

THE PROBLEM OF REVENGE IN MEDIEVAL LITERATURE:  
*BEOWULF, THE CANTERBURY TALES, AND LJÓSVETNINGA SAGA*

by

Ann Park Lanpher

A thesis submitted in conformity with the requirements  
for the degree of Ph.D.  
Graduate Department of English  
University of Toronto

© Copyright by Ann Park Lanpher 2010

# **The Problem of Revenge in Medieval Literature:**

## ***Beowulf, The Canterbury Tales, and Ljósvetninga saga***

Ann Park Lanpher

Doctor of Philosophy

Department of English

University of Toronto

2010

### **ABSTRACT**

This dissertation considers the literary treatment of revenge in medieval England and Iceland. Vengeance and feud were an essential part of these cultures; far from the reckless, impulsive action that the word conjures up in modern minds, revenge was considered both a right and a duty and was legislated and regulated by social norms. It was an important tool for obtaining justice and protecting property, family, and reputation. Accordingly, many medieval literary works seem to accept revenge without question. Many, however, evince a great sensitivity to the ambiguities and paradoxes inherent in an act of revenge. In my study, I consider three works that are emblematic of this responsiveness to and indeed, anxiety about revenge. Chapter one focuses on the Old English poem *Beowulf*; chapter two moves on to discuss Chaucer's *Reeve's Tale* and *Tale of Melibee* from the *Canterbury Tales*; and chapter three examines the Old Icelandic family saga, *Ljósvetninga saga*. I focus in particular on the

treatment of the avenger in each work. The poet or author of each work acknowledges the perspective of the avenger by allowing him to express his motivations, desires, and justifications for revenge in direct speech. Alongside this acknowledgement, however, is the author's own reflection on the risks, rewards, and repercussions of the avenger's intentions and actions. The resulting parallel but divergent narratives highlight the multiplicity of viewpoints found in any act of revenge or feud and reveal a fundamental ambivalence about the value, morality, and necessity of revenge. Each of the works I consider resists easy conclusions about revenge in its own context and remains incredibly current in the way it poses challenging questions about what constitutes injury, punishment, justice, and revenge in our own time.

## Acknowledgements

I owe many thanks to many people whose time and support have made this dissertation possible.

The first thanks go to my supervisor and committee: Andy Orchard, Toni Healey, Ian McDougall, and Will Robins. Their good humor, encouragement, precision, thoroughness, breadth and depth of knowledge, and probing and challenging questions have pushed me to do better than I imagined I could. I do not think I could have found a more generous and talented group of people to guide me through the process of writing a doctoral thesis, and I am truly grateful to each of them. All errors and infelicities remain my own.

To my friends and classmates, especially Dale Barleben, Amelia Defalco, Alysia Kolentsis, Sean Lafferty, Katie Larson, Romi Mikulinsky, and Stephen Yeager. Whether cramming for comps or celebrating their end, commiserating over Latin exams or forgetting about them on the squash court, preparing for conferences or simply sharing a drink at the pub, I enjoyed every moment I spent with these exceptional people. I feel very lucky to have had their fellowship through the highs and lows of graduate school.

To Claudia Lanpher, whose willingness to travel to Brooklyn to babysit her grandson allowed me numerous hours of worry-free work at the library in the later stages of writing. I could not have finished several chapters without her help.

To Mark Lanpher, whose own work ethic and intellectual curiosity inspire me, and whose patience and love never fail.

And finally, to my mom and dad, who made my education their first priority and provided me with incredible opportunities. They never questioned the decisions I made as I pursued this degree, only supporting me in whatever ways they could and always letting me know how proud they are of me. I owe them much more than these few words of gratitude can express.

## Table of Contents

Introduction.....	1
Chapter One	
Duty and Desire: Beowulf as Narrator and Avenger.....	46
Chapter Two	
Victim or Villain:	
The Choice of the Avenger in <i>The Reeve's Tale</i> and <i>The Tale of Melibee</i> .....	78
Chapter Three	
Writing Wrongs: Author as Avenger in <i>Ljósvetninga saga</i> .....	125
Epilogue.....	171
Appendices.....	174
Bibliography.....	182

## List of Appendices

1. Definitions of Feud.....	174
2. Genealogical Tables	
<i>Beowulf</i> .....	178
<i>Ljósvetninga saga</i> .....	180

## Introduction

‘Revenge is not a peculiarly medieval phenomenon.’<sup>1</sup> The desire to return an injury or insult, to pay back, to even the score, and thus, to gain justice for oneself is a basic human impulse. The history of western literature reflects this fact: in works as diverse as the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* of ancient Greece; *Hamlet*, *The Spanish Tragedy*, *Titus Andronicus* and other revenge dramas of early modern England; and nineteenth-century novels such as *Wuthering Heights* or *The Scarlet Letter*, revenge is an essential theme. In the *Merchant of Venice*, Shylock underscores the universality and automaticity of the will to revenge when he says:

I am a Jew. Hath not a Jew eyes? Hath not a Jew hands, organs, dimensions, senses, affections, passions; fed with the same food, hurt with the same weapons, subject to the same diseases, heal'd by the same means, warm'd and cool'd by the same winter and summer, as a Christian is? If you prick us, do we not bleed? If you tickle us, do we not laugh? If you poison us, do we not die? And if you wrong us, shall we not revenge?

(III.i.58–67)<sup>2</sup>

The same rationale lies behind the motto on Montresor's family arms in Poe's short story ‘The Cask of Amontillado,’ ‘*Nemo me impune lacessit* [No one provokes me with impunity],’<sup>3</sup> and even behind Captain Ahab's outrageous claim in *Moby Dick*, ‘I'd strike the sun if it insulted me’<sup>4</sup>—namely, that a wrong must be redressed in order to restore the

---

<sup>1</sup> Peter Sawyer, ‘The Bloodfeud in Fact and Fiction,’ *Tradition og historieskrivning*, ed. Kirsten Hastrup and Preben Meulengracht Sørensen (Aarhus: Aarhus universitetsforlag, 1987): 27–38 at 31.

<sup>2</sup> *The Riverside Shakespeare*, vol. 1, ed. G. Blakemore Evans (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1974), 268. Anne Pippin Burnett writes that the desire for revenge ‘is more universal perhaps than aggression itself, which is why Shylock can boast of it as a mark of humanity. . . .’ *Revenge in Attic and Later Tragedy*, Sather Classical Lectures, vol. 62 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 1.

<sup>3</sup> Edgar Allan Poe, *The Cask of Amontillado* in *Edgar Allan Poe: The Complete Stories* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1992), 883. ‘*Nemo me impune lacessit*’ is likely more well known as the national motto of Scotland.

<sup>4</sup> Herman Melville, *Moby Dick, or The Whale* (New York: Hendricks House, 1952), 162.

balance that existed previously and to repair ‘the broken outline of self suffered in an . . . attack.’<sup>5</sup>

Medieval literature is no exception when it comes to a preoccupation with the theme of revenge, and one need not look far to find numerous striking examples of vengeance desired and taken, both human and divine. Thoughts of revenge are what inspire the men in the Old English *Battle of Maldon* to continue fighting despite losing odds; one after another they declare their intentions to avenge their fallen lord, Byrhtnoth, no matter the cost:

Ic þæt gehate    þæt ic heonon nelle  
fleon fotes trym,    ac wille furðor gan,  
wrecan on gewinne    mine winedrihten. (246–248)<sup>6</sup>

I vow that I will not flee the space of one foot from here, but will go further to avenge in battle my friendly lord.

Ne mæg na wandian    se þe wrecan þenceð  
frecan on folce,    ne for feore muman. (258–259)

Never may he waver, he who intends to avenge his lord on that people, nor care at all for life.

In the Latin *Waltharius*, what finally engages a reluctant Hagen in the battle against his best friend and foster brother, Walter, is the desire to avenge his sister’s son:

Cetera fors tulerim, si vel unus dolor abesset.  
Unice enim carum rutilum blandum pretiosum  
carpsisti florem mucronis falce tenellum.  
Haec res est, pactum qua irritasti prior alium,  
iccircoque gazam cupio pro foedere nullam.  
Sitne tibi soli virtus, volo discere in armis,  
deque tuis manibus caedem perquiro nepotis.  
En aut oppeto sive aliquid memorabile faxo. (1272–1279)<sup>7</sup>

Perhaps I might have endured the others, if one grief were absent. For you plucked the only beloved, rosy, charming, precious, tender flower with the hook of your sword. This is the act by which you first

<sup>5</sup> Burnett, 2.

<sup>6</sup> D.G. Scragg, ed., *The Battle of Maldon* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1981), 65.

<sup>7</sup> Dennis M. Kratz, ed. and trans., *Waltharius and Ruodlieb* (New York: Garland Publishers, 1984), 61–62.



upset our favorable pact, and therefore I desire no royal treasure as treaty. Is there bravery in you alone, I want to learn in arms, and from your hands I seek the death of my nephew. Look, either I will die or I will do something memorable.

In Malory's *Morte Darthur*, Gawain seeks revenge on Lancelot for the deaths of his brothers, Gareth and Gaheris. Gawain once swore that he would 'never be against sir Lancelot for one day's deed,'<sup>8</sup> but his fury is relentless. He demands of King Arthur:

. . . now I shall make you a promise which I shall hold by my knighthood, that from this day forward I shall never fail sir Lancelot until that one of us have slain that other. And therefore I require you, my lord and king, dress you unto the war, for wit you well, I will be revenged upon sir Lancelot; and therefore, as ye will have my service and my love, now haste you thereto and assay your friends. For I promise unto God . . . for the death of my brother, sir Gareth, I shall seek sir Lancelot throughout seven king's realms, but I shall slay him, other else he shall slay me.<sup>9</sup>

Even though Arthur deeply mourns the loss of the fellowship of his knights and acknowledges that Lancelot unknowingly harmed Gareth and Gaheris, he readily accepts Gawain's desire for revenge: 'I wot now how it was . . . but as it is said, sir Lancelot slew them in the thickest of the press and knew them not. And therefore let us shape a remedy for to revenge their deaths.'<sup>10</sup> The narrator of *Havelok the Dane* implores not simply royal but divine authority to allow both the heroine and hero of the romance to have vengeance on those who cause them harm:

Jesu Crist, that Lazarun  
To live broucte fro dede bondes,  
He lese hire wit His hondes!  
And leve sho mote him yse  
Heye hangen on galwe tre  
That hire haved in sorwe brouth,

---

<sup>8</sup> D.S. Brewer, ed., *Malory: The Morte Darthur*, Parts 7 and 8, York Medieval Texts (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1974), 101.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 115.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

So as sho ne misdeed nouth.<sup>11</sup>

Jhesu Christ, that makede go  
The halte and the doumbe speken,  
Havelok, thee of Godard wreken!’ (542–544)

In the end both Goldeboru and Havelok are indeed ‘wreken wel’ (2992). *Mactacio Abel* of the fifteenth-century *Towneley Plays* features a desperate call for God’s revenge which is likewise promptly answered:

*Abell.* Veniance, veniance, Lord, I cry!  
For I am slayn, and not gilty. (330–331)<sup>12</sup>

...

*Deus.* Caym, Caym, thou was wode.  
The voyce of thi brotherys blode  
That thou has slayn on fals wise  
From erth to heuen venyance cryse.  
And, for thou has broght thi brother downe,  
Here I gif the my malison. (352–357)

A list of such excerpts could go on at some length, but these few quotations sufficiently highlight what *is* perhaps ‘peculiar’ or remarkable to the modern reader about many medieval examples of revenge: the fundamental acceptance and approval of revenge as a proper response to injury, instead of the condemnation of such action that we generally find and come to expect in later works. For example, after her cathartic lashing out at her cruel aunt, Mrs. Reed, Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* still says, ‘Something of vengeance I had tasted for the first time. As aromatic wine it seemed, on swallowing, warm and racy; its after-flavour,

---

<sup>11</sup> Ronald B. Herzman, Graham Drake, and Eve Salisbury, eds., *Havelok the Dane in Four Romances of England* (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 1999), 93–94.

<sup>12</sup> Martin Stevens and A.C. Cawley, eds., *The Towneley Plays*, vol. 1 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 21.

metallic and corroding, gave me a sensation as if I had been poisoned.’<sup>13</sup> Even Milton’s Satan concedes that ‘Revenge, at first though sweet, / Bitter ere long back on itself recoils . . .’ (IX.171–172).<sup>14</sup> When it comes to vengeance, the negative implications for those who engage in it predominate in a way that they do not in medieval ones. The simplest explanation for this discrepancy is that in medieval works the expectations regarding revenge are different because the expectations of society were so clearly different. Vengeance was commonly considered a right and a duty, the prompt and appropriate execution of which played a vital role in protecting kin, property, and reputation. Feud was a fact of life in many parts of medieval Europe,<sup>15</sup> and it was an important tool in obtaining justice in societies where strong centralized governments either did not exist or did not yet exclusively provide it through law enforcement on behalf of their citizens.<sup>16</sup> Even when these societies were largely

---

<sup>13</sup> Charlotte Brontë, *Jane Eyre* (London: Penguin Books, 2006), 45–46.

<sup>14</sup> John Milton, *Paradise Lost* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 211.

<sup>15</sup> For useful discussions of feud in medieval and early modern Europe, see J.M. Wallace-Hadrill, ‘The Bloodfeud of the Franks,’ in *The Long-Haired Kings and Other Studies in Frankish History* (London: Methuen & Co., 1962), 121–147; R.R. Davies, ‘The Survival of the Bloodfeud in Medieval Wales,’ *History* 54 (1969): 338–357; Stephen D. White, ‘Feuding and Peace-Making in the Touraine Around the Year 1100,’ *Traditio* 42 (1986): 195–263; William Ian Miller, *Bloodtaking and Peacemaking: Feud, Law, and Society in Saga Iceland* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1990); Daniel Lord Smail, ‘Common Violence: Vengeance and Inquisition in Fourteenth-Century Marseilles,’ *Past and Present* 151 (1996): 28–59; Howard Kaminsky, ‘The Noble Feud in the Later Middle Ages,’ *Past and Present* 177 (2002): 55–83; Paul R. Hyams, *Rancor and Reconciliation in Medieval England* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003); Jeppe Büchert Netterstrøm, ‘The Study of Feud in Medieval and Early Modern History,’ in *Feud in Medieval and Early Modern Europe*, ed. Jeppe Büchert Netterstrøm and Bjørn Poulsen (Aarhus: Aarhus University Press, 2007), 9–67.

<sup>16</sup> There has been much debate about the effect that the development of government and royal power had on feud. While most earlier scholars held the view that law replaced the private justice of feud, the consensus now seems to be that they ‘wrongly viewed feud and law as exclusive alternatives.’ Hyams, introduction, xii. Jenny Wormald writes: ‘. . . the demarcation between state or government on the one side and kindred and blood feud on the other may be too rigid. Just as the feud itself is a complex subject, so the question of the relationship between public and private order is also complex. There are infinite variations in the attitude and impact of governments on the blood feud.’ ‘The Blood Feud in Early Modern Scotland’ in *Disputes and Settlements: Law and Human Relations in the West*, ed. John Bossy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 103.

Christian ones, as was the case in England and (at least nominally after conversion in A.D. 1000) Iceland, the ethos of vengeance persisted. As much as the Bible directed that God was the sole proprietor of revenge in verses such as Deuteronomy 32:35 ('Vengeance is mine, and recompense')<sup>17</sup> or Hebrews 10:30 ('For we know the one who said, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay'), other verses presented more difficulties regarding retribution. For example, in one of Paul's letters to the Romans, he affirms that vengeance should ultimately be left to God, but he leaves some room for interpretation:

Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God, for it is written, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord." No, if your enemies are hungry, feed them, if they are thirsty, give them something to drink, for by doing this you will heap burning coals on their heads.

(Romans 12: 19–20)

The quotation from Proverbs<sup>18</sup> suggests that vengeance on one's enemies can still be achieved through generous acts; the 'coals of fire' could signify increased punishment on Judgment Day.<sup>19</sup> More importantly, there were those Old Testament verses that sanctioned vengeance, demanding 'an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth.'<sup>20</sup> As Paul Hyams notes,

---

<sup>17</sup> Bruce M. Metzger and Roland E. Murphy, eds., *The New Oxford Annotated Bible*, New Revised Standard Edition (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 262. Further references will be made in the text by chapter and verse number only.

<sup>18</sup> 'If your enemies are hungry, give them bread to eat; and if they are thirsty, give them water to drink; for you will heap coals of fire on their heads, and the Lord will reward you.' Proverbs 25: 21–22.

<sup>19</sup> Peter A. French writes: 'Perhaps all Saint Paul is doing is recommending a safe way of avenging one-self against one's enemies, given the fact that they are likely to be more powerful in the Roman society. One idea might be that, by providing drink and food to them when they have injured you, you will confound them. They will start to worry about why they are receiving succor from those they have harmed and they will feel bad, a form of self-inflicted punishment. Saint Paul calls that approach overcoming evil with good. Even if that is the real thrust of the message, the counsel is that vengeance is a good thing, an appropriate thing, morally and religiously, and the only important issue is one that focuses on the best means to accomplish it under the circumstances.' *The Virtues of Vengeance* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2001), 20.

<sup>20</sup> For example: 'If any harm follows, then you shall give life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, burn for burn, wound for wound, stripe for stripe' (Exodus 21: 23); 'Anyone who kills a human being shall be put to death. . . . Anyone who maims another shall suffer the same injury in return:

‘Medieval Christians started from a biblical sense of justice. Even churchmen had to take note of the Old Testament version. . . .’<sup>21</sup> Accordingly, many of the narrators and characters in medieval literary works seem not to struggle with revenge as a moral or ethical dilemma.

In his article on *The Battle of Maldon*, John Niles observes:

In secular literature, as far as I can judge, it is not until the seventeenth century that one can see strong evidence of the deflation of vengeance as an honorable ideal. In Webster and Tourneur’s lurid play “The Revenger’s Tragedy,” for example, the urge for revenge is represented as a personal passion, and hence as something unruly and socially destabilizing. Hamlet has his problems with revenge precisely because he is sensitive enough to see it as a tainted enterprise, especially in a universe governed by a God with a strong stake in the sixth commandment. The warriors depicted in *The Battle of Maldon* have no such qualms.<sup>22</sup>

It is true that the soldiers in *Maldon* have ‘no qualms’ about wanting to avenge their beloved lord, and given the depiction of the Vikings as bloodthirsty *waelwulfas* [slaughter-wolves] (96), neither do most readers of the poem regarding the vengeful words and deeds of the English. It would be an oversimplification to imagine that the medieval treatment of revenge can be so easily reduced to such a one-sided view, however. In this dissertation I will consider three works in particular which illustrate that long before the seventeenth century, poets and authors showed great sensitivity to the ambiguities and contradictions inherent in an act of revenge—to its potential for being ‘something unruly and socially destabilizing’ while also holding the promise of justice and security—and they consciously explored both the benefits and problems it posed for those whose ‘personal passion’ compelled them to take

---

fracture for fracture, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, the injury inflicted is the injury to be suffered’ (Leviticus 24: 17–20).

<sup>21</sup> Hyams, 44.

<sup>22</sup> John D. Niles, ‘Maldon and Mythopoesis,’ in *Old English Literature: Critical Essays*, ed. R.M. Liuzza (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), 473 n 56.

it. My study will focus on Old and Middle English literature, beginning with the Anglo-Saxon poem, *Beowulf*, in chapter one and moving on to the *Reeve's Tale* and *Tale of Melibee* from Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* in chapter two. In chapter three, I will discuss the Old Icelandic family saga, *Ljósvetninga saga*. Because the family sagas were written in a period contemporaneous with Middle English literature but share many literary preoccupations with Old English works, and because of early Iceland's particular circumstances regarding feud, the material provides an excellent and thought-provoking correlative to the two other chapters of the thesis. Through this study, I aim to show that a profound ambivalence did exist in medieval attitudes towards revenge and to examine some ways by which poets and authors were able to convey that ambivalence. I would also like to question how modern views on revenge continue to be challenged by these medieval perspectives, which do not allow for easy judgments and which remain current in the issues they raise regarding what constitutes fairness and the appropriate responses to injuries and affronts.

### **A Note on Terminology**

One preliminary item that requires attention involves terminology. While my study will focus more generally on the concept of revenge, or the individual 'act of doing hurt or harm to another in return for wrong or injury suffered,'<sup>23</sup> 'feud' will necessarily come up in the

---

<sup>23</sup> *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. 'revenge.'

contexts of *Beowulf* and the Icelandic sagas. This is where the confusion lies. Despite many anthropological and historical studies of feud in particular, there is no scholarly consensus on a definition of the concept. Basic elements of what constitutes ‘feud’ are disputed. For example, two major and frequently cited anthropological studies, that of Jacob Black-Michaud who researched feuds in the Middle East and the Mediterranean and that of Christopher Boehm who focused mainly on those in Montenegro, disagree on the fundamental question of whether a feud can end; Black-Michaud maintains that they are by nature interminable<sup>24</sup> while Boehm sees resolution as a distinct possibility.<sup>25</sup> There is similarly disagreement on what marks the start of a feud—must it begin with killing or bloodshed? Indeed, must there be any bloodshed at all? Helgi Þorláksson assumes that it is not a requirement, citing other features of a conflict—such as escalation and score-keeping as both side takes turns acting against each other—as reasons for its definition as a feud; furthermore, for him, only when there is actual bloodshed is the term ‘bloodfeud’ appropriate.<sup>26</sup> In contrast, William Ian Miller uses ‘feud’ and ‘bloodfeud’ more interchangeably, and his definition of feud is predicated on the notion that ‘the nonreducible core of what it meant to be in a state of feud or to have feuding relations, was ultimately the

---

<sup>24</sup> Jacob Black-Michaud, *Cohesive Force: Feud in the Mediterranean and the Middle East* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1975), 12–17, 63–80, and *passim*.

<sup>25</sup> Christopher Boehm, *Blood Revenge: The Anthropology of Feuding in Montenegro and Other Tribal Societies* (Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 1984), 220–221.

<sup>26</sup> Helgi Þorláksson, ‘Feud and Feuding in the Early and High Middle Ages: Working Descriptions and Continuity’ in Netterstrøm and Poulsen, *Feud in Medieval and Early Modern Europe*, 85.

obligation to have to kill and in turn to suffer the possibility of being killed.’<sup>27</sup> Other terms add to the confusion over feud: ‘vendetta’ and ‘vengeance killing,’ for example, are also used by various scholars to mean either the same thing as ‘feud’ or ‘bloodfeud’ or something different, often depending on the location of the conflicts in question.<sup>28</sup> Moreover, the lack of an actual word for ‘feud’ in either Old English or Old Icelandic further complicates modern attempts to define and describe the phenomenon in those cultures.<sup>29</sup> Given all of the above, it is not difficult to appreciate that regarding the matter of ‘feud,’ there is significant ‘definitional incoherence’<sup>30</sup> or that some recent scholars have even begun to deny the validity

---

<sup>27</sup> Miller, *Bloodtaking and Peacemaking*, 181.

<sup>28</sup> E.L. Peters writes for instance: ‘Vendetta, akin to feud in some of the forms of behaviour which characterize its hostility, is distinctively different, and appears where feuding relationships cannot be tolerated.’ Foreword, *Cohesive Force*, xiii. Conversely, Stephen D. White makes no attempt to separate ‘feud’ from ‘vendetta’ and uses the terms synonymously: ‘The conflicts commonly known as feuds, private wars (*guerres privées*), or vendettas constituted an important type of recurrent political process in Northern France during the later eleventh and earlier twelfth centuries, as well as in earlier and later periods.’ ‘Feuding and Peace-Making in the Touraine Around the Year 1100,’ 195.

<sup>29</sup> In my discussion of Anglo-Saxon legal texts below, I follow the Dictionary of Old English and translate the term *fæhþu* in these texts as ‘feud.’ According to the Dictionary, however, most of the term’s occurrences in the corpus (which number near sixty) occur in poetry, where ‘enmity’ or ‘hostility’ is often a more fitting translation. <<http://tapor.library.utoronto.ca/myaccess.library.utoronto.ca/doe/dict/indices/headwordindexf.html>>, accessed May 22, 2009. The term has a range of meanings in a variety of contexts besides the fairly specific legal sense of ‘feud.’ I will discuss this further, especially as it pertains to *Beowulf*, in chapter one. Miller writes that Old Icelandic has several terms which are used to describe states of enmity and quarrel, but ‘no reflex of PrmGerm *faihiþa* meaning feud. Feuds were designated loosely, in roughly descending order of frequency, as disputes, suits, transactions (*mál*), dealings (*deild*), or coldness (*fæð*) and enmity (*heipt*). The lack of a term for the institution evidently led Maurer (1910) to avoid talking about feud, preferring instead to discuss vengeance, a concept admitted in the native vocabulary (*hefnd*).’ *Bloodtaking and Peacemaking*, 181–182. The opposite argument might be made in the case of Iceland, however, that there is actually a plethora of terms for feud. Alongside those Miller mentions, we might add *víg* [fight, battle] or the highly evocative term *minning* [memory, remembrance]. Such an abundance of terms could suggest that feud was so much a part of the experience of Icelanders that their language reflected the fine distinctions and gradations they saw in a given feud and that no single term could suffice to describe all of them.

<sup>30</sup> Netterstrøm, *Feud in Medieval and Early Modern Europe*, 48.



of the term ‘feud’ as it has been applied in many medieval cases.<sup>31</sup> It seems impossible to arrive at an authoritative definition of feud, one that is applicable to many different cultural situations and historical times, and it is not my goal here to propose one. For the purposes of this dissertation, I will simply note the important commonalities that can be found in the various definitions and premises offered by the likes of Boehm, Miller, Byock, and Hyams,<sup>32</sup> and which can serve as a useful, general basis for the following discussions of feud in *Beowulf* and *Ljósvetninga saga* in particular.

Most are in agreement that feud involves a state of enmities or hostilities between two groups (made up of kin, of household members, or of lords and their retainers, for example). These ongoing hostilities, which can manifest themselves in acts ranging from insults to homicides, are usually precipitated by some injury to one’s honor—which has implications for the group’s honor—and are repaid in the attempt to regain honor and avoid shame. The opposing sides keep ‘score,’ responding according to escalating hostility, and they act in an alternating rhythm of tit for tat. The violence of the feud is controlled by social norms, however, and there are tacit and/or written regulations regarding acceptable responses and, if

---

<sup>31</sup> See Peter Sawyer, ‘The Bloodfeud in Fact and Fiction’; Guy Halsall, ‘Violence and Society in the Early Medieval West: An Introductory Survey,’ in *Violence and Society in the Early Medieval West*, ed. Guy Halsall (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 1998). Halsall writes: ‘We . . . have a choice. Either we make it clear whether we are using ‘feud’ in its medieval or its modern sense, or (probably preferably) we should banish the word ‘feud’ from our discussions of early medieval violence, except in the handful of instances where it is justified, keep it as a separate category of violence, and use ‘customary vengeance’ instead to describe instances where, after a violent attack the aggrieved party uses, or threatens to use retaliatory violence to bring about an end to a dispute (through compensation, where violence is not actually employed). If we choose it we do no more than remove a term which has become unhelpful, and unhelpfully value-laden, and replace it with one which fits the data exactly’ (28–29). Halsall does specifically point to the feuds in the Icelandic sagas as examples of “‘true” feuds’ (26).

<sup>32</sup> For the complete definitions proposed by these scholars, see Appendix 1.

and when applicable, the appropriate way to negotiate a settlement or truce between the two sides. In the pages that follow, I will use the term ‘feud’ when these basic conditions apply (again, mostly in relation to *Beowulf* and the sagas), as well as when called for by some technical term or usage in the text (see, for example, footnote 29).

### **Sociohistorical Background**

Unlike many previous studies that focus on the sociohistorical aspects of medieval feud, this study is primarily concerned with the literary treatment of medieval feud and revenge. I will address this latter aspect more specifically in the following pages, but it will be helpful first to consider medieval attitudes towards revenge based on other historical sources available for the time periods and places we are discussing—from roughly the seventh through thirteenth centuries in England and the tenth through thirteenth centuries in Iceland.

#### *England*

Records in the earliest periods, coming from various religious and secular sources, are understandably limited but nevertheless sufficient to allow for the observation that in early England feud was an established and accepted part of life. Not least of these secular sources are the law codes. Dorothy Whitelock points out that the ‘modifications in the laws of successive Anglo-Saxon kings of the regulations governing the blood-feud are themselves

adequate evidence of its continued existence.’<sup>33</sup> What is interesting about these laws and modifications is that even as they reveal both the growing attempts to restrain feud violence in the assertion of royal power and the growing influence of Christianity, they continue to accept the feud as the basis for the legal system and to acknowledge its existence, however problematic. The earliest extant law codes, those of Æthelbert of Kent (d. 616/18), begin the attempts to ‘refine the practice of feud’ with the ‘technical improvement of a list of payments or tariffs of payments, fixing what was to be paid and accepted to buy off retaliation.’<sup>34</sup> That is to say, his laws are specific regarding the wergild, stipulating, for example, that *Gif man mannan ofslæhð, medume leodgeld C scillinga gebete* [If anyone kills a man, he is to pay as an ordinary wergild 100 shillings];<sup>35</sup> adjustments are made in the price paid according to the status of the slain man.<sup>36</sup> Æthelbert 22 states that *Gif man mannan ofslæhð, æt openum græfe, XX scillinga forgelde 7 in XL nihte ealne leod forgelde* [If anyone kills a man, he is to pay 20 shillings at the open grave, and within 40 days the whole wergild].<sup>37</sup> This is perhaps the most apparent effort in Æthelbert to check the violence of feud, for the ‘open grave would be the location in which a blood feud would most likely break out: the payment of the first

---

<sup>33</sup> Dorothy Whitelock, *The Beginnings of English Society* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books Ltd., 1952), 43.

