THE *BEOWULF* POET'S SENSE OF DECORUM

By LEONARD NEIDORF

This paper reassesses the relationship between Beowulf *and the legendary tradition that existed prior to its composition. Through wide-ranging comparative analysis, it identifies probable departures from the antecedent tradition and argues that these departures are best understood not in impersonal terms, as Christian reactions to a pagan tradition, but in terms of a singular poet's sense of decorum, which was not possessed by all Christian authors throughout the Middle Ages. Focusing on interpretive controversies related to matters such as slavery, kin-slaying, the posthumous fate of pagans, and violence orchestrated by women, this paper argues that a series of ostensibly unrelated problems in the poem's critical literature could be resolved with a single coherent explanation: namely, that* Beowulf *was composed by a poet who sought to preserve as much as possible from the antecedent tradition, while not hesitating to obscure indecorous features and to express value judgments alien to the inherited material. The* Beowulf *poet's sense of decorum is shown herein to be idiosyncratic yet coherent and pervasive, responsible for various minor departures from tradition and for the selection of the untraditional protagonist around which the poem is structured.*

Beset by uncertainties about landholding, slavery, and royal authority in the early medieval period, line 73 of *Beowulf* is a longstanding crux in the poem's critical literature. The line occurs shortly after the genealogical prologue (ll. 1–63), in which the poet describes how Scyld Scefing founded the Danish empire and passed it on to his son Beow, who passed it on in turn to his son Healfdene. The narrator then focuses on Hrothgar, son of Healfdene, who becomes a successful warlord, and then conceives the idea to construct a magnificent mead-hall, where he would distribute everything God granted to him, with one noted exception:

> Þā wæs Hrōðgāre herespēd gyfen,
> wīges weorðmynd, þæt him his winemāgas
> georne hȳrdon, oðð þæt sēo geogoð gewēox,
> magodriht micel. Him on mōd bearn
> þæt healreced hātan wolde,
> medoærn micel men gewyrcean
> þon[n]e yldo bearn ǣfre gefrūnon,
> ond þǣr on innan eall gedǣlan
> geongum ond ealdum swylc him God sealde,
> būton folcscare ond feorum gumena. (ll. 64–73)

[Then to Hrothgar was given war-success, distinction in battle, so that his friends and kinsmen were willingly ruled by him, until the cadre of new recruits grew to a

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> large force of young men. It became fixed in his mind that he would direct men to construct a hall-structure, a mead-mansion larger than the offspring of the ancients had ever heard of, and there inside he would hand over to young and old all such as God had granted him, aside from the state itself and human lives.][1]

The discussion that has formed around the final line in this passage has moved in many directions, but the critical tradition is unified in one important respect: the line has been uniformly understood to reflect an externally imposed restriction on Hrothgar's authority. During the nineteenth century, critics interpreted this apparent restriction within a national or ethnic framework, construing it as a sign of continuity with ancient Germanic legal traditions and as an inchoate harbinger of English legal traditions to come.[2] Connecting line 73 to the limitations on royal authority mentioned in Tacitus's *Germania*, Johannes Müller remarks that it constitutes evidence for the "astonishingly tenacious constancy of Germanic conditions" ("erstaunliche Beharrlichkeit der germanischen Verhältnisse").[3] Similarly, a tradition originating with John Mitchell Kemble associates the difficult term *folcscaru* — a word that otherwise means "nation" or "state" in Old English poetry — with the concept of "public land."[4] C. L. Wrenn, a relatively late adherent to this tradition, writes of *folcscaru* that it "looks back to the ancient Germanic right of the people of a village to own certain land for grazing as an inalienable due in common — a right still partly preserved in our 'commons'."[5]

More recent commentators are duly skeptical of attempts to discern proto-democratic significance in line 73, but nonetheless perpetuate the assumption that Hrothgar's generosity is externally constrained by custom or law. Stefan Jurasinski, in his comprehensive reassessment of line 73 and its critical history, concludes that *folcscaru* refers to "ancestral lands," that is, to Hrothgar's personal patrimony, and that *feorh gumena* refers to the personnel attached to those lands. He adduces evidence from various legal sources to argue that Hrothgar was "prevented from giving away his own lands" on account of a customary

[1] The text of the poem is cited throughout by line number from *Klaeber's Beowulf: Fourth Edition*, ed. R. D. Fulk, Robert E. Bjork, and John D. Niles (Toronto, 2008). Translations of block quotations from *Beowulf* are cited throughout from *The Beowulf Manuscript: Complete Texts, and the Fight at Finnsburg*, ed. and trans. R. D. Fulk (Cambridge, MA, 2010). Translations of individual words and phrases are guided by Fulk's translation, but will occasionally depart from it.

[2] See Eric Gerald Stanley, *Imagining the Anglo-Saxon Past: The Search for Anglo-Saxon Paganism and Anglo-Saxon Trial by Jury* (Woodbridge, 2000), 63–76; and Stefan Jurasinski, *Ancient Privileges:* Beowulf, *Law, and the Making of Germanic Antiquity* (Morgantown, 2006), 49–75.

[3] Johannes Müller, *Das Kulturbild des Beowulfepos* (Halle, 1914), 2; the translation is cited from Stanley, *Imagining the Anglo-Saxon Past*, 65.

[4] See *Codex Diplomaticus Ævi Saxonici*, ed. J. M. Kemble (London, 1839–48), 2:ix. For an analysis of this tradition and its intellectual history, see Jurasinski, *Ancient Privileges*, 54–63.

[5] *Beowulf*, ed. C. L. Wrenn, rev. W. F. Bolton (London, 1973), 100.

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expectation for certain lands to remain within a family's possession.[6] In a briefer lexicographical discussion of *folcscaru*, Roberta Frank concurs with Jurasinski and expresses the following understanding of the line in question:

> Hrothgar is permitted by the law of his day to distribute all manner of gifts in Heorot — but not 'ancestral property' (tribal land, homeland) and the 'lives of men' (presumably those working these lands). Whatever the specifics of this double exemption, *folcscaru* would have served as a 'ye olde' sign, highlighting the virtue of a distant northern past in which even the most powerful of kings could not transfer hallowed kin-lands to members of his war-band.[7]

In proposing that *folcscaru* be understood as "a 'ye olde' sign" or a conscious archaism, Frank appears to be offering a modified version of Müller's position: instead of demonstrating the genuine continuity of Germanic legal tradition from Tacitus to the *Beowulf* poet, the line associates Hrothgar with the bygone legal traditions of an idealized past. In the most recent study of line 73, Alfred Bammesberger concurs with Müller and Frank in finding antique tradition (whether genuine or feigned) in the apparent limitations of Hrothgar's authority. Bammesberger develops a new reading of line 73 by attributing a specialized sense to *gumena*, which he construes not as a reference to humans in general, but as a reference specifically "to Hrothgar's inner circle and close allies," with the result that "[t]he restriction [expressed in line 73] means that Hrothgar will in no way interfere with the personal affairs of his immediate entourage."[8] Bammesberger concludes by supposing that "[t]he line possibly represents a distant echo of the Tacitean statement about Germanic conditions: *nec regibus infinita aut libera potestas* (*Germania* vii, 1) 'the power of kings is not unlimited or arbitrary.' The ruler has no authority over his men's clan and their mobile property."[9] Although recent commentators avoid the romantic excesses of earlier scholarship, they have only slightly modified the earlier consensus, as they continue to construe line 73 as an allusion to some sort of ancient Germanic legal convention that externally constrained the royal authority of Hrothgar.

I would suggest, however, that it is mistaken to perceive external constraints of any sort to be operative in line 73. The sentence in question is explicitly concerned not with the world in which Hrothgar lives, but with the world that Hrothgar is planning to create. It describes an idea that has entered his mind: *Him on mōd bearn* . . . ("It became fixed in his mind . . . ," l. 68b). The passage describes Hrothgar's conception — what an Old English poet might have termed his *modgeþanc* —

[6] Jurasinski, *Ancient Privileges*, 67.

[7] Roberta Frank, "F-Words in *Beowulf*," in *Making Sense: Constructing Meaning in Early English*, ed. Antonette diPaolo Healey and Kevin Kiernan (Toronto, 2007), 9.

[8] Alfred Bammesberger, "The Meaning of Old English *folcscaru* and the Compound's Function in *Beowulf*," *North-Western European Language Evolution* 72 (2019): 1–10, at 7–8.

[9] Bammesberger, "The Meaning of Old English *folcscaru*," 8.

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and it highlights the essential novelty of this conception, as Hrothgar plans to build the largest mead-hall that mankind had ever seen. The passage says nothing about Hrothgar being constrained by "the law of his day" (in the words of Frank); nor does it say that Hrothgar was "prevented" (in the words of Jurasinski) from distributing *folcscare* and *feorum gumena*. On the contrary, the infinitive *gedǣlan* ("to distribute") is governed ultimately by the auxiliary verb *wolde* ("wished, willed, desired"). This construction indicates that in the new world Hrothgar is conceiving, he is planning to abstain voluntarily from distributing *folcscare*, whatever the term might mean, and *feorum gumena*, which evidently refers to the lives of the enslaved.[10] In my reading, the purpose of line 73 is not to signal a link between Hrothgar and the rulers of Germanic antiquity, but to contribute to the characterization of Hrothgar as an untraditional and peculiar king, who repeatedly expresses monotheistic convictions in his speeches and possesses an intuitive, but ultimately limited, sense of what might please this singular deity.[11] Hrothgar, intuiting that slavery might displease the deity, plans to omit it from the novel world he is creating — an omission that mirrors the general omission or obfuscation of slavery in *Beowulf*. What we are

[10] The inadequacy of all of the proposed meanings for *folcscaru* is signaled in the question marks that appear in the glossary of *Klaeber's Beowulf*, where the word is defined as "nation (?), heritable land (?)." My discussion focuses on the more transparent phrase *feorh gumena*, but I would assume that *folcscaru* refers to something (land? property?) that a king *could* distribute, but Hrothgar, because he is an exceptionally good king, voluntarily refrains from distributing it. In a recent note, David Hullinger proposes that the term could mean "private property," a solution that is devoid of external parallels, but fits the context relatively well. See David Hullinger, "The Meaning of *Folcscare* in *Beowulf* 73," *ANQ: A Quarterly Journal of Short Articles, Notes and Reviews* 34 (2021): 7–8.

