusch, *Gregorii episcopi turonensis libri historiarum X*, pp. 107–8; cited elsewhere as *HF*.

the battle in some ways better off than before. If the prospect of wealth and enhanced status is a motive for aggression among sixth-century Franks, it seems to be equally so for the warriors of *Beowulf*.

Honour

'Honour' is one of the most frequently used words in this book, a major project of which is to understand the ways in which honour motivates action in *Beowulf*, as characters fight to acquire, maintain or recover it. That it does so has been stated often. The idea that what the Beowulfian warrior chiefly desires is 'fame' or 'glory'—Old English *ār*, *blæd*, *dōm*, *brēð*, *lof*, *mārðo*, *tīr* or *þrymm* with various compounds (the number of relevant terms is telling)—has been around for well over a century.³⁰

I have long been uncomfortable with the words 'fame' and 'glory' as frequently employed in the literature on *Beowulf*. In starting to write this book I found myself avoiding these terms as both imprecise and overburdened with associations (for example, with paganism—see below, pp. 23–5) which I had no wish to evoke. Rather, I have chosen the word 'honour', which to be sure is fraught in its own way. But my choice of the word has two advantages. First, it connects us with a considerable body of useful research on honour spanning many times and cultures.³¹ Second, it

³⁰ Clark, 'The Hero and the Theme', p. 272, traces it as far back as the 1892 translation of *Beowulf* by Earle, *Deeds of Beowulf*, pp. xciv–xcv. Earle writes: 'In the last clause of this inner Prologue occurs a word LOF praise, to which I attach a peculiar value. This word occurs again in the closing line of the Poem, but in the interval it appears only once, and then in a position which, whether mechanically or mentally considered, is central. More than any other word that can be named, that word LOF is the Motto of this Poem. What a prince must aim at is PRAISE, that is to say, the moral approbation of his peers.' Earle refers to lines 24, 1513 and 3182.

³¹ The literature on honour is in fact immense and written in many languages, and I cannot pretend to be in control of all, or even most of it. For definitions of broad usefulness together with extensive bibliography, Stewart, *Honor* and Alexander Welsh, *What is Honor?* are excellent. For a survey of the Germanic field, somewhat dated, see Jones, *Honor in German Literature*. Gehl, *Ruhm und Ehre* is a trap to be avoided: for a critique see Andersson, 'The Displacement of the Heroic Ideal in the Family Sagas'. For Iceland, W. I. Miller, *Bloodtaking and Peacemaking*, Byock, *Viking Age Iceland*, pp. 185–251, and Byock, 'Feuding in Viking-Age Iceland's Great Village'. Literary

associates the Beowulfian concept with the preoccupations of many other medieval characters, such as the heroes of the Icelandic sagas and the knights of romance. Such scholarship as William Ian Miller's *Bloodtaking and Peacemaking* and Andrew Cowell's *Medieval Warrior Aristocracy* (a study of French literature), which discuss the pursuit of honour exhaustively, leave little doubt that Beowulfian 'fame' does indeed participate in a broader medieval phenomenon.

Honour is a complex concept with many moving parts, definitions sometimes in conflict, and much variability across cultures. The definition used in this study begins with honour as the esteem in which one is held by others, measured by what they say. If one is spoken of in admiring terms, then one has great honour—'fame' or 'glory' in traditional Beowulfian terms.

To refine the definition, if 'dignity' is the respect that is one's due by virtue of being alive, human and free, 'honour' is something more, as anthropologist David Graeber explains in a discussion of slavery (understood as the violent stripping away of dignity):

. . . this ability to strip others of their dignity becomes, for the master, the foundation of his honor. . . . Men of honor tend to combine a sense of total ease and self-assurance, which comes with the habit of command, with a notorious jumpiness, a heightened sensitivity to slights and insults, the feeling that a man (and it is almost always a man) is somehow reduced, humiliated, if any 'debt of honor' is allowed to go unpaid. This is because honor is not the same as dignity. One might even say: honor is surplus dignity. It is that heightened consciousness of power, and its dangers, that comes from having stripped away the power and dignity of others; or at the very least, from the knowledge that one is capable of doing so. At its simplest, honor is that excess dignity that must be defended with the knife or sword.³²

Honour is thus closely connected to the practice of violence, the warrior's

scholarship dealing with honour will be cited throughout this book. An anthropological study that I have found useful for understanding honour in a feuding society is Boehm, *Blood Revenge*.