<sup>34</sup> Derek Roebuck, *Early English Arbitration* (Oxford: HOLO Books / The Arbitration Press, 2008), 85.

<sup>35</sup> LawAbt 21 from Felix Liebermann, ed., *Die Gesetze der Angelsachsen: hrsg. Im Auftrage der Savigny-Stiftung, vol. 1* (1903), 4. <<http://www.archive.org/details/diegesetzedera101liebuoft>>, accessed May 22, 2009. I transcribe from the text of the Cambridge, Corpus Christi College, 173 manuscript. All translations of the Anglo-Saxon laws are from Dorothy Whitelock, *English Historical Documents, c. 500–1042*, vol. 1 (London: Eyre Methuen and New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), except where noted.

<sup>36</sup> For instance, the killing of a *ceorl*’s dependant requires six shillings compensation, while the killing of a *læt* (which Liebermann translates as ‘half-free’) requires 80, 60, or 40 shillings depending on whether he is of the first, second, or third class. Whitelock, *EHD* I, 29.

<sup>37</sup> LawAbt 22 from Liebermann, *Gesetze I*, 4.

installment here may have been intended precisely to avoid such an outbreak.<sup>38</sup> Subsequent laws issued by Kentish kings add a few new components regarding homicide and wergild: the jointly-issued laws of Hlothre and Eadric (c. 685) address situations when servants kill freemen or men of noble birth, for example, while the laws of Wihtred (695) attend to those killed while in the act of robbery.<sup>39</sup> The laws of Ine, king of Wessex (688 x 694),<sup>40</sup> also promulgate laws on thieving, at much more length than Wihtred's, however, and they help to show an emerging aspect of the king's role in feud. Ine's is still clearly 'feud-centred law, in that its primary concern is compensation of injured by injuring party,'<sup>41</sup> but the king now asserts himself more in the process. This is visible in his repeated emphasis on the fact that thieves caught in the act are not legally entitled to be avenged by their kinsmen:

Se ðeof gefehð, ah X scill., 7 se cyning ðone ðeof; 7 þa mægas him swerian aðas unfæhða.<sup>42</sup>

---

<sup>38</sup> Lisi Oliver, *The Beginnings of English Law* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2002), 97. She further notes: 'Reinhold Schmid points out that the Frisian custom was to pronounce the accusation of murder at the open grave, and Liebermann adds that payment was made here to put the soul to rest.'

<sup>39</sup> LawHl 1–4 from Liebermann, *Gesetze I*, 9:

*Gif mannes esne eorlcunde mannan ofslæhð, þane ðe sio þreom hundum scill' gylde, se agend þane banan agefe 7 do þær þrio manwyrð to.* [If a man's servant kills a man of noble birth, who has a wergild of 300 shillings, the owner is to give up the slayer and pay in addition the value of three men.]

*Gif se bane opbyrste, feorþe manwyrð he togedo 7 hine gecænne mid godum æwdum þæt he þane banan begeten ne mihte.* [If the slayer escapes, he is to add the value of a fourth man, and is to clear himself with good oath-helpers, that he could not capture the slayer.]

*Gif mannes esne frigne mannan ofslæhð, þane þe sie hund scillinga gelde, se agend þane banan agefe 7 oþer manwyrð þær tó.* [If a man's servant kills a freeman, who has a wergild of 100 shillings, the owner is to give up the slayer, and the value of another man in addition.]

*Gif bana opbyrste, twam manwyrþum hine man forgelde 7 hine gecænne mid godum æwdum, þæt he þane banan begeten ne mihte.* [If the slayer escapes, he is to be paid for with the value of two men, and [the owner] is to clear himself with good oath-helpers, that he could not capture the slayer.]

LawWi 25 from Liebermann, *Gesetze I*, 14:

*Gif man leud ofslea an þeofðe, licge buton wyrgele.* [If anyone kill a man who is in the act of thieving, he is to lie without wergild.]

<sup>40</sup> Ine's laws survive only in manuscripts of the laws of Alfred where they were added as an appendix.

<sup>41</sup> Patrick Wormald, *The Making of English Law: King Alfred to the Twelfth Century* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1999), 105.

<sup>42</sup> LawIne 28 from Liebermann, *Gesetze I*, 100.

He who captures a thief has a right to 10 shillings, and the king to the thief; and the kinsmen are to swear to him oaths that they will wage no feud.

Se ðe ðeof slihð, he mot aðe gecyðan, þæt he hine fleondne for ðeof sloge, 7 þæs deadan mægas him swerian unceases áð. Gif he hit þonne dierne, 7 sie eft yppe, þonne forgielde he hine.<sup>43</sup>

He who slays a thief may declare with an oath that he slew him fleeing as a thief, and the kinsmen of the dead man are to swear to him an oath not to carry on a feud. If, however, he conceals it and it is revealed later, he is then to pay for him.

More than they aim to limit the violence of feud, these laws make use of its existence to confront another societal problem; those who attempt robbery risk their kinsmen's legal recourse to satisfaction or compensation in the case that they are killed in the act. The 'normal punishments' are waived in order to deter the thief, 'the common enemy to be pursued and killed without any expectation of compassion, mercy or, above all, any hope of reparation for his kin.'<sup>44</sup> Other laws in Ine's code witness how the king, in 'a society still habituated to blood-feud . . . [is] now a self-appointed [instrument] of vengeance' and begins to take feud's 'functions (and profits) unto [himself]'.<sup>45</sup> For instance:

Gif mon elðeodigne ófslea, se cyning ah twædne dæl weres, þriddan dæl sunu oððe mægas.<sup>46</sup>

If a foreigner is slain, the king has two-thirds of the wergild, his son or kinsmen the third part.

Gif he ðonne mægleas sie, healf kyninge, healf se gesið.<sup>47</sup>

If, however, he is without kinsmen, half [goes to] the king, half to the *gesith*.

---

<sup>43</sup> LawIne 35 from Liebermann, *Gesetze I*, 104.

<sup>44</sup> Stanley Rubin, 'The Bot, or Composition in Anglo-Saxon Law: A Reassessment,' *The Journal of Legal History* 17.2 (1996): 144–154 at 153.

<sup>45</sup> Patrick Wormald, "'Inter Cetera Bona Genti Suae': Law-Making and Peace-Keeping in the Earliest English Kingdoms," in *Legal Culture in the Early Medieval West: Law as Text, Image, and Experience* (London and Rio Grande: The Hambledon Press, 1999), 195–196.

<sup>46</sup> LawIne 23 from Liebermann, *Gesetze I*, 98.

<sup>47</sup> LawIne 23.1 from Liebermann, *Gesetze I*, 98.

Such laws proclaim for the king that, as Wormald writes, ‘disturbances among their people were their business,’<sup>48</sup> but they yet take the feud system for granted. This remains true for King Alfred, though his efforts to deter feud violence are more explicit. Alfred’s laws place a great emphasis on the acceptability of compensation, a point which he explains in his introduction:

Siððan ðæt þa gelamp, þæt monega ðeoda Cristes geleafan onfengon, þa wurdon monega seonoðas geond ealne middangeard gegaderode, 7 eac swa geond Angelcyn, siððan hie Cristes geleafan onfengon, halegra biscepa 7 éac oðerra geðungenra witena; *hie ða gesetton, for ðære mildheortnesse þe Crist lærde, æt mæstra hwelcre misdæde þætte ða weoruldhlafordas moston mid hiora leafan buton synne æt þam forman gylte þære fiohbote ónfon, þe hie ða gesettan; buton æt hlafordsearwe hie nane mildheortnesse ne dorston gecweðan, forþam ðe God ælmihtig þam nane ne gedemde þe hine oferhogdon, ne Crist Godes sunu þam nane ne gedemde þe hine to deaðe sealde, 7 he bebead þone hlaford lufian swa hine.*<sup>49</sup>

Afterwards when it came about that many peoples had received the faith of Christ, many synods were assembled throughout all the earth, and likewise throughout the English people, after they had received the faith of Christ, of holy bishops and also of other distinguished wise men; *they then established, for that mercy which Christ taught, that secular lords might with their permission receive without sin compensation in money for almost every misdeed at the first offence, which compensation they then fixed; only for treachery to a lord they dared not declare any mercy, because Almighty God adjudged none for those who scorned him, nor did Christ, the Son of God, adjudge any for him who gave him over to death; and he charged [everyone] to love his lord as himself.*<sup>50</sup>

This emphasis on compensation prioritizes peaceful methods of settling disputes, and accordingly, the section of the laws *Be fæhðe* [concerning feud] specifically directs Englishmen to try various alternative and delaying methods before they resort to violence in a conflict:

Eac we beodað: se mon se ðe his gefan hamsittenden wite, þæt he ne feohte, ær ðam he him ryhtes bidde.<sup>51</sup>

<sup>48</sup> Wormald, “‘Inter Cetera Bona Genti Suæ’: Law-Making and Peace-Keeping in the Earliest English Kingdoms,” 198.

<sup>49</sup> AfEl 49.7 from Liebermann, *Gesetze I*, 44–45.

<sup>50</sup> Translation is from Whitelock, *EHD I*, 408. My emphasis.

<sup>51</sup> LawAfI 42 from Liebermann, *Gesetze I*, 74.

Moreover we command: that the man who knows his opponent to be dwelling at home is not to fight before he asks justice for himself.

Gif he mægnes hæbbe, þæt he his gefán beride 7 inne besitte, gehealde hine VII niht inne 7 hine ón ne feohte, gif he inne geðolian wille; 7 þonne ymb VII niht, gif he wille on hand gan 7 wæpenu sellan, gehealde hine XXX nihta gesundne 7 hine his mægum gebodie 7 his friondum.<sup>52</sup>

If he has sufficient power to surround his opponent and besiege him there in his house, he is to keep him seven days inside and not fight against him, if he will remain inside; and then after seven days, if he will surrender and give up his weapons, he is to keep him unharmed for 30 days, and send notice about him to his kinsmen and his friends.

Gif he ðonne cirican geierne, sie ðonne be ðære cirican are, swa we ær bufan cwædon.<sup>53</sup>

If he, however, reaches a church, it is then to be [dealt with] according to the privilege of the church, as we have said above.

Gif he ðonne þæs mægenes ne hæbbe, þæt he hine inne besitte, ride to þam ealdormen, bidde hine fultumes; gif he him fultuman ne wille, ride to cyninge, ær he feohte.<sup>54</sup>

If he [the attacker] has not sufficient power to besiege him in his house, he is to ride to the ealdorman and ask him for support; if he will not give him support, he is to ride to the king, before having recourse to fighting.

Eac swelce, gif mon becume on his gefán, 7 he hine ær hamfæstne ne wite, gif he wille his wæpen sellan, hine mon gehealde XXX nihta 7 hine his freondum gecyðe; gif he ne wille his wæpenu sellan, þonne mot he feohtan on hine. Gif he wille on hond gan 7 his wæpenu sellan, 7 hwa ofer ðæt on him feohte, gielde swa wer swa wunde swa he gewyrce, 7 wite 7 hæbbe his mæg forworht.<sup>55</sup>

Likewise, if a man run across his opponent, and did not previously know him to be at home, if he will give up his weapons, he is to be kept for 30 days and his friends informed; if he will not give up his weapons, then he may fight against him. If he is willing to surrender, and to give up his weapons, and after that anyone fights against him, he [who does] is to pay wergild or compensation for wounds according to what he has done, and a fine, and is to have forfeited [the right to avenge] his kinsman.

Still, despite these obvious attempts to restrain violent attempts at redress, '[n]one of this

undermines the feud itself as the rock on which the legal system still stands.'<sup>56</sup> Indeed,

<sup>52</sup> LawAfI 42.1 from Liebermann, *Gesetze I*, 74.

<sup>53</sup> LawAfI 42.2 from Liebermann, *Gesetze I*, 76.

<sup>54</sup> LawAfI 42.3 from Liebermann, *Gesetze I*, 76.

<sup>55</sup> LawAfI 42.4 from Liebermann, *Gesetze I*, 76.

<sup>56</sup> Roebuck, 134.

Alfred accepts the ‘implicit right to kill an uncooperative adversary,’<sup>57</sup> and he unreservedly allows men to fight on behalf of their lords or their kinsmen without fear of reprisal through feud, as well as those men who find their wives, daughters, sisters, or mothers *betynedum durum oððe under anre réon* [within closed doors or under the same blanket] (42.7) with another man. Like those before him, Alfred ‘expect[ed] crime to be amended between parties rather than punished by [his] officers.’<sup>58</sup> Moreover, notwithstanding the Biblical emphasis in Alfred’s introduction, there is:

none of the ideological hostility to Christian bloodshed that led Charlemagne to call homicide a breach of God’s law, or the bishops convened at Paris in 829 to declare that avengers of Christian blood had arrogated to themselves a prerogative of God’s.<sup>59</sup>

Such an ideological shift is more apparent in Edmund’s laws (939–946),<sup>60</sup> whose emphasis on regulations concerning feud point to its widespread persistence<sup>61</sup> and which take great steps to thwart feud violence.<sup>62</sup> The prologue of II Edmund professes as a goal for the kingdom’s citizens *ðæt we ure gesibsumnesse 7 geðwærnesse fæstlicost us betweenan heoldan* [that we should keep most firmly our peace and concord among ourselves]; that peace certainly contains a Christian element. Edmund stipulates:

Eac ic cyððe, þæt ic nelle socne habban to minum hirede, ær he hæbbe godcunde bote underfangen 7 wið þa mægðer [sic; cf. B *mægðe*] gebet on bote befangen 7 to ælcum rihte gebogen, swa biscop him tæce, ðe hit on his scyre sy.<sup>63</sup>

---

<sup>57</sup> Patrick Wormald, ‘Giving God and King Their Due,’ in *Legal Culture in the Early Medieval West: Law as Text, Image, and Experience*, 336.

<sup>58</sup> James Campbell, *The Anglo-Saxons* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1982), 99.

<sup>59</sup> Wormald, ‘Giving God and King Their Due,’ 336–337.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 337. The following analysis follows Wormald’s; see 337–339.

<sup>61</sup> Roebuck, 147; Whitelock, *EHD* I, 427.

<sup>62</sup> Hyams writes that ‘the code [is] hailed by scholars as a pioneering effort to minimize bloodshed and the spread of feud’ (82).

<sup>63</sup> LawIIEm from Liebermann, *Gesetze* I, 188.



Further, I make it known that I will allow no resort to my court before he [the slayer] has undergone ecclesiastical penance and undertaken the prescribed compensation to the kindred, and submitted to every legal obligation, as the bishop, in whose diocese it is, instructs him.

Spiritual concerns are now an important aspect of settlement in a feud.

Another significant shift which occurs in II Edmund is the individual's responsibility superseding that of the kin group. The kin is no longer bound to support a relative who committed homicide and can thus be free from the threat of retaliation by the victim's kin:

Gif hwa heononforð ænigne man ofslea, ðæt he wege sylf ða fæþhe, butan he hy mid freonda fylste binnan twelf monðum forgyldde be fullan were, sy swa boren swa he sy.<sup>64</sup>

If henceforth anyone slay a man, he is himself to bear the feud, unless he can with the aid of his friends within twelve months pay compensation at the full wergild, whatever class he [the man slain] may belong to.

Gif þonne seo mægð forlete, 7 him foregyldan nellen, ðonne wille ic, ðæt eall seo mægð sy unfah, butan ðam handdædan, gif hy him syððan ne doð mete ne munde.<sup>65</sup>

If, however, the kindred abandons him, and is not willing to pay compensation for him, it is then my will that all that kindred is to be exempt from the feud, except the actual slayer, if they give him neither food nor protection afterwards.

Gif ðonne syððan hwilc his maga hine feormige, ðonne beo he scyldig ealles ðæs ðe he age wið þone cyning 7 wege ða fæhðe wið þa mægðe, forðam hi hine forsocan ær.<sup>66</sup>

If, however, any one of his kinsmen harbours him afterwards, he is to be liable to forfeit all that he owns to the king, and to bear the feud as regards the kindred [of the slain man], because they previously abandoned him.

Gif þonne of ðære oðre mægðe hwa wrace dó on ænigum oðrum men butan on ðam rihthanddædan, sy he gefah wið þone cyning 7 wið ealle his frind 7 ðolige ealles ðæs he age.<sup>67</sup>

If, however, anyone of the other kindred takes vengeance on any man other than the actual slayer, he is to incur the hostility of the king and all his friends, and to forfeit all that he owns.

---

<sup>64</sup> LawIIEm 1 from Liebermann, *Gesetze I*, 186.

<sup>65</sup> LawIIEm 1.1 from Liebermann, *Gesetze I*, 186.

<sup>66</sup> LawIIEm 1.2 from Liebermann, *Gesetze I*, 186.

<sup>67</sup> LawIIEm 1.3 from Liebermann, *Gesetze I*, 188.

These laws effectively diminish the value of pursuing private vengeance on both sides. As Wormald explains: ‘Edmund has reduced the liability of an offender’s associates for the harm he does: without such a liability, an injured party’s chance of obtaining redress is seriously reduced, as is an offender’s opportunity to provide it.’<sup>68</sup> Rather than take their chances, those involved in a feud would do better to follow the king’s regulations for settlement. Like Alfred’s code, however, Edmund’s still nods to the reality that feuds will persist. The final portion of II Edmund<sup>69</sup> addresses the specifics of compensation for a slain man, following the injunction *Witan scylan fæhðe sectan* [Leading men must settle feuds],<sup>70</sup> and leaves the impression that the code ‘intended no outright prohibition of feud,’ but rather to ‘conclude *fæhðe* speedily, and without further bloodshed if possible.’<sup>71</sup> Perhaps Edmund’s code did reduce the disorder caused by feuding behavior, but later laws—such as Æthelred’s 1014 code which attends especially to scenarios in which monks and men in holy orders

---

<sup>68</sup> Wormald, ‘Giving God and King Their Due,’ 337–338.

<sup>69</sup> Wormald warns of the textual difficulties here, suggesting that the final clauses of the code may have been added by another hand. ‘Reasons for thinking so are (a) that they apparently revert to the topic of feud after laws on other issues altogether; (b) that the law-making *persona* changes from first to third person; (c) that there is a new paragraph and enlarged initial in one MS.’ ‘Giving God and King Their Due,’ 338 n 21.

<sup>70</sup> LawIIEm 7–7.3 from Liebermann, *Gesetze I*, 188–190:

*Witan scylan fæhðe sectan: ærest folcrichte slaga sceal his forspecan on hand syllan, 7 se forspeca magum, þæt se slaga wylle bean wið mægðe.* [Leading men must settle feuds: First, according to the common law the slayer must give a pledge to his advocate, and the advocate to the kinsmen, that the slayer is willing to pay compensation to the kindred.]

*Ðonne syððan gebyrð, þæt man sylle ðæs slagan forspecan on hand, ðæt se slaga mote mid grið nyr 7 sylf wæres weddian.* [Then afterwards it is fitting that a pledge be given to the slayer’s advocate, that the slayer may approach under safe-conduct and himself pledge to pay the wergild.]

*Ðonne he ðæs beweddad hæbbe, ðonne finde he ðærto wærborh.* [When he has pledged this, he is to find surety for the wergild.]

*Ðonne ðæt gedon sy, ðonne rære man cyninges munde; of ðam dæge on XXI nihton gylde man healsfang; ðæs on XXI niht manbote; ðæs on XXI niht ðæs weres ðæt frumgyld.* [When that has been done, the king’s *mund* (‘protection’) is to be established; 21 days from that day *healsfang* (‘fine/payment’) is to be paid; 21 days from then the compensation to the lord for his man; 21 days from then the first instalment of the wergild.]

<sup>71</sup> Hyams, 83.

become involved in bloodfeud<sup>72</sup>—continue to address the issue in one form or another.

Furthermore, there is evidence that not only royal laws, but also more local regulations continued dealing with the realities of feud. The Thegn's Guild of Cambridge<sup>73</sup> was still concerned in the late tenth century with the details of vengeance and compensation after homicide. They stipulate:

And gyf hwa gyldan ofstlea. ne si nan oþer butun eahta pund to bote. gif se stlaga þonne þa bote oferhogie. wrece eal gildscipe þone gildan. 7 eall beran. Gif hit þonne án dó. beran ealle gelice. 7 gif ænig gilda hwilcne man oftslea 7 he neadwraça si. 7 his bismer bete. 7 se ofstlagana twelfhende sy. fylste ælc gegylda he[alf] mearc to fylste. Gyf se ofstlagena ceorl si. twegen oran. gif he Wylisc si. anne oran. Gif se gilda þonne hwæne mid dysie 7 myd dole stlea. bere sylf þ he worhte. 7 gif gegilda his gegildan þurh his agen dysi ofstlea. bere sylf wiþ magas þ he bræc. 7 his gegilde eft mid eahta pundum gebycge. oþþe he þolie á geferes 7 freondscipes.

And if anyone slay a guild-brother, let there be nothing for compensation but eight pounds; but if the slayer scorns the compensation, let all the guildship avenge the guild-brother, and all bear [i.e. the *fæhð*, *feud*]. But if a guild-brother do it, let all bear alike. And if any guild-brother slay any man, and he be an avenger by compulsion, and compensate for his violence, and the slain be a twelve-hynde man, let each guild-brother contribute a half-mark for his aid; if the slain be a ceorl, two oras; if he be Welsh, one ora. But if the guild-brother slay any one through wantonness and with guile, let himself bear what he has wrought. And if a guild-brother slay his guild-brother through his own folly, let himself suffer on the part of the kindred for that which he has violated; and buy back his guildship with eight pounds, or for ever forfeit our society and friendship.<sup>74</sup>

<sup>72</sup> LawVIIIATR 23–25 from Liebermann, *Gesetze I*, 266:

*And gif man gehadodne mid fæhðe belecge 7 secge, þæt he wære dædbana oððe rædbana, ladige mid his magan, þe fæhðe moton mid beran oððe forebetan.* [And if a man in orders is charged with a blood-feud and accused of being either the actual slayer or the instigator, he is to clear himself with his kinsmen who must bear the feud with him or pay compensation for it.]

*And gif he sý mægleas, ladige mid geferan oððe fæste to corsnæde, 7 þaræt gefare þæt þæt God ræde.* [And if he is without kinsmen, he is to clear himself with his associates, or fast before the ordeal of the consecrated morsel, and experience at it what God decrees.]

*And ne þearf ænig mynstermunuc ahwar mid rihte fæhðbote biddan ne fæhðbote betan: he gæð of his mæglage, þonne he gebihð to regollage.* [And no cloistered monk anywhere need by rights demand compensation in a feud nor pay compensation in a feud; he leaves the obligations of kinship when he submits to the monastic rule.]

<sup>73</sup> Whitelock notes: 'This is the most interesting set of guild regulations, especially in its evidence for the survival of the blood-feud at so late a date.' They are found in a late-tenth-century hand. *EHD I*, 603.

<sup>74</sup> Benjamin Thorpe, ed., *Diplomatarium Anglicum Ævi Saxonici* (London: Macmillan & Co., 1865), 611–612. Thorpe's translation.

Other sources support what we find in the Anglo-Saxon laws regarding the importance of feud and the existence of a culture of revenge. Even the Church seems to show its ‘acceptance of the reality’ of a feuding society.<sup>75</sup> For example, the seventh-century *Poenitential Theodori*—written by Theodore of Tarsus, archbishop of Canterbury from c. 668–690—acknowledges homicide for vengeance of kin and stipulates a penance of seven to ten years, which could be lessened if the killer paid compensation according to secular law:

*Si quis pro ultione propinqui hominem occiderit, peniteat sicut homicida, VII. vel X. annos. Si tamen reddere vult propinquis pecuniam aestimationis, levior erit penitentia, id est, dimidio spatii.*<sup>76</sup>

If anyone kills a man for vengeance of a relative, let him do penance just as a homicide, seven or ten years. If however he wishes to pay back money of assessment to the relatives, the penance will be lighter, that is, half the time.

The penitential demands a much less severe penance of only three years for a man who kills while taking vengeance for his brothers: *Qui occiderit hominem pro vindicta fratris, IIIbus. annis peniteat. . . .* [Whoever kills a man for vengeance for his brothers, let him do three years penance. . . .]<sup>77</sup> Bede tells of the same Archbishop Theodore’s intervention in 679 A.D. in a quarrel between the kings of Northumbria and Mercia. While his account clearly praises the successful peacekeeping efforts of Theodore, it also admits of the obligation of vengeance, payable either with life or money:

Anno regni Ecgfridi nono, conserto graui proelio inter ipsum et Aedilredum regem Merciorum iuxta fluuium Treanta, occisus est Aelfuini frater regis Ecgfridi, iuuenis circiter X et VIII annorum, utrique prouinciae multum amabilis. Nam et sororem eius, quae dicebatur Osthryd, rex Aedilred habebat uxorem. Cumque materies belli acrioris et inimicitiae longioris inter reges populosque feroces uideretur exorta, Theodorus Deo dilectus antistes, diuino functus auxilio, salutifera exhortatione

<sup>75</sup> Roebuck, 122.

<sup>76</sup> Arthur West Haddan and William Stubbs, eds., *Councils and Ecclesiastical Documents relating to Great Britain and Ireland* vol. 3 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1871), 180.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid.

coeptum tanti periculi funditus extinguit incendium; adeo ut, pacatis alterutrum regibus ac populis, nullius anima hominis pro interfecto regis fratre sed debita solummodo multa pecuniae regi ultori daretur. Cuius foedera pacis multo exinde tempore inter eosdem reges eorumque regna durarunt. (Book 4, Chapter 21)<sup>78</sup>

In the ninth year of the reign of King Ecgfrith, a hard battle was fought between himself and Æthelred, king of the Mercians, close to the river Trent, and the brother of King Ecgfrith, Ælfwine, was killed, a young man around eighteen years old and much loved in both provinces. For King Æthelred had his sister, who was called Osthryth, as his wife. And though the cause of more bitter war and longer enmity between the kings and the warlike peoples seemed to have arisen, Archbishop Theodore, beloved by God, working with God's help, entirely extinguished the beginning fire of such great danger with beneficial words of encouragement; so that, with both kings and peoples peaceful, the life of no man was to be given for the death of the king's brother but only the fine of money due to the king as avenger. The treaties of peace endured long after that time between those kings and their kingdoms.

Over a century later, another prominent churchman not only accepts the duty of vengeance

but expresses his approval of the one who takes it. In A.D. 801, Alcuin writes to

Charlemagne recommending *Torhcmundum Hedrildi Regis fidelem famulum, virum in fide*

*probatum, strenuum in armis: qui fortiter sanguinem domini sui vindicavit* ['Torhtmund, the

faithful servant of King Ethelred, a man tested in loyalty, vigorous in arms, who bravely

avenged the blood of his lord'].<sup>79</sup> Another two centuries later, Wulfstan, Archbishop of

York, still 'countenance[s] some of the fundamentals of feud' in the law codes of Cnut,

which are 'surprising' for the lack of 'anything about the restraint of feud' visible in previous

laws.<sup>80</sup> Wulfstan maintains the directives from Æthelred's 1014 code 'that the kin of a cleric

charged with homicide "may (*moton*) bear the feud with him or compensate for it"; while the

"cloistered monk" should neither receive nor pay "feud-money," in that 'he departs from his

<sup>78</sup> Bertram Colgrave and R.A.B. Mynors, eds., *Bede's Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969), 400–401. My emphasis.

<sup>79</sup> Haddan and Stubbs, 534. Whitelock writes: 'Alcuin expresses approval of his act, for the vendetta was the only means recognised by Anglo-Saxon law of punishing homicide.' *EHD* I, 862.

<sup>80</sup> Wormald, *Making of English Law*, 363–364.

kin-law when he submits to rule-law.<sup>81</sup> Aside from the laws that he wrote, Wulfstan's own sermons have a talionic ring to them. The evils suffered by the English people of which he speaks in *Sermo Lupi ad Anglos* are, according to him, brought on by their own evil and lawless acts. Relief will come when they deserve better of God:

... 7 unrihta to fela ricsode on lande. And næs na fela manna þe hogode ymbe þa bote swa georne swa man scolde, ac dæghwamllice man ihte yfel æfter oðrum, 7 unriht aræde 7 unlaga manega ealles to wide geond ealle þas ðeode. And we eac forðam habbað fela bersta 7 bismra gebiden, 7 gif we ænige bote gebidan sculon, þonne mote we þæt to Gode earnian bet þonne we ær ðisum didon. Forðam mid micclum earnungum we geearnodon þa yrmða þe us onsittað, 7 mid swiðe micelan earnungan we þa bote motan æt Gode geræcan gif hit sceal heonanforð godigende wurðan. (14–24)<sup>82</sup>

... and too many wrongs reigned in the land. And there were not many men who thought about that remedy as eagerly as one ought, and daily one added one evil to another, and committed wrong and many abuses of law entirely too widely throughout all this nation. And we also therefore have endured many injuries and insults, and if we should expect any remedy, then we must earn that from God better than we did before this. Because with great deserts we earned those miseries which oppress us, and with very great deserts we may obtain remedy from God if there is to be an improvement in the future.