[11] There has been considerable debate throughout the history of *Beowulf* criticism about the peculiar theological status of the poem's historically pagan characters. I adhere to the view that these characters, especially Beowulf and Hrothgar, are depicted as enlightened monotheists who have not received the Christian revelation (and hence make no explicit references to Christian dogma), but have intuited the existence of the single deity that governs the universe and judges the behavior of mankind. A view comparable to the one I have outlined is developed, with differing nuances and emphases, in the following studies: Charles Donahue, "*Beowulf*, Ireland, and the Natural Good," *Traditio* 7 (1949): 263–77; idem, "*Beowulf* and Christian Tradition: A Reconsideration from a Celtic Stance," *Traditio* 21 (1965): 55–116; Marijane Osborn, "The Great Feud: Scriptural History and Strife in *Beowulf*," *Publications of the Modern Language Association* 93 (1978): 973–81; Thomas D. Hill, "The Christian Language and Theme of *Beowulf*," in *Companion to Old English Poetry*, ed. Rolf H. Bremmer Jr. and Henk Aertsen (Amsterdam, 1994), 63–77; Dennis Cronan, "*Beowulf*, the Gaels, and the Recovery of the Pre-Conversion Past," *Anglo-Saxon* 1 (2007): 137–80; and Geoffrey Russom, "Historicity and Anachronism in *Beowulf*," in *Epic and History*, ed. David Konstan and Kurt A. Raaflaub (Malden, 2010), 243–61. In his most recent take on the matter, Cronan argues persuasively that the moral intuitions of the characters (particularly Hrothgar) develop concomitantly with the poem's narrative. See Dennis Cronan, "Hrothgar and the *Gylden Hilt* in *Beowulf*," *Traditio* 72 (2017): 109–32.

seeing here is one of several cases in which the values of the *Beowulf* poet, which cannot necessarily be equated with Judeo-Christian values, have conspired to generate a poem that is both highly traditional and notably untraditional in certain respects.[12]

The argument developed below is that the *Beowulf* poet reshaped the literary tradition he inherited by minimizing features that he considered objectionable or indecorous. This study aims to move beyond the conventional dichotomies that have haunted *Beowulf* scholarship — pagan versus Christian, Germanic versus Mediterranean, secular versus religious, and so on — in order to explore one poet's idiosyncratic relationship to literary tradition, insofar as this tradition can be reconstructed from other sources concerned with the legendary heroes and peoples of northern Europe that flourished (or were imagined to have flourished) during the migration period of the fifth and sixth centuries.[13] My intention is not at all to resurrect the caricature of the *Beowulf* poet as a censorious Christian moralist who told tales of pagan heroes merely to chastise them. Rather, the assumption governing the present study is that the poet held a generally positive attitude toward antecedent tradition, but he found certain features incompatible with his sense of decorum and unsuitable for prominent mention in a dignified epic infused with a unique combination of heroic, courtly, and Christian values.[14] These

[12] As David A. E. Pelteret observes: "At no time in the Middle Ages did the Church condemn the institution of slavery." See David Pelteret, "Slavery in Anglo-Saxon England," in *The Anglo-Saxons: Synthesis and Achievement*, ed. J. Douglas Woods and David A. E. Pelteret (Waterloo, 1985), 117–34, at 131.

[13] The temporal extent of the migration-period *legendarium* is reflected in *Widsith*, where the earliest historically verifiable figure in its catalogues is the Gothic king Ermanaric (d. 375) and the latest historically verifiable figure is the Langobardic king Alboin (d. 572). This "heroic age" was apparently closed to anyone born after the sixth century. For discussion of the history of this period, the legendary traditions that developed therefrom, and the extant witnesses to these legends, see *Widsith: A Study in Old English Heroic Legend*, ed. R. W. Chambers (Cambridge, 1912); Theodore M. Andersson, *A Preface to the Nibelungenlied* (Stanford, 1987), 3–16; Edward R. Haymes and Susann T. Samples, *Heroic Legends of the North: An Introduction to the Nibelung and Dietrich Cycles* (New York, 1996); and Carolyne Larrington, "Eddic Poetry and Heroic Legend," in *A Handbook to Eddic Poetry: Myths and Legends of Early Scandinavia*, ed. Carolyne Larrington, Judy Quinn, and Brittany Schorn (Cambridge, 2016), 147–72.

[14] The formulation "heroic, courtly, and Christian" is indebted to an apt phrase of Andreas Heusler, who described *Beowulf* as a didactic poem designed to inculcate "heldisch-höfisch-kirklich" values in the audience of young aristocrats for whom it was presumably composed. For his assessment of *Beowulf* as a "geistlich-höfisches Heldenepos," see Andreas Heusler, *Die altgermanische Dichtung* (Potsdam, 1929), 184. Heusler's view of the poem, briefly propounded in his literary history, was recently developed at length in Edward Currie, "Political Ideals, Monstrous Counsel, and the Literary Imagination in *Beowulf*," in *Imagination and Fantasy in the Middle Ages and Early Modern Time: Projections, Dreams, Monsters, and Illusions*, ed. Albrecht Classen (Berlin, 2020), 275–301. In this learned essay, which came to my attention after the draft of my article was completed, Currie

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problematic features, discussed in the sections below, include slavery, kin-slaying under compulsion, and violence orchestrated by women, among other matters. This essay will not consider all of the features of Germanic legend that the poet has theoretically omitted, which might include "rape, incest, cannibalism, infanticide, blood drinking, shape-shifting, metamorphosis of men into wolves or bears, and more," but will instead consider how the material that is actually included in *Beowulf* reflects the poet's modification of tradition.[15] In doing so, it suggests that some interpretive problems in *Beowulf* criticism originate in the poet's discomfort with tradition and might approach resolution upon recognition of this origin.

Slavery

The notion that line 73 states that Hrothgar expressly refused to distribute slaves to his followers at Heorot acquires greater plausibility in light of the general treatment of slavery in *Beowulf*. Slavery must have been a feature of both the world in which the poet lived and the legendary tradition he inherited, yet its presence in *Beowulf* is notably muted.[16] There are some allusions to non-aristocratic laborers at Heorot, but it is never suggested that these individuals are enslaved. Following Beowulf's fight with Grendel, laborers are summoned to repair the hall:

> Đā wæs hāten hreþe Heort innanweard
> folmum gefrætwod; fela þāra wæs,
> wera ond wīfa þe þæt wīnreced,
> gestsele gyredon. Goldfāg scinon

discusses *Beowulf* in relation to some of the same witnesses to migration-period legend that are used in the present article, though he reaches conclusions that are rather different from my own. A reader interested in the poet's relationship to antecedent tradition should consult Currie's essay for an alternative take on the matter.

[15] James W. Earl, "The Forbidden *Beowulf*: Haunted by Incest," *Publications of the Modern Language Association* 125 (2010): 289–305, at 291. Earl's essay will be discussed in the concluding section of the present article. In the vast critical literature on *Beowulf*, Earl's essay appears to represent one of the few concerted discussions of the poet's sense of decorum, which has usually been discussed only in a piecemeal manner. There is one essay on *Beowulf* with the word "decorum" in its title — Lenore Abraham, "The Decorum of *Beowulf*," *Philological Quarterly* 72 (1993): 267–87 — but this essay is actually concerned with the poem's structural unity, not with the poet's sense of decorum and the departures from tradition for which it is responsible.

[16] See David A. E. Pelteret, *Slavery in Early Mediaeval England: From the Reign of Alfred until the Twelfth Century* (Woodbridge, 1995); Ruth Mazo Karras, *Slavery and Society in Medieval Scandinavia* (New Haven, 1988); and the essays collected in *The Work of Work: Servitude, Slavery, and Labor in Medieval England*, ed. Allen J. Frantzen and Douglas Moffat (Glasgow, 1994).

web æfter wāgum, wundorsīona fela
secga gehwylcum þāra þe on swylc starað. (ll. 991–96)

[Then, by command, the inside of Heorot was decorated quickly by hand; there were many men and women who prepared the wine-hall, the guest-house. Gold-patterned textiles gleamed along the walls, a collection of wonderful sights for any who gaze on the like.]

The poet's consciousness of class distinction is perhaps registered in the use of two relatively prosaic nouns, *wer* ("man") and *wif* ("woman"), to refer to the people engaged in the task of preparing the hall, whereas the poetic noun *secg* ("warrior") is used to refer to the leisured aristocrat who could idly admire the tapestries that adorn Heorot.[17] If there is a meaningful distinction here, it would seem to be between the aristocratic warrior class and the laboring peasant class rather than between the free and the enslaved. Other laborers at Heorot are mentioned: there are *byrelas* ("cup-bearers," l. 1161b) who serve wine at the great banquet scene and there is a *seleþegn* ("hall-attendant," l. 1794a) who shows Beowulf to his quarters and attends to his needs following his victory over Grendel's mother. Again, there is no suggestion of enslavement in these cases. Some critics have supposed that the etymology of the Danish queen Wealhtheow's name indicates that she is or was a slave, but such arguments are unpersuasive for numerous reasons.[18] The presence of the same *þēow* ("servant") deuterotheme in the names of both Ecgtheow and Ongentheow casts considerable doubt on the purported relationship between name-etymology and characterization. Outside of Heorot, there is only one reference to an individual who is possibly enslaved: the thief who stole the dragon's cup might be called a *þēow* at line 2223b, but the manuscript is damaged at this point, and it is not

[17] On the distinction between poetic and prosaic vocabulary in Old English, see M. S. Griffith, "Poetic Language and the Paris Psalter: The Decay of the Old English Tradition," *Anglo-Saxon England* 20 (1991): 167–86; and Dennis Cronan, "Poetic Meanings in the Old English Poetic Vocabulary," *English Studies* 84 (2003): 397–425. In referring to *wer* and *wif* as "relatively prosaic," I do not mean to imply that they are normally excluded from poetry, but rather that they are not exclusively or predominantly poetic words. They possess a lower, more colloquial register than a word like *secg*, which is a marked piece of poetic diction.