³² Graeber, *Debt: The First 5,000 Years*, ch. 7.

craft: it is an essential component of the identity of the fighting man.³³ Even today, the word 'honour' remains associated with violence, being especially common in military contexts: it is a property of the soldier, and also of some of the uniformed personnel who have increasingly come to be referred to as 'first responders' in a militarized post-9/11 America, particularly police officers and firefighters.³⁴

To win honour it is not enough to perform violent acts. Graeber again writes, 'the quintessence of a warrior's honor, which is a greatness that can only come from the destruction and degradation of others, is his willingness to throw himself into a game where he risks that same destruction and degradation himself' (ch. 12). One gains nothing by killing children, or burning people in their houses; one must risk both death and the dishonour of defeat.³⁵ Relatedly, one must 'play graciously, and by the rules' (*ibid.*), observing (as stated earlier) the 'shared norms' that govern violence in one's society. For an early medieval male, this usually means facing down one's enemy (as opposed to slipping up behind him or poisoning his

³³ As well understood by Shakespeare, whose Jaques says of the soldier, one of the 'parts' played by men upon the stage of life: 'Full of strange oaths, and bearded like the Pard, / Ielous in honor, sodaine, and quicke in quarrell, / Seeking the bubble Reputation / Euen in the Canons mouth' (*As You Like It* Act II Scene 7).

³⁴ 'Honour' is common in the titles of novels with military themes, such as W. E. B. Griffin's 'Honor Bound' series, David Weber's 'Honor Harrington' series, Radclyffe's 'Honor' series, and the Tom Clancy titles *Debt of Honor*, *Mission of Honor*, and *Shadow of Honor* (the last two apparently commissioned but not written by Clancy). Indeed, the word 'honour' in an American novel's title seems to function as an assurance that it will be set among soldiers, police, firefighters or intelligence agents and that it will be patriotically themed. The study of honour can be an occasion for conservative polemic, as with James Bowman's *Honor: A History* (2006). 'Honour' is also, unsurprisingly, found often in the titles of historical romances (titles gathered from <http://www.amazon.com>, accessed 29 Oct. 2011). The statement concerning the increasing popularity of the phrase 'first responders' is based on a search in the Google Ngram Viewer, <http://books.google.com/ngrams/>, accessed 29 Oct. 2011. 'Honour' does not appear to be associated with other uniformed 'first responders' such as paramedics and emergency room workers.

³⁵ Compare Alexander Welsh, *What is Honor?*, p. 4: 'For men to join in battle is generally thought to be honourable, but not if they are so situated as to be able to kill others without exposing themselves to any danger whatever.'

beer), owning one's deeds and keeping agreements. Finally, it is evident in *Beowulf* that, while a man of honour must be a good fighter, he can also win honour for other attributes: Wulfgar, the door-guard at Heorot, is widely admired for his *wīg ond wīsdōm* 'warfare and wisdom' (350).³⁶

As Miller has shown for the sagas, the assessment of one's own honour and that of others is no simple matter, and people are constantly engaged in the task. Nor is honour an exclusively 'heroic' or 'Germanic' concept. Chrétien de Troyes's *Le Chevalier de la charrette*³⁷ is a drama of honour as much as love. In the fictional world of this romance, to ride in a cart is considered a great disgrace—a stripping away of dignity—and yet Lancelot does so to forward his quest to rescue Guinevere. We judge the characters he meets along the way by their reactions to him: can they correctly assess Lancelot's honour despite his 'dishonourable' act? Chrétien carefully guides our own response to the hero: his fighting prowess, physical beauty, faithfulness to his lady, scrupulous treatment of others (including foes), and willingness to risk his honour by climbing into the cart all enlist our support. And it helps that the act from which his disgrace arises has no particular meaning for the poem's audience. If he had, say, betrayed his lord, abandoned his lady, or slain an unarmed foe, then our estimation of him might be lower: but he has only ridden in a cart. Lancelot's true fault is his hesitating *deus pas* 'two steps' (364, 4505) before climbing into the cart. It is not only a slight to his lady: for the brief moment when he feels *honte* 'shame' (4502), he is himself guilty of the same error as those who will soon be hurling insults at him.