Finally, secular narrative sources tell of 'real-life instances of feud.'<sup>83</sup> One is the famous *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* entry for 755 A.D.,<sup>84</sup> which tells the story of *Cynewulf and Cyneheard*. Often compared to a saga,<sup>85</sup> it relates a West Saxon battle for power and includes several vengeance killings. Cynewulf deprived Sigeberht of Wessex for certain *unryhtum*

<sup>81</sup> Ibid. See LawVIIIAt23 (Liebermann, *Gesetze I*, 266); cf. LawICn 5, 2b (Liebermann, *Gesetze I*, 286).

<sup>82</sup> Dorothy Bethurum, ed., *The Homilies of Wulfstan* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1957), 261.

<sup>83</sup> Hyams, 75.

<sup>84</sup> Stephen D. White notes: 'Although the entry in the manuscripts is for the year 755, editors routinely assume that it treats a sequence of events beginning in 757 and ending in 786.' 'Kinship and Lordship in Early Medieval England: The Story of Sigeberht, Cynewulf, and Cyneheard,' repr. in *Old English Literature*, ed. R.M. Liuzza (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), 173 n 3.

<sup>85</sup> The entry stands out from those around it in the chronicle for its length and style. See R.W. McTurk, "'Cynewulf and Cyneheard' and the Icelandic Sagas," *Leeds Studies in English* 12 (1981): 81–127, for a comparison of the entry with Icelandic saga. McTurk explores the claims that both deal with 'divided loyalties' and more specifically 'loyalty to one's lord vs. loyalty to one's kin' (84), and against the background of oral origins of the stories.

*dædum* [unjust acts].<sup>86</sup> Sigeberht was soon killed by a swineherd who avenged his own lord, Ealdorman Cumbra, in doing so. After many years of ruling the kingdom, Cynewulf tried to exile Cyneheard, Sigeberht's brother; Cyneheard, however, first caught Cynewulf unawares while he was visiting his mistress and duly killed him. Cyneheard offered Cynewulf's men *feoh ond feorh* [money and life] if they would follow him, but they refused and were likewise killed. The following morning, a larger company of the king's rode to the scene, where they were offered similar terms by Cyneheard and reminded that some of their own kinsmen were inside with him. They refused and proceeded to attack and kill Cyneheard and his men in vengeance for their fallen lord.

Another much later story of a long-lasting feud comes from the anonymous *De Obsessione Dunelmi*,<sup>87</sup> likely written around the year 1100. In this pamphlet, whose purpose was to trace the history of certain estates in the bishopric of Durham, the author makes a 'digression' to tell about the powerful Earl Uhtred and his family.<sup>88</sup> Uhtred was made earl of Northumbria and York by Æthelred after he won a decisive victory over invading Scots; he was later given the king's own daughter, Ælfgifu, in marriage (his third, the first being to Ecgfrida, and the second to Sige). After Æthelred died in 1016, Uhtred decided to make terms with Cnut, though he had previously sworn loyalty to his father-in-law. Before he

---

<sup>86</sup> Richard Marsden, ed., *Cynewulf and Cyneheard* in *The Cambridge Old English Reader*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 247.

<sup>87</sup> On the story of Earl Uthred see Christopher J. Morris, 'Marriage and Murder in Eleventh-Century Northumbria: A Study of 'De Obsessione Dunelmi,' Borthwick Paper no. 82 (York: Borthwick Institute of Historical Research, University of York, 1992); Richard Fletcher, *Bloodfeud: Murder and Revenge in Anglo-Saxon England* (London: Penguin Books, 2002); and Hyams, 75–77, 277–279.

<sup>88</sup> Fletcher, 5.

could, however, he was ambushed by Thurbrand Hold,<sup>89</sup> and he and his forty men were slaughtered. Uhtred's earldom passed to his son with Ecgfrida, Ealdred, who in turn avenged his father by killing Thurbrand. After a period of fierce hostilities between Ealdred and Carl, Thurbrand's son, a settlement was mediated whereby it seemed lasting peace and indeed, friendship and sworn brotherhood, was established between the two men. In 1038, while waiting to go on pilgrimage together, Carl hosted Ealdred at his own home. Something happened to break their friendship, however, and Carl had Ealdred killed in a nearby wood, thus prolonging the feud. Hostilities between the families then remained quiet until the 1070s when Waltheof II, Uhtred's great-grandson through Ealdred's daughter, killed all but two of Carl's sons and his grandsons as they were feasting together near York. The record of this bloodfeud, which very possibly continued, ends here.

Hyams finds that the Uhtred-Thurbrand feud 'usefully spans the period between Æthelred's reign and across the Norman Conquest,'<sup>90</sup> as it provides more reason to believe that 'feud does not cease [to] be a topic for study after 1066.'<sup>91</sup> Indeed, while its expression may have changed in certain respects, the tradition and mentality of vengeance apparently did not altogether disappear from the consciousness or the laws of the English until well past Anglo-Saxon times. We can look to similar types of sources (i.e., legal, ecclesiastical,

---

<sup>89</sup> Uhtred's marriage to Sige was 'allegedly made on condition that Uhtred kill his father-in-law's enemy, Thurbrand, surnamed Hold. . . . Uhtred was joining, maybe politicizing, an existing enmity. Whether Uhtred tried to perform his obligation, we are not told. But he probably did.' Hyams, 277.

<sup>90</sup> Hyams, 75–76. I am greatly indebted to Hyams' study of feud in the eleventh and twelfth centuries in England which forms the basis of this next section.

<sup>91</sup> Paul R. Hyams, 'Feud in Medieval England,' *Haskins Society Journal* 3 (1991): 1–21 at 1.



narrative) to find evidence of the persistence of the feud and the importance of vengeance through subsequent years.

The *Leges Henrici Primi* (1100–1135)<sup>92</sup> borrow much from the Anglo-Saxon laws, and thus '[p]rovisions of the criminal law, dealing with physical injury, self-defence, theft, murder, [and] the feud . . . figure largely.'<sup>93</sup> There is also, as might be expected, a continuing concern for peaceable solutions to disputes and limitations on the violence of feud. For instance, parts of II Edmund are adopted wholesale into the code (88.12–88.12d), and the laws disregard the claims of those who injure or kill adversaries who have offered to make amends:

83.3 Qui rectum offerentem occiderit uel afflixerit in aliquo, emendet witam uel uulnus uel denique sicut egerit, et quicquid aduersus eum habebat, forisfaciat.

If anyone slays or injures in any way a person who offers to do justice he shall pay as amends the *wite* or compensation for the wound or for whatever he has done; and he shall lose whatever claim he had against him.

Likewise, the wergild or settlement money is directed to be paid promptly in order to achieve peace:

59.4 De peccunia etiam, que pro pace uel inimicitia uadiata est, terminus protelari non debet nec placitum de morte inimicorum, nisi exercitus regia necessitas inpediat uel infirmitatis uel ydonee ueritatis aliquid occurrat; et tunc inter eos firma pax et diffinita plenaque consistat.

---

<sup>92</sup> Douglas and Greenaway offer the following caveat: 'This treatise . . . is incompetent in construction, frequently vague in its terms, and its authority is not beyond question: it must therefore be used with caution. Its usefulness is further limited by the confusion of its language and arrangement, and by the difficulties of rendering the author's probable meaning in translation. But with all these qualifications, it illustrates the procedure adopted in local and feudal courts during the first quarter of the twelfth century.' David C. Douglas and George W. Greenaway, *English Historical Documents: 1042–1189*, Vol. II, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (London: Eyre Methuen, 1981), 491.

<sup>93</sup> L.J. Downer, ed. and trans., *Leges Henrici Primi* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972), 4. Translations are Downer's.

With respect to money which has been pledged in order to deal with the question of settlement or continued bloodfeud, the appointed day or the plea concerning the killing of bloodfeud enemies must not be deferred (unless a duty to the king of military service prevents attendance or some question of sickness or other appropriate genuine excuse occurs), and after that a firm, established, and undivided peace shall stand between them.

Still, there are allowances made for vengeance killings. Those committed in self-defense or otherwise necessitated can be permissible if certain rules are followed or if particular conditions apply. For example:

83.6–6a Si quis in uindictam uel in se defendendo occidat aliquem, nichil sibi de mortui rebus aliquid usurpet, non equum, non galeam uel gladium uel peccuniam prorsus aliquam set ipsum corpus solito defunctorum more componat, caput ad occidens, pedes ad oriens uersum, super clipeum si habeat, et lanceam suam figat et arma circummittat et equum adregnet.

Et ad proximam uillam et cui prius obuiauit denuntiet, et etiam socnam habenti, quod probari denique uel defendi possit contra parentes uel consocios eius.

If anyone kills a person in the course of a feud or in self-defence, he shall appropriate nothing at all for himself from the dead man's possessions, neither his horse nor his helmet nor his sword nor indeed any property; but he shall lay out the body itself in the manner customary for the dead, the head turned towards the west, the feet towards the east, resting on his shield, if he has one, and he shall drive his spear into the ground and arrange his arms about it and put a halter on the horse.

He shall make this known at the nearest village and to the first person he meets, and also to the lord who has soke, so that it may be possible for a case to be established or denied as against the slain man's relatives or associates.

88.11b–11c Et alia est wera uel uindicta thaini, alia uillani, sicut prediximus.

Qui secus fecerint, querant parentes mortui were uel uindictae superplus, tam in generositate quam in propinquiori pertinentia.

There is one wergeld or revenge-slaying appropriate for a thegn, and another for a villein, as we have said before.

If any have done otherwise than they are entitled, the relatives of the dead man shall demand the surplus of the wergeld or retributory vengeance, as well against the kindred in general as against the closer relatives.

88.19 De coacto ad homicidium wita iuste remanebit, de eo pariter qui se uindicabit.

In the case of a person compelled by necessity to commit a slaying the *wite* will with justice remain unpayable, which is equally true of a person who commits a revenge-slaying in a feud.

Importantly, the *Leges* seem most interested in providing fairness and a ‘restoration of a balance,’<sup>94</sup> which can be achieved by compensation or by vengeance. The latter is not as automatically appropriate as it once was, as this somewhat humorous example from the laws illustrates well:

90.7–7a Si homo cadat ab arbore uel quolibet mechanico super aliquem ut inde moriatur uel debilitetur, si certificare ualeat quod amplius non potuit, antiquis institutionibus habeatur innoxius.

Vel si quis obstinata mente contra omnium estimationem uindicare uel weram exigere presumpserit, si placet, ascendat et illum similiter obruat.

If a man falls from a tree or some man-made structure on to someone else so that as a result the latter dies or is injured, if he can prove that he was unable to avoid this, he shall in accordance with ancient ordinances be held blameless.

Or if anyone stubbornly and against the opinion of all takes it upon himself to exact vengeance or demand wergeld, he shall if he wishes climb up and in similar fashion cast himself down on the person responsible.

Nevertheless, even this example shows that it was still accepted that vengeance could supply the sought-after balance necessary to settle a case of injury. While some later laws, such as Glanville (likely written around 1189), put homicide and many other serious injuries firmly under the jurisdiction of the king,<sup>95</sup> the language of compensation and vengeance persists in other codes. Hyams describes such holdovers from earlier laws:

---

<sup>94</sup> Hyams, 142.

<sup>95</sup> I.1–2: Placitorum aliud criminale aliud ciuile. Item placitorum criminalium aliud pertinet ad coronam domini Regis, aliud ad uicecomites prouinciarum. Ad coronam domini Regis pertinent ista: Crimen quod in legibus dicitur crimen lese maiestatis, ut de nece uel seditione persone domini Regis uel regni uel exercitus; occultatio inuenti thesauri fraudulosa; placitum de pace domini Regis infracta; homicidium; incendium; roberia; raptus; crimen falsi, et si qua sunt similia: que scilicet ultimo puniuntur supplicio aut membrorum truncatione. [Pleas are either criminal or civil. Some criminal pleas belong to the crown of the lord king, and some to the sheriffs of counties. The following belong to the crown of the lord king: The crime which civil lawyers call lèse-majesté, namely the killing of the lord king or the betrayal of the realm or the army; fraudulent concealment of treasure trove; the plea of breach of the lord king’s peace; homicide; arson; robbery; rape; the crime of falsifying and other similar crimes: all these are punished by death or cutting off of limbs.] *The Treatise on the Laws and Customs of the Realm of England Commonly Called Glanville*, ed. G.D.G. Hall (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993). Hall’s translation.

It often seems as if the old compensation system remained fully valid well into the twelfth century. The “Leges Willelmi” held that an appellor was entitled to compensation for the head of an opponent who could not be produced in court. Its author also proclaimed the continuing validity of many Alfredian tariff payments. The “Leges Edwardi Confessoris” (taking the story at least into mid-century) still obliged killers against the king’s peace to make amends to their victim’s kin “or suffer the life [werram],” according to the English proverb that required killers to buy off or suffer a spear in their side, “buge spere of side oðer bere!” When the books were not talking of compensation, they were using the language of vengeance. When a thief of poor public reputation fails to appear and follow the appropriate procedure, “he may be avenged live or dead,” and the goods are to be returned to those who claim them. His own kin are expressly warned not to interfere on his behalf, for executions (which this would be) are expressly exempt from feud and attempts can be prosecuted by plaint before royal justice. Yet vengeance killing is licit enough when a daughter or wife is caught in the act of adultery.<sup>96</sup>

Thus, while certainly the culture was evolving towards a more ‘civilized’ idea of law and order involving pleas and courts, the process was slow. Kin continued to play a crucial role in criminal prosecution, the fundamental notions of balance and evenness in achieving justice and peace were not abandoned, and the right to private action or ‘self-help’ was not denied in many cases.<sup>97</sup>

Ecclesiastical sources can further substantiate the continuing existence of vengeance and feuding behaviors. For instance, William of Malmesbury’s *Vita Wulfstani*<sup>98</sup> tells the

---

<sup>96</sup> Hyams, 147–148.

<sup>97</sup> Donald W. Sutherland writes, for example, that in the late thirteenth century an owner dispossessed of his property had ‘four days [to] take any opportunity to move back in, putting his adversary out in turn. But after only four days if he has not yet made his move he loses his right of self-help. . . . The fact is, however, that the thirteenth-century courts knew no such doctrine, and did not restrain an owner’s rights of self-help in any way even nearly so strict. . . . The records yield, on the contrary, a great many cases that demonstrate the law’s general permissiveness.’ *The Assize of Novel Disseisin* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1973), 97–98.

<sup>98</sup> The date of the *Vita Wulfstani* is in the period c. 1124–c. 1143. It is a translation of Coleman’s Old English version, no longer extant, which was written sometime between 1095, the year of Wulfstan’s death, and 1113, the year of Coleman’s own. *The Vita Wulfstani of William of Malmesbury*, ed. Reginald R. Darlington (London, 1928), viii. Coleman’s *Life* is ‘almost the last work known to have been composed in Old English prose.’ Andy Orchard, ‘Parallel Lives: Wulfstan, William, Coleman and Christ,’ in *St. Wulfstan and His World*, ed. Julia S. Barrow and N.P. Brooks (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2005), 57. Nicholas Brooks writes, ‘Claims of literary parentage in a lost work written in an ancient language need to be treated with caution. . . . Throughout the *Vita*, however, William of Malmesbury repeatedly names Coleman as the source of particular stories, having made clear in his prefatory letter that he has followed Coleman’s account closely, as the community had indeed wished. He admits to having omitted a few of the numerous names that Coleman

story of how Bishop Wulfstan of Worcester (c. 1008–1095), with divine assistance, settled a case between William the Bald and five brothers who desired vengeance for a sixth brother whom William had accidentally killed. Wulfstan approached the brothers on William's behalf, but they insisted that they would not settle for anything but revenge, even if it meant they would be excommunicated and even after Wulfstan prostrated himself at their feet:

*Addiderunt facto non mitiora uerba; malle se omnino excommunicari, quam necem fratris non ulcisi. . . Nichil illi pro tanta flexi humilitate; omnem abiurabant concordiam.*<sup>99</sup>

They did not add milder words to their deed; they preferred that they be entirely excommunicated than not to avenge the murder of their brother. . . . They were not at all persuaded by such great humility; they denied all peace.

After much effort on Wulfstan's part and his declaration that *beati pacifici, quoniam filii dei uocabuntur* [blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called the children of God], one of the brothers is suddenly struck by divine punishment:

*Secuta est e uestigio maledicta populi diuina ultio; uno ex fratribus eodemque acerrimo statim insano facto. Uolubatur ad humum miser, mordicus terram apprehendens; digitis effodiens, spumas uirulentas iaciens; fumigabundis etiam quod uix alias audierim menbris; ut teterrimus odor uicinum infestaret aerem.*

Divine vengeance followed in an instant the curses of the people; one of the brothers and that same most violent one immediately went insane. The wretch was rolled to the ground, seizing the earth by biting with his teeth, gouging with his fingers, spewing noxious foams; moreover, with his limbs smoking, what I have scarcely heard of otherwise, so that a foul odor infested the surrounding air.

The brothers quickly begged for mercy, which Wulfstan granted, and peace was achieved (*omnibus reformauit pacem* [he reestablished peace with all]). Much like Bede's story of

---

had included, which he felt were no longer relevant to the readers of a subsequent generation. He had made minor revisions to the structure of the work. . . . He had also added a few stories that he had heard from Prior Nicholas (1113–24). But the bulk of what we have rings true as a faithful but more literary rendering into Latin of an Old English *Life*. . . . 'Introduction: How Do We Know About St. Wulfstan?' in *St. Wulfstan and His World*, 5.

<sup>99</sup> Darlington, 38–39.

Archbishop Theodore, the emphasis is squarely on the peacekeeping abilities of Wulfstan, but the centrality of vengeance cannot be dismissed. The fact that it is divine vengeance or punishment (*ultio*) that convinces the brothers of their misguided ways does nothing to mitigate its importance. As Hyams rightly observes: ‘When Wulfstan and others worked to counter feud by summoning up God’s divine power against recalcitrant disputants, they were themselves buying into a version of the ethos of vengeance.’<sup>100</sup> The underlying belief that an act of vengeance can restore things to right is key.

I hope to have shown in this brief summary that while the practice and concept of revenge or feud evolves through the centuries, as different bodies such as the king or members of the Church co-opt the system for various purposes,<sup>101</sup> the salience of the institution of vengeance in early English culture remains strong in both the Old and Middle English periods. Adding the evidence from the laws and other historical sources of those time periods to the contemporary poetry, romances, and epics (which I will discuss in the chapters below) makes clear that vengeance was part of the social consciousness.

### *Iceland*

The situation in medieval Iceland differs from that of England in that there seems almost no need to state the importance of vengeance to the society; thanks in large part to the sagas,

---

<sup>100</sup> Hyams, 123.

<sup>101</sup> See Hyams on ‘the crusade as the locus classicus for any demonstration of the positive values that could be set upon vengeance and enmity,’ for example, as well as on how monks could be ‘eager customers for vengeance whenever their property [came] under threat’ (119–121).

early Iceland is known for, perhaps equated with, its violence and feuding. Anthropologists, historians, legal scholars, and even an economist or two have been drawn to the unique culture and compelling images of revenge as much as students of literature have, and much has been written regarding the system and ethos of feud in Iceland. Nevertheless, it will be useful to rehearse a few details about the conditions that created such a system and the laws that regulated it.

Medieval Iceland, from its settlement c. 870 until it came under Norwegian rule in 1262, was in effect a stateless society.<sup>102</sup> Though there were elaborate and established laws, *goðar*<sup>103</sup> who wielded power and authority, as well as a system of regular local and national assemblies at which judicial courts presided, there was no king or other executive power in the country. The prosecution of crimes and the settlement of disputes were ultimately a private responsibility. As William Ian Miller writes, the ‘sanction behind legal judgment and arbitrated settlement was self-help. . . .’<sup>104</sup> Vengeance and the larger framework of feud were

---

<sup>102</sup> Theodore M. Andersson and William Ian Miller, *Law and Literature in Medieval Iceland: Ljósvefninga saga and Valla-Ljóts saga* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1989), 6.

<sup>103</sup> On the term *goði* (pl. *goðar*): ‘This word was little known outside Iceland in Christian times, and seems to refer to a particularly Icelandic concept. A *goði* [sic] was a local chieftain who had legal and administrative responsibilities in Iceland. The name in fact seems to have originally meant “priest,” or at least a person having a special relationship with gods or supernatural powers, and thus shows an early connection between religious and secular power. As time went on, however, the chief function of a *goði* came to be secular. The first *godis* were chosen from the leading families who settled Iceland in c. 870–930. Every free person was required to be a *thingman* of one *goði*. While the office of *goði* was predominantly hereditary, allegiance to him was more or less voluntary and could be transferred. If the *goði* neglected to look after the people under his responsibility, they could decide to withdraw their support when he needed it.’ *The Complete Sagas of Icelanders*, vol. 5, 410.

<sup>104</sup> Miller, *Bloodtaking and Peacemaking*, 20–21.

therefore not only licit in early Iceland, but formed the ‘foundation of dispute processing and social control.’<sup>105</sup> As a result of the Icelandic decentralization of power, there also developed

. . . a corresponding emphasis on the integrity of the individual human being. . . . The key concept was *mannhelgi*, that is, an inviolability or integrity, which distinguished the free from slaves. It was not a matter of freedom in the modern sense, as defined, for example, in terms of human rights. It was above all a freedom from being violated.

Along with the legally based right to inviolability went the duty to take vengeance, if a violation had actually taken place.<sup>106</sup>

An individual’s integrity or honor became the mark of status in the Icelandic community, and it was closely guarded. People were highly sensitive to affronts to their honor, and any violation, however slight, called for the appropriate action to reestablish one’s reputation and standing and ultimately to deter others from attempting the same. This focus on the individual did not amount to solitary action in vengeance and feud, however (or, for that matter, in almost any substantive undertaking). Rather, the kin group formed the most important network of support, and it was expected that kin—whether related by blood, marriage, fosterage, or sworn brotherhood—would come to the aid of one involved in a conflict. Groups other than those formed by ties of kinship were also sources of support and obligation; the relationships between *þingmenn* and *goði* or among those in a household, for instance, could form the basis for a group that either coincided or conflicted with a kin group. Whatever the makeup of the social group, the duties of ‘membership’ entailed various possibilities—ranging from being obliged to take blood vengeance for one’s kin, to risking

---

<sup>105</sup> Andersson and Miller, 22.

<sup>106</sup> Preben Meulengracht Sørensen, ‘Social Institutions and Belief Systems of Medieval Iceland (c. 870–1400) and Their Relations to Literary Production,’ trans. Margaret Clunies Ross in *Old Icelandic Literature and Society*, ed. Margaret Clunies Ross (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 8–29 at 22–23.



being the target of an adversary's vengeance, to giving legal support, to arbitrating and mediating settlements—for importantly, the Icelandic feud

could wend its way from blood revenge to law to arbitration to peaceful coexistence, back to blood or law without being any less a feud for happening to be in a less violent phase. Feud was something more than active violence; it was the whole process by which people in hostile competition regulated their affairs.<sup>107</sup>

The laws of early Iceland, more than those of Anglo-Saxon England, provide a strong background to understanding the importance of vengeance in the culture and its literature. *Grágás*, the main collection of early Icelandic law,<sup>108</sup> ‘contrasts . . . in every way with the patchy and interstitial quality of the Anglo-Saxon and continental barbarian codes [in the] range of its coverage and its detail within each area covered.’<sup>109</sup> The *Grágás* laws are extremely specific, for example, regarding what constitutes injury and the proper penalty for said injury. The opening section of the treatment of homicide begins with the following provisions on assault:

Þat er mælt þar er menn finaz aförnom vegi. oc hleypr maðr til manz logmæto frumhlavpe oc varðar þat fiorbaugs garð. En þessi ero v. lög mæt frum lavp. ef maðr högr til manz eða legr eða scytr eða verpr eða drepr. En þat er hlaúp er maðr reipir fram oc ber þat quidr at hann vilde a man lata coma enda se hann sva nær at á mætti coma fyrir þeim söcom ef eigi væri stoðvat agange. eða hann mætti hæva eða sva huigi er hann scytr eða verpr at hann mundi coma mega því til hans sva at á mætti coma fyrir þeim söcom ef ekki stoðvaðe eða hann vm hefðe. Þa er hlavp stoðvat a gange ef menn taca við eða kómr avapn eða a völl eða a vápir þa er fram var reitt. Þat er et vi. lögmætt lavp ef maðr fellir man oc varðar þat scog gang. en þa er fall ef maðr styðr niðr kné eða hendi eða allra helzt ef hann fellr meir. Þat er et .vii. ef maðr ryscir man oc varðar þat scog gang. Þat er et .viii. ef maðr rænir man

<sup>107</sup> Andersson and Miller, 23.

<sup>108</sup> *Grágás* survives in fragments dating from the end of the twelfth century and as a whole in two manuscripts, *Konungsbók* and *Staðarhólsbók* from the mid- to late thirteenth century.

<sup>109</sup> Miller, *Bloodtaking and Peacemaking*, 222. The Icelandic laws stand out among early Scandinavian law codes as well. Gunnar Karlsson comments that *Grágás* ‘is much longer than any other Nordic medieval law’ [*The History of Iceland* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 22] and Byock notes: ‘Bulk is another distinctive feature of *Grágás*. *Konungsbók* alone is three and a half times the size of the Danish East Sjøælland Laws, the largest of the Scandinavian provincial lawbooks.’ *Medieval Iceland: Society, Sagas, and Power* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 26.

handráne. þat varðar scog gang. Þat er et ix. ef maðr kyrkir man. Þat varðar scog gang. . . . Ef maðr vegr man, oc varðar þat scog gang.<sup>110</sup>

It is prescribed that if men meet as they travel and one man makes what the law deems an assault on another, the penalty is lesser outlawry. These are five assaults deemed such by law: if a man cuts at a man, or thrusts at him, or shoots or throws at him, or strikes at him. And it counts as an assault if a man swings a weapon and a panel gives a verdict that he meant the stroke to land, and he was moreover at such close range that for that matter it could have landed if it had not been stopped on its way, or that he could have hit him; or that, no matter what missile he shoots or throws, he could have reached him with it and for that matter touched him if it had not been stopped, or that he could have hit him. An assault is stopped on its way if someone intercepts it or if a stroke offered meets a weapon or the ground or clothing. The sixth assault deemed such by law occurs when a man fells another, and the penalty for that is outlawry. It is a fall if a man goes down on knee or hand, and especially if he falls further than this. The seventh assault is when one man shakes another and the penalty is outlawry. The eighth is when a man wrests something from another's grasp; the penalty is outlawry. The ninth is if a man throttles someone; the penalty is outlawry. . . . If a man kills someone, the penalty is outlawry.<sup>111</sup>

Just as the laws are specific about what constitutes injury, they are also explicit about who may take action for it and when:

Þat er mælt. at maðr a sin at hefna ef hann vill sa er á verþr unit til þess alþingis er hann er scylldr at sækia of averkin oc sva þeir menn allir er vigs eigo at hefna. En þeir eigo vigs at hefna er vigsacar ero aðilia. Sa maðr fellr o heilagyr fyrir honom er a honom van oc sva firir þeim monnom öllum er honom fylgia. enda er rétt at aðrir menn hefne hans ef vilia. til iafnlengðar anars döggrs. (K 86, 147)

It is prescribed that a man on whom injury is inflicted has the right to avenge himself if he wants to up to the time of the General Assembly at which he is required to bring a case for the injuries; and the same applies to everyone who has the right to avenge a killing. Those who have the right to avenge a killing are the principals in a killing case. The man who inflicted the injury falls with forfeit immunity at the hands of a principal and at the hands of any of his company, though it is also lawful for vengeance to be taken by other men within twenty-four hours.<sup>112</sup>

It further specifies who exactly constitutes a 'principal' in a killing case:

Sonr manz er aðile vig sacar xvi. vetra gamall. eða ellre frials borenn oc arfgengr sva hygin at hann kune fyrir raða. Ef eigi er sonr til eða er ere en sva þa a faðir þar næst. þa á bróðir samfeðre þar næst.

<sup>110</sup> Grágás, ed. Vilhjálmur Finsen, *Konungsbók* (Copenhagen, 1852), K 86, 144–145. <<http://www.archive.org/stream/grgsisl1852iceluoft#page/n1/mode/2up>>, accessed July 14, 2009. All further references will be made by section number and page number in the text.

<sup>111</sup> Andrew Dennis, Peter Foote, and Richard Perkins, eds. and trans., *Laws of Early Iceland, Grágás I* (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2000), 139–140. It is useful to remember that while the penalty of lesser outlawry (*fjörbaugsgarðr*) meant exile from Iceland for three years and confiscation of property, full outlawry (*skóggangr*) meant one could be killed with impunity. As Karlsson writes, 'A sentence of full outlawry amounted to a general hunting licence on the outlaw.' *The History of Iceland*, 58.

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.*, 141.

Þa abroþir sammeðri þar næst. Ef breðr ero fleire samfeðra oc eigo þeir allir iöfnom höndom þat er þeir á taka. . . .