[18] The notion that Wealhtheow's name indicates that she is or was a slave is widespread. See, for example, Andy Orchard, *A Critical Companion to Beowulf* (Cambridge, 2003), 219; and Thomas D. Hill, "'Wealhtheow' as a Foreign Slave: Some Continental Analogues," *Philological Quarterly* 69 (1990): 106–12. For arguments against the supposition that Wealhtheow bears a meaningful, characterizing name, see Stefan Jurasinski, "The Feminine Name *Wealhtheow* and the Problem of *Beowulf*ian Anthroponymy," *Neophilologus* 91 (2007): 701–15; and Leonard Neidorf, "Wealhtheow and Her Name: Etymology, Characterization, and Textual Criticism," *Neophilologus* 102 (2018): 75–89. For arguments against the supposition that any name in *Beowulf* should reflect meaningfully on its bearer, see R. D. Fulk, "The Etymology and Significance of Beowulf's Name," *Anglo-Saxon* 1 (2007): 109–36.

implausible that *þēof* ("thief") was the reading that had been transmitted before letters were lost due to charring.[19]

The general impression conveyed in *Beowulf* is that slavery was not a prominent or noteworthy feature of the great courts of the fabled kings of the migration period. There are, however, ominous hints in the poem of enslavement as one of the wretched fates that could befall a conquered populace. The Geatish woman who mourns at Beowulf's funeral delivers a lament in which she expresses a fear of *hȳ[n]ðo ond hæf(t)nȳd* ("humiliation and captivity," l. 3155a) following the invasion of foreign armies. There might also be an allusion to conquered Geats being sold as slaves in foreign lands when the Geatish messenger predicts that his people will *oft nalles ǣne elland tredan* ("tread foreign ways not once but often," l. 3019) now that their king is dead. It is possible that the messenger is merely alluding to the conventional fate of exile, with displaced Geatish men and women traveling through multiple foreign lands in search of a new protector, but the phrase seems likelier to refer to the fact that early medieval slaves were often sold and resold in foreign markets.[20] In any event, the unambiguous allusion to slavery in the collocation of *hȳ[n]ðo ond hæf(t)nȳd* reveals that the poet associates slavery with the chaotic and threatening forces that exist outside of the peaceful and idealized world of the civilized hall. Rather like Grendel and his mother, the prospect of enslavement for the defeated lurks ominously in the cold world beyond the confines of the warm hall. Slavery can be mentioned in the poem as one of the grim fates facing the defeated Geats, but it will not be included in the splendid world of Heorot, where wine flows, tapestries are hung, formal speeches are delivered, and courtly etiquette is meticulously observed.

The minor Eddic poem *Hlǫðskviða* shows that the *Beowulf* poet's omission of slavery from the great courts of the migration period was not inevitable. *Hlǫðskviða*, though preserved in late manuscripts of *Saga Heiðreks konungs ins vitra*, has long been considered "one of the oldest, if not the very oldest, pieces of poetry in the Norse language."[21] It deals with legendary characters who were

[19] For an argument that *þēof* is the missing word, see Theodore M. Andersson, "The Thief in *Beowulf*," *Speculum* 59 (1984): 493–508. For a defense of *þēo(w)*, see R. D. Fulk, "Some Contested Readings in the *Beowulf* Manuscript," *Review of English Studies* 56 (2005): 192–223, at 214–15. Pelteret supports Andersson's position and doubts that the thief of the dragon's cup would have been a slave: "To have introduced a slave, or even an ordinary freeman, would have been inappropriate in such an heroic world where all men were *eorlas*, a word which itself denotes aristocratic status. Thus for Beowulf to have died as a result of the action of slave would have reduced his stature." See Pelteret, *Slavery in Early Medieval England*, 53.

[20] See Pelteret, "Slavery in Anglo-Saxon England" (n. 12 above), 120–21.

[21] Christopher Tolkien, "The Battle of the Goths and the Huns," *Saga Book* 14 (1955–56): 141–63, at 141. Larrington recently concurs with Tolkien in deeming *Hlǫðskviða* "one of the oldest poems preserved in Old Norse." See Larrington, "Eddic Poetry and Heroic Legend" (n. 13 above), 155. See also *Eddica minora: Dichtungen eddischer Art aus den Fornaldarsögur*

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certainly known in Anglo-Saxon England: four of the figures central to the legend behind *Hlǫðskviða* (Heiðrekr, Sifka, Hlǫð, and Angantýr) are collocated together in *Widsith* (*Heaþorīc ond Sifecan, Hlīþe ond Incgenþēow*, l. 116), the Old English poem that happens to evince the most extensive knowledge of the cast of characters from *Beowulf*.[22] *Hlǫðskviða* relates a dispute over patrimony between the sons of the Gothic king Heiðrekr: Angantýr, his legitimate heir, inherits the whole Gothic kingdom, but Hlǫð, an illegitimate child that Heiðrekr conceived with the Hunnish bondwoman Sifka, demands that Angantýr give him half of the kingdom and half of the wealth it contains. In making this demand, Hlǫð specifies that he must be given half of everything, including *þý ok af þræli / ok þeira barni* ("slave and bondmaid / and their sons and daughters").[23] Angantýr refuses to divide the kingdom equally, but he attempts to placate his half-brother by offering him ample wealth and a third of the kingdom:

Ek mun bjóða þér	I will give you
bjartar vigrar,	gleaming lances,
fé ok fjǫlð meiðma,	wealth and cattle
sem þik fremst tíðir;	well to content you;
tólf hundruð manna,	thralls a thousand,
tólf hundruð mara,	a thousand horses,
tólf hundruð skálka,	a thousand bondmen
þeira er skjǫld bera.	bearing armour.
Manni gef ek hverjum	Each shall get of me
mart at þiggja,	gifts in plenty,
annat œðra	nobler than all that
en hann á at ráða;	he now possesses;
mey gef ek hverjum	to every man
manni at þiggja,	shall a maid be given,
meyju spenni ek hverri	the neck of each
men at hálsi.	by necklace clasped.
Mun ek um þik sitjanda	I will measure you in silver
silfri mæla,	as you sit in your chair,
en ganganda þik	upon your departing
gulli steypa,	I will pour down gold,

und anderen Prosawerken, ed. Andreas Heusler and Wilhelm Ranisch (Dortmund, 1903), xiii–xiv; and *Anglo-Saxon and Norse Poems*, ed. Nora Kershaw (Cambridge, 1922), 142–44.

[22] On the connections between *Hlǫðskviða* and *Widsith*, see Kemp Malone, "*Widsith* and the *Hervararsaga*," *Publications of the Modern Language Association* 40 (1925): 769–813. On the connections between *Beowulf* and *Widsith*, see *Klaeber's Beowulf*, ed. Fulk, Bjork, and Niles (n. 1 above), clxxvii.

[23] *The Saga of King Heidrek the Wise*, ed. and trans. Christopher Tolkien (London, 1960), 49.

svá á vegu alla rings shall go rolling
velti baugar; round about you;
þriðjung Gotþjóðar, a third of Gothland
því skaltu einn ráða. shall you govern over.[24]

Angantýr is depicted here and throughout the poem as a magnanimous and reasonable ruler, who wishes to avoid conflict with his implacable kinsman, yet the words that come out of his mouth are strikingly different from the words spoken by Hrothgar, Wealhtheow, Hygelac, or any other character in *Beowulf* with control over a kingdom and the wealth it contains. There are several scenes of gift-giving in *Beowulf* where the gifts are described in considerable detail, yet human lives are never mentioned as a part of these transactions. Indeed, Hygelac even requites Beowulf's gifts by sharing rule of the kingdom with him — more or less giving him what Hlǫð demanded from Angantýr — yet the poet describes this transaction in terms of treasure, land, hall, and throne rather than human life (ll. 2190–99).[25] If line 73 indicates that Hrothgar promised to refrain from distributing slaves to his people, the subsequent narrative suggests that he fulfilled this promise and that the other kings and queens in the poem incidentally fulfilled it as well.

Hlǫðskviða demonstrates that slaves could be mentioned in heroic-legendary poetry as an index of a ruler's wealth, power, and magnanimity. *Beowulf* conversely demonstrates that slavery could be carefully omitted from this kind of poetry by a poet who found it distasteful or indecorous. Whether the poet's aversion to slavery was deeply moral or purely aesthetic cannot, of course, be determined. The consumption of food is never described in the scenes of feasting in *Beowulf*, which concentrate instead on the alcohol that is consumed, yet the poet could not have been morally opposed to eating.[26] Rather, in the idealized heroic world of the poem, the ingestion of morsels of food must have seemed too mundane or messy to be worth highlighting. A similar rationale might inform the omission of slavery in *Beowulf*, a poem that explicitly mentions the distribution of the enslaved only once and only in order to protest that this was *not* a part of Hrothgar's plan.

Kin-slaying

Perhaps the most salient respect in which *Beowulf* differs from other works of Germanic legend is that it does not focus on a character who is compelled by

[24] *The Saga of King Heidrek the Wise*, ed. and trans. Tolkien, 50.

[25] On Hygelac's joint kingship with Beowulf, see Frederick M. Biggs, "The Politics of Succession in *Beowulf* and Anglo-Saxon England," *Speculum* 80 (2005): 709–41.

[26] For an analysis of the scenes of feasting in *Beowulf*, see Hugh Magennis, *Images of Community in Old English Poetry* (Cambridge, 1996), 60–81.

circumstances to kill one of his or her kinsmen. Situationally compelled kin-slaying and oath-breaking (a variant of the former) are ubiquitous in legends of migration-period heroes, and they are present in the digressions of *Beowulf*, but these themes are never given prominence in the poem's central narrative, which focuses on Beowulf's combat with three monsters and his rise to kingship.[27] Indeed, kin-slaying and oath-breaking are kept out of the protagonist's life, and in his final moments alive, he expressly rejoices in the fact that he dies unstained by either of these deeds:

> Ic on earde bād
> mælgesceafta, hēold mīn tela,
> ne sōhte searonīðas, nē mē swōr fela
> āða on unriht. Ic ðæs ealles mæg
> feorhbennum sēoc gefēan habban;
> forðām mē wītan ne ðearf waldend fīra
> morðorbealo māga, þonne mīn sceaceð
> līf of līce. (ll. 2736b–43a)

> [I lived out at home my allotment of time, managed well what was mine, did not go looking for unwarranted aggression, did not swear multitudes of oaths in injustice. Sickened as I am by mortal wounds, I can take satisfaction in all that; on that account the ruler of men need not accuse me of the murder of kinsmen when the life departs from my body.]

This speech forms the subject of a brilliant study by Thomas D. Hill, in which he argues that the protagonist's "asseverations are not pointless banalities, but rather implicitly contrast this hero with the heroes of the most famous cycle of heroic legend of the Germanic world, the Volsungs."[28] While it is true that kin-slaying and oath-breaking are especially prominent in *Vǫlsunga saga*, and that the *Beowulf* poet seems to evince knowledge of these deeds in the reference to *fǣhðe ond fyrena* ("feuds and crimes," l. 879a) in the Sigemund digression, I would argue that there is much more to Beowulf's dying speech than the establishment of an intertextual relationship with the Volsung cycle. The speech highlights how different Beowulf is from heroes in nearly all of the legendary cycles pertaining to the migration period, the majority of which focus on a character

[27] For examples, see Andersson, *A Preface to the Nibelungenlied* (n. 13 above), 3–16; Larrington, "Eddic Poetry and Heroic Legend" (n. 13 above), 147–56; and W. P. Ker, *Epic and Romance*, 2nd ed. (London, 1908), 75–87. For a recent reading of *Beowulf* as a poem focusing in its foreground not only on the monster fights, but also on the protagonist's relationship with the concept of kingship, see Francis Leneghan, *The Dynastic Drama of Beowulf* (Cambridge, 2020).