A public challenge to one's honour must always be answered. A knight who taunts Lancelot for riding in the cart must be fought; a bed that has been declared too good for one so disgraced must be slept in. In another of Chrétien's romances, when Enide tells Erec that people are openly criticizing him for spending too much time making love to her and not enough

³⁶ The phrase is apparently, almost predictably, a formula: compare Alfred the Great's letter to Wærferth: *ond hū him ðā spēow ægðer ge mid wīge ge mid wīsdōme* 'and how they then succeeded both with warfare and with wisdom' (Sweet, *King Alfred's West-Saxon Version*, 3.8–9).

³⁷ Citations of Chrétien's romances are from Foerster, *Christian von Troyes: Sämtliche Werke*.

fighting, he sets out on a quest to regain his honour. Erec forces Enide to ride along in silence: he is angry with her as the one who has broken the bad news, but her main role is to bear witness to his deeds as the one who must validate his claim to honour.

In Icelandic sagas women play a similar role, though in a more assertive key, and there too, men look to them for affirmation.³⁸ In *Eyrbyggja Saga*, Þórarinn's mother Geirríð provokes a massacre when, having witnessed an insult to her son, she delivers that most classic of Icelandic taunts: *meir befir þú, Þórarinn, kvenna skap en karla* 'you have more the nature of a woman than of a man, Þórarinn'.³⁹ Returning home after the slaughter, Þórarinn addresses his mother:

Varðak mik, þars myrðir
morðfárs vega þorði,
hlaut orrn af ná neyta
nýjum, kvenna frýju. (p. 38)

I defended myself, where the murderous one
dared to wage deadly battle
(the eagle got to choose fresh carrion
to eat), from the taunts of women.

What Þórarinn's clever skaldic syntax conceals until the last moment is that the insult that had to be acted upon was not the one delivered by the men he has just killed, but rather that of his mother (representative of 'women'). Further, his mother is the one who must now validate the outcome. *Tekit befir þá brýningin* 'then the whetting has been effective', she observes with satisfaction (p. 39).

As he sets out for Denmark, Beowulf looks more like a volunteer than Erec and Þórarinn do, but we are told that prominent Geats *hwetton* 'whetted' him (204). And while we are not to suppose that the nation's elders have manipulated him in quite the way that Enide (hesitantly) and

³⁸ See Frank, 'Why Skalds Address Women'; Quinn, 'Women in Old Norse Poetry and Sagas'.

³⁹ Quotations of this saga are from Einar Ólafur Sveinsson and Matthías Þórðarson, *Eyrbyggja Saga*, p. 36.

Geirrið (stridently) have done, others do precisely that, and their words and Beowulf's reactions manoeuvre him into a position where the only alternative to his winning honour is to lose it.

Unferth's challenge to Beowulf is motivated by envy (501–5), but the prediction that ends his speech can also be read as a dare:

Donne wēne ic tō þē wyrsan geþingea,
ðēah þū heaðoræsa gehwær dohte
grimre gūðe, gif þū Grendles dearest
nihtlongne fyrst nēan bīdan. (525–8)⁴⁰

And so I expect a worse result for you,
though you have prevailed in battle rushes and fierce
warfare everywhere, if you dare to await
Grendel nearby all night long.

Unferth may not intend his rude speech as a whetting, but that is its effect: it threatens Beowulf's honour, and the only answer that can rescue it is that he will indeed confront Grendel (601–6). Hrothgar is pleased with Beowulf's speech (607–10), though he has in the course of it insulted Unferth and the whole Danish aristocracy: the king likes the vow to act. Wealhtheow appears next, and though she is far more gracious than Unferth, her speech (reported as indirect discourse) is no less a whetting. She presents a cup to Beowulf:

Grētte Gēata lēod, Gode þancode
wīsfæst wordum þæs ðe hire se willa gelamp
þæt hēo on ænigne eorl gelyfde
fyrena frōfre. (625–8)

She greeted the Geatish man, thanked God,

⁴⁰ Quotations of *Beowulf* are based on consultation of several editions: Klaeber, *Beowulf*, vol. 4 of Krapp and Dobbie, *Anglo-Saxon Poetic Records*, Mitchell and Robinson, *Beowulf*, Kiernan, *Electronic Beowulf* and Fulk, Bjork, and Niles, *Klaeber's Beowulf*. A single quotation may select readings from more than one of these. Capitalization and punctuation are often mine. Except where noted otherwise, all quotations of Old English poems other than *Beowulf* are based on the texts in Krapp and Dobbie, *Anglo-Saxon Poetic Records*, sometimes with revised punctuation and capitalization.

secure in the wisdom of her words, that the pleasure
should befall her of believing in relief from violence
from any man.