Þesir menn ero til aðilþar talþir. Eptir breþr er sonr lavngetin aðile. þa broþir lavngetin samfeðre. þa broþir lavngetinn sammeðri. Ef eigi ero þesir menn til. þa a söcina en nánasti niðr frialsborena oc arfgengra oc samlendra. Ef fleire menn ero iafn nánir þa scal sa raða er sokia vill. til laga. eigi ræðr alldr með iafn nánom monnom nema brøðrom. (K 94, 167–168)

A man's son is the principal in a killing case, sixteen winters old or older, freeborn, and a lawful heir, of such mental capacity that he can take charge of [his inheritance]. If there is no son or if he is younger than this, then the case lies with a man's father next, then next with a brother born of the same father, then next with a brother born of the same mother. If there are more brothers than one born of the same father, they all have equal shares in whatever they get from the case. . . .

These men are on the list for being a principal. After brothers an illegitimate son is principal, then an illegitimate brother born of the same father, then an illegitimate brother born of the same mother. If these men do not exist, then the suit lies with the nearest descendant among those who are freeborn, lawful heirs, and present in the country. If several men are equally close kin, then the one among them who wishes to prosecute according to the law's rigor is to have his way. Age is not decisive among equally close kin except among brothers.<sup>113</sup>

It is apparent from these laws and the way they are written that the desire for retribution and to achieve a state of balance was very strong, and that the rights and responsibilities of taking vengeance were equally taken very seriously. There is seemingly a provision for every type of injury and a principal appointed to avenge it, even if that principal ends up being a distant relation. There was a low threshold for injury, and there was also strict liability—another law in the section on homicides deems that ‘there shall be no such thing as accidents.’<sup>114</sup> The threat of violence was ever present, and violence itself was ‘the legitimate tool of anyone to restore justice.’<sup>115</sup>

<sup>113</sup> Ibid., 156–157.

<sup>114</sup> Dennis, Foote, and Perkins, K 92, 155. Even if it is decided that the injurer is cleared and under no penalty because the injured party himself caused the injury, he is still first subject to legal action: ‘all these panels to give clearing verdicts are to be drawn from the prosecution panel with which he is prosecuted, and five neighbors are to be drawn from it.’

<sup>115</sup> Karlsson, 57.

Byock writes that the incorporation of vengeance killings in the law privileged violent redress.<sup>116</sup> While this may be true to an extent, there were still norms and rules regulating the process of feud. For instance, the publishing of an injury is crucial to its proper prosecution, and the laws are, as might be expected, detailed about the process:

Laga losto þessa alla er her ero talþir vm vig oc vm sár oc drep oc vm frum hlavp oll scal lysa fyrir v. bvom þeim er allir se rettir at leiðar lengð i .ix. bva quið fra vetvangi. oc scal lyst fyrir þriðio sol þaðan fra er þeir scilðumz. (K 87, 150)

Publishing of all these lawbreakings here told, killings, wounds, and blows and all assaults, is to be done before five neighbors qualified in terms of distance from the place of action to serve on a panel of nine neighbors; and the publishing must be done before the third sunrise from the time the two sides separated.<sup>117</sup>

There is even a provision to cover publishing of injuries in cases where a man has lost his voice:

Þat er mælt. ef maðr er omale oc scal sa maðr lysa er adile væri vigsacarinar ef hin væri vegin ef sa er þar. oc scal hann nefna vatta at því aðr at hin ma eigi mæla eða sva ef hann mælir eigi af viti. En ef sa er eigi þar oc er rett at lyse sa er vill. Þat er mælt. ef honom batnar. oc a hann cost hvarz hann vill at hafa þa lysingina. eða lysa sialfr ianat sin oc fara sva at lysingo sem aðr var tint. ef hann selde lysing. (K 87, 151–152)

It is prescribed that if a man has lost his power of speech, publishing is to be undertaken by the man, if at hand, who would be the principal in the killing case if the man in question had been killed; and he is first to name witnesses to witness that the man in question cannot speak, or similarly if he does not speak sense. But if that man is not at hand, then it is lawful for anyone who wishes to undertake the publishing.

It is prescribed that if he recovers then he may choose whether he accepts that publishing or publishes it again himself, and he is to set about the publishing as was rehearsed previously in case he transferred the publishing.<sup>118</sup>

Legal process carries weight, which leaves room for peaceable (or at least, non-violent) settlements of disputes. If it allows for violent redress, *Grágás* does not demand it. Even outlaws are given some latitude:

---

<sup>116</sup> Byock, 26.

<sup>117</sup> Dennis, Foote, and Perkins, 143.

<sup>118</sup> *Ibid.*, 144.

Eigi er manne scyllt at drepa scogar man þott hann hitte hann at male ef hann tecr hann eigi oc ræðr honom eigi biarg ráð nema hann hafe sectan. (K 110, 189)

A man is not required to kill an outlaw, unless he was the one who got him condemned, even if he happens to meet him to speak to, as long as he does not take him in and afford him help.<sup>119</sup>

Moreover, the laws give attention to formal truce as a suitable solution, the refusal of which carries its own penalty:

Hvarvetna þes er vegnar sakir standa obøttar a milli manna. enda vile menn sættaz a þav mál þeir er lut eigo í hvarirtvegio sem fyrst má. søkiendr oc verendr oc hollendr. hvatki er sátt þeira duellr. huerigra luta er þeir beiða. Þa eigo menn grið at selia huarir avðrom ef menn vilia þes beiðt hafa. Þat ero forn lavg a islandi. Ef vegande beiþir ser griða nás nið eða nefa. eða hans frændr honom. eða ser fyrir þriðio sól eptir vígit. með vatta oc til heilla sáttá við frændr veganda eða vine. full tíða menn oc frials borna. Þa scolo þeir eigi griða varna ef at lögvn er beiðt. . . . Þa varðr Fiör Bavgs Garð ef hinn varnar griða huegi er hann suarar eða sva ef hann suarar engo. Þa scal vatta at nefna. Enda varþar iafn mikit huerngi veg sem varnar griða.<sup>120</sup>

Wherever killing cases remain unatoned between men, and participants on both sides—prosecutors and defendants and sympathizers—wish to settle in those cases as soon as possible, then, whatever delays their agreement and whatever things they are asking, each side must give truce to the other, if they wish to ask for it. That is ancient law in Iceland.

If a killer asks for truce for himself from the corpse's kin by blood or marriage, or if his kinsmen do so for him or for themselves, before the third sunrise after the killing, with witnesses and with a view to complete settlement with the kinsmen of the killer or his friends, men of age and free born, then they are not to refuse a truce if asked in accordance with the law. . . .

Then the penalty is lesser outlawry if the other man refuses truce, however he words his answer and also if he makes no answer. Witnesses are then to be named to that refusal, but the penalty is the same however he refuses truce.<sup>121</sup>

Trucebreaking (on which more in chapter three) was likewise discouraged with strong sanctions.

Of course, that a law was written in *Grágás* does not mean it is a perfect reflection of reality. It is difficult to assess the relationship between actuality and ideal in any medieval law. Miller writes:

<sup>119</sup> Ibid., 171. I have emended the translation.

<sup>120</sup> *Grágás efter det Arnemagnæanske Haandskrift Nr. 334 fol., Stæðarhólsbók*, ed. Vilhjálmur Finsen (Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 1879), St 277, 305–306.

<sup>121</sup> Dennis, Foote, and Perkins, 210.

We can only guess at how the Icelanders understood their will to make law. Different laws seem to have had different types of motivation. Some seem to have been more in the nature of meditations on rules without certain relation to practice. . . . But numerous laws were undoubtedly the consequence of the blandest of functional assumptions. They were meant either to constrain practice or settle disputes arising from unconstrainable practices. On a more general level, it seems that people felt that law promoted order, not just the systemic order derived from the assignment of things to a place in a legal and social structure, but actual peace.<sup>122</sup>

The presence of such laws as those concerned with legal procedure and truce in *Grágás*, however, does seem to bear witness to a concern for an overarching social order as the ultimate goal of the fairness and balance sought through licit vengeance, which correlates to the importance of the social community in Iceland alongside its emphasis on the individual. This seems paradoxical on some levels, but Sørensen well describes the interaction between the two:

Honour implies that individuals make decisions about themselves and their affairs and take responsibility for them; but, since the individual is also acting under the appraising eye of other people, the action is dependent on the common social norms that the individual strives to comply with. Where there is no strong responsible power to enforce social norms, the peace of society depends on free men and women behaving in accordance with them, under pressure from the collectivity's esteem and the desire of the individual to gain the collectivity's recognition to the highest degree possible. From an ideal perspective, this is how a society functions in which honour is the dominant ethical principle. The risk involved with this form of social order is that it depends absolutely on the individual human being, and that order therefore breaks down and turns into conflict if the members of society ignore the social contract based on honour. . . .<sup>123</sup>

The violence for which medieval Iceland is known did not exist for its own sake or because its people were somehow primitive or barbaric. Rather, revenge and feud had an essential function in the governance of the society, and both its place and its complexity should not be underestimated.

---

<sup>122</sup> Miller, *Bloodtaking and Peacemaking*, 228–229.

<sup>123</sup> Sørensen, 23.

## The Texts

Some of the best information about vengeance in these medieval cultures is to be found in the popular literature of each one. As mentioned above, medieval literature is full of memorable examples of revenge, and vengeance certainly forms the basis of many a tale well told. It remains to be addressed in this introduction, therefore, why I chose the particular works of *Beowulf*, the *Reeve's Tale* and the *Tale of Melibee*, and *Ljósvetninga saga* together to discuss medieval ambivalence about revenge.

Each of these works is easily identified as one in which vengeance plays a large, if not central, role. *Beowulf's* slaying of Grendel and his mother in return for their predations on the Danes is only one of the many feuds described in *Beowulf*, and the hero's declaration that it is better to avenge one's friend than to mourn too much [*Selre bið æghwæm þæt he his freond wrece, / þonne he fela murne* (1384b–1385b)] is often cited as an expression of the ethic of vengeance in the poem. Chaucer's *Reeve's Tale* itself constitutes the revenge of the Reeve on the Miller for a perceived insult, and the *Tale of Melibee* is built around the question of whether Melibeus ought to respond to an assault on his daughter with vengeance or forgiveness. *Ljósvetninga saga*, as one might expect from an Icelandic family saga, traces the progression of a feud, this time a regional one between the two leading families of Mǫðruvellir and Ljósavatn, with numerous examples of revenge killings and legal

proceedings before it is finally settled. Indeed, if there were an anthology of medieval revenge literature, these few works would certainly be included.

It is not simply for thematic overlap that these works amount to a productive group of texts in the consideration of medieval attitudes towards revenge, however. It is rather the narrative features that they share that make them emblematic of what might constitute a subgenre of medieval revenge literature.<sup>124</sup> In particular, in each one it is the space created between the point of view of the avenger and the perspective of the narrator/author that leaves room for the expression of doubts and concerns regarding the act of and desire for vengeance. The struggle to reconcile the satisfying and legitimate aspects of revenge and feud with the more troubling ones is not located within one figure, as it is in *Hamlet* or any of the early modern revenge tragedies, for example. In these medieval works, the doubts are external to the avenger (though perhaps there is a case that even Beowulf has his hesitations), and it is the juxtaposition of the narrator's own reflection on what an act of revenge means

---

<sup>124</sup> Many other family sagas would certainly belong in this subgenre and would make a particularly interesting group, given that saga narrators have often been thought of as invisible or completely objective. Heather O'Donoghue writes about the absence of 'the whole apparatus of what Wayne C. Booth called "the rhetoric of fiction"': 'As Booth points out, we may no longer expect to be directly addressed by an author—the 'dear Reader trope'—or to be engaged by him or her in a mock dialogue about our opinions of what has been related as story. But we may still, consciously or unconsciously, expect the author to insert his or her opinions about what is going on into the narrative prose, to describe the unspoken thoughts and feelings of the characters, and to help the reader to evaluate both character and event. In saga narrative, focalization—the way events are presented from the viewpoint of one or more of the characters in the narrative—is typically wholly external, that is, events are seen from the perspective of a narrator who stands outside the world of the narrative. The virtual absence of the rhetoric of fiction means that we as readers must work at interpreting characters' behaviours for ourselves. . . .' *Old Norse-Icelandic Literature*, 35. I will argue in my chapter on *Ljósvetninga saga* that the author, though subtle, certainly gives direction as to how to interpret his characters' actions. The fact that he stands 'outside the world of the narrative' changes but does not necessarily limit his participation in the evaluation of what happens within that narrative.



for the avenger and the avenger's own history, goals and motivations that produces the works' ultimate ambivalence regarding revenge.<sup>125</sup>

The strategies by which these poets and authors create and utilize the 'space' between the narrative perspectives can be very different, but they also share important aspects in common. The most important of these shared features is that all three authors—the anonymous *Beowulf* poet, Chaucer, and the anonymous saga writer—have the avengers in their works expressing their motivations and beliefs about revenge in direct speech. In *Beowulf*, the poet has the hero tell several of his own revenge narratives, many of which are then retold or commented on by the narrator-poet himself. Chaucer similarly allows the Reeve as well as Melibeus to talk about why they desire and indeed, deserve to take a legitimate revenge on their enemies alongside his own ironic commentary. The saga author, before expressing his own laconic but clear opinions, depicts the insults leveled against Guðmundr (which are the impetus for his vengeance-seeking) in direct speech and gives Guðmundr the same opportunity of describing his own wishes for revenge. Thus, the voices of these characters seem significantly independent of the narrator's, and the production of parallel but divergent narratives is a crucial means by which the works are able to convey

---

<sup>125</sup> John Kerrigan writes about how early modern authors placed this role in the hands of the avengers themselves: 'The avenger reflects upon what has been done in order to reflect what has been done. . . . If revenge attracts a dramatist because, by submitting characters to a scenario, it does as a matter of course what his own writing does perforce, it also attracts him because the revenger is a surrogate artist. . . . In pursuit of retribution, the avenger must manipulate a fluid and contingent world with a dramatist's inventiveness and authority. He must be, in the play, an image of its author, transmuting creative ambition into narrative and stage action. This helps explain the familiar posture of the Elizabethan revenger, standing slightly outside his role, examining his actions like a playwright at work.' *Revenge Tragedy: Aeschylus to Armageddon* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), 16–17.

such complex views. The heteroglossia of the works reflects the multiple perspectives inherent in an act of vengeance or in a feud: there is always a winner and a loser, a victim and an attacker, an avenger and a newly wronged whose turn it is then to avenge and to turn the tables once more. The pros and cons of each revenge act begin to register through the many voices and points of view in each story, and no easy conclusions are allowed by any of them. René Girard writes:

In a world still haunted by the specter of vengeance it is difficult to theorize about vengeance without resorting to equivocations or paradoxes. In Greek tragedy, for instance, there is not—and cannot be—any consistent stand on the subject. To attempt to extract a coherent theory of vengeance from the drama is to miss the essence of tragedy. For in tragedy each character passionately embraces or rejects vengeance depending on the position he occupies at any given moment in the scheme of the drama.<sup>126</sup>

This is an apt description of the shifting ground on which the authors, attackers, and avengers stand in the consideration of each act of vengeance. Revenge and feud, however accepted and essential in these medieval cultures, are revealed to be problematic and difficult to wrestle with—perhaps even more difficult than in today's society where revenge is restricted, to be dispensed by judges in courtrooms and actors in films.<sup>127</sup> The sophisticated treatment of revenge in these works is thoroughly 'modern' in its anxiety and thoughtfulness about a practice that was so destructive and yet so necessary.

---

<sup>126</sup> René Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, trans. Patrick Gregory (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1972), 15.

<sup>127</sup> Bengt af Klintberg writes: 'It is no longer considered a social duty to take personal revenge. On the contrary, we must not. Instead we have police and prisons to take care of crimes and the official attitude to antisocial behaviour is characterised by attempts to understand it. Consequently, we are taught that crime can often be explained by the social background of the criminal. Subsequently, feelings of revenge have become more or less taboo in our society. 'Why Are There So Many Modern Legends About Revenge?' in *Contemporary Legend: A Reader*, ed. Gillian Bennett and Paul Smith (New York: Garland Publishing, 1996), 261–266 at 263.

\*\*\*\*

### **A Note on Translation**

Translations are my own except where noted. In chapter three I have kept personal and place-names in the Old Norse nominative. Though Old Norse verb tenses often skip back and forth between past and present, I have translated them uniformly in the past tense for less stilted reading.

## 1.

### Duty and Desire:

#### Beowulf as Narrator and Avenger

##### Introduction

Feuds are ubiquitous in *Beowulf*. From the biblical story of Cain and Abel to the Germanic legend of Finn and Hengest to the semi-historical accounts of Geatish tribal conflicts, the poem is crowded with scenes of revenge and the reciprocal violence of feud. Whether related in great detail or alluded to in only a few words, the feuds of the poem provide the basis for much of its drama and, some would argue, its tragedy. That said, one cannot generalize too much about the many instances of feud and revenge; however recurrent a motif, it occurs in many different contexts and with different effects. Even the briefest survey of past scholarship on the topic of feuds in *Beowulf* reflects this great variety. Stanley Kahrl traces through the poem, for instance, the recurrence of the word *fæhð*, most often translated as ‘feud,’ and explores how the *Beowulf* poet establishes a complex of associations (from the archetypal feud of Cain and Abel to the word’s connection to *fyren* [crime, sin] to the familial and tribal feuds of the Danes and Geats and Swedes) around the term before further developing its meaning ‘through the techniques of variation.’<sup>128</sup> Marijane Osborn writes about how the *Beowulf* poet depicts the feuds of scriptural history and those of

---

<sup>128</sup> Stanley Kahrl, ‘Feuds in *Beowulf*: A Tragic Necessity?’ *Modern Philology* 69.3 (1972): 189–198 at 197.

Scandinavian history in discrete ways, maintaining ‘two complementary frames of reference’<sup>129</sup> and creating distinct levels of knowledge for the characters of the poem and for its audience. Frederick Biggs concentrates on Ecgtheow’s feud with the Wylfings to show how it highlights political problems of succession of both Danes and Geats,<sup>130</sup> and John Hill takes up the in-law feuds of the Finn and Hengest and the Freawaru and Ingeld episodes to discuss what they reveal about individual and group psychology in the world of the poem.<sup>131</sup> Part of the variety in the feuds represented in *Beowulf* arises from the diverse tellers of these embedded narratives. Among those who mention feuds besides the poet (or more accurately, through the poet) are, for example, Hrothgar (Ecgtheow’s feud, Danish feud with Grendel); the scop at Heorot (Sigemund, Finn and Hengest); the messenger at the end of the poem (renewed strife for the Geats with neighboring tribes); and indeed, Beowulf himself. The hero’s stories of vengeance include the recounting of his own feats against Grendel and his mother and the warrior Dæghrefn, respectively; the prophecy about Freawaru and Ingeld; the sad tale of Herebeald and the fratricide Hæthcyn; and a portion of the Swedish–Geatish feud. It perhaps does not surprise that Beowulf follows only the poet-narrator in having the most to say about feud, since he of all the characters has the greatest total lines of speech in the

---

<sup>129</sup> Marijane Osborn, ‘The Great Feud: Scriptural History and Strife in *Beowulf*,’ *PMLA* 93 (1978): 973–981 at 973.

<sup>130</sup> Frederick M. Biggs, ‘The Naming of Beowulf and Ecgtheow’s Feud,’ *Philological Quarterly* 80.2 (2001): 95–112.

<sup>131</sup> 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* 78.1–2 (1999): 97–123.

poem.<sup>132</sup> In this essay, I would like to focus specifically on Beowulf's own revenge narratives in order to consider why the hero himself should tell these stories and to suggest what larger implications his motivations might have for our understanding of the role of feud and revenge in the poem.

### **Freawaru and Ingeld (2020a–2069a)**

Beowulf's longest and most imaginative account of vengeance is that of Hrothgar's daughter, Freawaru, and her marriage to the Heathobard prince, Ingeld. It is not 'imaginative' in the sense of fanciful or untrue, of course, as Beowulf's words about the fate of Freawaru and Ingeld turn out to be more prophetic than speculative. According to legend, the marriage does end rather badly, with Freawaru's father and husband squaring off in battle.<sup>133</sup> As the *Widsith* poet reports:

Hroþwulf ond Hroðgar  
 . . .  
 . . . Ingeldes ord forbigdan,  
 forheowan æt Heorote Heaðobeardna þrym.<sup>134</sup> (45–49)

Hrothulf and Hrothgar . . . crushed the army of Ingeld, cut down at Heorot the force of the Heathobards.

---

<sup>132</sup> Beowulf speaks 585.5 lines to be exact. Hrothgar and Wiglaf follow with 258.5 and 100.5 lines respectively. See Appendix A in Robert Bjork, 'Speech as Gift in *Beowulf*,' *Speculum* 69.4 (1994): 993–1022 at 1017–8. See also Table IV: Speech-acts in *Beowulf* in Andy Orchard, *A Critical Companion to 'Beowulf'* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2003), 206–207.

<sup>133</sup> For the most thorough yet succinct guide to the subject of Germanic legend in Old English literature, see Roberta Frank, 'Germanic Legend in Old English Literature' in *The Cambridge Companion to Old English Literature*, ed. Malcolm Godden and Michael Lapidge (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 88–106. On Hrothulf, Hrothgar, and Ingeld, see especially pages 91–92, 99.

<sup>134</sup> Kemp Malone, ed., *Widsith, Anglistica XIII* (Copenhagen: Rosenkilde and Bagger, 1962), 24.

More precisely, Beowulf's story is highly imaginative in its evocative and nuanced description of the motivations behind revenge and the course it eventually takes. Situated in the middle of his reply to Hygelac concerning his Danish adventure, the story begins as an aside at the mention of Freawaru.

Hwilum for duguðe dohtor Hroðgares  
 eorlum on ende ealuwæge bær  
 þa ic Freaware fletsittende  
 nemnan hyrde, þær hio nægled sinc  
 hæleðum sealde. Sio gehaten is,  
 geong goldhroden, gladum sona Frodan;  
 hafað þæs geworden wine Scyldinga,  
 rices hyrde, ond þæt ræd talað,  
 þæt he mid ðy wife wælfæhða dæl  
 sæcca gesette. Oft seldan hwær  
 æfter leodhryre lytle hwile  
 bongar bugeð, þeah seo bryd duge!<sup>135</sup> (2020a–2031b)

At times the daughter of Hrothgar, whom I heard those hall-sitters call Freawaru, bore the ale-cup to the men from the troop of veteran retainers, where she gave the bejeweled treasure-cup to heroes. She is promised, young, adorned with gold, to the gracious son of Froda; with respect to that it has occurred to the friendly lord of the Scyldings, guardian of the kingdom, and that he considers good counsel, that he with that woman a portion of deadly feuds, fights, might settle. Always, seldom anywhere after the fall of a prince does the deadly spear rest for a little while though that bride be good!

Beowulf does not quickly turn back to the main thread of his tale and his feats against Grendel, instead choosing to elaborate on his gnomic statement to envision exactly how and why the spear will not rest.

Mæg þæs þonne ofþyncan ðeodne Heaðo-Beardna  
 ond þegna gehwam þara leoda,  
 þonne he mid fæmnan on flett gæð:  
 dryhtbearn Dena duguða biwenede;  
 on him gladiað gomelra lafe,  
 heard ond hringmæl Heaða-Beardna gestreon,  
 þenden hie ðam wæpnum wealdan moston,—  
 oð þæt hie forlæddan to ðam lindplegan  
 swæse gesiðas ond hyra sylfra feorh.

<sup>135</sup> Fr. Klaeber, ed., *Beowulf and 'The Fight at Finnsburg'*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Boston: D.C. Heath, 1950), 76. Further references will be made in the text by line number.

Þonne cwið æt beore    se ðe beah gesyhð,  
 eald æscwiga,    se ðe eall geman,  
 garcwealm gumena    —him bið grim sefa—,  
 onginneð geomormod    geongum cempan  
 þurh hreðra gehygd    higes cunnian,  
 wigbealu weccan    ond þæt word acwyð:  
 “Meaht ðu, min wine,    mece gecnawan,  
 þone þin fæder    to gefeohte bær  
 under heregriman    hindeman siðe,  
 dyre iren,    þær hyne Dene slogon,  
 weoldon wælstowe,    syððan Wiðergyld læg,  
 æfter hælepa hryre    hwate Scyldungas?  
 Nu her þara banena    byre nathwylces  
 frætsum hremig    on flet gæð,  
 morðres gylpeð    ond þone maðpum byreð,  
 þone þe ðu mid rihte    rædan sceoldest.”  
 Manað swa ond myndgað    mæla gehwylce  
 sarum wordum,    oð ðæt sæl cymeð,  
 þæt se fæmnan þegn    fore fæder dædum  
 æfter billes bite    blodfag swefeð,  
 ealdres scyldig;    him se oðer þonan  
 losað lifigende,    con him land geare.  
 Þonne bioð abrocene    on ba healfe  
 aðsweord eorla;    syððan Ingelde  
 weallað wælniðas    ond him wiflufan  
 æfter cearwælmum    colran weorðað.  
 Þy ic Heaðo-Beardna    hyldo ne telge,  
 dryhtsibbe dæl    Denum unfæcne,  
 freondscipe fæstne. (2032a–2069a)

That may then displease the prince of the Heathobards, and each of the thanes of those peoples, when he goes with that woman on the floor: the noble sons of the Danes attended to lavishly; on them shine leavings of ancestors, hard and ring-marked, treasures of Heathobards, as long as they were permitted to wield those weapons—until they led to destruction into that shieldplay their own dear companions and their own lives. Then at the beer-drinking he who sees the ring-hilt speaks, the old spear-warrior, he who remembers all, spear-death of men—he has a grim heart—he begins, sad at heart, to test the mind of the young warrior through the thoughts of his heart, to awaken war-bale and says these words: ‘Can you, my friend, recognize the sword that your father bore to battle under the army-mask for the last time, precious iron, where the Danes killed him, controlled the battlefield, after Withergyld lay dead, after fall of heroes, bold Scyldings? Now here the son of some one of those killers, exulting in adornments, goes on the floor, boasts of murder and bears that treasure, that which you by right should possess.’ He urges thus and reminds on each of occasions with grievous words until that time comes, that the thane of the woman, on account of the deeds of his father, after the bite of the sword, sleeps bloodstained, having forfeited life; for himself that other escapes living from there, he knows the land well. Then are broken on both sides the oaths of earls; when in Ingeld deadly enmities well up and in him affections for a wife, after seething sorrows, become cooler. For that I do not consider the loyalty of the Heathobards, part of the alliance of peace, with the Danes to be undeceitful, the friendship firm.



Why should the poet depict Beowulf making this lengthy and detailed digression at the mention of Freawaru? In several respects, the passage further establishes the hero as a paragon among men. Because the events Beowulf describes are ‘in time future for the world of the poem, but time past for the audience,’<sup>136</sup> his words, as mentioned above, acquire the weight of truth to them in a way that Wealhtheow’s earlier declarations about the solidarity of the next generation of Danes, for instance, do not. When she claims that

Ic mine can  
glædne Hroþulf, þæt he þa geogoðe wile  
arum healdan gyf þu ær þonne he,  
wine Scildinga, worold oflættest;  
wene ic þæt he mid gode gyldan wille  
uncran eaferan gif he þæt eal gemon,  
hwæt wit to willan ond to worðmyndum  
umborwesendum ær arna gefremedon. (1169b–1187a)

I know my gracious Hrothulf, that he will hold those young warriors with kindnesses if you, friend of Scyldings, sooner than he leave the world; I expect that he will repay with good the heirs of us two, if he remembers all that, what of benefits we two have done for him as a child as to his desires and honors.

the irony is palpable.<sup>137</sup> As told in Saxo’s *Gesta Danorum*, Hrothulf will not hold

Wealhtheow’s and Hrothgar’s sons ‘with kindnesses,’ but rather will usurp the Danish

throne, dispatching Hrethric in the process. Beowulf’s observations—which turn out to be

---

<sup>136</sup> Kahrl, 196. Frank writes: ‘The Old English poet endows [Beowulf] with a remarkable sense of the past and of the future. He can look back two generations, tracing the origins of the feud between the Swedes and Geats (2379–96, 2472–89, 2611–19 and 2922–98). He can also forecast the feuds of the next generation: on the basis of a piece of information picked up at the Danish court, he turns the Ingeld legend . . . into a political prophecy, a sequence of events likely to occur in the near future’ (100).

<sup>137</sup> It seems safe to assume that the original audience would register the irony in Wealhtheow’s speech even more readily than a modern one. J.D.A. Ogilvy and Donald C. Baker posit that the audience of *Beowulf* ‘must have known a good deal about these events, so that the allusions . . . were as plain as allusions to George Washington or George III . . . would be to us.’ *Reading ‘Beowulf’* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1983), 28. Dorothy Whitelock writes: ‘Unless the poet could count on his audience’s previous knowledge, not only would much of what he had to say have lost all significance, but he would surely have been running the risk of interruption.’ *The Audience of ‘Beowulf’*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1951), 37.

sharp insights on the flawed policy of the Danes—place him in stark contrast to both Wealhtheow and Hrothgar, who in his expectations for Freawaru displays a discouraging lack of foresight equal to his wife's. Just as they were unable to prosecute their own feud with Grendel, they will be unable to avoid disaster with the Heathobards. Beowulf's power of perception, the poem asserts, is as formidable as his famous handgrip.