[28] Thomas D. Hill, "The Confession of Beowulf and the Structure of *Volsunga Saga*," in *The Vikings*, ed. R. T. Farrell (London, 1982), 165–79, at 177.

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who is compelled to kill a kinsman or break an oath before the end of his or her life. The speech is comparable to line 73: it mentions a prominent feature of antecedent tradition only to affirm that it was *not* a part of the life of one of the poem's virtuous monotheists. Furthermore, the speech offers extraordinary insight into Beowulf's intuitive sense of monotheistic morality: he imagines that he will be judged posthumously by a single deity who would consider *morðorbealo māga* ("the murder of kinsmen") to be particularly reprehensible.[29] If the protagonist is here giving voice to the values of the poet, his speech might shed considerable light on why *Beowulf* differs so markedly from other works of Germanic legend.

Outside of *Beowulf*, kin-slaying is often represented in legend as an act committed by a hero who is, in the words of R. W. Chambers, "rather to be pitied than blamed."[30] It is motivated not by sheer malice, but usually by a concern for self-preservation, a conflict of loyalties, or a need to set right a grievous wrong. Consider Angantýr in *Hlǫðskviða*: he is compelled to become the killer of his unrelenting brother after Hlǫð leads an army of Huns into Gothland and kills his half-sister, Hervǫr, in the process. Standing over his brother's corpse after the Huns are defeated, Angantýr delivers a lament that elicits sympathy for the unfortunate victor:

Bauð ek þér, bróðir,	Treasures uncounted,
basmir óskerðar,	kinsman, I offered you,
fé ok fjǫlð meiðma,	wealth and cattle
sem þik fremst tíddi;	well to content you;
nú hefir þú hvárki	but for war's reward
hildar at gjǫldum,	you have won neither
ljósa bauga,	realm more spacious
né land ekki.	nor rings glittering.
Bölvat es okkr, bróðir,	We are cursed, kinsman,
bani em ek þinn orðinn;	your killer am I!

[29] Richard North, noting that the phrase *morðorbealo māga* is also used in the Finnsburg episode (l. 1079a), writes of Beowulf's dying words: "Hereby, perhaps, Beowulf shuns the example set by the Frisians in Finnsburh." He goes on to suggest that the speech might also allude to Beowulf's restraint toward Wiglaf and Weohstan. See Richard North, *The Origins of Beowulf: From Vergil to Wiglaf* (Oxford, 2006), 286. More recently, North conjectures that the phrase *morðorbealo māga* could also allude to Beowulf's relationship with Heardred and serve thereby to contrast Beowulf's refusal to kill his cousin with Hrothulf's possible killing of Hrethric. See idem, "Hrothulf's Childhood and Beowulf's: A Comparison," in *Childhood and Adolescence in Anglo-Saxon Literary Culture*, ed. Susan Irvine and Winfried Rudolf (Toronto, 2018), 222–43, at 242.

[30] R. W. Chambers, *Beowulf: An Introduction to the Study of the Poem with a Discussion of the Stories of Offa and Finn*, rev. C. L. Wrenn, 3rd ed. (Cambridge, 1959), 29.

þat mun æ uppi,	It will never be forgotten;
illr er dómr Norna.	the Norns' doom is evil.[31]

The speech illuminates how the hero who engaged in kin-slaying under compulsion might have been viewed in legendary tradition prior to *Beowulf*. Angantýr had no desire to become his brother's bane; he tried to prevent the battle with a generous overture. He is a victim of fate, a condition made explicit when he decries the cruelty of the Norns (*illr er dómr Norna*). He did not want to engage in kin-slaying, but the obligation to preserve his life, defend his kingdom, and avenge his sister compelled him to commit a transgression in which he took no pleasure.

A similar attitude to the kin-slaying hero is suggested in the *Hildebrandslied*, an Old High German poem composed around the year 800.[32] Hildebrand faces his son Hadubrand, from whom he had been separated in exile for the past thirty years, at the head of opposing armies. Hildebrand recognizes his son, but Hadubrand refuses to believe that his opponent is his father, and the son believes it is a ruse when the father attempts to convey that they are related. Realizing that a violent clash is unavoidable, Hildebrand delivers a lament comparable to that of Angantýr:

welaga nu, waltant got [quad Hiltibrant],	wewurt skihit.
ih wallota sumaro enti wintro	sehstic ur lante,
dar man mih eo scerita	in folc sceotantero:
so man mir at burc ęnigeru	banun ni gifasta,
nu scal mih suasat chind	suertu hauwan,
breton mit sinu billiu,	eddo ih imo ti banin werdan. (ll. 49–54)

['Ah, now, mighty God!', said Hildebrand, 'a woeful fate is being enacted. I have been wandering for thirty years abroad, where I have always been assigned to the company of the spearmen. Whereas at no city has death been inflicted on me, now must my own child strike me with the sword, smite me with his blade, or I become his killer.'][33]

Like Angantýr, Hildebrand has no desire to become the slayer of his kinsman; he has also tried to prevent the battle with peace-making overtures. Hildebrand is another victim of a cruel and inexorable fate, a condition made explicit in his statement that "a woeful fate" (*wewurt*) is about to transpire. In a classic analysis

[31] *The Saga of King Heidrek the Wise*, ed. and trans. Tolkien (n. 23 above), 58.

[32] On the date and context of *Hildebrandslied*, see J. Knight Bostock, "The Lay of Hildebrand," in idem, *A Handbook on Old High German Literature*, rev. K. C. King and D. R. McLintock, 2nd ed. (Oxford, 1976), 43–82.

[33] The text of the poem is cited from the edition in *Althochdeutsches Lesebuch: Zusammengestellt und mit Wörterbuch versehen*, ed. Wilhelm Braune, rev. Ernst. A. Ebbinghaus, 17th ed. (Tübingen, 1994). The translation is cited from Bostock, "The Lay of Hildebrand," 46.

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of the prevalence in Germanic legend of kin-slaying and oath-breaking under compulsion, Bertha S. Phillpotts argues that heroes such as Angantýr and Hildebrand were not merely pitied but were also admired for acting resolutely and maintaining their character under crushing circumstances.[34] While lesser mortals might have broken down when confronted by the need to choose between two evil courses, these heroes had the fortitude to do what duty required. There is no impression conveyed in these works that characters comparable to Angantýr and Hildebrand were condemned to an eternity in hell by a deity who considered the killing of kinsmen to be an unpardonable offense.

In *Beowulf*, however, there is a clear sense that no hero genuinely worthy of admiration could have a life-story that included kin-slaying. The poem's two most prominent characters, the enlightened monotheists Beowulf and Hrothgar, have lived lives that are, as far as we are told, entirely free from the stains of kin-slaying and oath-breaking.[35] The one character in the foreground of the poem who has killed a kinsman prior to the events being narrated is Unferth, and the poet makes it clear that this character is not to be admired. Unferth occupies a position of importance at the Danish court, where he is trusted by Hrothgar and Hrothulf, yet the poet describes him as jealous and insecure (ll. 501b–5), embarrassed by his earlier words to Beowulf (ll. 980–84a), and cowardly by comparison with the protagonist (ll. 1465–72). The treatment of Unferth is unusual relative to the rest of the poem's human characters, on whom the poet generally refrains from passing judgment.[36] The source of the poet's exceptional disdain for Unferth evidently stems from the fact that this character was known in legendary tradition to have killed his kinsmen. Beowulf, responding to a speech in which Unferth taunts him for losing a swimming match to Breca, clears up what actually happened and condemns Unferth to hell for being a kin-slayer:

Breca nǣfre gīt
æt heaðolāce, nē gehwæþer incer,
swā dēorlice dǣd gefremede

[34] Bertha S. Phillpotts, "*Wyrd* and Providence in Anglo-Saxon Thought," *Essays and Studies* 13 (1928): 7–27.

[35] For an argument that kin-slaying might have formed a part of Hrothgar's back-story, see James H. Morey, "The Fates of Men in *Beowulf*," in *Source of Wisdom: Old English and Early Medieval Latin Studies in Honour of Thomas D. Hill*, ed. Charles D. Wright, Frederick M. Biggs, and Thomas N. Hall (Toronto, 2007), 26–51. Morey's argument is difficult to credit, and it has not gained much traction in subsequent scholarship. If Morey were correct, then the poet evidently sought to conceal this aspect of Hrothgar's past and exculpate his wise and pious king.

[36] The only other human character in *Beowulf* to be depicted in a decidedly negative manner is Heremod. Some readers find that the poet is also critical of Hygelac, but a strong case can be made for viewing Hygelac as a largely admirable (if somewhat tragic) character. See Arthur G. Brodeur, *The Art of Beowulf* (Berkeley, 1959), 78–87.

fāgum sweordum — nō ic þæs [fela] gylpe —
þēah ðū þīnum brōðrum tō banan wurde,
hēafodmǣgum; þæs þū in helle scealt
werhðo drēogan, þēah þīn wit duge (ll. 583b–89).

[Breca has never yet at sword-play, nor either of you, accomplished so daring a deed with chased swords — I boast little about it — though you turned out to be your brothers' killer, your closest kinsmen's, for which you will suffer damnation in hell, clever as you are.]

The narrator confirms in a later passage that Beowulf did not smear Unferth's name with a false allegation, that Unferth had genuinely killed his kinsmen, and that the Danish royal family was perhaps mistaken to trust a man with such a past (ll. 1165b–68).[37] A vast critical literature has formed around the figure of Unferth, with critics debating whether he is to be understood as a court jester, a pagan magician, an evil counselor, or a formidable champion (among many other things).[38] I would argue that this critical enigma probably stems from the *Beowulf* poet's decision to depart from antecedent tradition and denigrate a character who had not previously been treated in such a negative manner. In view of the fact that Unferth continues to have a high position at the Danish court, it is doubtful that he could have killed his kinsmen in a cowardly or treacherous manner. In all likelihood, Unferth had a backstory in which circumstances compelled him to kill his kinsmen. Perhaps he found himself in a

[37] On the probable veracity of Beowulf's allegation, see Carol Clover, "The Germanic Context of the Unferþ Episode," *Speculum* 55 (1980): 444–68, esp. 463. Most of the critics cited in the following two footnotes concur with Clover and accept that Unferth had genuinely killed his kinsmen, but for a dissenting view on the matter, see Scott Gwara, *Heroic Identity in the World of Beowulf* (Leiden, 2008), 126–29, who argues that Beowulf is bending the truth here.