Wealhtheow's public expression of confidence is in counterpoint to Unferth's expression of doubt, but it has a similar effect, raising the stakes by attributing to Beowulf a degree of honour that he can maintain only by fighting and winning. As he takes the cup, Beowulf's formal vow to do or die (632–8) is just what we expect; but if he were having doubts, Wealhtheow's speech and the vow it has elicited would make it impossible to back out. Like Geirríð, Wealhtheow is pleased that the whetting has gone well (639–40).

Honour is an unstable commodity, always rising or falling in value. And because honour's sole ingredient is the opinion of others, the character who wishes to win it is constantly influenced by the people around him. That is why whetting works so well. Unferth and Wealhtheow merely confirm Beowulf in his determination to do what he meant to do anyway, but Erec, Pórarinn and many others (including Hengest in *Beowulf*—see Chapter Six) are spurred to action by people around them communicating a sense that honour has been lost. Few things better illustrate the social nature of violence than the way various characters promote it by invoking honour.

Peacemaking

It is impossible to discuss violence without touching on peacemaking, if only because the story of any dispute is in part the story of attempts to settle it. Despite the pervasiveness of violence, early medieval societies longed for peace⁴¹ and worked hard to achieve it. Practices surrounding the settlement of disputes have been studied extensively for Iceland, for example by Miller and Byock.⁴² Anglo-Saxon historians have a much less colourful set of

⁴¹ As well documented in Kershaw, *Peaceful Kings*, a book that appeared as this project was near completion but is essential for all wishing to understand war and peace in the early Middle Ages.

⁴² W. I. Miller, *Bloodtaking and Peacemaking*, 'Gift, Sale, Payment, Raid'; Byock, 'Feuding in Viking-Age Iceland's Great Village', *Medieval Iceland*.

materials to work with, but the settlement of disputes in that country has been studied by Wormald and others; and there is a sizeable literature for Europe generally.⁴³

It is well known that *Beowulf* takes a pessimistic view of peacemaking. The hero's famous statement,

Oft seldan hwær
 æfter lēodhryre lȳtle hwīle
 bongār būgeð, þēah sēo brȳd dūge! (2029–31)

Very seldom anywhere,
 after the fall of a king, does the deadly spear rest
 even for a little while, though the bride is good!

refers to marriage for the purpose of peacemaking only by way of a concessive clause; its broader claim is that the fall of a king will *always* be followed by revenge-taking. And it is, in *Beowulf*, as killing answers killing in the Swedish-Geatish wars, and peacemaking fails in the Finn episode (see Chapter Six) and also (according to Beowulf's prediction) in the Freawaru episode (see pp. 63 and 155–66).

But peacemaking does not always fail, even in *Beowulf*. Hrothgar tells how he once paid compensation on behalf of Beowulf's father Ecgtheow after he had killed one Heatholaf (see pp. 186–7), a story that hints at the importance of peacemaking even in a warrior culture: Hrothgar's generosity earned him the loyalty, affirmed by oaths, of an *æpele ordfruma* 'noble war-leader' (263, 472), and the expectation of good service from the son of the man he helped.

What does one purchase by handing over gold—or a daughter—to an enemy? William Ian Miller's *Eye for an Eye*, a study of the law of talion in which Anglo-Saxon and Norse sources figure prominently, would seem to answer that people, their limbs and their lives must be paid for with the same, or with an equivalent in money or property. People could even be used as money (or at least as a unit for measuring value):

⁴³ See e.g. Wormald, 'Charters, Law', the essays in Bossy, *Disputes and Settlements* and several of the essays in Brown and Górecki, *Conflict in Medieval Europe*. But much of the literature about violence and dispute is implicitly about peacemaking as well.