The wisdom of Beowulf's speech is made more remarkable by the polished form in which it is delivered. Many have noted this particular section, 'generally acknowledged one of the finest passages in the poem,'<sup>138</sup> for its careful construction, readily apparent in its dexterous layering of speech and perspective and in its use of numerous rhetorical devices including (but not only) cross- and plurilinear alliteration, envelope structure, repetition, and paronomasia.<sup>139</sup> Striking aspects such as the direct question of the *eald æscwiga*, one of few in the poem,<sup>140</sup> and the image of the ironically named dead Heathobard warrior, *Wiðergyld* [repayment, requital],<sup>141</sup> impart an immediacy and intensity to the passage. By granting this rhetorical tour de force to Beowulf, the poet emphasizes his character's persona as a man of

---

<sup>138</sup> Adrien Brodeur, *The Digressions in 'Beowulf'* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1950), 57.

<sup>139</sup> See especially Orchard, 241–244; Bjork, 'Speech as Gift,' 1011–1013.

<sup>140</sup> T.A. Shippey notes: 'In over 1,200 lines of direct speech, I count only six.' 'Principles of Conversation in Beowulfian Speech' in *Techniques of Description: Spoken and Written Discourses*, ed. John M. Sinclair, Michael Hoey, and Gwyneth Fox (London and New York: Routledge, 1993), 109–126 at 119.

<sup>141</sup> In his translation R.M. Liuzza notes that *Wiðergyld* is 'Apparently a famous Heathobard warrior.' *Beowulf: A New Verse Translation* (Toronto: Broadview Press, 2000), 115 n 2. Klaeber writes that the same name occurs in *Widsith* at 124 and that "a common noun *wiðergyld* ('requital') is nowhere found"; a check of the Dictionary of Old English Corpus supports Klaeber's statement. Whether a reference to an actual figure or a nonce-formation, as Orchard suggests (243), the irony of the name stands, sharply underscoring the message of the spear warrior's incitement and reinforcing Beowulf's own image as a man of poetic abilities.

exceptional words as well as deeds.<sup>142</sup> Beowulf's story of Freawaru and Ingeld thus becomes indicative not only of his wise counsel in political affairs but also of his abilities as a scop of sorts, reminiscent of Hrothgar's own court poet who recited a similar tale of revenge involving Finn and Hengest and Hildeburh.

Though these effects function on the level of the poet/audience perspective, they bear on that of Beowulf/Hygelac in significant ways. If we consider Beowulf in the role of scop or storyteller, his seemingly digressive reply to Hygelac makes particular sense. Rather than quickly divulging the details of his encounters with Grendel and his mother, he delays, musing on Freawaru and Ingeld and thus creating what suspense he might in an account whose end is already *undyrne* [unhidden, manifest] (2000a) to his immediate audience. Not only does he add in this way to the expectations of his audience, but he prepares them with the kind of story he tells to be more receptive to his frame story about his own deeds avenging the wrongs perpetrated against the Danes in Heorot.

Beowulf's narrative conveys a view of feud as inexorable, an unavoidable fact of life. His maxim (ll. 2029b–2031b) points to the futility of compensation—even in its most valuable form—to settle a feud. Freawaru is, as a peaceweaver, literally compensation in the plan of her father (ll. 2028a–2029a); but however good she might be, what peace she inspires will necessarily be temporary and fragile. Beowulf absolves her of any blame by intimating that the duty and desire for revenge trumps all. Interestingly, Beowulf seems to exculpate

---

<sup>142</sup> For the standard essay on the subject of Beowulf's words and deeds, see Robert E. Kaske, 'Sapientia et Fortitudo as the Controlling Theme of *Beowulf*,' *Studies in Philology* 55 (1958): 423–56, repr. in Lewis E. Nicholson, *An Anthology of Beowulf Criticism* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1963), 269–310.

Ingeld as well. The only adjective he uses to describe him is *glæd* (2025b); given the adjective's range of meaning, from 'bright, shining' to 'glad, cheerful' to 'kind' or 'gracious'<sup>143</sup> Beowulf does not impute to Ingeld rash or wrathful tendencies. Moreover, he does not name Ingeld as the target of the old spear warrior's incitement and thus does not directly portray him as the person who breaks the settled peace between the two tribes, which significantly is broken *on ba healfe* [on both sides] (2063b). Even the depiction of his emotions is oddly removed. They act upon him with their own agency; *wælnið* surges, *wiflufu* cools, *cearwælm* happens, and Ingeld is at their mercy. In fact, Beowulf consistently grants agency in his story to disembodied emotions, objects and nameless men: the spear does its work in his gnomic utterance; the old spear-warrior does his on the anonymous young champion; the *fæmnan þegn* (2059a) forfeits life to that champion for the deeds of his unnamed father. The inevitability of feud is emphasized in this series of anonymity, as if to say that someone, anyone, it does not matter who, will remember past offences and will take action on someone, anyone, it does not matter whom, and the cycle will begin again. The pattern of feud is unbreakable, and feud itself is uncomposable. From Beowulf's own statements and actions here and elsewhere in the poem, it would seem that he believes that in a world with such limits, one should embrace the duty of vengeance as a desirable way to

---

<sup>143</sup> *Dictionary of Old English*, s.v. 'glæd,' <<http://tapor.library.utoronto.ca/myaccess.library.utoronto.ca/doe/dict/indices/headwordsindexg.html>>, accessed July 1, 2009. See also Gale R. Owen-Crocker, "'Gracious" Hrothulf, "Gracious" Hrothgar: A Reassessment,' *English Language Notes* 38.4 (2001): 1–7. Crocker argues that Klaeber's gloss of 'gracious' for *glæd* in four of its five occurrences in *Beowulf* obscures its other semantic possibilities. She suggests an improbable meaning of 'appreciative' for the word in the context of the poem.

overcome those limits, a lasting way to gain glory and prove bravery. As he says to Hrothgar at the death of Æschere, in perhaps his clearest approval of vengeance:

Ne sorga, snotor guma! Selre bið æghwæm  
 þæt he his freond wrece, þonne he fela murne.  
 Ure æghwylc sceal ende gebidan  
 worolde lifes, wyrce se þe mote  
 domes ær deaþe; þæt bið drihtguman  
 unlifgendum æfter selest. (1384a–1389b)

Do not sorrow, wise man! It is better for each that he should avenge his friend, than that he should mourn much. Each of us must experience the end of life in the world, let him achieve, he who is permitted, glory before death; that is for the retainer, unliving, afterwards best.

Even though the enmity of Hrothgar and Ingeld constitutes a ‘bad’ kind of feud between kinsmen (about which Beowulf is particularly concerned, a point I will return to), in the scenario that Beowulf imagines, he does not fault Ingeld and the Heathobards for their retaliation for past grievances. As an avenger himself—a position he acknowledges at the beginning of his speech, ‘*ic ðæt eall gewræc*’ [I avenged all that] (2005b)—Beowulf is sympathetic to those who must exact vengeance.<sup>144</sup>

<sup>144</sup> Even his portrayal of the vengeance of Grendel’s mother is not devoid of sympathy:

Pa wæs eft hraðe  
 gearo gynwræce Grendeles modor,  
 siððode sorhfull; sunu deað fornam,  
 wighete Wedra. Wif unhyre  
 hyre bearn gewræc, beorn acwealde  
 ellenlice; (2117b–2122a)

Then quickly afterwards was Grendel’s mother ready with revenge for injury, sorrowful she journeyed; death took her son, war-hate of Weders. The monstrous woman avenged her child, courageously killed a warrior;

Beowulf describes Grendel’s mother in very human terms and says she acts *ellenlice*, an adverb we might expect to be applied to his own courageous actions. Interestingly, the other occurrence of *ellenlice* in the Corpus is found in Alcuin’s *Virtues and Vices*, where it glosses *fortiter* in an allegorical description of patience which bears adversity ‘courageously, bravely’ and notably, without seeking vengeance in the future: *patientia vera est in faciem fortiter sustinere injurias, et in futuro vindictam non quaerere, sed ex corde ignoscere* [true patience is in the shape of sustaining wrongs, and in the future not seeking revenge, but forgiving from the heart] (9, 619C). *Dictionary of Old English*, s.v. ‘ellenlice,’ <<http://tapor.library.utoronto.ca/myaccess.library.utoronto.ca/doe/dict/indices/headwordindexe.html>>, accessed July 1, 2009.

The view of feud presented in Beowulf's story of Freawaru and Ingeld thus bolsters his own position as a feuding/avenging hero. Recall that this story is embedded in Beowulf's long reply to Hygelac, who wants to know how he fared on his journey to Denmark and pointedly reminds him that he went against his lord's own wishes:

Hu lomp eow on lade,    leofa Biowulf,  
 þa ðu færinga    feorr gehogodest  
 sæcce secean    ofer sealt wæter,  
 hilde to Hiorote?    Ac ðu Hroðgare  
 widcuðne wean    wihte gebettest,  
 mærum ðeodne?    Ic ðæs modceare  
 sorhwylmum seað    siðe ne truwode  
 leofes mannes;    ic ðe lange bæd,  
 þæt ðu þone wælgæst    wihte ne grette,  
 lete Suð-Dene    sylfe geweorðan  
 guðe wið Grendel.    Gode ic þanc secge,  
 þæs ðe ic ðe gesundne    geseon moste. (1987a–1998b)

How did it ensue for you on the journey, beloved Beowulf, when you suddenly thought to seek conflict far over the salt water, battle at Heorot? But did you remedy at all for Hrothgar, the famous prince, the widely known woe? I seethed over that care of mind, with surging sorrow, trusted not the journey of the beloved man, I long entreated that you not approach that murderous creature at all, let South-Danes themselves settle war with Grendel. I say thanks to God, that I was permitted to see you safe.

According to Hrothgar, Beowulf made an impulsive decision to seek the Danes and involve himself in their feud, much to his lord's dismay. Brian Shaw writes that the doubt expressed here by Hygelac 'probably accounts for the order of events as narrated by Beowulf. The report of the defeat of Grendel justifies the trip, and then the hero can go on to tell of his reception by Hrothgar.'<sup>145</sup> I would extend Shaw's argument to account for the inclusion of the Freawaru and Ingeld story as well. In comparison with the kin-feud he describes, the feud he prosecutes for Hrothgar easily garners admiration and moral endorsement. There is

---

<sup>145</sup> Brian A. Shaw, 'The Speeches in *Beowulf*: A Structural Study,' *The Chaucer Review* 13.1 (1978): 86–92 at 89.

nothing tragic or inappropriate about his fights with the monstrous Grendel and his monstrous mother, especially since he does remedy the griefs of the Danes despite the seeming impossibility of ending a feud, which he himself has just outlined. Beowulf even justifies his participation in the feud by creating a retroactive imperative, as it were, reporting that Hrothgar invoked Hygelac's name in entreating Beowulf to avenge Æschere:

Ða se ðeoden mec    *ðine life*<sup>146</sup>  
 healsode hreohmod,    þæt ic on holma geþring  
 eorlscipe efnde,    ealdre geneðde,  
 mærdō fremede;    he me mede gehet. (2131a–2134b)

Then that prince, troubled in mind, implored me, *by your life*, that I in the tumult of the seas should perform a heroic deed, risk life, do a glorious thing; he promised me reward.

Once involved to such a degree, Beowulf has no choice but to do his duty as a loyal thane, of both Hygelac and Hrothgar, and to avenge for the second time the loss of the Danes, this time against Grendel's mother. Hygelac might accuse him of seeking out someone else's feud, but Beowulf makes it appear that feud had a way of finding him—even as it will find Ingeld and others after him.

The poem's final word about Beowulf is that he is *lofgeornost* [most eager for praise] (3182b); from all accounts, the capacity in which he gains the most praise and fame through the poem is in his role as avenger. Though he is importantly also a king, we do not hear much more than that he ruled wisely and well for fifty winters, a seemingly stock description of a good king.<sup>147</sup> Moreover, these few lines are wedged between his triumphant return from

---

<sup>146</sup> My emphasis.

<sup>147</sup> W.W. Lawrence writes of the same detail of Hrothgar: 'We are told that Hrothgar has ruled fifty years, that he is wise and venerated; but these are epic characteristics of the powerful king, like Charlemagne's *barbe*

Denmark and the introduction of the dragon, who renders Beowulf an avenger for the last time. The episode with the dragon also turns him into a storyteller once more. The revenge narrative he relates at this moment shows important repetition and variation with his story of Freawaru and Ingeld, and it plays an even more crucial part in influencing its audience.

### **Hrethel, Herebeald, Hæthcyn, and Hygelac (2435a–2509b)**

Just as he digressed from telling of his own feats against Grendel at the mention of Freawaru, Beowulf turns aside from a reflection on his own life to narrate the story of the death of Herebeald. Having set out to face the dragon and, as the audience knows, his death, Beowulf sits on the ness for a moment and begins to speak, seemingly addressing his troop of twelve men. He begins with his fosterage at age seven by Hrethel who, he remembers, treated him no less as a son than Herebeald, Hæthcyn, or Hygelac. At the mention of these sons, Beowulf turns to the story of the elder two:

Wæs þam yldestan ungedefelice  
 mæges dædum morþorbed stred,  
 syððan hyne Hæðcyn of hornbogan,  
 his freawine flane geswencte,  
 miste mercelses ond his mæg ofscet,  
 broðor oðerne blodigan gare.  
 Þæt wæs feohleas gefeoht, fyrenum gesyngad,  
 hreðre hygemeðe; sceolde hwæðre swa þeah  
 æðeling unwrecen ealdres linnan. (2435a–2443b)

A death-bed was spread for that eldest, unfittingly, by the deeds of a kinsman, after Hæthcyn struck him, his friendly lord, with an arrow from the horn-bow, missed the mark and shot dead his kinsman,

---

*fleurie* and Beowulf's reign of fifty years.' *'Beowulf' and Epic Tradition* (New York and London: Hafner Publishing, 1963) 74.



one brother the other with a bloody missile. That was an uncompensated fight, having sinned with wickedness, mind-wearying to the heart; yet nevertheless the nobleman unavenged had to part from life.

Linda Georgianna writes that this story of the brothers is ‘disorienting because it is so abruptly introduced . . . after Beowulf’s “joys of the hall” reverie which appears to introduce the speech but contradicts its tone.’<sup>148</sup> What comes next only compounds this sense of disorientation, as Beowulf offers an unusual extended simile to convey the depth of Hrethel’s grief:

Swa bið geomorlic gomelum ceorle  
to gebidanne, þæt his byre ride  
giong on galgan; þonne he gyd wrece,  
sarigne sang, þonne his sunu hangað  
hrefne to hroðre, ond he him helpe ne mæg  
eald ond infrod ænige gefremman.  
Symble bið gemyndgad morna gehwylce  
eaforan ellorsið; oðres ne gymeð  
to gebidanne burgum in innan  
yrfeweardas, þonne se an hafað  
þurh deaðes nyd dæda gefondad.  
Gesyhð sorhcearig on his suna bure  
winsele westne, windge reste  
reote berofene,— ridend swefað  
hæleð in hoðman; nis þær hearpan sweg,  
gomen in geardum, swylce ðær yu wæron.  
Gewiteð þonne on sealman, sorhleod gæleð  
an æfter anum; þuhte him eall to rum,  
wongas ond wicstede. (2444a–2462b)

So is it sad for an old man to live to see that his young son should ride on the gallows: then let him utter a dirge, a mournful song when his son hangs as a benefit for the raven, and he, old and very wise, is not able to perform any help for him; always on each of mornings the journey elsewhere of his son is called to mind. He does not care to wait for another heir inside the stronghold when that one has had his portion of deeds through the necessity of death. Sorrowful, he looks on the chamber of his son, deserted wine-hall, windy resting place, deprived of joy,—riders sleep, heroes in graves; there is no music of the harp, joy in dwellings as there formerly were. He goes then to his couch, sings a song of sorrow, one after another; it seems to him all too spacious, the plains and dwelling-place.

<sup>148</sup> Linda Georgianna, ‘King Hrethel’s Sorrow and the Limits of Heroic Action in *Beowulf*,’ *Speculum* 62.4 (1987): 829–850 at 834.

The Herebeald–Hæthcyn story in its entirety is indeed ‘disorienting’; the critical attention given to analysing how, why, and to what effect the hero says what he does at this moment in the poem (in short, the attempt to orient the scene for readers) attests to its strangeness.<sup>149</sup> As one point of entry, we might focus on the notable stylistic and thematic similarities between this narrative and Beowulf’s previous tale of Freawaru and Ingeld. Just as the Herebeald–Hæthcyn material cuts off and contrasts with Beowulf’s reminiscences about the joys of Hrethel’s hall, so too does the Freawaru–Ingeld tale with the narration immediately preceding it, in which Beowulf tells of his success in the Danish hall and the joyous feasts that celebrated his victory against Grendel. In both instances, the hall is quickly transformed into a locus of trouble and grief—too full of close kinsmen for comfort in the earlier episode and too empty of them in the later one.<sup>150</sup> The interplay of the specific and the general, the named and the unnamed, in order to convey something universal is central to both stories. As Georgianna points out, the situation of the anonymous *gamol ceorl* and his generalized laments epitomize the misery of the specific situation of the named father, Hrethel.<sup>151</sup>

Similarly, Beowulf uses the particular details of Freawaru’s arrival at Ingeld’s hall and the

---

<sup>149</sup> Alongside Georgianna, see, for example, Dorothy Whitelock, ‘Beowulf 2444–2471’ *Medium Aevum* 8 (1939): 198–204; Stefan Jurasinski, ‘*Feohleas Gefeoht*: Accidental Homicide and the Hrethel Episode,’ in *Ancient Privileges: ‘Beowulf’, Law, and the Making of Germanic Antiquity* (Morgantown: West Virginia University Press, 2006), 113–148.

<sup>150</sup> Compare, too, the abrupt, almost cinematic shift, of scene at 1213–1214: *Geata leode / hreawic heoldon.—Heal swege onfeng* [The people of the Geats held the place of corpses.—The hall received the noise], which provides another example of how scenes of joys of the hall are closely linked to those of death and destruction. In the midst of the celebration of the defeat of Grendel is a recollection of Hygelac’s last battle—the noise of which is quickly transformed into the noise of revelry in the hall; in a half-line we are transported from the frame-tale back into the present moment. The transfer of the din of a battlefield in the distant past to the roar of revelry that surrounds Beowulf is expressed by the single word, *onfeng*, as the poet breaks off his recollection of Hygelac’s last expedition to Frisia, a digression triggered by the mention of the famous Broisinga necklace.

<sup>151</sup> Georgianna, 839–840.

individualized yet anonymous scenario of the *eald æscwiga* to illustrate the general notion that violence and revenge will outweigh the virtues of a good bride. The significance of memory and its intimate relationship to revenge is also essential in both of Beowulf's narratives. The old spear-warrior *myndgað / mæla gehwylce* (2057) [reminds on each of occasions] the young man of the loss of his father; likewise for the old father is the loss of his young son *gemyndgad / morna gehwylce* (2450) [called to mind on each of mornings]. These reminders of loss do double duty, as implicit in each is a call to action to avenge that loss.<sup>152</sup> In the later narrative, Beowulf accords sympathetic attention to the person who ought to take revenge, as he did in the earlier one with Ingeld. His extended simile consequently develops not the regret of the accidental killer, but the impotent grief of a father who should exact vengeance for his dead son. This is perhaps why he depicts the Herebeald incident in seemingly negative terms, why he

treats the death not as an accidental tragedy, but as a wicked crime. Hæthcyn makes for his brother what the poet calls a "murder bed". . . . The act is called a "crime wickedly done" (*fyrenum gesyngad*), an unavenged death described in the cold terms of economics and law as "a fight without a price" or recompense (*feohleas gefeoht*). Suddenly and without warning or transition the kinsman's tragic "dæd" becomes a fight, a feud (*fæþo*), and the doer becomes a life-slayer (*feorh-bonan*, l. 2465).<sup>153</sup>

---

<sup>152</sup> Black-Michaud writes that in feud 'the events of generations past must be remembered in order that the history of outrage and homicide may serve as a mould in which to cast the pattern of present relations.' *Cohesive Force*, 78–79. His observations of the different mnemonic devices and rituals in preliterate societies offer thought-provoking parallels for the present discussion. See also David Day, 'Hwanan sio fæhð aras: Defining the Feud in *Beowulf*,' *Philological Quarterly* 78.1–2 (1999): 77–95. While Day maintains that the 'poet's conception of feud is . . . not commensurate with modern models of feuding behavior' (79), he also notes how feud in *Beowulf* can 'function as a sort of mnemonic aid—something to be remembered as one engages in it, a sort of rationalizing principle for violence: Beowulf notes of Eofor's retaliatory killing of Ongentheow that *hond gemunde / fæhðo genoge, feorhsweng ne ofteah* (2488–89; the hand remembered feuds enough, did not withhold the death blow). The feud is thus not only a justification for large scale violence, but an enabling principle for individual violent acts' (84).

<sup>153</sup> Georgianna, 836.

Such a ‘cold’ depiction of the killing only makes clearer a need for revenge and keeps the would-be avenger and his dilemma at the heart of the narrative.

The echoes and parallels between his telling of the Freawaru–Ingeld story and the Herebeald–Hæthcyn one point to continuities in Beowulf’s own preoccupations and motivations at these different moments in his life. In the previous instance, I argued that Beowulf seemed intent on justifying his role as an avenger to a doubtful lord. Here, even though as king he ostensibly answers to no one but himself, this is apparently not his own view. When he first learns of the dragon and the burning of his house by that beast, the poet reports:

wende se wisa,    þæt he Wealdende  
ofer ealde riht    ecean Dryhtne  
bitre gebulge;    breost innan weoll  
þeostrum geþoncum,    swa him geþywe ne wæs. (2329–2332)

that wise one thought that he had bitterly offended the Ruler against old law, the eternal Lord; his breast welled within him with dark thoughts, as was not customary for him.

The precise nature of the *Wealdend*/*Dryhten* here is and has been a matter for debate<sup>154</sup>; for the present argument it suffices to say that Beowulf clearly expects that he answers to someone and that he is, in effect, still someone’s thane. Thus, the Herebeald–Hæthcyn digression serves, in part, like the Freawaru–Ingeld one, to address doubts about himself—this time, his own—as he prepares to face his most formidable opponent at his most vulnerable moment yet. Earlier, Beowulf could speak with utter confidence when he

<sup>154</sup> I follow Klaeber’s text, which capitalizes *Wealdend* and *Dryhten*. Klaeber writes in his note, ‘The phrase *ofer ealde riht*, “contrary to old law”...is here given a Christian interpretation,’ 211 n 2329–31; cf. Mitchell and Robinson who do not capitalize these words, and Kahrl who follows Morton W. Bloomfield in positing that *ealde rihte* refers to natural law rather than Old Testament law.

responded to Hygelac because, as noted above, the outcome of what he reported was *undyrne*; he had already won his battle against Grendel and his mother as well as great rewards and fame for his deeds. What the outcome will be here, while repeatedly made known to the audience of the poem, is hidden from Beowulf's perspective. Although he is still the model of courage, at this point in Beowulf's life unlike when he confronted Grendel, doubts are not so easily pushed aside in the name of action and revenge. The poet reveals their effects on him: *Him wæs geomor sefa / wæfre ond wælfus* [His spirit was sad / restless and ready for death] (2419b). Where he once declared *ic ðæt eall gewræc* [I avenged all that] (2005a), boasting of how he put an end to Grendel's depredations before telling of Freawaru and Ingeld, Beowulf begins this time by invoking memories of past victories, as if to steel himself for the next fight:

Fela ic on giogoðe    guðræsa genæs,  
orleghwila;    *ic þæt eall gemon.*<sup>155</sup> (2426a–2427b)

I survived in youth many battle-storms, times of war; *I remember all that.*

This phrase connects him to the *eald æscwiga* of his Freawaru story, *se ðe eall geman* [he who remembers all] (2042) and who uses that memory to compel another to take vengeance.

Orchard writes that 'unlike Unferth, whose words and deeds do not tally, Beowulf can transform his words into courage and his courage into deeds.'<sup>156</sup> What we witness as

---

<sup>155</sup> My emphasis.

<sup>156</sup> Orchard, 255.

Beowulf speaks is precisely this process, and though he has an audience in Wiglaf and his troop of men, he seems most of all to be speaking to himself.<sup>157</sup>

While the Freawaru–Ingeld story expresses a view of feud as inexorable, the Herebeald–Hæthcyn story explores a feud that is impossible to prosecute.<sup>158</sup> Even though the situation of kin-feud between Ingeld and Hrothgar was grave, it did not preclude action, however evil the prospect of fighting with one’s own affines. Here, the hero describes a feud that paradoxically thwarts action, and thus, with the Herebeald–Hæthcyn narrative he gives voice to doubts about the productiveness of feud and vengeance itself: how it might not accomplish what one wants, might not run a predictable course, might not even be pursued at times. Aural effects in the diction emphasize the frustration of expectations: Herebeald and Hæthcyn’s misfortune has to remain a *feohleas gefeoht* [uncompensated fight] (2441a), and the only recourse for the old father is that he *gyd wrece* [to utter a dirge] (2446b), when he would rather *gewrece* [avenge] his young son.<sup>159</sup> The story, though brief, vividly depicts how

---

<sup>157</sup> Edward B. Irving, Jr. writes of the three speeches given to Geats (Beowulf, Wiglaf, and the Messenger) in this section of the poem that they ‘often seem to have the peculiar candor and inwardness of the soliloquy: even when not actually alone, they sound like men speaking alone.’ *A Reading of Beowulf* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1968), 198.

<sup>158</sup> ‘Homicide within the kindred could not be fitted into the framework of the rules of vendetta, for the same persons could not be both receivers and payers of wergeld, or performers and sufferers of the feud. Where this crime is mentioned in the Germanic codes, it is as a penal offence punished, variously in the different codes, by the state . . . . Usually, however, we hear only of penance, and there is some evidence, collected by Liebermann, that shows the prevalence, even in post-Conquest times, of the opinion that vengeance could not be taken for a slaying within the kindred. We can hardly doubt, therefore, that this was the legal position at the date of the composition of *Beowulf*, even if ecclesiastical penalties were already attached to the deed. Hence Hreðel was obliged to let his dead son remain unavenged and unatoned for.’ Whitelock, ‘*Beowulf* 2444–2471,’ 199.

<sup>159</sup> The form *gewrece* does not occur in this particular passage. The verbs *wrecan* and *gewrecan* and their compounds resonate throughout the text, however, and it is the memory of these occurrences that the poet perhaps plays upon in line 2446b. The ideas themselves of lament and revenge are closely connected

Hrethel's contradictory position as father of both killer and killed renders him powerless in a situation that demands action and how he remains paralyzed by his obligations towards both sons. This stasis is an important underlying connection with the portrait of the old father, of which Irving writes:

The verbs in this passage [of the father whose son has been hanged] suggest either passivity or endurance (*to gebidanne* [twice], *ride*, *hangað*, *swefað*) or a very limited kind of action (*gyd wrece*, *gesyhð*, *gewiteð on sealman*, *gæleð*) that is almost another kind of thought. There is the ironic motion of the hanged son "riding" on the gallows, but at the end of this lament all riders are sleeping; wind and the pecking raven can still impart motion to the son, but his father cannot.<sup>160</sup>

Hrethel, too, is described in passive terms and defined mostly by what he *cannot* do; indeed, the only active choice Hrethel makes is one that removes all possibility of action—that is, he dies:

Swa Wedra helm  
 æfter Herebealde heortan sorge  
 weallinde wæg; wihte ne meahte  
 on ðam feorhbonan fæghðe gebetan;  
 no ðy ær he þone heaðorinc hatian ne meahte  
 laðum dædum, þeah him leof ne wæs.  
 He ða mid þære sorhge, þe him to sar belamp,  
 gumdream ofgeaf Godes leoht geceas. . . . (2462b–2469b)

Thus the protector of Weders after Herebeald bore surging sorrow of the heart; not at all was he able to settle the feud with that slayer; no sooner for that was he able to hate that warrior for hateful deeds, though he was not dear to him. Then he with that sorrow which befell him too sorely, gave up joy of men, chose God's light. . . .

The appellation *Wedra helm* takes on an ironic cast as Hrethel proves able to offer no protection to himself, his son, or his people whom he leaves vulnerable to Swedish hostilities

---

throughout various cultures and time periods. Carol Clover explores the links in 'Hildigunnr's Lament,' repr. in *Cold Counsel: Women in Old Norse Literature and Mythology*, ed. Sarah M. Anderson and Karen Swenson (New York and London: Routledge, 2002), 15–54. Most interesting and relevant to the present discussion are her observations that revenge is often the subtext of lament and vice versa (23), and her comparison of Hrethel in *Beowulf* to Egill of the eponymous saga whose poem, *Sonatorrek*, 'mixes the terms of lament [with those of] vengeance-anger' (29).

<sup>160</sup> Irving, 225.

with his death. While Beowulf's enemy is easily identified in the dragon and while he is able, willing, and eager to retaliate, his course of action is also not as straightforward as it might seem, for he, like Hrethel, occupies a dual position. His role as king is at odds with his role as an avenger. As Laurence N. de Looze writes, Beowulf's situation is complex in that

it binds him to honor mutually conflicting obligations. The attack on his hall and the challenge to his authority demand that he take vengeance regardless of risks. Yet Beowulf has an equally strong responsibility to provide leadership to his people, a task which requires above all that he not sacrifice his life needlessly. These two demands are, of course, irreconcilable.<sup>161</sup>

It would seem that Beowulf faces a no-win situation because in order to protect his people from the dragon, he must assume the role of the avenger. We know from the speech of the messenger and the lament of the Geatish woman that in so privileging one role over the other—even when it is judged that vengeance is necessary—Beowulf too will leave the Geats open to renewed feuds and hostilities with neighboring tribes. His predicament turns out, in fact, to have significant points of contact with that of Hrethel.