[38] The critical literature on Unferth is enormous. For some papers that adumbrate the possibilities of interpretation, see James L. Rosier, "Design for Treachery: The Unferth Intrigue," *Publications of the Modern Language Association* 77 (1962): 1–7; Norman E. Eliason, "The Þyle and Scop in *Beowulf*," *Speculum* 38 (1963): 267–84; Fred C. Robinson, "Personal Names in Medieval Narrative and the Name of Unferth in *Beowulf*," in *Essays in Honour of Richebourg Gaillard McWilliams*, ed. Howard Creed (Birmingham, 1970), 43–48; G. C. Britton, "Unferth, Grendel, and the Christian Meaning of *Beowulf*," *Neuphilologische Mitteilungen* 72 (1971): 246–50; Carroll Y. Rich, "Unferth and Cain's Envy," *South Central Bulletin* 33 (1973): 211–13; Ida Masters Hollowell, "Unferð the þyle in *Beowulf*," *Studies in Philology* (1976): 239–65; Patricia Silber, "Hunferth and the Paths of Exile," *In Geardagum* 17 (1996): 15–29; Leslie A. Donovan, "Þyle as Fool: Revisiting Beowulf's Hunferth," in *Poetry, Place, and Gender: Studies in Medieval Culture in Honor of Helen Damico*, ed. Catherine E. Karkov (Kalamazoo, 2009), 75–97; Judy King, "Transforming the Hero: Beowulf and the Conversion of Hunferth," in *The Hero Recovered: Essays on Medieval Heroism in Honor of George Clark*, ed. Robin Waugh and James Weldon (Kalamazoo, 2010), 47–65; and Francisco J. Rozano-García, "'Unferþ Maðelode': The Villain in *Beowulf* Reconsidered," *English Studies* 100 (2019): 941–58.

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situation where duty required him to choose loyalty to his lord, Hrothgar, over loyalty to his family.[39] It would seem that in the opinion of the *Beowulf* poet, contrary to the opinion of the poets behind *Hlǫðskviða* and *Hildebrandslied*, the circumstances neither excuse the deed nor create sympathy for the man fated to kill his kinsmen.

Considering this departure from tradition, one must wonder if the *Beowulf* poet actually agreed with Alcuin that heroes like Ingeld — that is, those marked by the stains of kin-slaying or oath-breaking — have little to do with Christ and are condemned to an eternity in hell.[40] There are suggestions in *Beowulf* that some virtuous pagans merited the salvation of their souls, but the three characters who attract these suggestions (that is, Scyld, Hrethel, and Beowulf) are not known to have killed kinsmen or broken oaths prior to their passing.[41] What exactly the poet thought about the posthumous fate of the kin-slayers and oath-breakers mentioned in the poem's digressions, such as Hengest or Ingeld or Eadgils, is never made clear. The one character in the poem whose salvation is suggested most explicitly is Beowulf, and he happens to be the one character whose abstention from the conventional acts of kin-slaying and oath-breaking is explicitly acknowledged. This is unlikely to be a coincidence. Although the poet was evidently fascinated by and knowledgeable about the legends of migration-period heroes, he appears not to have been comfortable with the prospect of focusing an epic narrative on a kin-slayer or oath-breaker and holding up such a character as a moral exemplar before his audience. This discomfort probably explains why the

[39] This conjecture concerning Unferth's back-story is entertained in George Clark, *Beowulf* (Boston, 1990), 65. It is developed in Gernot R. Wieland, "The Unferth Enigma: The *þyle* between the Hero and the Poet," in *Fact and Fiction from the Middle Ages to Modern Times: Essays Presented to Hans Sauer on the Occasion of His 65th Birthday — Part II*, ed. Renate Bauer and Ulrike Krischke (Frankfurt, 2011), 35–46; and in Leonard Neidorf, "Unferth's Ambiguity and the Trivialization of Germanic Legend," *Neophilologus* 101 (2017): 439–54.

[40] On the context and interpretation of Alcuin's infamous rhetorical question ("What has Ingeld to do with Christ?"), see Donald A. Bullough, "What Has Ingeld to Do with Lindisfarne?" *Anglo-Saxon England* 22 (1993): 93–125; and Mary Garrison, "Quid Hinieldus cum Christo?" in *Latin Learning and English Lore: Studies in Anglo-Saxon Literature for Michael Lapidge*, ed. Katherine O'Brien O'Keeffe and Andy Orchard (Toronto, 2005), 1:237–59. For an argument (much different from my own) that the *Beowulf* poet has a theological perspective comparable to that of Alcuin, see W. F. Bolton, *Alcuin and Beowulf: An Eighth-Century View* (New Brunswick, 1978).

[41] See Stanley B. Greenfield, "Beowulf and the Judgement of the Righteous," in *Learning and Literature in Anglo-Saxon England: Studies Presented to Peter Clemoes*, ed. Michael Lapidge and Helmut Gneuss (Cambridge, 1985), 393–407; Bruce Mitchell, *On Old English* (Oxford, 1988), 30–40; Hill, "The Christian Language" (n. 11 above), 70–76; and Paul Cavill, "Christianity and Theology in *Beowulf*," in *The Christian Tradition in Anglo-Saxon England: Approaches to Current Scholarship and Teaching*, ed. Paul Cavill (Woodbridge, 2004), 15–39.

poet focuses most of his attention on Beowulf and Hrothgar, two ostensibly minor figures in legendary tradition, who were not already known by the poet's audience to have done such deeds.[42] The *Beowulf* poet rejects the amoral vision of an antecedent tradition that had concerned itself primarily with heroes who were neither good nor bad and prefers instead to focus on an unambiguously benevolent hero's struggle against unambiguously malevolent monsters.[43] In doing so, the poet generated a work that is a notable outlier in the corpus of witnesses to Germanic legend.

Women and Violence

Readers familiar with the courtly romances of the later Middle Ages might assume that the royal women of *Beowulf* are characterized in a manner that is highly traditional.[44] Queens in *Beowulf* are generally depicted as elegant and stately practitioners of courtly etiquette, who observe the correct ritual behaviors in the distribution of mead, gifts, and political counsel. Their depiction is favorable overall, as the poet highlights their political importance in a manner that appears unaffected by the Latin antifeminist tradition.[45] Indeed, two of the poem's queens are explicitly praised for their wisdom: Wealhtheow is said to be *wīsfæst wordum* ("astute in her words," l. 626a) and Hygd is described as *wīs wēlþungen* ("wise, accomplished," l. 1927a). Although Wealhtheow is depicted as being assertive enough to challenge Hrothgar's plan to make Beowulf a prospective heir to the throne (ll. 1169–87), there is no suggestion in the poem that Wealhtheow (or Hygd, Hildeburh, and Freawaru) has any propensity for committing or orchestrating acts of violence. In this respect, I would argue, the characterization of royal women in *Beowulf* is relatively untraditional. There is, however, one royal woman in the poem's digressions whose propensity for violence

[42] For arguments that the *Beowulf* poet took a relatively minor figure in antecedent legend and developed him into a protagonist for a new kind of epic poem, see Larry D. Benson, "The Originality of *Beowulf*," in *The Interpretation of Narrative: Theory and Practice*, ed. Morton W. Bloomfield (Cambridge, 1970), 1–43; and Leneghan, *The Dynastic Drama of Beowulf* (n. 27 above), 104–52.

[43] For similar observations, see Phillpotts, "*Wyrd* and Providence" (n. 34 above), 19–22; Kemp Malone, "*Beowulf*," *English Studies* 29 (1948): 161–72, at 165–66; and Hill, "The Confession of Beowulf" (n. 28 above), 176–77.

[44] On the proto-courtliness of the poem's women, see Eric Gerald Stanley, "Courtliness and Courtesy in *Beowulf* and Elsewhere in Medieval English Literature," in *Words and Works: Studies in Medieval English Language and Literature in Honour of Fred C. Robinson*, ed. Peter S. Baker and Nicholas Howe (Toronto, 1998), 67–103.

[45] See Alexandra Hennessey Olsen, "Gender Roles," in *A Beowulf Handbook*, ed. Robert E. Bjork and John D. Niles (Lincoln, 1997), 311–24; Stacy S. Klein, *Ruling Women: Queenship and Gender in Anglo-Saxon Literature* (Notre Dame, 2006), 87–124; and R. D. Fulk and Christopher M. Cain, *A History of Old English Literature* (Chichester, 2013), 6–11.

is acknowledged: the wife of Offa, prior to their marriage, orchestrated the deaths of men who glanced at her (ll. 1931b–40).[46] Her aggression will be curtailed by Offa (ll. 1944–54), but before that outcome is related, the narrator interjects to condemn the princess's behavior:

> Ne bið swylc cwēnlic þēaw
> idese tō efnanne, þēah ðe hīo ǣnlicu sȳ,
> þætte freoðuwebbe fēores onsæce
> æfter ligetorne lēofne mannan. (ll. 1940b–43)

[Such is not a queenly virtue for a noblewoman to practice, even if she is peerless, that a peace-weaver should seek the life of a valued man after a feigned offense.]

This condemnation of the princess's orchestration of violence is comparable to the allusion to slavery in line 73 and the allusion to kin-slaying and oath-breaking in Beowulf's final speech. Once again, an aspect of antecedent tradition that is generally omitted or minimized in *Beowulf* is explicitly mentioned only to affirm that it was avoided, contained, and absent from the civilized world of the poem's idealized courts. In this case, the princess's aggression is mentioned in order to praise both Offa, for rooting it out, and the Geatish queen Hygd, for never engaging in such behavior and for being wise and generous despite her youth (ll. 1926b–31a).