Yet as he continues to speak, he begins to distance himself from the conflicted figure of Hrethel and more closely align himself with Hygelac. The end of Beowulf's speech and his last embedded story of revenge, in which he recounts a portion of the Swedish–Geatish feud and his own past deeds, stand in marked contrast to the preceding stories of negated or frustrated revenge. Beowulf says:

Ða wæs synn ond sacu    Sweona ond Geata  
ofer wid wæter    wroth gemæne,  
herenið hearda    syððan Hreðel swealt,  
oððe him Ongenðeowes    eaferan wæran

---

<sup>161</sup> Laurence N. de Looze, 'Frame Narratives and Fictionalization: Beowulf as Narrator,' *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 26.2 (1984): 145–156 at 148.



frome fyrdhwate, freode ne woldon  
 ofer heafo healdan, ac ymb Hreosnabeorh  
 eatolne inwitscear oft gefremedon.  
 Pæt mægwine mine gewræcan,  
 fæhðe ond fyrene, swa hyt gefræge wæs,  
 þeah ðe oðer his ealdre gebohte,  
 heardan ceape; Hæðcynne wearð,  
 Geata dryhtne guð onsæge.  
 Þa ic on morgne gefrægn mæg oðerne  
 billes ecgum on bonan stælan,  
 þær Ongenþeow Eofores niosað;  
 guðhelm toglad, gomela Scylfing  
 hreas heoroblac; hond gemunde  
 fæhþo genoge, feorhsweng ne ofteah.  
 Ic him þa maðmas, þe he me sealde,  
 geald æt guðe, swa me gifeðe wæs,  
 leohtan sweorde; he me lond forgeaf,  
 eard eðelwyn. Næs him ænig þearf,  
 pæt he to Gifðum oððe to Gar-Denum  
 oððe in Swiorice secean þurfe  
 wýrsan wigfreca, weorðe gecypan;  
 symle ic him on feðan beforan wolde,  
 ana on orde, ond swa to alder sceall  
 sæcce fremman, þenden þis sweord þolað,  
 pæt mec ær ond sið oft gelæste,  
 syððan ic for dugeðum Dæghrefne wearð  
 to handbonan, Huga cempan; —  
 nalles he ða frætwe Frescýninge,  
 breostweorðunge bringan moste,  
 ac in campe gecrong cumbles hyrde,  
 æþeling on elne; ne wæs ecg bona,  
 ac him hildegrap heortan wylmas,  
 banhus gebræc. Nu sceall billes ecg,  
 hond ond heard sweord ymb hord wigan. (2472a–2509b)

Then there was hostility and strife, shared quarrel of Swedes and Geats over wide water, hard hostility after Hrethel died, until to them the sons of Ongentheow were bold and warlike, did not wish to hold friendship over the seas, but around Hreosnabeorh often performed terrible malicious slaughter. That feud and crime my kinsmen and friends avenged, as it was well known, though one paid for it with his life, a hard bargain; the battle became fatal for Hæthcyn, the lord of the Geats. Then, I heard, in the morning one kinsman avenged the other on the slayer with the edges of a sword, when Ongentheow attacks Eofor; the battle helmet split open, the old Scylfing fell battle-pale; the hand remembered enough feuds, did not hold back the mortal blow. I repaid to him at battle those treasures which he gave to me, as was granted to me, with a gleaming sword; he gave to me land, a home and joy of ancestral land. There was no need for him to seek among the Gifthas or Spear-Danes or in Sweden, to buy for a price a less worthy warrior: I would always go before him in the foot-troop, alone in the vanguard and so forever shall do battle while this sword endures, that before and later often was of service to me, when before the troop of veteran retainers I slew Dæghrefn, champion of the Hugas; not at all was he permitted to bring that treasure, breast adornment, to the king of the Frisians but the guardian of the battle standard fell in battle, a nobleman in strength; nor was an edge the slayer, but a

battle-grip broke his bonehouse, surgings of the heart. Now must the sword's edge, hand and hard sword, fight about the hoard.

After the portions of Beowulf's speech recounting the inertia of the Hrethel and old father, this section is all breathless action. Beowulf situates himself in the family line with his foster-brothers (literally, his uncles) as men who were also both lords of the Geats and proper avengers. Hæthcyn is rehabilitated from his previous identification as a fratricide and instead is presented as a 'kinsman and friend' who rightly retaliated against the violent onslaughts (significantly called here *fæhðe ond fyrene*, just as Grendel's ravages were) of the Swedes against his people. When Hæthcyn is killed, Hygelac in turn avenges his brother through the hand of the warrior, Eofof. At the mention of Hygelac, Beowulf considers his connection to his lord—established through the poem as his most important relationship and recalled at the outset of this particular speech with his designation *Hygelac min* [my own Hygelac] (2434b)—and especially the well-defined role he always had in relation to him. By his own account, he was first and foremost a warrior who fought for and was richly rewarded by his lord. It is telling that his resolve to fight the dragon is first expressed (in his own words as opposed to the poet's) intertwined with these reminiscences. In lines 2498–2509, his speech slips easily from past tense to present tense and back again (*wolde*, *sceall fremman*, *þolað*, *gelæste*, *sceall wigan*) while describing his past victory in battle and his determination to win future ones. Remembering the past and the active role he played under Hygelac separates his own situation from that of Hrethel and crystallizes the action he must take in the present moment. Through the course of his speech Beowulf considers his dual role and then affirms

his primary identification as an avenger. After he finally returns to the moment *nu* (2508b–2509b), he begins his speech again, to redo it in a sense, repeating the thought that began his reminiscences (l. 2426) but this time following pointedly with what will be his last boast and promise of action:

*Ic geneðde fela*  
*guða on geogoðe;*<sup>162</sup> gyt ic wylle,  
 frod folces weard fæhðe secan,  
 mærdū fremman, gif mec se mansceaða  
 of eorðsele ut geseceð. (2511b–2515b)

*I ventured many battles in youth; once more I, old guardian of the people, will seek the battle, perform a glorious deed, if that wicked ravager seeks me from out of his earth-hall.*

In this reprise, he need not hesitate or ponder or story-tell anymore; he has renewed his courage and resolve through the preceding speech. Having now chosen his course, he can move forward to pursue the fight with the dragon.

De Looze argues that Beowulf uses the Herebeald-Hæthcyn story, the fiction of the old father, and the subsequent history of the Swedish-Geatish wars to ‘examine his own situation with increasing objectivity before deciding his own course of action,’ and that when he cannot find a suitable model he ‘has no recourse but to fall back on the heroic code so familiar to him’—that is, simply to do battle.<sup>163</sup> I would agree with this insofar as Beowulf does quite purposefully use these mini-narratives of revenge, but the decision to fight and thereby avenge the evils done by the dragon also seems to signify something more than simply a lack of options for the hero. For him, the duty implied by the heroic code is

---

<sup>162</sup> My emphasis. Compare l. 2426: *Fela ic on giogoðe guðræsa genæs*. [I survived in youth many battle-storms.]

<sup>163</sup> De Looze, 155.

inseparable from his desire to fulfill that duty. Fighting courageously, dying bravely if necessary, and achieving glory are indeed what Beowulf knows to do and has always done, but the first time we witness him involved in these actions, as he seeks out Hrothgar and faces Grendel, we are made aware that that involvement has come by his conscious choice. Even his own lord did not wish him to go. Here, in his last efforts to live heroically, it is once again a positive choice to carry out the duties he has known and embraced his whole life—something Wiglaf expresses and laments after Beowulf's death:

Ne meahton we gelæran    leofne þeoden,  
 rices hyrde    ræd ænigne,  
 þæt he ne grette    goldweard þone  
 lete hyne licgean,    þær he longe wæs,  
 wicum wunian    oð woruldende.  
 Heold on heahgesceap;    hord ys gesceawod,  
 grimme gegongen;    wæs þæt gifeðe to swið,  
 þe ðone [þeodcyning]    þyder ontyhte. (3079a–3086b)

We were not able to persuade our beloved lord, guardian of the kingdom, with any counsel, that he not approach that guardian of gold, let him lie where he long had been, remain in the dwelling-places until the end of the world. He held to his high destiny; the hoard is shown, grimly won; that fate was too strong, which impelled that king of the people thither.

Wiglaf refers both to Beowulf's individual will, which could not be persuaded, and to destiny and fate, seemingly equating the man's desires with the uncontrollable forces that lead him to his death.

## Conclusions

What do Beowulf's actions and revenge narratives tell us? Many critics would agree that they further substantiate the poem's 'unrelentingly negative'<sup>164</sup> view of feud, which serves to expose the inherent limits and flaws in the heroic world it depicts. As Kahrl concludes:

What, finally, did the poet mean us to make of this treatment of the theme of feud in *Beowulf*? In the heroic action of the poem Beowulf selflessly uses his gift of extraordinary strength to remedy, *gebetan*, two of the greatest of feuds. For this, his *ellenweorc*, men praised him to his death. For this, his *dom* still lives. But equally the tragedy of the world in which this action lies is that surrounding Beowulf's exploits are the deeds of other men who go on creating, starting feuds by force, more often than not through malice akin to envy, which neither they nor Beowulf could settle by force. Even with wisdom and fortitude the hero can only do so much. Beyond him must lie the law, the law of *wergild*, of treaties made and kept. For in the affairs of men violent solutions lead only to further violence, to a train of revenge that leads finally to the extermination of one of the feuding parties. Beowulf could save the Danes and Geats from the monsters ravaging their land. He could not save them from themselves.<sup>165</sup>

It is not difficult to appreciate why such statements represent the general consensus. The ubiquity of feuds in the poem conveys a sense of interminable and ultimately purposeless violence, and the focus on not only principal players in a feud but particularly the collateral damage—the destruction of Heorot, *healærna mæst* [greatest of halls] (78a), for example, or the plight of innocent victims such as Hildeburh or Ongentheow's wife—ensures a

---

<sup>164</sup> Day, 95 n 19.

<sup>165</sup> Kahrl, 198. Similar statements can be found in Harry Berger, Jr. and H. Marshall Leicester, Jr., 'Social Structure as Doom: The Limits of Heroism in *Beowulf*,' in *Old English Studies in Honour of John C. Pope*, ed. Robert P. Burlin and Edward B. Irving, Jr. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1974), 37–79; Anne Leslie Harris, 'Hands, Helms, Heroes: the Role of Proper Names in *Beowulf*,' *Neophilologische Mitteilungen* 83 (1982): 414–421; Eric Wilson, 'The Blood Wrought Peace: A Girardian Reading of *Beowulf*,' *English Language Notes* 34.1 (1996): 7–30; and in the previously cited works by Georgianna, Day, and Irving. Cf. John M. Hill who offers an alternative view in 'The Ethnopsychology of In-Law Feud and the Remaking of Group Identity in *Beowulf*: The Cases of Hengest and Ingeld.' Stefan Jurasinski in *Ancient Privileges* also challenges received ideas about vengeance in the Finn (79–111) and the Hrethel (113–148) episodes specifically.

memorable picture of the problems posed by feud. Even while describing the most morally unambiguous feud of the poem, that between Grendel and the Danes, the poet declares:

Ne wæs þæt gewrixle til,  
þæt hie on ba healfa    bigan scoldon  
freonda feorum! (1304b–1306a)

That was not a good exchange, that they on both sides had to pay with lives of friends!

The universal brutality of feud is plainly acknowledged in this ‘ringing condemnation on the nature of vendetta.’<sup>166</sup>

Such a view of feud and revenge in the poem is both well-founded and valuable, but the overwhelming focus on their tragic and negative aspects can have the effect of flattening the different perspectives inherent in a feud or even an individual act of vengeance. As I discussed in my introduction to this dissertation, we know from various legal, ecclesiastical, and narrative Anglo-Saxon sources that contemporary attitudes toward revenge were complex rather than one-sided and negative. Recall that vengeance for the ‘right’ reasons, such as in retaliation for the death of one’s lord, is recognized in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* entry on Cynewulf and Cyneheard as well as in the *Battle of Maldon*. Other Old English literary works further the observation that vengeance and feud could be positive actions and have beneficial results. Vengeance seems to be represented as a remedy in *Maxims I*: ‘*Wræd sceal wunden, wracu heardum me, boga sceal stræle*’<sup>167</sup> [For wounds there must be a

---

<sup>166</sup> Orchard, 194.

<sup>167</sup> Bernard J. Muir, ed., *Maxims I* in *The Exeter Anthology of Old English Poetry: An Edition of Exeter Dean and Chapter MS 3501*, vol. 1 (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2000), 255. Further references will be made in the text by line number only.

bandage, for a hard man, revenge; for an arrow there must be a bow] (152), and the poet seems to associate a vengeful act with courage when he later echoes this passage:

Gearo sceal guðbord,    gar on sceaft,  
ecg on sweorde    ond ord spere,  
*hyge heardum men.*    Helm sceal cenum,  
ond a þæs heana hyge    hord unginnost. (201–204)

The war-shield must be ready, the spear on the shaft, the edge on the sword, and the point on the spear, courage in a fierce man. A helmet must be for a brave man, and always the least treasure for poor courage.

Poems such as *The Wanderer* and *The Seafarer* place emphasis on the plight of the exile or solitary man, and both thereby idealize the community and relationships with lord and kin that the institution of vengeance equally depended on and perpetuated. It seems evident that Anglo-Saxon poets held more nuanced perspectives on the institution of vengeance than modern sensibilities allow.

Katherine O'Brien O'Keefe writes that in '*The Battle of Maldon*, as in the Chronicle entry on Cynewulf and Cyneheard, the principles of balance and symmetry are sources of heightened interest in the narrative.'<sup>168</sup> In *Beowulf*, it is the principles of repetition and variation, especially as found in and surrounding Beowulf's revenge narratives, that serve to bring out nuances and distinctions present in the concept of vengeance. It is not a coincidence, for example, that the Freawaru–Ingeld and Herebeald–Hæthcyn stories are both

---

<sup>168</sup> Katherine O'Brien O'Keefe, 'Heroic values and Christian ethics,' in *The Cambridge Companion to Old English Literature*, ed. Malcolm Godden and Michael Lapidge (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 107–125 at 122.

concerned with intra-group feud and revenge. Beowulf is preoccupied with this idea,<sup>169</sup> which is evident not only in these two narratives but elsewhere in Beowulf's accusations of Unferth's fratricide (587a–589b); in the poet's words that the hero never slew hearth-companions (2177a–2180b); and in Beowulf's own dying words that he is irreproachable for slaughter of kinsmen (2740a–2742a). On one level, the topic simply makes for compelling storytelling; as Whitelock notes, a 'favourite theme in Germanic literature was provided by any situation when [the duty of vengeance] clashed with other feelings, such as friendship or marital affection',<sup>170</sup> or indeed, ties of kinship. But on another level, it is significant because Beowulf never engages in this problematic type of feud, rather placing himself in opposition to those who do. Black-Michaud posits that '*intra*-group killing is the complete antithesis of social behaviour and brings confusion.'<sup>171</sup> In contrast to such behavior, Beowulf fights 'good' feuds in order to bring relief and comfort to others, the Danes or his own people, for example. Vengeance and feud might have evil and destructive consequences, but Beowulf's intentions are noble, and he assumes the avenging role to achieve positive ends. As Roberta Frank writes:

The *Beowulf* poet seems especially concerned to distinguish between justifiable and unjustifiable aggression, to place the warlike activities of his pagan hero in an ethical context. Beowulf resorts to arms out of concern for the defenseless and for the common good, not exclusively out of lust for conquest, ambition, or vengeance.<sup>172</sup>

---

<sup>169</sup> Craig Davis argues that one of the *Beowulf* poet's primary purposes is 'the demonization and extermination of the resurgent spirit of kin-feud.' *'Beowulf' and the Demise of Germanic Legend in England* (New York and London: Garland Publishing, 1996), 133.

<sup>170</sup> Whitelock, *The Beginnings of English Society*, 39.

<sup>171</sup> Black-Michaud, 234.

<sup>172</sup> Roberta Frank, 'The *Beowulf* Poet's Sense of History,' in *The Wisdom of Poetry: Essays in Early English Literature in honor of Morton W. Bloomfield* (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 1982), 62.



This thematic repetition between the two stories expresses Beowulf's (and the poet's) concern with separating legitimate revenge from illicit action. His heroism depends on the distinction.

Yet the repetitions and variations in Beowulf's narratives connect those narratives not only to each other but also to other stories and voices in the poem. Eric Wilson writes that

[p]art of *Beowulf's* force as a poem emanates from its heteroglossia. Voices of violence and peace, monsters and heroes, chaos and cosmos are vitalized by their unending struggle with one another; no one voice predominates the poem.<sup>173</sup>

Indeed, in any given conflict the poet constantly calls attention to the multiplicity of intentions and perspectives. Based on his treatment of both sides in a feud, it is as easy to appreciate Ingeld's position as Hrothgar's, or Hengest's versus Finn's, or Ongentheow's versus Hygelac's, perhaps even Grendel's mother's versus Beowulf's. Peace agreements are broken *on ba healfa*, and in the dichotomous nature of a feud one side's victory is the other side's tragedy. This fact of feud is especially drawn out in the messenger's account (as opposed to Beowulf's) of the Swedish–Geatish feud, where Ongentheow is doubly portrayed as *se goda* [that good man] (2949a) who defends his nation against the Geats who attack *for onmedlan* [in arrogance] (2926a) and rescues his captive wife, and equally as a terrifying enemy who kills Hæthcyn, corners the Geats in Ravenswood, and threatens to hang them *fuglum to gamene* [as a sport for birds] (2941a), thus perhaps deserving of the vengeance that

---

<sup>173</sup> Wilson, 15.

Hygelac exacts from him.<sup>174</sup> The ambivalence of the messenger's account is nowhere found in Beowulf's (which he recalls from a very different position and for very different reasons, as outlined above), and this variation situates Beowulf's own perspective as one of an array of possible approaches. This aspect of feud and of the poem complicates the idea of a legitimate vengeance—even while it is so carefully delineated in the problem of intra-group feud—by showing that 'legitimate' or 'licit' is itself a matter of perspective. This is not to say, however, that no legitimate revenge exists; rather an act of revenge is at the same time just and unjust, expected and sudden, warranted and presumptuous. Because of its reciprocal nature, revenge can never simply be one or the other when taking into account all of the parties and perspectives involved.

This is part of the reason why it is so important that Beowulf should relate revenge narratives in his own voice. We are conditioned, especially through the first half of the poem, to put faith in Beowulf's exemplary words and deeds. Thus, though his voice is only one of many in the poem, his words occupy a somewhat privileged place beside the poet-narrator's. When Beowulf tells why a Heathobard warrior or Hygelac or he himself should take vengeance, we believe him. The poet makes us see and feel the motivations and satisfactions of vengeance from Beowulf's point of view before offering us another perspective on that same feud or act of vengeance, which complicates and introduces doubts about the hero's position without necessarily invalidating it. The discrepancies we find

---

<sup>174</sup> See Georgianna, 845 n 53 for interesting overlaps among the descriptions of Ongentheow, Beowulf, and the dragon.

between his accounts of events and those of other characters or the poet-narrator reflect the natural ones that form between the different vantage points of a feud. They disallow absolute sympathy or rejection by an outside observer of any one side in that feud and instead demand acknowledgment of the balance between the good and the bad that such violent action produces—a balance that the *Beowulf* poet achieves.

## 2.

### Victim or Villain:

#### The Choice of the Avenger in *The Reeve's Tale* and *The Tale of Melibee*

##### Introduction

Although the world of pilgrimage and game in Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* stands in marked contrast to the martial-heroic world of *Beowulf*, the importance of revenge is nonetheless a common element. Chaucer's work also considers 'tribes' of people—this time defined by their sex, class and occupation—whose solicitude for personal and communal honor prompts them to 'quite' those who somehow abuse them. Though these battles are verbal rather than physical as in *Beowulf*, they can yet be bitter and brutal. Figures such as the Friar and the Summoner or the Wife of Bath and the Clerk trade blows by means of their stories whose negative depictions do violence to the reputations of their professional and personal enemies. That violence is not simply figurative, as the concepts of word and deed are still intimately linked in the Middle English period. Writing in the early fourteenth century, Robert Mannyng of Brunne equates slander with murder in his penitential manual, *Handlyng Synne*, for example. Near the close of the section regarding the Fifth Commandment, 'pou shalt no man slo,' Mannyng writes:

what sey 3e of þys bakbyters  
þat wykked wurdes aboutē bers?  
þey make oftē mochē stryfe,  
And a-peyryn many mannys lyfe.  
3yf þou bring a man yn fame,  
þat he haue euer lasting shame,—

Byforē god, þou hym slo  
 whan þou reuyst hys gode los. (1515–1522)<sup>175</sup>

Mannyng's words, 'Byforē god,' stress the seriousness of the offence of these 'backbiters'; they are actually liable for the 'gostly' deaths of three people or groups of people (themselves, those who believe them, and those whom they defame) for which they will face proper retribution on Judgment Day when the deeds of all are made known. Engaging in slanderous speech was thus not only 'a crime of considerable gravity' which incurred hefty fines and stiff penalties 'commensurate with [those] for fraud, theft, perjury, and prostitution,'<sup>176</sup> but also a mortal sin. Word and deed were closely connected in the eyes of the church and the state and presumably of its citizens. Accordingly, in the world of Chaucer's pilgrims, spoken insults and challenges are taken seriously, and verbal quiting is—as the physical vengeance is in *Beowulf*—a real and risky business.

One of the pilgrims who undertakes those risks is the Reeve. In the first half of this chapter, I would like to examine the motives and method of the Reeve to rethink conventional readings of his tale and his revenge. I will then turn to Chaucer's 'own' *Tale of Melibee* which pairs very well with the *Reeve's Tale* on this topic. While more theoretical in its discussion of what revenge entails and incurs, the *Melibee* also explores the implications of vengeance-taking. There are interesting and unexpected correlations in the ways that the *Reeve's Tale* and the *Melibee* define and delimit revenge, and the interplay between the two

---

<sup>175</sup> Frederick J. Furnivall, ed., *Robert of Brunne's 'Handlyng Synne,'* Early English Text Society O.S. 119 (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner, 1901), 54–55.

<sup>176</sup> Carl Lindahl, *Earnest Games: Folkloric Patterns in the Canterbury Tales* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1987), 76.

narratives raises important questions about how we assess the attitudes towards vengeance—and those who take it—in the work as a whole.

***The Reeve's Tale: 'leveful is with force force of-showve'***

Most readers judge Oswald the Reeve and his tale to be especially vengeful. This is not without reason. Described in the *General Prologue* as a 'colerik man' (I 587)<sup>177</sup> and therefore, according to medieval physiognomy, 'lyght to wrethe' and loving 'hasty wengeaunce,'<sup>178</sup> the Reeve seems inherently vindictive.<sup>179</sup> Rather than for any apparent 'sentence' or 'solaas,' the Reeve offers his tale to requite Robyn the Miller whose story of an old, cuckolded carpenter has offended him. As a 'wel good wrighte, a carpenter' (I 614) himself—and one who is sensitive about his own old age as he reveals in his *Prologue*—Oswald takes the humor of the Miller's story as a personal insult and promises, 'I shal hym quite anon' (I 3916).<sup>180</sup> This desire to 'quite' is not in itself extraordinary in the

---

<sup>177</sup> Larry D. Benson, ed., *The Riverside Chaucer* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1987), 32. Further references will be made in the text by section and line number.

<sup>178</sup> Robert Steele, ed., *Three Prose Versions of the 'Secreta Secretorum'*, Early English Text Society E.S. 74 (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner, 1898), 220. See also Walter Clyde Curry who posits that the 'Reeve is made to seem a consistent and unified whole when his personal appearance is interpreted.' *Chaucer and the Medieval Sciences* (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1926), 90.

<sup>179</sup> Lindahl argues that 'the Reeve is mean-spirited not only because he is *colerik*, but also because he hails from Norfolk' (136). See *Earnest Games*, 136 ff. for his discussion of how the Reeve fits the stereotype of Norfolkers as 'cruel, irascible, guileful, greedy, and antisocial' men (138).

<sup>180</sup> Oswald's violent reaction to the *Miller's Tale* is somewhat curious—that he takes it so personally seems a rather forced interpretation on his part and adds to the image of a vindictive man looking for insults to return. Lindahl suggests that there is a sociohistorical basis for such a reaction: 'Some critics have conceded that a trade fight between a *miller and reeve* would indeed be sufficiently motivated, then hasten to add that the fight in the *Canterbury Tales* is not couched in such terms, but in terms of *miller versus carpenter*. The Reeve was a carpenter on the pilgrimage, and he should be the one to respond to the taunts of the Miller. Such arguments ignore one important fact. Though there were almost eighty practicing trades in a city the size of London, there

context of the *Tales*, nor is it necessarily negative. It has already been expressed several times in the first fragment largely innocuously; the Host, Harry Bailly, good-naturedly invites the Monk to tell ‘somewhat to quite with the Knyghtes tale’ (I 3119), while the Miller drunkenly insists that he would ‘quite’ (I 3127) that tale himself. Even within the *Miller’s Tale*, Absolon’s angry but botched attempt to ‘quyte’ (I 3746) Alison functions mainly as the trigger for the comic denouement. In the Reeve’s case, however, it is the spite and singular purpose with which he proceeds that make his character’s and his tale’s version of quitting stand out to readers as particularly mean-spirited. Oswald takes only two-thirds as many lines as Robyn to deliver his rebuttal, and seemingly not a single detail of his tale deviates from the goal of expedient revenge. Sheila Delany observes that for the Reeve ‘quitting degenerates into a narrow vengefulness which is not related to any larger scheme of order or justice’ and ‘is equivalent to simple vindictiveness.’<sup>181</sup>

The Reeve proves to be a ‘wel good wrighte’ indeed, crafting a tale that relentlessly mocks and efficiently punishes the Miller for his perceived offenses. There is no mistaking

---

were no more than three on most rural manors: miller, blacksmith, and carpenter. In London, a rivalry between a carpenter and a miller was far-fetched, but in the country the idea was easily conceivable. . . . the mill was one of those fixtures of the country estate where a carpenter’s services were most often required, and the reeve was frequently the officer who oversaw the construction work done there—a situation which would bring this antagonistic triad into uncomfortably close proximity. Finally, as reeves were often recruited from among the rich villeins of the manor, the carpenter’s craft was one of the few privileged positions from which a villein might ascend to the rank of reeve. Oswald’s double career is in no way unusual, and it is not surprising that the Miller would resent that part of the Reeve that was once a carpenter as much as that part which is currently a reeve.’ Lindahl, 112.

<sup>181</sup> Sheila Delaney, ‘Clerks and Quitting in the *Reeve’s Tale*,’ *Mediaeval Studies* 29 (1967): 351–356 at 352.

that in Symkyn the miller, Oswald creates an ‘effigy’ of Robyn the Miller.<sup>182</sup> While Robyn ‘at wrastlynge wolde have alwey the ram’ (I 548) and ‘a baggepipe wel koude . . . blowe and sowne’ (I 565), Symkyn ‘pipen . . . koude’ (I 3927) and ‘wel wrastle’ (I 3928). While Robyn ‘wel koude . . . stelen corn and tollen thries’ (I 562), Symkyn ‘a theef . . . was for sothe of corn and mele, / And that a sly, and usuant for to stele’ (I 3940). Robyn ‘a swerd and bokeler bar . . . by his syde’ (I 558), and Symkyn

Ay by his belt he baar a long panade,  
And of a swerd ful trenchant was the blade.  
A joly poppere baar he in his pouche;  
    . . .  
A Sheffield thwitel baar he in his hose. (I 3929–3933)

The parallels continue to accumulate as the tale progresses. If the Reeve ‘alone of the pilgrims *identifies* with one of the characters in *The Miller’s Tale*,’<sup>183</sup> he makes certain that all of the pilgrims will identify his tale’s miller with the one at the head of their cavalcade. Moreover, the Reeve’s purpose proves not only to make the pilgrims laugh at the Miller’s expense but also—and more importantly—to convince them of his moral corruption. The Reeve therefore builds on the caricature of the arrogant and dishonest Symkyn by giving him a wife whose illegitimacy does nothing to curb her (or his) overweening pride and a daughter who with her ‘kamus nose’ (I 3974) is as unattractive as her father with his (I 3934), yet is intended by her parson grandfather to be married

---

<sup>182</sup> Stewart Justman, ‘*The Reeve’s Tale* and the Honor of Men,’ *Studies in Short Fiction* 32.1 (1995): 21–27 at 24. To differentiate between the Miller introduced in the *GP* and the character in the *RT*, I use ‘Miller’ (with a capital M) to represent the *GP* figure, Robyn, and ‘miller’ (lowercase) to denote the character, Symkyn, in the *RT*.