By stating that it was not a *cwēnlic þēaw* ("queenly custom") for a noblewoman to avenge a real or perceived insult with violence, the poet implies that Offa's princess is an aberration and that the other royal women in the poem illustrate the normal behavior of queens at the great courts of the migration period. In legendary tradition, however, the situation is arguably reversed, as the women who figure most prominently in legend are precisely those who brought about extraordinary violence in order to set right a wrong done to themselves or their kinsmen. Paul the Deacon, in his *Historia Langobardorum* (ca. 790), relates the legend of the Gepid princess Rosimund's extravagant orchestration of the death of her husband, the Langobardic king Alboin.[47] Prior to their marriage, Alboin had

[46] Although Offa's queen has long been known in *Beowulf* criticism as "Thryth" or "Modthryth," the sequence of letters transcribed in the manuscript as <mod þryðo> is almost certainly not a proper name. It would appear that the poet either refrained from mentioning the name of this character or the name was lost from the text in the course of its transmission. See R. D. Fulk, "The Name of Offa's Queen: *Beowulf* 1931–2," *Anglia* 122 (2004): 614–39; Eric Weiskott, "Three *Beowulf* Cruces: *Healgamen*, *Fremu*, *Sigemunde*," *Notes and Queries* 58 (2011): 5–6; and Kenneth Sisam, *Studies in the History of Old English Literature* (Oxford, 1953), 41, n. 2. For critical discussion of this character, see Gillian R. Overing, *Language, Sign, and Gender in Beowulf* (Carbondale, 1990), 101–12; Mary Dockray-Miller, "The Masculine Queen of Beowulf," *Women and Language* 21 (1998): 31–38; and Klein, *Ruling Women*, 105–11.

[47] For analyses of this legend, see Otto Gschwantler, "Die Heldensage von Alboin und Rosimund," in *Festgabe für Otto Höfler*, ed. Helmut Birkhan (Vienna, 1976), 214–54;

killed Rosimund's father, but the two were successfully married until one evening when an intoxicated Alboin urged Rosimund to drink wine from a goblet made out of her father's skull. Incensed by this insult, Rosimund determines to murder her husband: she tricks one of his retainers into unwittingly sleeping with her in order to coerce that retainer to kill Alboin under the threat of exposing their liaison; the retainer then carries out the deed, ambushing a napping Alboin after Rosimund had tied his sword to the bedpost. This story might well have been known in Anglo-Saxon England: Alboin, son of Audoin, garners a vignette in *Widsith* (ll. 70–74), where he appears as Ælfwine, son of Eadwine. The tale of Rosimund's vengeance, attested in an eighth-century source, confirms the relative antiquity of the type of the vengeful, honor-bound queen that is well attested in later sources. Rosimund's behavior is comparable, for example, to that of Brunhild in the *Nibelungenlied*, who orchestrates the death of Siegfried on account of an insult. Her story also resembles that of Signý's vengeance in *Vǫlsunga saga*, in that Signý commits incest with her unwitting brother, Sigmundr, in order to produce an offspring to aid in the killing of her husband, who had previously killed her father. The standout figure in this tradition is Guðrún, who is described in *Atlakviða* as murdering the children she bore Atli, feeding them to him, and then killing Atli in order to avenge the kinsmen whom Atli had killed. The carnage is comparable only to the bloodbath incited by Kriemhild in the *Nibelungenlied*, where the German equivalent of Guðrún brings about the deaths of her brothers, herself, and hundreds of others in order to avenge the killing of Siegfried.[48]

In view of the prominence accorded violent women in Germanic legend, the virtuous and elegant queens of *Beowulf* appear to possess a relationship to tradition comparable to that of the two most prominent male characters. While Offa's queen, confined to a digression, exemplifies a kind of behavior well known from antecedent tradition, the women in the foreground notably abstain from this behavior, just as Beowulf and Hrothgar abstain from the kin-slaying and oath-breaking practiced by such figures as Ingeld and Hengest. Yet even in the digressions, the poet's discomfort with a tradition wherein women demanded vengeance might be manifest in one instance. The figure of Hildeburh, the Danish princess married to the Frisian king Finn, is characterized in the Finnsburg episode as a

Andersson, *A Preface to the Nibelungenlied* (n. 13 above), 7–8; and Shami Ghosh, *Writing the Barbarian Past: Studies in Early Medieval Historical Narrative* (Leiden, 2016), 121–40.

[48] On the legendary women mentioned in this paragraph (and their sources and analogues elsewhere in medieval Germanic literature), see Jenny Jochens, *Old Norse Images of Women* (Philadelphia, 1996); Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir, *Women in Old Norse Literature: Bodies, Words, and Power* (New York, 2013); Theodore M. Andersson, *The Legend of Brynhild* (Ithaca, 1980); Stephanie B. Pafenberg, "The Spindle and the Sword: Gender, Sex, and Heroism in the *Nibelungenlied* and *Kudrun*," *The Germanic Review* 70 (1995): 106–15; and Eric Shane Bryan, "A Pragmatic Analysis of the Quarrel of the Queens in *Völsungasaga*, *Þiðreks Saga*, and *Das Nibelungenlied*," *Neophilologus* 97 (2013): 349–65.

geōmuru ides ("rueful lady," l. 1075b), who innocently loses a brother, a son, and a husband in a tragic series of events.[49] Her brother, the Danish king Hnæf, is killed along with the son she bore Finn in a nocturnal attack on the hall of a party of Danes visiting Frisia; Hengest, the leader of the surviving Danes, is forced to accept a truce and swear oaths of allegiance to Finn, but he is eventually driven by shame to break those oaths and avenge his lord by killing Finn, looting the palace, and returning with Hildeburh to Denmark.[50] The poet does not describe Hildeburh's reaction to the death of her husband, focusing instead on the traumatizing shock she experienced on the morning when she discovered that her son and brother had been killed (ll. 1076–80a). She is then described engaging in an act of public mourning at Hnæf's funeral:

> Hēt ðā Hildeburh æt Hnæfes āde
> hire selfre sunu sweoloðe befæstan,
> bānfatu bærnan, ond on bǣl dôn
> ēa*m*e on eaxle. Ides gnornode,
> geōmrode giddum. (ll. 1113–18a)

> [Then Hildeburh directed that her own son be committed to the blaze at Hnæf's pyre, the bone-vessels be burned, placed on the funeral pile at the shoulder of the uncle. The lady lamented, mourned with dirges.]

After this scene, Hildeburh falls out of focus, and the episode concentrates on the internal struggle of Hengest, who finally pursues revenge after being exhorted by Guthlaf and Oslaf. A minor debate has emerged in the critical literature concerning the interpretation of Hildeburh: is she to be understood as an absolute victim, who is further devastated by the death of Finn, or did she sympathize with the other Danes in desiring the vengeance for Hnæf that could be obtained through the death of her husband?[51] Since Rosimund, Guðrún, and Signý (not to

[49] See Joyce Hill, "'Þæt Wæs Geomuru Ides!': A Female Stereotype Examined," in *New Readings on Women in Old English Literature*, ed. Helen Damico and Alexandra Hennessey Olsen (Bloomington, 1990), 235–47.

[50] There have been various reconstructions of the events narrated in the Finnsburg episode, each possessing certain nuanced differences. For some distinct interpretations, see *Finnsburh: Fragment and Episode*, ed. Donald K. Fry (London, 1974), 5–25; J. R. R. Tolkien, *Finn and Hengest*, ed. A. J. Bliss (London, 1982), 159–62; Richard North, "Tribal Loyalties in the Finnsburh Fragment and Episode," *Leeds Studies in English* 21 (1990): 13–43; Scott Gwara, "The Foreign *Beowulf* and the 'Fight at Finnsburg,'" *Traditio* 63 (2008): 185–233; *Old English Minor Heroic Poems*, ed. Joyce Hill, 3rd ed. (Toronto, 2009), 27–29; and Leonard Neidorf, "Garulf and Guthlaf in the *Finnsburg* Fragment," *Notes and Queries* 66 (2019): 489–92.

[51] For interpretations of Hildeburh as an unavenged victim, see Edward B. Irving, Jr., *A Reading of Beowulf* (New Haven, 1968), 137; Jane Chance, "The Structural Unity of *Beowulf*: The Problem of Grendel's Mother," in *New Readings on Women in Old English Literature*, ed. Damico and Olsen, 251; Hill, "'Þæt Wæs Geomuru Ides,'" 241; and Orchard, *A Critical*

mention Ingeld) value the bonds of kinship over the bonds of matrimony, it is not unlikely that Hildeburh sided with the Danes in antecedent tradition and perhaps even played some role in bringing about the death of Finn. In *Beowulf*, there might be a vestige of this tradition in Hildeburh's public mourning, which could be perceived as an incitement to avenge her losses. Nevertheless, if Hildeburh did take a more active role in antecedent tradition, this has clearly been minimized in *Beowulf*, where her described behavior is limited to the kind of ritualistic performance that the poet deemed suitable for the stately queens in the poem's foreground. Accordingly, the debate over Hildeburh might constitute another case where critical uncertainty has arisen because the poet's sense of decorum prompted him to obscure a feature of antecedent tradition that he considered objectionable.

There is, of course, one female figure in *Beowulf* who uses violence in order to avenge her kin: Grendel's mother, who kills Hrothgar's dearest counselor in retaliation for the death of her son. In this instance, the poet would seem once again to be taking an objectionable aspect of antecedent tradition and locating it outside of the idealized world of the poem's civilized courts, where the main human characters in the foreground behave virtuously and deliver speeches that express monotheistic intuitions. Just as slavery, kin-slaying, and oath-breaking are kept out of the present world of hall life depicted in the poem and confined to digressions, flashbacks, and hints of future turmoil, violence brought about by women is restricted to a digression (where the perpetrator is reformed) and a monstrous non-human creature with lupine characteristics, who dwells in a hellish, subterranean lair. By including (or creating) the figure of Grendel's mother, the poet expresses his discomfort with a feature of antecedent tradition not by omitting it entirely, but by displacing it onto an unsympathetic outcast who could not be mistaken by any audience member to be an exemplar of human conduct.[52]

Further Possibilities

The arguments presented above suggest that a series of ostensibly unrelated interpretive problems in the poem's critical literature could be resolved with a single, coherent explanation: namely, that *Beowulf* was composed by a poet who admired the literary tradition he inherited, but felt obligated to clean it up

Companion to Beowulf (n. 18 above), 178. For the argument that Hildeburh's losses are avenged through the killing of Finn, see Olsen, "Gender Roles" (n. 45 above), 316–18; and John M. Hill, "The Ethnopsychology of In-Law Feud and the Remaking of Group Identity in *Beowulf*: The Cases of Hengest and Ingeld," *Philological Quarterly* 78 (1999): 97–123.