<sup>183</sup> Ross G. Arthur, “‘Why Artow Angry’: The Malice of Chaucer’s Reeve,” *English Studies in Canada* 13.1 (1987): 1–11 at 7.



into som worthy blood of auncetrye;  
 For hooly chirches good moot been despende  
 On hooly chirches blood, that is descended.  
 Therefore he wolde his hooly blood honoure,  
 Though that he hooly chirche sholde devoure. (I 3982–3986)

The scathing tone of these particular lines are perhaps the strongest signal that the Reeve's opening descriptions are meant to be more satirical than comical, and lest we are still tempted to dismiss the parody as part of the fabliau's humor, V.A. Kolve points out:

Only at line 4002, with the introduction of the two clerks, does the action move into the language and mood of fabliau; only then do words like "play," "game," and "jape" become important. . . . Everything up to line 4002, for all its energy and comic detail, is "in earnest," a moral landscape with figures.<sup>184</sup>

Even as the story moves more fully into the 'mood' of fabliau with its bawdy and slapstick comedy, the Reeve keeps up the moral undertones by emphasizing how the miller is a true villain and consequently *deserving* of the punishment the story inflicts. The miller gleefully cheats the clerks of their corn, then looses their horse, sending them on a wild chase into the fens to retrieve it, and later derides them when they return to suffer the further injustice of having to ask him for their room and board that night. When the clerks decide one after the other to 'swyve' the miller's daughter and his wife as compensation for the day's losses, they prove to be no more honorable than the miller; nevertheless, they succeed because the tale is meant to focus squarely on the miller's moral shortcomings, and the clerks themselves are the instruments through which he receives his comeuppance. It is part of the poetic justice of the Reeve's story that Malynes, though 'disparaged' (I 4271) by Aleyn, should imagine herself in

---

<sup>184</sup> V.A. Kolve, *Chaucer and the Imagery of Narrative: The First Five Canterbury Tales* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1984), 235.

love with him and help him to recover the lost corn; her generous act, the only one in the tale, functions as a rebuke to the miller's self-serving greed. It is likewise fitting in the Reeve's scheme of revenge that Symkyn's wife experiences 'so myrie a fit' as 'ne hadde she nat ful yooore' (I 4230) thanks to John rather than her husband and that she later inadvertently 'delivers the decisive blow'<sup>185</sup> to her husband in his scuffle with the clerks. At the close of his tale the Reeve ensures that anyone listening to the tale appreciates that the miller has brought all his misfortune—or rather, his punishment befitting each of his crimes—upon himself:

Thus is the proude millere wel ybete,  
And hath ylost the gryndyng of the whete,  
And payed for the soper everideel  
Of Aleyn and of John, that bette hym weel.  
His wyf is swyved, and his doghter als.  
Lo, swich it is a millere to be fals!  
And therefore this proverbe is seyde ful sooth,  
"Hym thar nat wene wel that yvele dooth." (I 4313–4320)

Though it is conventional for fabliaux to have this type of 'neatly pointed ending'<sup>186</sup>—such as the one we find tidily wrapping up the *Miller's Tale*, for example<sup>187</sup>—the Reeve here explicitly connects Symkyn's falseness and wrongdoing with what he and his family undergo

---

<sup>185</sup> Helen Cooper, *Oxford Guides to Chaucer: The Canterbury Tales*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 111. Cooper points out that this detail is not found in the analogues to the tale. Gay L. Balliet suggests that the 'wife's attack on her husband is intentional,' both 'to protect herself from the consequences of her infidelity' and 'to take revenge against a husband who has been a cheat to his customers and is unworthy of her.' See 'The Wife in Chaucer's *Reeve's Tale*: Siren of Sweet Vengeance,' *English Language Notes* 28 (1996): 1–6.

<sup>186</sup> Douglas Gray, explanatory notes to *The Miller's Prologue and Tale* in *The Riverside Chaucer*, 848.

<sup>187</sup> *The Miller's Tale* concludes:

Thus swyved was this carpenteris wyf,  
For al his kepyng and his jalousye,  
And Absolon hath kist hir nether ye,  
And Nicholas is scalded in the towte.  
This tale is doon, and God save al the rowte! (I 3850–3854)

by the end of the tale. It is difficult to disagree wholly with his summation. As Derek Brewer comments, 'If the miller had been honest, Chaucer makes us feel, he would not have suffered as he did.'<sup>188</sup>

The Reeve's counter-attack is two-fold; not only does the revenge exacted on Symkyn within the tale enact revenge against Robyn in the 'real' world of the pilgrimage, but the Reeve accomplishes it by appropriating the diction and imagery of the Miller's own tale and turning them against him. J.A.W. Bennett discusses the 'distorted-mirror effect' between the two tales, observing that they

are bound to each other in a tight warp and woof of parallels and contrasts, verbal echoes and reflections. It is not merely a matter of antagonism in the characters and callings of the two narrators or of the shared motifs of the cuckolding clerk and snoring husband, things mis-seen in the dark, bourgeois wives on parade at church, or of descriptions in one tale recalling images or phrases in the other: as when Jankin's 'swete note' is counterpointed by the 'stif burdoun' of the sleeping miller's snores, which provide the crude Cambridge compline (A 4171) to balance the Oxford lauds (A 3655)—or the colt's 'wehee' echoes Alison's 'tehee' (with Alison Nicholas can 'rage and play' but none 'dorste rage or ones pleye' with Simkin's wife). Even the oaths and the furnishings are similar: 'Seint Thomas' and 'Seint Frideswide' are simply replaced as expletives by 'Seint Cutberd' and 'Rood of Bromeholm'; beds and beards and headdress and the lubricant of ale figure in both stories; and in both descriptive phrases are nicely weighted: 'hende' giving just the same value to Nicholas's *courtoisie* as 'ycomen of noble kin' does to the rank of the priest's illegitimate daughter. . . . *It is as if the Reeve . . . had taken note of every phrase in the tale told against a member of his own mystery and turned it to profit—just as he was wont to 'yeve and lene' to his master goods that were not his to give and lend, and yet get credit for so doing* (A609–12).<sup>189</sup>

Chaucer clearly endows his Reeve with rhetorical wit and intelligence, but Oswald (unlike Beowulf) does not win himself any praise with his keen storytelling abilities. While he is

<sup>188</sup> Derek Brewer, 'The Reeve's Tale' in *Chaucer's Frame Tales: The Physical and the Metaphysical*, ed. Joerg O. Fichte (Tübingen: Gunter Narr Verlag and Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1987), 77.

<sup>189</sup> J.A.W. Bennett, *Chaucer at Oxford and at Cambridge* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1974), 19–20. My emphasis. On these links between the *Reeve's Tale* and *Miller's Tale*, see also Walter Morris Hart, 'The Reeve's Tale: A Comparative Study of Chaucer's Narrative Art,' *PMLA* 23 (1908): 10–11; Walter Clyde Curry, *Chaucer and the Mediaeval Sciences* (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1960), 75–79; Paul A. Olson, 'The Reeve's Tale: Chaucer's Measure for Measure,' *Studies in Philology* 59.1 (1962): 14–16; M. Copland, 'The Reeve's Tale: Harlotrie or Sermonyng?' *Medium Aevum* 31.1 (1962): 28–31; Lindahl, 143–144.

able to make us feel that the miller gets his just rewards, he does not succeed in making himself appear just. After he declares, ‘Thus have I quyt the Millere in my tale’ (I 4324), the only pilgrim to react is the Cook, who takes peculiar delight in the miller’s punishment<sup>190</sup> and extrapolates a tangential moral [‘Ne bryng nat every man into thyn hous, / For herberwyng by nyghte is perilous’ (I 4331–4332)] which calls into question how well he has listened to or understood the tale. The general silence is very different from the group’s reaction to the *Miller’s Tale*, where the response is largely one of mirth if not approval: ‘Diverse folk diversely they seyde, / But for the moore part they lough and pleyde’ (I 3857–3858).<sup>191</sup> Modern audiences resemble the pilgrims in having little to no positive reaction to the *Reeve’s Tale*, and critics tend to stress the malevolence and bitterness of the Reeve himself. Thus, in the same vein as Sheila Delany’s observation quoted above, Ross G. Arthur submits that the ‘Reeve’s manner of constructing his tale reveals his basic meanness.’<sup>192</sup> Paul A. Olson concludes that the tale conveys its true moral message by its ‘condemnation of the vindictive man.’<sup>193</sup> Even Glending Olson who argues for a reading of the tale as an archetypal fabliau (rather than as any sort of exemplum) admits, ‘In some respects the narrative is certainly

---

<sup>190</sup> The Cook may have his own vengeful tendencies, as his interactions suggest. In the *Cook’s Prologue*, after Harry Bailly pokes fun at his questionable kitchen practices, the Cook threatens: ‘er we parte, ywis, thou shalt be quit’ (I 4362). Later in the *Manciple’s Prologue*, the Host warns the Manciple of the dangers of openly poking fun at the drunken Cook:

But yet, Manciple, in feith thou art to nyce,  
Thus openly repreve hym of his vice.  
Another day he wole, peraventure,  
Reclayme thee and bryng the to lure. . . . (IX 69–72)

<sup>191</sup> My emphasis.

<sup>192</sup> Arthur, 9.

<sup>193</sup> Paul A. Olson, 17.

well-suited to the Reeve, whose spitefulness and anger focus on the humiliation of a character based on the Miller on the pilgrimage.’<sup>194</sup> Perhaps most damning are those who identify the Reeve’s diabolical and Satanic features and make them central to the interpretation of his character and tale.<sup>195</sup> It would seem in the end that the Reeve’s attempt at revenge is a failure, for despite his best efforts to expose the Miller’s vices, it is his own anger, capacity for cruelty, and blindness to personal faults that are most fully acknowledged. The fate of the Miller’s ‘sely’ carpenter, John, thus resonates deeply for the Reeve: ‘For what so that this carpenter answerde, / It was for noght; no man his reson herde’ (I 3843–3844).

But what of the Reeve’s ‘reson’? Is it and is he so easily dismissed? Jill Mann describes Chaucer’s own ‘refusal to take up an absolute standpoint’<sup>196</sup> regarding the values and morals of the characters that he presents. This refusal begins in the *General Prologue*, where Chaucer

deliberately omits [the victims who suffer from the actions of a given pilgrim] in order to encourage us to see the behaviour of the pilgrims from their own viewpoints, and to ignore what they necessarily ignore in following their courses of action.<sup>197</sup>

---

<sup>194</sup> Glending Olson, ‘The *Reeve’s Tale* as a Fabliau,’ *Modern Language Quarterly* 35.3 (1974): 219–30 at 227. Olson writes, for example, that ‘one could argue on the basis of comparison with [the tale’s analogue] *Le Meunier* that Chaucer altered motivations to diminish the sense of revenge and lust inherent in the plot so that he might attain a livelier atmosphere where one could enjoy a clever and satisfying plot without having to attend too closely to the moral implications of certain actions’ (227).

<sup>195</sup> See John Block Friedman, ‘A Reading of Chaucer’s *Reeve’s Tale*,’ *Chaucer Review* 2.1 (1967): 8–19; Edward Vasta, ‘The Devil in Chaucer’s Reeve,’ *American Notes & Queries* 22 (1984): 126–128; Deborah S. Ellis, ‘Chaucer’s Devilish Reeve,’ *Chaucer Review* 27.2 (1992): 150–161.

<sup>196</sup> Jill Mann, *Chaucer and Medieval Estates Satire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973), 190. This aspect particularly stands out to Mann as a departure from the conventions of estates literature.

<sup>197</sup> *Ibid.*

Though victims become vividly apparent in many of the tales, the pilgrims' individual ethics and worldviews continue to guide and redirect each successive part of the whole. As Mann writes, 'The method of the work is not additive, but dialectic; the tales modify and even contradict each other, exploring subjects in a way that emphasises their different and opposed implications.'<sup>198</sup> The effect of these strategies in both the *Prologue* and the tales is to allow the entire *Canterbury Tales* to resist any totalizing scheme or 'systematic platform for moral values.'<sup>199</sup> Chaucer continually presents contrasting, often irreconcilable, but equally compelling perspectives within and between the tales, forgoing didactic judgments and thus challenging readers to ponder for themselves the substance and morality of each individual's worldview. In the Reeve's case, there is, in fact, a consistent logic underlying his words and deeds which amounts to more than an expression of a mean nature and which merits some consideration.

In his *Prologue*, the Reeve addresses his fellow pilgrims and carefully establishes the basis for his actions:

I pray yow alle that ye nat yow greve,  
 Thogh I answer, and somdeel sette his howve,  
 For leveful is with force force of-showve.  
 This dronke Millere hath ytoold us heer  
 How that bigyled was a carpenter,  
 Peraventure in scorn, for I am oon.  
 And, by your leve, I shal hym quite anon;  
 Right in his cherles termes wol I speke. (I 3910–3917)

---

<sup>198</sup> Ibid.

<sup>199</sup> Ibid., 192.

He later caps off the tale with a proverb that reinforces his logic: ‘A gylour shal hymself bigyled be’ (I 4321). Contrary to what Delany concludes, that the Reeve’s ‘narrow vengefulness . . . is not related to any larger scheme of order or justice,’ Oswald proves to operate according to a very strict kind of justice—namely, the talionic justice that demands an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth. He desires literally to get even, and while this smacks of vindictiveness and irrationality to modern sensibilities,

the more ancient and deeper notion is that justice is a matter of restoring balance, achieving equity, determining equivalence, making reparations, paying debts, taking revenge—all matters of getting back to zero, to even. . . . The work of justice is to reestablish right order, to restore a prior supposed equilibrium that has been disturbed by some wrongful act or some debt owed but not paid. In corrective justice, evenness . . . is the end point.<sup>200</sup>

The Reeve abides by the principle that you get what you give and vice versa, finding fairness and order in the maintenance of balance between conflicting parties that such a principle enables.

The Reeve’s belief in talionic justice is consistent with, perhaps springs from, the demands of his professional duties. It was the Reeve’s responsibility to oversee the work and lands of his lord’s manor and to provide an annual account of these, as we learn in the

*General Prologue:*

Wel koude he kepe a gerner and a bynne;  
 Ther was noon auditour koude on him wynne.  
 Wel wiste he by the droghte and by the reyn  
 The yeldyng of his seed and of his greyn.  
 His lordes sheep, his neet, his dayerye,  
 His swyn, his hors, his stoor, and his pultrye  
 Was hoolly in this Reves governynge  
 And by his covenant yaf the rekenynge,  
 Syn that his lord was twenty yeer of age.

---

<sup>200</sup> William Ian Miller, *Eye for an Eye* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 4.

There koude no man brynge hym in arrerage. (I 593–602)

If the Reeve mismanaged the work of the manor, he suffered the consequences: ‘However complicated the management of a farm became, it always fell on the reeve to balance the accounts of the lord’s farm, and often this balancing of accounts required the reeve to give money from his own pocket to the lord.’<sup>201</sup> Thus, it was in Oswald’s own best interests to excel at each aspect of his job (which he apparently does) with an overall concern for balanced accounts. If he did well to keep his ‘gerner’ and ‘bynne,’ he would reap the rewards; if he did not, he shouldered the cost. The ‘get what you give’ logic of the talion (which itself evokes the images and language ‘of debts incurred and accounts settled, of setting value and establishing prices, of obligations discharged in full, of paying for and paying back, and of satisfaction’)<sup>202</sup> so applies to the practical details of the Reeve’s life. When it comes to his conflict with Robyn, the Reeve tells his tale as ‘an attempt at balancing the accounts’<sup>203</sup> between them. Having suffered dishonor at the hands of the Miller, the Reeve feels obliged to demand satisfaction and to even the score by repaying the ‘force’ of the Miller’s insults with his own.

---

<sup>201</sup> Richard B. McDonald, ‘The Reve Was a Scendre Colerik Man’ in *Chaucer’s Pilgrims: An Historical Guide to the Pilgrims in The ‘Canterbury Tales,’* ed., Laura C. Lambdin and Robert T. Lambdin (Westport, CT and London: Greenwood Press, 1996), 292. Muriel Bowden writes that the early fourteenth-century treatise ‘*Hosebonderie* speaks of the necessity of teaching bailiffs and provosts [whose offices Chaucer’s Reeve discharges] the proper way to render accounts. The bailiffs who hold court must, at the proper season, “give up their rolls to the lord or the auditor of the account that they may be able to charge by these rolls the provosts and bailiffs who must account for the purchases of the court throughout the year.”’ *A Commentary on the General Prologue to the Canterbury Tales*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (New York: Macmillan Company, 1967), 250.

<sup>202</sup> Miller, 5.

<sup>203</sup> McDonald, 292.



Reeves ‘were not only in charge of enforcing regulations as they applied to farm labor, but they were the community’s principal agent in charge of enforcing its moral standards.’<sup>204</sup> Whether due to his community members’ indiscretions or his own ruthlessness (or both), the *General Prologue* reveals that Oswald excels in this capacity as well: ‘Ther nas baillif, ne hierde, nor oother hyne, / That he ne knew his sleighte and his covyne; / They were adrad of hym as of the deeth’ (I 603–605). In the *Miller’s Prologue* when Robyn first announces that his story will tell ‘how that a clerk hath set the wrightes cappe’ (I 3143), the Reeve strongly objects on moral, not personal, grounds and specifically cites the Miller’s drunken misconduct<sup>205</sup>:

The Reve answerde and seyde, “Stynt thy clappe!  
 Lat be thy lewed dronken harlotrye.  
 It is a synne and eek a greet folye  
 To apeyren any man, or hym defame,  
 And eek to bryngen wyves in swich fame.  
 Thou mayst ynogh of othere thynges seyn.” (I 3144–3149)

Here, the Reeve’s warning about defamation is reminiscent of Mannyng’s words in *Handlyng Synne* (quoted at the opening of this chapter), and he clearly understands the consequences of the malicious talk that the Miller proposes. After the Miller finishes, the Reeve reiterates his disapproval of the style and substance of the tale: “So theek,” quod he, “ful wel koude I thee quite / With bleryng of a proud milleres ye, / If that me liste speke of ribaudye” (I 3864–3866). His subsequent decision to quite the Miller ‘right in his cherles termes’ would be an abrupt reversal were it not for the guiding rationale of talionic justice. Since his brand

---

<sup>204</sup> Ibid.

<sup>205</sup> ‘Misbehavior in the form of poor work habits, drunkenness, or promiscuity could result in a fine, and recurrent fines could eventually result in a tenant’s eviction from the community.’ McDonald, 292.

of justice means getting even in its most literal sense, he gives back the Miller's insult in the exact terms he received it and engages in the 'ribaudye' that he seemed previously to reject.

The *Reeve's Tale* itself is concerned with fairness in a way that the *Miller's Tale* is not and suggests that the Reeve views this as a further immoral or amoral aspect of that tale and its teller. In the *Miller's Tale*, it is unclear that John, who ends up with a broken arm and a ruined reputation after Nicholas and Alison trick him in order to spend the night together, is entirely deserving of such treatment. Though one might argue that he is getting his due for being so gullible and for jealously keeping his young, pretty wife 'heeld narwe in a cage' (I 3224), one could as easily point to the solicitous concern he shows for Nicholas, when he thinks the young clerk has 'falle, with his astronyme, / In some woodnesse or in som agonye' (I 3451–3452), as a mitigating factor for why he should not be so abused at the tale's end. John shows similar consideration when Nicholas tells him of the 'flood' to come; his first thoughts and words are not for himself but for his wife: 'Allas my wyf! / And shal she drenche? Allas, myn Alisoun!' (I 3522–3523). Despite this apparent decency, however, it is John who is punished in this story and not the perpetrators of the 'crime,' the ones who lie and cause harm to others. Nicholas may be left scarred from his antics, but Alison remains free from any kind of retribution, and both fare better in the end than the carpenter who is 'bore doun' (I 3831) and effectively silenced by them though he attempts simply to tell the truth. In contrast, the *Reeve's Tale* certainly metes out a hard justice to the proud and thieving miller and his family, but it is scrupulous in ensuring that the clerks, too, first pay

their share. As Brewer notes: 'It is only after they have been cheated and humiliated that they exact a punishment which if it does not exactly suit the crime is in a sense justified by it, is connected with it.'<sup>206</sup>

Even the fact that the *Reeve's Tale* is 'meaner' than the *Miller's Tale* is rooted in its underlying evenhandedness and concern for balance. It is undeniably darker in tone and more focused in purpose than either of the tales that precede it; the physical environments themselves reflect the shift, moving from the open and colorful expanses of the *Knight's Tale* to the carpenter's large household in the *Miller's Tale* and finally ending in one dark and narrow room in the *Reeve's Tale*. McDonald contends that 'the Reeve is not merely interested in collecting what is due (evening the score); he also wants to exact a degree of interest over and above what would settle the account.'<sup>207</sup> The fact that his tale is harsher than the Miller's, however, is also closely tied to the Reeve's philosophy of justice. The *lex talionis* requires that the Reeve not only return the Miller's insult but add 'an extra kick in the pants' for starting the trouble, as William Ian Miller explains in his discussion of what 'getting even' demands:

Fair compensation requires this: you had me down, and now it is my turn to have you down, to witness and delight in your humiliation as you delighted in mine. That is what is so rightly captured when we say, I'm going to get even with you. The justness of this is easy to see if it is my ox you misappropriated. I should get not only my ox back, but also the rental value of the ox for the time you had it. . . .

When the debt is of honor . . . the notion of getting even is understood to embody a hostile intention to make the other feel your pain, to get him down, if not to obliterate him. At a minimum it means you want to make sure you (and others) can *see* he is as humiliated as you were seen to have been. And if we can with some degree of confidence blame the wrongdoer for having started it . . . then the

---

<sup>206</sup> Brewer, 77.

<sup>207</sup> McDonald, 296.

wrongdoer deserves an extra kick in the pants for upsetting the initial equilibrium. But there is nothing extra in the humiliation of the initial wrongdoer to compensate adequately for the humiliation suffered by the first victim. It is merely squaring the account, as any justice worthy the name would require.<sup>208</sup>

In the Reeve's eyes, the Miller upset the equilibrium by insulting him first, and he duly fashions his tale to repay him for both transgressions. A similar calculus within the tale gives grounds for the clerks' seemingly disproportionate response to being cheated by the miller. Though Aleyn's exact formulation differs when he gives reasons for swyving Malyne, he, too, relies on an essential and, in his eyes, lawful maintenance of balance to justify his retaliatory actions. He explains to his fellow clerk:

Som esement has lawe yshapen us,  
For, John, ther is a lawe that says thus:  
That gif a man in a point be agreved,  
That in another he sal be releved.  
Oure corn is stoln, sothly, it is na nay,  
And we han had an il fit al this day;  
And syn I sal have neen amendement  
Agayn my los, I will have esement. (I 4179–4186)

Paul Olson notes that the equivalent Latin legal maxim, '*Qui in uno gravatur in alio debet relevari*' [Who in one thing is oppressed, in another he ought to be relieved]<sup>209</sup>:

occurs in the medieval glosses in sections of the *Corpus Iuris Civilis* which are concerned with suits for the recovery of stolen goods. . . . The maxim is used to explain passages which require that a convicted robber return to the person he has injured either whatever goods he has stolen plus threefold their value or otherwise simply fourfold their value.<sup>210</sup>

---

<sup>208</sup> Miller, *Eye for an Eye*, 17–18.

<sup>209</sup> Found as a marginal gloss in the London, British Library, Harley 7334 and the Aberystwyth, National Library of Wales, Hengwrt 154 manuscripts, respectively. Douglas Gray, explanatory notes to *Riverside Chaucer*, 851. My translation.

<sup>210</sup> Paul A. Olson, 10 n 19.

Aleyn, Olson continues, is presumably ‘getting his fourfold by “swyving the Miller’s daughter.”’<sup>211</sup> While Aleyn’s actions may be callous and violent, they are not irrational. He demands ‘esement’—that is, compensation or redress<sup>212</sup>—for his day’s losses, just as the Reeve does for his loss of honor. Even Symkyn himself uses the same line of reasoning ‘to justify his *outrageous* thievery’ of the clerks’ grain:

‘The moore queynte crekes that they make,  
[If a man in a point be agrieved]  
The moore wol I stele whan I take.  
[In another he shall be . . . relieved.] (I, 4051–52)’<sup>213</sup>

While they may be opposed to one another, the characters of the *Reeve’s Tale* are unanimous in the view that justice is to be found in a state of evenness between them, and their attitudes and actions reflect the Reeve’s own beliefs of what justice entails.

Oswald’s insistence on getting even with the Miller is not in and of itself as damning as critics lead us to believe. For as hypocritical<sup>214</sup> and bad-tempered as the Reeve may be, his belief in ‘eye for an eye’ retribution as a basic form of justice is consistent, logical and not without foundation, as I hope to have shown above. The problems with the Reeve’s revenge

---

<sup>211</sup> Ibid.

<sup>212</sup> *Middle English Dictionary*, s.v. ‘esement,’ <http://ets.umd.umich.edu/m/med/>, accessed June 7, 2007.

<sup>213</sup> Joseph L. Baird, ‘Law and the *Reeve’s Tale*,’ *Neuphilologische Mitteilungen* 70.4 (1969): 679–683 at 680–681.

<sup>214</sup> The Reeve’s acute sense of fairness does not apply to himself. We know from the *General Prologue* that while he may keep seemingly impeccable accounts for his lord’s estate, he in fact cheats him for his own profit:

He koude better than his lord purchase.  
Ful riche he was astored pryvely.  
His lord wel koude he plesen subtilly,  
To yeve and lene hym of his owene good.  
And have a thank, and yet a cote and hood. (I 608–612)

Bowden comments: ‘In Chaucer’s time, if we believe the great smoke of pulpit literature betokens fire, actual reeves were still cheating both landlord and tenant. . . . Dan Michel’s *Ayenbite of Inwit* also inveighs against “ontrewe reven, provos, and bedeles . . . that steleth the amendes and withdrayeth the rentes of hire lhordes . . .” In short, such complaints were commonplaces, and in that respect, Chaucer’s Reeve is merely typical’ (252).

are more nuanced, and the summary rejection of his actions precludes discussion of these more complex issues.

It would be a mistake to single out the Reeve for the vengeance in his tale as he is matched—perhaps even outdone—by a number of other pilgrims who also present vengeance as corrective justice in their tales. Moreover, some of the most powerful images of revenge in the whole collection come from those pilgrims whose occupations suggest a more rigorous sense of morality than the Reeve's own. That is to say, if in the world of the pilgrims revenge itself were considered sinful or illicit, these particular pilgrims' tales would likely reflect that fact. What we actually find in these tales, however, is that the line between revenge and just punishment is often blurred, at times making one indistinguishable from the other and indeed, pointing out that they are not mutually exclusive. The Prioress, for example, depicts a severe retribution against the Jews who murder the 'litel clergeon' (VII 502) in her tale. The magistrate, declaring that 'Yvele shal have that yvele wol deserve' (VII 632), immediately has the offending Jews drawn and quartered, then hanged. The Man of Law also portrays wrongdoers brought to justice, explicitly called 'vengeance,' in his tale. When a thief attempts to attack Custance on her ship, he meets a quick end: 'The thief fil over bord al sodeynly, / And in the see he dreynte for vengeance; / And thus hath Crist unwemmed kept Custance' (II 922–924). Likewise, when Custance's father, the Roman Emperor, discovers the harm done to his daughter by the Syrian sultana and people, he unleashes his wrath against them:

... this Emperour hath sent anon  
 His senatour, with roial ordinance,  
 And othere lordes, God woot, many oon,  
 On Surryens to taken heigh vengeance.  
 They brennen, sleen, and brynge hem to meschance. (II 960–964)

Later, the Monk tells of the fate of King Antiochus who was struck down for his pride and cruelty with a ‘resonable’ (meaning ‘just, fair, equitable’)<sup>215</sup> punishment, also described, as in the *Man of Law’s Tale*, as ‘wreche’ or vengeance:

God for his manace hym so soore smoot  
 With invisible wounde, ay incurable,  
 That in his guttes carf it so and boot  
 That his peynes weren importable.  
 And certainly the wreche was resonable,  
 For many a mannes guttes dide he peyne. (VII 2599–2604)

These examples corroborate the Reeve’s view that evenness is an essential form of justice and that where an offense has been committed, swift and strict retribution is called for.

Widening the scope to include other Middle English works continues to show that the Reeve is far from unique in demanding a talionic standard of justice. For example, in the romance, *Ywain and Gawain*, when the hero rescues the wrongly accused maiden, Lunet, from being burned at the stake, he turns her persecutors’ punishment back on them:

[Sir Ywayn] sone quit to tham thaire hire—  
 For both he kest tham in the fire,  
 And said, “Wha juges men with wrang,  
 The same jugement sal thai fang.” (2639–2642)<sup>216</sup>

<sup>215</sup> *Middle English Dictionary*, s.v. ‘resonable,’ <http://ets.umd.umich.edu/m/med/>, accessed June 7, 2007.

<sup>216</sup> Stephen H.A. Shepherd, ed., *Ywain and Gawain*, in *Middle English Romances* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1995), 140. While *Ywain and Gawain* may reflect the twelfth-century ethos of the poem on which it is based, Chrétien de Troyes’ Old French *Yvain*, it is telling that the fourteenth-century English adapter, who greatly abbreviated the original, did not excise these lines: ‘Voilà donc notre héros qui a, exactement comme il le voulait, délivré la demoiselle. . . . Quant aux autres, ils furent brûlés sur le bûcher qui avait été allumé pour brûler la demoiselle, car c’est un principe de justice que celui qui condamne à tort autrui doive mourir de la

In a similar fashion, the divine vengeance of Mannyng's *Handlyng Synne* subjects damned souls to torments that reflect the very ways they sinned in life. Mannyng tells the story of a knight who once stole a cloak from a poor man. After he dies of a sudden illness, his ghost appears to a fellow knight to relate his terrible fate:

“A peyne y suffer hard for þe nones,  
For a cloþe þat y refte ones  
Of a poure man with-outē ryȝt;  
Alas þat euer y say þat syȝt;  
Þat cloþe ys caste on me to peyne  
As heuy as any mounteyne;  
Hyl ne mounteyne, erþe ne stone,  
Vndyr heuene so heuy ys none;  
No so hote fyre ys yn no land  
As hyt ys aboute me brennand.”<sup>217</sup>

Here we again find that even—and perhaps especially—when the story is overtly Christian, many contemporary works still prefer retributive punishment to forgiveness and mercy, invoking an often gruesome vengeance as a positive action taken against those who deserve it; such scenes would have been reassuring to those who suffered injustice that every evildoer would get his due, whether in this life or the next, whether by God's hand or through the hand of one of his faithful. In the romance, *Bevis of Hampton*, the hero's goal and eventual triumph is the avenging of the wrongful death of his father. Bevis, a steadfast Christian,<sup>218</sup>

---

même mort que celle à laquelle il l'avait condamné.' Chrétien de Troyes, *Yvain, Le Chevalier au lion*, ed. Claude-Alain Chevallier (Librairie Générale Française, 1988), 139–140.