[52] For comparable readings of Grendel's mother, see Paul Acker, "Horror and the Maternal in Beowulf," *Publications of the Modern Language Association* 121 (2006): 702–16; and Renée R. Trilling, "Beyond Abjection: The Problem with Grendel's Mother Again," *Parergon* 24 (2007): 1–20.

by obscuring indecorous aspects, focusing on relatively untraditional characters, and expressing value judgments that were likely alien to the antecedent tradition. This explanation suggests, in turn, a method for reading *Beowulf* in general, which would be rather different from reading the poem as a fundamental critique of the entire heroic tradition or some central aspect of it (for example, the pursuit of fame, the institution of revenge, the desire for treasure, and so on).[53] In my reading, the *Beowulf* poet sought not to reject, undermine, or disparage the tradition he inherited; rather, he sought to renovate it for moral purposes by omitting what he found unpalatable, minimizing what he found questionable, and foregrounding what he found admirable. This reading generates a hermeneutic that could be applied to other problems in the poem's critical literature. For example, there has been considerable uncertainty about the relationship between the speech of the old Heathobardic warrior in the Ingeld digression (ll. 2041–66) and the speech that Starkaðr (Lat. Starcatherus) delivers to incite Ingeld to avenge his father in Saxo Grammaticus's *Gesta Danorum* (ca. 1200).[54] A common tradition clearly lies behind the two speeches, as both are spoken by an aged warrior at Ingeld's court, who exhorts a young man to avenge his slain kinsman and terminate a peace created by a marriage pact. It is generally and quite reasonably assumed that *Beowulf*, composed centuries before the *Gesta Danorum*, records the more authentic version of this tradition. Yet while it is clear that Saxo's account is untraditional in many obvious respects, the arguments developed above raise the possibility that the *Gesta Danorum* might preserve some features of the original tradition that the *Beowulf* poet omitted.[55]

Starkaðr, valorized by Saxo as a champion of traditional Danish values, is a figure whom the *Beowulf* poet is likely to have found distasteful. A notable kinslayer and oath-breaker, who despises courtliness and is even violent toward

[53] Numerous readings of *Beowulf* as a poem fundamentally critical of heroism have been produced. See, for example, John Leyerle, "Beowulf the Hero and the King," *Medium Ævum* 34 (1965): 89–102; Linda Georgianna, "King Hrethel's Sorrow and the Limits of Heroic Action in *Beowulf*," *Speculum* 62 (1987): 829–50; and Fidel Fajardo-Acosta, *The Condemnation of Heroism in the Tragedy of Beowulf* (Lewiston, 1989).

[54] See R. W. Chambers, *Beowulf: An Introduction to the Study of the Poem* (n. 30 above), 22–23; Jan de Vries, "Die Starkadsage," *Germanisch-Romanisch Monatsschrift* 36 (1955): 281–97; E. O. G. Turville-Petre, *Myth and Religion of the North: The Religion of Ancient Scandinavia* (New York, 1964), 209–11; and Russell Poole, "Some Southern Perspectives on Starcatherus," *Viking and Medieval Scandinavia* 2 (1996): 141–66.

[55] In Saxo's version (or in the tradition leading up to it), a conflict between Danes and Heathobards has been altered into a conflict between Danes and Germans, with the original Heathobards now depicted as Danes. On the influence of contemporary politics in Saxo's work, see André Mucenieks, *Saxo Grammaticus: Hierocratical Conceptions and Danish Hegemony in the Thirteenth Century* (Kalamazoo, 2017).

women, Starkaðr was known in legend to have killed Víkarr, his lord and foster-brother, at the instigation of Óðinn. At a counsel of the gods, Óðinn decreed that Starkaðr would live out three human lifespans, while Þórr condemned him to commit one abominable deed — a *níðingsverk* (as it is called in *Gautreks saga*) or an *exsecrabile opus* (as it is called in the *Gesta Danorum*) — in each of these lifespans.[56] In view of the association between Starkaðr and these heinous crimes, it appears plausible that the *Beowulf* poet deliberately omitted the name of Starkaðr and reduced him to an anonymous Heathobard. There are some hints that this Heathobard could have been Starkaðr in antecedent tradition: most significantly, the description of this figure as an *eald æscwiga sē ðe eall geman* ("an old ash-fighter who remembers all," l. 2042) recalls the supernaturally extended lifespan of Starkaðr, who bears the nickname *hinn gamli* ("the old") in Old Icelandic tradition.[57] Furthermore, it is possible that the versified speech delivered by Starkaðr in the *Gesta Danorum* preserves some features of the common tradition that were omitted from *Beowulf* on account of their indecorous character. While the speech of the aged warrior in *Beowulf* focuses on an offensive object borne by one of the queen's retainers, the speech of Starkaðr takes aim at both Ingeld and his foreign queen. The words addressed to the queen differ considerably from any words that are spoken in *Beowulf*:

Vxor Ingelli leuis ac petulca	The wife of Ingiald, skittish and wanton,
Theutonum ritus celebrare gestit,	joys to practise Teuton rites,
Instruit luxus et adulterinas	devises orgies and prepares
Preparat escas.	adulterated foods.
Nam nouis palpat dapibus palatum,	She titillates the palate with new menus,
Captat ignoti libitum saporis,	chases a flavour unheard-of and sensual,
Aestuans ferclis onerare mensas	yearns to cumber each table with courses
Lautius omnes.	ever more gorgeous.
Hec uiro uinum pateris propinat	She dispenses bowls of wine to her husband,
Cuncta propenso meditans paratu,	planning all with eager provision,

[56] On the various sources concerning the legend(s) of Starkaðr, see Marlene Ciklamini, "The Problem of Starkaðr," *Scandinavian Studies* 43 (1971): 169–88; on his three abominable deeds, see Georges Dumézil, "The Three Sins of Starcatherus," in *The Destiny of the Warrior*, trans. Alf Hiltebeitel (Chicago, 1970), 82–95; on his hostility toward courtliness, see Kemp Malone, "Primitivism in Saxo Grammaticus," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 19 (1958): 94–104; and on his violence against women, see Poole, "Some Southern Perspectives," 157–59.

[57] On Starkaðr's old age, see Ciklamini, "The Problem of Starkaðr," 181–82; and William Layher, "Starkaðr's Teeth," *Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 108 (2009): 1–26. On the hints in *Beowulf* that the old Heathobard is Starkaðr, see de Vries, "Die Starkadsage," 283–84; Turville-Petre, *Myth and Religion of the North*, 210; Poole, "Some Southern Perspectives," 155–56; and Currie, "Political Ideals" (n. 14 above), 295–301.

Cocta torreri iubet et secundo	and assigns dishes, once-cooked, to be roasted
Destinat igni.	in a second oven.
Pascit ut porcum petulans maritum,	A pert, precocious whore, she feeds
Impudens scortum natibusque fidens,	her pig of a mate and, bold with her buttocks,
Gestit admissum tolerare penem	she delights to receive his thrusting penis
Crimine stupri.	in criminal lust.[58]

If the *Beowulf* poet found anything like this in the tradition he inherited, there can be little doubt that he would have considered it unsuitable for inclusion in his dignified epic. Although Saxo's poem must be substantially different from the tradition that existed prior to *Beowulf*, it is conceivable that the common tradition included incendiary insults of some sort, perhaps vulgar and xenophobic in nature, that were directed at Ingeld's foreign queen: a vestige of this tradition might be preserved in *Beowulf* in the cryptic remark that Ingeld's *wiflufu* ("affection for his wife," l. 2065b) will grow cold after the peace is broken.[59] Given the absence of vulgarity and xenophobia in *Beowulf*, it is clear that if these features were present in the original legendary tradition surrounding Ingeld, the poet would have found little use for them.[60]

Another passage in *Beowulf* wherein antecedent tradition has likely been obfuscated on account of the poet's sense of decorum is the digression on Sigemund and Fitela (ll. 874b–902a), who are depicted in our poem as uncle and nephew, though depicted elsewhere as father and son, with Fitela being the child conceived of the incestuous union between Sigemund and Signý. In this case, critics have long entertained the possibility that the poet's discomfort with antecedent tradition prompted an alteration. Frederick Klaeber, for instance, supposes that if a change has been made, "it may be attributed to the Christian author's desire to

[58] Saxo Grammaticus, *Gesta Danorum: The History of the Danes*, ed. Karsten Friis-Jensen, trans. Peter Fisher (Oxford, 2015), 1:430–31.

[59] For an argument that Saxo has reshaped native tradition under the influence of Horace's poetry, see Karsten Friis-Jensen, "The Lay of Ingellus and its Classical Models," in *Saxo Grammaticus: A Medieval Author between Norse and Latin Culture*, ed. Karsten Friis-Jensen (Copenhagen, 1981), 65–78.

[60] On the absence of (human-oriented) xenophobia in *Beowulf*, see Dennis Cronan, "*Eotena*, *Eotenum* 'Jutes' in the Finnsburg Episode in *Beowulf*," *Modern Philology* 116 (2018): 1–19, at 15–16; and Leonard Neidorf, "*Beowulf* as Pre-National Epic: Ethnocentrism in the Poem and its Criticism," *English Literary History* 85 (2018): 847–75. Vulgarity is manifestly absent from *Beowulf*, but the possibility that it was present in antecedent tradition is raised by its presence in some Eddic poems. See Folke Ström, *Níð, Ergi, and Old Norse Moral Attitudes* (London, 1974), 15–17.

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suppress that morally revolting motive."[61] James W. Earl develops this suggestion and argues that there are several other passages in *Beowulf* where the poet's suppression of the theme of incest might be discerned, such as in those pertaining to Halga and Yrse, who were known to have incestuously conceived Hrothulf.[62] Earl, like Klaeber, identifies Christianity as the source of the poem's deviations from tradition. He writes that although *Beowulf* "could hardly seem more Germanic" when read in isolation, that perception changes in the light of works drawing on the same legendary traditions: "Compared with the analogues, *Beowulf* is hardly the consummate Germanic poem; it is a poem struggling to subdue its Germanic nature, to bring it into rough harmony with Christianity."[63] In certain respects, Earl's method of reading *Beowulf* is the closest in spirit to the method recommended herein, but I would resist the temptation to understand the poem's deviations from antecedent traditions in terms of a dichotomous tension between broad concepts such as "the Christian" and "the Germanic" (here evidently synonymous with "pagan"). Furthermore, I would depart from Earl (and from Klaeber) in identifying Christianity as the explanation for the untraditional nature of *Beowulf*. Instead, I would contend that the poem's vexed relationship with antecedent tradition is best understood as a consequence of the peculiar sense of decorum, the particular set of moral and aesthetic values, possessed by the *Beowulf* poet.

The poet's values are influenced by Christianity, but they reflect an idiosyncratic reaction to the religion's teachings. The conviction that kin-slayers and oath-breakers were destined to an eternity in hell and undeserving of prominence in a literary work could be considered a sign of Christian influence, but it is by no means inevitable that an acquaintance with Christian learning would implant such a conviction in an author's mind. Other medieval Christian authors plainly did not see anything wrong with describing and even valorizing the kind of behavior that apparently troubled the *Beowulf* poet. Saxo Grammaticus was a Christian (and probably a canon),[64] yet he chose to make the belligerent and amoral figure of Starkaðr — in many ways the antithesis of the kind and

[61] *Beowulf and the Fight at Finnsburg*, ed. Frederick Klaeber, 3rd ed. (Boston, 1950), 159. For comprehensive analysis of the passage in question, see M. S. Griffith, "Some Difficulties in *Beowulf*, Lines 874–902: Sigemund Reconsidered," *Anglo-Saxon England* 24 (1995): 11–41, esp. 40, where Griffith concludes that the poet resorted to "ambiguity and euphemism" in his treatment of the problematic figure of Sigemund.

[62] Earl, "The Forbidden *Beowulf*" (n. 15 above), 295–96. See also North, "Hrothulf's Childhood" (n. 29 above), 227, where it is suggested that "The moral charge of Halga's *til*-agnomen (*Beowulf*, line 61) might therefore tell us that the poet has the same story [of Halga's incest] but omits most of it as distasteful, protesting only that Halga was both father and grandfather to Hrothulf through no fault of his own."

[63] Earl, "The Forbidden *Beowulf*" (n. 15 above), 291.

[64] See *Gesta Danorum*, ed. Friis-Jensen, trans. Fisher, 1:xxix–xxxiii.

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gentle protagonist of *Beowulf* — one of the central heroes of his legendary history of the Danes. Likewise, the author of the *Nibelungenlied* was a Christian, yet he composed an epic in which the greatest prominence is given to Hagen, another morally ambivalent figure, who treacherously murders Siegfried in the first half of the poem (and is condemned by the poet for doing so) and then valiantly fights to the death a battle that he is fated to lose in the second half of the poem (and is praised by the poet for doing so).[65] The *Nibelungenlied* also features many forms of violence that go beyond the moral boundaries of *Beowulf*: Hagen strikes dead Ortlieb, the young child that Kriemhild bore Etzel; Kriemhild later decapitates the subdued Hagen; Hildebrant, revolted by Kriemhild's killing of Hagen, retaliates by striking the queen dead with his sword. The *Beowulf* poet's decision to construct a migration-period epic around a virtuous hero who breaks no oaths and commits no violence against women, children, or his own kinsmen can be understood as a Christian reaction to antecedent tradition, but it is a reaction peculiar to this poet, which was not necessarily shared by other Christian authors who trafficked in similar legendary material.

In certain respects, the arguments propounded above might be thought to resemble those put forward by Fred C. Robinson in his seminal monograph, *Beowulf and the Appositive Style*. Indeed, Robinson and I share the premise that the *Beowulf* poet possessed an ambivalent relationship to the antecedent legendary tradition and sought to omit from his poem material that might offend the sensibilities of his audience. Yet my arguments diverge from those of Robinson in two important respects. First, whereas I view the poet's ambivalence affecting what was left out of the poem, Robinson argues that it is thematized within the poem itself. Second, whereas I consider a particular sense of decorum to underlie the poet's omissions, Robinson construes these omissions through the lens of tension between Christianity and paganism. As the following quote makes clear, Robinson perceives a similar process of filtration in *Beowulf*, but he develops from this perception an overall reading of the poem that is fundamentally different from my own:

[65] On the morally questionable character of Hagen, see Ursula R. Mahlendorf and Frank J. Tobin, "Hagen: A Reappraisal," *Monatshefte* 63 (1971): 125–40; Francis G. Gentry, "Hagen and the Problem of Individuality in the *Nibelungenlied*," *Monatshefte* 68 (1976): 5–12; Holger Homann, "The Hagen Figure in the Nibelungenlied: Know Him by His Lies," *Modern Language Notes* 97 (1982): 759–69; Stephen Jaeger, "Hagen and Germanic Mythology," *Res Publica Litterarum* 6 (1983): 171–85; Joachim Heinzle, "Gnade für Hagen? Die epische Struktur des *Nibelungenliedes* und das Dilemma der Interpreten," in *Nibelungenlied und Klage: Sage und Geschichte, Struktur und Gattung: Passauer Nibelungenliedgespräche 1985*, ed. Fritz Peter Knapp (Heidelberg, 1987), 257–77; and Katherine DeVane Brown, "Courtly Rivalry, Loyalty Conflict, and the Figure of Hagen in the *Nibelungenlied*," *Monatshefte* 107 (2015): 355–81.

> [T]he poet has by design selected the more inconspicuous, inoffensive tokens of heathenism for iteration throughout *Beowulf* because he does not wish his audience to lose sympathy with the poem's characters. He wants them to accept the heathenism of the men of old and to join him in regretting it, but then he wishes to take his audience beyond this recognition of their spiritual status to a sympathetic evaluation of them for what they were.[66]

By including "mild yet pervasive signs of paganism" throughout *Beowulf* and omitting the most egregious manifestations, the poet can plausibly express "admiration and regret" for characters who are virtuous but nevertheless damned on account of their ignorance of the Christian revelation.[67] Because the poet "wants to acknowledge his heroes' damnation while insisting on their dignity," his ambivalence affects the material excluded from *Beowulf* as well as the material that remains within it.[68] The crucial difference between Robinson's reading and my own is that I see the poet omitting indecorous material from his poem so that he could express a far less ambivalent attitude toward the virtuous monotheists depicted in his poem's foreground. Contrary to the view of Robinson, Beowulf is not represented as a benighted pagan, who is dignified but damned.[69] He is represented as an intuitive monotheist, in the manner of an Old Testament patriarch, who believes in God, receives God's support, and fights God's enemies; his speech contains references to providence (ll. 440b–41), judgment (l. 978b), salvation (l. 2469b), and damnation (ll. 588b–89a); his soul, upon death, seeks *sōðfæstra dōm* ("the judgment of the righteous," l. 2820b), a phrase that in all other contexts would refer to salvation.[70] The *Beowulf* poet omitted indecorous material from his poem and created a protagonist without the immoderate and transgressive characteristics of his predecessors not to express an ambivalent perspective on paganism, a phenomenon the poet likely

[66] Fred C. Robinson, Beowulf *and the Appositive Style* (Knoxville, 1985), 11.

[67] Robinson, Beowulf *and the Appositive Style*, 11.

[68] Robinson, Beowulf *and the Appositive Style*, 13.

[69] See James Cahill, "Reconsidering Robinson's *Beowulf*," *English Studies* 89 (2008): 251–62.

[70] On the representation of the foregrounded characters as intuitive monotheists, see especially Donahue, "*Beowulf* and Christian Tradition" (n. 11 above); Osborn, "The Great Feud" (n. 11 above); Hill, "The Christian Language" (n. 11 above); and Cronan, "Hrothgar and the *Gylden Hilt*" (n. 11 above). Much has been written about the meaning of *sōðfæstra dōm*. I subscribe to the view put forward by Cavill in "Christianity and Theology in *Beowulf*" (n. 41 above), 20–24. For a contrary view, see A. J. Bliss, "Beowulf, Lines 3074–3075," in *J. R. R. Tolkien, Scholar and Storyteller: Essays in Memoriam*, ed. Mary Salu and Robert T. Farrell (Ithaca, 1979), 41–63, at 49–50. For counterarguments to Bliss's interpretation, see Mitchell, *On Old English* (n. 41 above), 30–40. For further discussion, see Greenfield, "Beowulf and the Judgement" (n. 41 above); and Marie Padgett Hamilton, "The Religious Principle in *Beowulf*," *Publications of the Modern Language Association* 61 (1946): 309–30, at 328.

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regarded with abhorrence,[71] but to create a stainless protagonist, superior in strength, courage, and conduct to all who came before him, whose life can be admired and whose death can be mourned without reservation. Not all scholars would agree with this reading, but I believe it constitutes the simplest and most coherent assessment not only of what is included in *Beowulf* but also of what is excluded from it.[72]

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Keywords: *Beowulf*, slavery, *Hlǫðskviða*, *Hildebrandslied*, Saxo Grammaticus, *Nibelungenlied*

[71] For an argument against Robinson's supposition of thematic tension between Christianity and paganism in *Beowulf*, see C. E. Fell, "Paganism in *Beowulf*: A Semantic Fairy-tale," in *Pagans and Christians: The Interplay between Christian Latin and Traditional Germanic Cultures in Early Medieval Europe*, ed. T. Hofstra, L. A. J. R. Houwen, and A. A. MacDonald (Groningen, 1995), 9–34.

[72] There is longstanding disagreement among *Beowulf* critics as to whether the poet casts a critical or an admiring eye upon the protagonist. For readings that ascribe to the poet a perspective ranging from negative to ambivalent, see E. G. Stanley, "*Hæþenra Hyht* in *Beowulf*," in *Studies in Old English Literature in Honor of Arthur G. Brodeur*, ed. Stanley B. Greenfield (Eugene, 1963), 136–51; Leyerle, "Beowulf the Hero and the King" (n. 53 above); Margaret E. Goldsmith, *The Mode and Meaning of Beowulf* (London, 1970); Georgianna, "King Hrethel's Sorrow" (n. 53 above); Andy Orchard, *Pride and Prodigies: Studies in the Monsters of the* Beowulf-*Manuscript* (Cambridge, 1995); North, *The Origins of Beowulf* (n. 29 above); and Gwara, *Heroic Identity* (n. 37 above). For readings that ascribe to the poet a broadly positive perspective on the protagonist, see Kenneth Sisam, *The Structure of Beowulf* (Oxford, 1965); Irving, *A Reading of Beowulf* (n. 51 above); Mary P. Richards, "A Reexamination of *Beowulf* ll. 3180–3182," *English Language Notes* 10 (1973): 163–67; T. A. Shippey, *Beowulf* (London, 1978); Clark, *Beowulf* (n. 39 above); and John M. Hill, *The Cultural World in Beowulf* (Toronto, 1995). For an overview of the voluminous scholarship on both sides of the debate, see George Clark, "The Hero and the Theme," in *A Beowulf Handbook*, ed. Robert E. Bjork and John D. Niles (Lincoln, 1997), 271–90.