<sup>217</sup> 'Handlyng Synne,' 81.

<sup>218</sup> Early on in the poem Bevis refuses King Ermin's offer of his daughter's hand as well as the inheritance of his kingdom, if only Bevis will convert from Christianity. Bevis answers:

For al the selver ne al the golde,  
That is under hevene light,  
Ne for thee doughter, that is so bright.  
I nolde forsake in none manere  
Jesu, that boughte me so dere. (562–566)



accomplishes the deed by killing his stepfather, pouring a kettle full of scalding pitch and brimstone on him to be certain of his death; then he rejoices at the subsequent death of his mother, who witnesses the scene and, in shock, falls and breaks her neck. Bevis' reaction is to thank God:

Tho was Beves glad and blithe  
And thanked God ful mani a sithe,  
That he was wreke wel inough  
Of him, that his father slough. (3471–3474)<sup>219</sup>

All of these works save revenge for the prideful, for those who persecute wrongly, or for the unbelieving Other, as in the case of the Jews in the *Prioress's Tale* and the Syrians in the *Man of Law's Tale*. Is it such a far leap for someone like the self-righteous Reeve to believe that he takes a sanctioned and indeed 'reasonable'<sup>220</sup> revenge on a prideful Miller, who lies opposite him in so many ways<sup>221</sup> and who, while unprovoked, takes such wicked pleasure in denigrating an old carpenter like himself?

Even as these other examples validate the Reeve's basic philosophy, they illuminate the key problems he encounters in his practical application of it. The differences in the scenarios are crucial. First, in the tales of the Prioress, the Man of Law, and the Monk, as well as in *Ywain and Gawain*, *Bevis of Hampton*, and Mannyng's penitential manual, the crimes against the

---

*Bevis of Hampton* in *Four Romances of England*, 217.

<sup>219</sup> Ibid., 292.

<sup>220</sup> Here, I use the term to signify 'just, fair, equitable,' as it does in the excerpt from the *Monk's Tale*. *Middle English Dictionary*, s.v. 'reasonable,' <http://ets.umdl.umich.edu/m/med>, accessed June 17, 2007.

<sup>221</sup> As Gray points out in the Riverside notes (821), 'in physique and in personality, the Reeve is in complete contrast to the Miller.' The nature of their social standing and trade rivalry inherent in their professions also puts them in 'direct competition' (see Lindahl, 111–112). Even their placement in the cavalcade, with the Miller leading and the Reeve bringing up the rear, emphasizes their opposing natures.

victims are visible ones and therefore undeniable. There is a physicality to the harms done to the little clergeon, to Custance, and even to King Antiochus' nameless victims that is missing in the case of the Reeve. The Prioress, for example, makes no fewer than four pointed references to the 'throte ykoreven' (VII 611) of the little saint in her tale.<sup>222</sup> In this respect, the crimes these pilgrims describe have more in common with the crimes of Grendel and his mother than with those of the Miller. The Reeve may be truly pained by the Miller's wit, but the offense itself and therefore, the Reeve's status as a victim, are not so readily apparent to others—either the pilgrims or readers of the poem. I stated earlier that words and deeds in this period were still intimately connected, in which case the Miller's insults should be enough to warrant the anger and revenge of the Reeve. (This is a frequent occurrence in contemporaneous Icelandic saga, which I will discuss in the next chapter.) Words are subtle weapons, however, and while they may inflict great harm, they have the ability to do it without much mess. The artfulness of the speaker and the attitude and perception of the hearer make the nature of the injuries inflicted (and whether they even were) open to question. Taking into account the multiple perspectives of the wider audience makes defining an offense even more difficult. The Miller employs his words with a precision that makes pointed insults appear to be general and oblique statements to some. Lindahl recognizes this in the Miller's speech and concludes that it is full of 'verbal tricks'; when

---

<sup>222</sup> At lines VII 571, 611, 648, 649.

examining the rhetorical structure of the Miller's exchanges with the Host and Reeve leading up to his tale, he writes:

With subterfuge, [the Miller] has turned an apology into a threat against the Host, mocked the entire social order, insulted the Reeve indirectly, and turned a disclaimer into a frontal assault. He accomplishes all this without directly insulting anyone, or so much as admitting that there is an argument in progress.<sup>223</sup>

The Reeve may be fully justified in taking the revenge that he does on the Miller, but Robyn never makes explicit his intent to insult Oswald and thus his words can be construed otherwise. To anyone who decides that there is enough to doubt regarding the hostility of the Miller's intent, the vehemence of the Reeve's reaction is disproportionate and he himself is simply petty and vindictive.

If the Reeve's identity as a victim is in doubt, it is his identity as an avenger that is more problematic. In the tales of the Prioress, Man of Law, and Monk, the avenger is never the victim himself or herself. Rather, a third party endowed with royal, judicial or, more impressively, divine authority acts on behalf of the injured, either by themselves or commissioning yet another party to do so. They thereby validate both the victim's status as well as the outrage that demands revenge. They also make evident the social bonds that connect them to the victim and that oblige them to take action. Their revenge, therefore, is about acknowledging—perhaps it is not too much to say honoring—relationships and communities more than maintaining one's own honor. This is even true of Beowulf who, while he performs feats that add to his own reputation and glory, arrives at Heorot to aid the

---

<sup>223</sup> Lindahl, 113.

Danes and, at least according to Hrothgar, does so to repay the debt his father incurred when they sheltered him from his own feud.<sup>224</sup> In contrast, the Reeve and his characters act simultaneously as victims, judges, avengers; no outside party, divine or otherwise, sanctions their retributive actions. Certainly extra-legal and extra-curial means of settling disputes and obtaining justice were not uncommon in the fourteenth century, by means of ‘violent self-help’ (though prohibited by law)<sup>225</sup> or a ‘loveday,’<sup>226</sup> for example. Yet, the kind of

---

<sup>224</sup> See lines 456a–472b: Hroðgar maþelode, helm Scyldinga:  
 ‘For [g]lewy[r]htum þu, wine min Beowulf,  
 ond for arstafum usic sohtest.  
 Gesloh þin fæder fæhðe mæste;  
 wearþ he Heaþolafe to handbonan  
 mid Wilfingum; ða hine Wedera cyn  
 for herebrogan habban ne mihte.  
 Ðanon he gesohte Suð-Dena folc  
 ofer yða gewearc, Ar-Scyldinga;  
 ða ic furþum weold folce Deniga  
 ond on geogoðe heold ginne rice,  
 hordburh hæleþa; ða wæs Heregar dead,  
 min yldra mæg unlifigende,  
 bearn Healfdenes; se wæs betera ðonne ic!  
 Siððan þa fæhðe feo þingode;  
 sende ic Wylfingum ofer wæteres hrycg  
 ealde madmas; he me aþas swor.

Hrothgar, protector of the Scyldings, spoke: ‘For deeds done and for kindnesses, you, my friend Beowulf, sought us. Your father brought about the greatest hostility by fighting when he became a hand-slayer to Heaþolaf among the Wylfings; then the kin of the Geats could not keep him for fear of war. Thence he sought over the rolling of waves the people of the South-Danes, Honor-Scyldings; then I first ruled the people of the Danes and held in youth the kingdom of jewels, treasure-city of heroes; then was Heorogar dead, my older kinsman unliving, son of Healfdane; that one was better than I! Afterward I settled that hostility with payment; I sent old treasures over the ridge of water to the Wylfings; he swore oaths to me.

<sup>225</sup> Paul A. Olson notes, ‘Both Continental and English law prohibited Aleyn’s kind of resort to private justice’ (11 n 19). Pollock and Maitland write that this prohibition already existed in English law in the thirteenth century: ‘So fierce is it against self-help that it can hardly be induced to find a place even for self-defence. The man who has slain another in self-defence deserves, it is true, but he also needs a royal pardon.’ *The History of English Law Before the Time of Edward I*, vol. II, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1968), 574. Still, as Richard W. Kaeuper writes, ‘Public opinion on questions of order was . . . complex and difficult to characterize. But we can say . . . that for their part subjects [of the king] did want more order and did place much hope for improvement of the public peace in royal leadership, retaining always a belief, perhaps even a

encompassing self-directed action taken by the Reeve and his characters negatively affects them in important ways. First, they undermine the fairness of the punishments they exact from their adversaries because it seems implausible that the injured parties could view their situations objectively and judge accordingly. Even if they do manage this difficult task, their actions remain open to question; as Richard Posner explains, an ‘avenger, being a judge in his own cause, is likely to misjudge the balance of right and wrong in his own favor, sensing a slight when none is intended or believing that to maintain credibility he must interpret every injury to himself in the worst possible light.’<sup>227</sup> Second, by acting independently in these multiple roles, the Reeve and his characters make themselves appear isolated and egocentric. The motivation for Oswald’s tale-telling has much less to do with participating in the pilgrims’ group game than with obtaining what he considers justice for himself. John and Aleyn justify their actions to one another, but Aleyn would have his revenge whether John has his or not. Symkyn’s revenge on the two clerks backfires when his own daughter, Malyne, tells Aleyn where to find his lost grain. For the Reeve and those in his tale, there are no communal or familial bonds strong enough to trump self-interest. The revenge on which they each insist thus turns them into vigilantes who act for their own benefit and according to

---

fondness, for violent self-help in circumstances of their own choosing.’ *War, Justice, and Public Order: England and France in the Later Middle Ages* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), 143.

<sup>226</sup> ‘... any meeting of contending parties for the purpose of settling their dispute might be called a “loveday” in popular and literary writing. At least three different types of pacification were covered by the term. It was used for private settlements out of court; less frequently for regular cases of arbitration in which the court took an active interest; and for the settlement of all kinds of private and public quarrels, from the vicar’s pacification of scolding women to treaty-making on the borders.’ Josephine Waters Bennett, ‘The Mediaeval Loveday,’ *Speculum* 33.3 (1958): 351–370 at 361.

<sup>227</sup> Richard Posner, *Law and Literature*, rev. ed. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998), 53.

their own codes of behavior. The unpredictability and recklessness of this sort of vigilantism is more threatening than the justice it might achieve is reassuring, and thus it—and anyone who practices it—is feared and rejected by the larger group.

Through the zealous pursuit of justice for himself, the Reeve ends up perceived as the villain in his verbal scuffle with the Miller. In some ways, he is *too* effective in his insistence on evenness between them. John Kerrigan, while discussing Greek revenge tragedy, explains well the predicament of the Reeve. He writes:

Ethical exchanges are implicit in the simplest plot. In that primal action on the open stage, the symmetry of revenge is inseparable from a dramatic irony which complicates the moral situation of the revenger. This irony takes effect regardless of the authors' views; whether or not they approve of vengeance, the complications will register. For when B, injured by A, does to A what A did to him, he makes himself resemble the opponent he has blamed, while he transforms his enemy into the kind of victim he once was. Indeed, the more scrupulous he is in pursuit of retribution, the more exact in exacting vengeance, the more he effects this interchange.<sup>228</sup>

Heedless of this dynamic, Oswald becomes what he despises in his bullying adversary and unwittingly affirms Chaucer's warning in the *Miller's Prologue* that the Reeve, like the Miller, is simply a 'cherl' (I 3182) with an unsavory tale to tell.

### **The Tale of the Melibee: Curing by Contraries?**

Chaucer informs his audience that next to such churlish tales as those of the Reeve and Miller, they will discover those that 'toucheth gentillesse, / And eek moralitee and hoolynesse' (I 3179–3180); all one need do is 'turne over the leef and chese another tale' (I

---

<sup>228</sup> Kerrigan, 6.

3177). Simply because we leave the genre of fabliau behind, however, does not mean we also leave its concerns. The idea that words do not necessarily square with intentions remains particularly salient. Mann writes that in the ‘fabliau tales, words and intentions have to be carefully discriminated. Only fools would dream of taking words at face-value; for the worldly wise, they are a mask behind which one can work towards one’s own ends.’<sup>229</sup> One of the ‘moral’ tales which picks up on this notion is Chaucer’s ‘own’ *Tale of the Melibee*. While on first glance it seems utterly opposed to the ‘harlotrie’ (I 3184) of the *Reeve’s Tale* in both style and substance, we find that the former actually echoes the latter’s concerns with both vengeance and the value of words and develops them in interesting ways.

Of all the tales, the *Melibee* is the one most explicitly engaged in theorizing violence and revenge. While it raises many questions with its form, length, style, purpose, and indeed its very presence,<sup>230</sup> what remains generally less questioned about the *Melibee* is its ethical stance on vengeance.<sup>231</sup> Given Prudence’s preaching in favor of forbearance and forgiveness

---

<sup>229</sup> Jill Mann, introduction, *The Canterbury Tales*, ed. Jill Mann (London: Penguin Books, 2005), xxxviii.

<sup>230</sup> For various perspectives on these issues not cited elsewhere in this dissertation, see, for example, Dolores Palomo, ‘What Chaucer Really Did to *Le Livre De Melibee*,’ *Philological Quarterly* 53 (1974): 304–320; Seth Lerer, “‘Now Holde Youre Mouth’: The Romance of Orality in the *Thopas-Melibee* Section of the *Canterbury Tales*’ in *Oral Poetics in Middle English Poetry*, ed. Mark C. Amodio and Sarah Gray Miller (New York: Garland Publishing, 1994), 181–205; Edward E. Foster, ‘Has Anyone Here Read *Melibee*?’, *The Chaucer Review* 34.4 (2000): 398–409; Stephen G. Moore, ‘Apply Yourself: Learning While Reading the *Tale of Melibee*,’ *The Chaucer Review* 38.1 (2003): 83–97; Amanda Walling, “‘In Hir Tellyng Difference’: Gender, Authority, and Interpretation in the *Tale of Melibee*,’ *The Chaucer Review* 40.2 (2005): 163–181. Carolyn P. Collete, ‘Heeding the Counsel of Prudence: A Context for the *Melibee*,’ *The Chaucer Review* 29.4 (1995): 416–433 opens with a brief but helpful review of criticism.

<sup>231</sup> Four recent sources which do reevaluate this ethical stance are Daniel Kempton, ‘Chaucers (sic) Tale of Melibee: “A Litel Thyng in Prose,”’ *Genre* 21 (1988): 263–278; David Aers, ‘Chaucer’s *Tale of Melibee*: Whose Virtues?’ in *Medieval Literature and Historical Inquiry: Essays in Honour of Derek Pearsall*, ed. David Aers (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2000), 69–81; Kathleen E. Kennedy, ‘Maintaining Love Through Accord in the *Tale of Melibee*,’ *The Chaucer Review* 39.2 (2004): 165–176; and Marion Turner, ‘Conflict Resolved?: The

as well as the tale's closing scenes of reconciliation, it seems to come down firmly on the side of pacifism and penance. Indeed, it is frequently connected with the moralizing *Parson's Tale* and more for its thematic concerns than for its prose form.<sup>232</sup> Over sixty years ago, W.W. Lawrence identified as the tale's most important (and up to that point 'strangely neglected') feature 'its repeated and earnest pleading for peace rather than war, for mediation and law rather than private revenge.'<sup>233</sup> Many later critics generally followed this line of argument, stating of the *Melibee* that its lessons 'are the great Christian lessons of forgiveness, charity, and justice'<sup>234</sup>; that it 'argues and demonstrates that vengeance and war cannot succeed, that they are no remedy for human misfortune'<sup>235</sup>; and that the 'central message of the *Melibee* is the need for self-control and moderation. . . . As opposed to the easy gratification of appetites in *Thopas* and its glorification of war . . . *Melibee* urges prudence, patience, and forgiveness.'<sup>236</sup> R.F. Yeager goes a step farther, looking beyond the tale itself and its immediate teller (i.e. Chaucer the pilgrim) to posit that 'the *Thopas*–*Melibeus* pair . . . reveal[s] the opposition of *Chaucer the man* to war in most, if not

---

Language of Peace and Chaucer's "Tale of Melibee" in *Chaucerian Conflict: Languages of Antagonism in Late Fourteenth-Century London* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2007), 167–191.

<sup>232</sup> See for example, Paul G. Ruggiers, 'Serious Chaucer: The *Tale of Melibeus* and the *Parson's Tale*' in *Chaucerian Problems and Perspectives: Essays Presented to Paul E. Beichner, C.S.C.*, ed. Edward Vasta and Zacharias P. Thundy (Notre Dame and London: University of Notre Dame Press, 1979), 83–94. Ruggiers writes that both tales 'belong to a discussion of moral philosophy and theology' and 'reflect the long tradition of the study of man as a moral and spiritual being' (86).

<sup>233</sup> William Witherle Lawrence, 'The Tale of Melibeus,' in *Essays and Studies in Honor of Carleton Brown* (New York: New York University Press, 1940), 103.

<sup>234</sup> Donald R. Howard, *The Idea of the Canterbury Tales* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976), 312.

<sup>235</sup> Jerome Mandel, *Geoffrey Chaucer: Building the Fragments of the 'Canterbury Tales'* (Rutherford, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press and London and Toronto: Associated University Press, 1992), 167.

<sup>236</sup> C. David Benson, 'Their Telling Difference: Chaucer the Pilgrim and His Two Contrasting Tales,' *The Chaucer Review* 18.1 (1983): 61–76 at 71.



all, cases.<sup>237</sup> With such judgments regarding the message of the *Melibee*, the tale seems to offer a rebuttal to the *Reeve's Tale* and its endorsement of talionic justice. Indeed, if we agree with Yeager's theory about the beliefs of the author himself, such pacifism would certainly stand in opposition to the Reeve's brand of justice and be first among the opinions formed against the *Reeve's Tale*. In that case, we might conclude that Chaucer earlier leaves the *Reeve's Tale* purposefully un-quited in a string of tales that explicitly quite each other, as if he is acknowledging that vengeance leads nowhere productive and consequently 'dissociat[ing] himself from a too-narrow definition of morality as mathematical retribution.'<sup>238</sup> One could argue that the *Melibee* provides an answer to the *Reeve's Tale* and furthers that dissociation; the former picks up where the latter leaves off with the image of a family assaulted by outsiders, and it changes the underlying ethics of their story from justice through vengeance to patient suffering and merciful forgiveness.<sup>239</sup> Indeed, several passages of the *Melibee* are uncanny in their seemingly direct response to fundamental arguments in the *Reeve's Tale*. For example, when Melibeus first solicits advice on how to respond to his enemies' attack on his wife and daughter, the physicians counsel him to do as they do for illnesses and to 'cure by contraries.' Much as the Reeve believes that 'leveful is with force

---

<sup>237</sup> R.F. Yeager, 'Pax Poetica: On the Pacifism of Chaucer and Gower,' *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 9 (1987): 97–121 at 120. My emphasis.

<sup>238</sup> Delany, 356. It is possible that the *Cook's Tale* may have answered the Reeve's in some fashion, but the Cook's apparent enjoyment of the *Reeve's Tale* and the fact that his animosities are directed at the Host make this unlikely.

<sup>239</sup> It is interesting to consider this in terms of the distinction made in *Beowulf* between 'good' or legitimate feuds (those between a group and outsiders) vs. 'bad' feuds, i.e. intra-group conflict. In such a feuding culture, the family in the *Reeve's Tale* or in *Melibee* would have the moral authority to fight back since their feud would involve outsiders who attacked them. In the *Melibee*, however, waging even a 'good' feud gives way to a more Christian reaction.

force of-showve,<sup>240</sup> Melibeus understands curing by contraries to mean that ‘right as they han venged hem on me and doon me wrong, right so shal I venge me upon hem and doon hem wrong; / and thanne have I cured oon contrarie by another’ (VII 1279–1280). Prudence, however, questions her husband’s interpretation and proposes a different understanding of the physicians’ advice:

For certes, wikkednesse is nat contrarie to wikkednesse, ne vengeaunce to vengeaunce, ne wrong to wrong, but they been semblable. / And therfore o vengeaunce is nat warissed by another vengeaunce, ne o wroong by another wroong, / but everich of hem encreesceth and aggreggeth oother. / But certes, the wordes of the phisiciens sholde been understonden in this wise: / for good and wikkednesse been two contraries, and pees and werre, vengeaunce and suffraunce, discord and accord, and manye othere thynges; / but certes, wikkednesse shal be warissed by goodnesse, discord by accord, werre by pees, and so forth of othere thynges. (VII 1286–1290)

Rejecting the use of force against force, Prudence encourages Melibeus to take a different approach and end rather than prolong the cycle of violence and vengeance—a cycle which very possibly began with Melibeus himself.<sup>241</sup> Accordingly, Prudence later says it behooves Melibeus to consider his own faults and shortcomings before taking retaliatory action against others:

Yet sette I caas ye have bothe myght and licence for to venge yow, / I seye that ther be ful manye thynges that shul restreyne yow of vengeaunce-takyng / and make yow for to encline to suffre, and for to han pacience in the wronges that han been doon to yow. / First and foreward, if ye wole considere the defautes that been in youre owene persone, / for whiche defautes God hath suffred yow have this tribulacioun, as I have seyde yow heer-bifore. / For the poete seith that ‘we oghte paciently taken the tribulacions that comen to us, whan we thynken and consideren that we han disserved to have hem.’ / And Seint Gregorie seith that ‘whan a man considereth wel the nombre of his defautes and of his synnes, / the peynes and the tribulaciouns that he suffreth semen the lesse unto hym; / and in as muche

<sup>240</sup> The Ellsmere MS contains the marginal gloss, ‘*vim vi repellere*,’ a phrase which occurs three times in the primary source of the *Melibee*, Albertanus of Brescia’s *Liber Consolationis et Consilii* (1246). See Louis McCorry Myers, ‘A Line in the Reeve’s Prologue,’ *Modern Language Notes* 49.4 (1934): 222–226.

<sup>241</sup> Dominick Grace attends to a possible change in Chaucer’s translation from his immediate French source which would suggest that Chaucer meant for the attack to be identified as the enemies’ own vengeance on Melibeus. See ‘Telling Differences: Chaucer’s *Tale of Melibee* and Renaud de Louens’ *Livre de Mellibee et Prudence*,’ *Philological Quarterly* 82.1 (2003): 367–400 at 378–379.

as hym thynketh his synnes moore hevy and grevous, / in so muche semeth his peyne the lighter and esier unto hym.' (VII 1491–1500)

Prudence argues that Melibeus' own sins both engender and outweigh the pain he suffers at the hands of his enemies and that these facts should sufficiently deter him from seeking vengeance, even if he did have the power and the right to take it. This reproach could easily apply to the Reeve. While he seems in his *Prologue* to concede that in his old age, he is guilty of certain sins ['avauntyng, lying, anger, coveitise' (I 3884)], they remain the general sins of 'we' in old age. At no time does the Reeve take responsibility for his individual wrongdoing of which we learn in the *General Prologue*, and as outlined above, his own flaws do not keep him from exploiting those of the Miller. His sole concern is how to achieve justice for himself for the offense perpetrated against him. This fixation on his own honor and the insistence on revenge anticipate Melibeus' own, but in the latter case those obsessions are ultimately and rightly (at least according to that story) cast aside. Rather than quite, Chaucer seems to say, one ought to follow the example of Christ and turn the other cheek.

To make such statements about Chaucer the poet's intentions for the *Melibee*, however, can be problematic. The tale bears a level of complexity that goes beyond what we find in the other pilgrims' tales since it is Chaucer's 'own' and only complete tale as well as one of his 'least original works,'<sup>242</sup> a close translation of a French version of a Latin

---

<sup>242</sup> William Kamowski, 'Varieties of Response to *Melibee* and the *Clerk's Tale*,' in *Chaucer in the Eighties*, Julian N. Wasserman and Robert J. Blanch, eds., (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1986), 194.

original.<sup>243</sup> Even Yeager—who makes definitive claims regarding Chaucer the poet’s attitudes and intentions—acknowledges some of the difficulties when analyzing an anti-war passage in the *Melibee*:

Since the attitudes presented here are those of a character (an ancient counselor of Melibeus’s) reported by a character (Chaucer the Pilgrim) in a poem which twice its author disavows (i.e., in *The Miller’s Prologue* and in the *Retraction*), “fixing” the speaker is difficult. How much of this language is Chaucer’s, from the heart, and how much merely an attitude struck for effect by a character? . . . Can we, in fact, isolate the poet’s honest voice?<sup>244</sup>

If we leave aside the questions regarding authorial identity and intention and try to concentrate on the fictional pilgrim alone, Chaucer becomes no less perplexing. While Oswald the Reeve is one of the most individualized and seemingly knowable pilgrims (even his horse is named, a detail that pertains to no other on the journey), Chaucer the pilgrim is one of the most mysterious. He escapes the notice of the Host for most of the journey; when Harry Bailly finally does see him, he must ask, ‘What man artow?’ (VII 695). There is something otherworldly [‘elvyssh’ (VII 703)] and unsociable [‘unto no wight dooth he daliaunce’ (VII 704)] about him, and the strange combination of tales he tells does not necessarily enable the Host (or the reader) to perceive him more clearly. Just as the response to the *Reeve’s Tale* is either silent disapproval or the Cook’s muddled delight, so too are the

---

<sup>243</sup> Lee Patterson writes of the critical tendency to dismiss the difficulties here: ‘The other unhappy consequence that follows from the overvaluation of *Melibee* . . . is the assumed relation of Chaucer to the *Tale*. For recent criticism has largely understood this relation as being as unproblematic as the *Tale* itself. For Howard, Chaucer here “appears before us in good earnest,” and other critics assert that “there is no trace of ambiguity in Chaucer’s attitude to the *Tale*,” that “the author of the *Melibee* writes essentially without irony.” In other words, the problem of self-representation, both as a general issue and within the specific context of this group of *Canterbury Tales*, is for these critics no problem at all—as if Chaucer’s entire poetic oeuvre were not marked with the signs of his profound involvement in precisely this issue.’ See ‘What Man Artow?: Authorial Self-Definition in *The Tale of Sir Thopas* and *The Tale of Melibee*,’ *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 11 (1989): 117–175 at 138–139.

<sup>244</sup> Yeager, 109.

responses to Chaucer's own tales either negative or somewhat misconceived. First, Harry interrupts Chaucer's telling of *Sir Thopas*, complaining that his ears ache from the 'drasty speche' (VII 923), charging that Chaucer's 'drasty rymyng is nat worth a toord' (VII 930), and imploring him to tell something in prose instead. Then, after Chaucer completes the *Melibee*, the Host contrasts the violent temper of his own wife, the ironically named Goodelief,<sup>245</sup> with the patience of Prudence,<sup>246</sup> revealing more about his own marriage, preoccupations, and 'critical ineptitude'<sup>247</sup> than anything about the actual tale or its teller.<sup>248</sup>

Just as Chaucer (the pilgrim or the poet) is not so easily understood, I would argue that neither is the message concerning vengeance in the *Melibee* and its relationship to the *Reeve's Tale* so tidily summed up as the sample analysis above, which assumes a binary

---

<sup>245</sup> Goodelief was one form of the name of the Flemish Saint Godeleva, of whom there are two early lives, one dating from the early twelfth century and another from the mid-fourteenth. Both narratives stress her goodness as a wife and her spiritual devotion. [Ethel Seaton, 'Goode Lief My Wife,' *Modern Language Review* 41.2 (1946): 196–202.] Harry's wife is, according to him, clearly no saintly, patient wife:

For she nys no thyng of swich pacience  
As was this Melibeus wyf Prudence.  
By Goddes bones, whan I bete my knaves,  
She bryngeth me forth the grete clobbed staves,  
And crieth, 'Slee the dogges everichoon,  
And brek hem, bothe bak and every boon! (VII 1895–1900)

<sup>246</sup> Mari Pakkala-Weckström, using historical pragmatics to analyze the debate between Prudence and Melibeus, shows that Prudence may not be as patient as she seems. She writes, 'There is an obvious pattern in Prudence's behavior: her patience and respectfulness are only a thin layer on the surface; they are tools which she uses to get her husband's attention, and they can be cast aside when no longer needed.' 'Prudence and the Power of Persuasion—Language and *Maistrie* in the *Tale of Melibee*,' *The Chaucer Review* 35.4 (2001): 399–412 at 407.

<sup>247</sup> Kamowski, 193.

<sup>248</sup> The combination of Harry's interrupting *Sir Thopas* and Chaucer's subsequent telling of the *Melibee* led some critics to propose that the latter is Chaucer's own revenge on the Host for the former, a view now dismissed. See for example, Mather, *Chaucer's Prologue, Knight's Tale, and Nun's Priests's Tale*, xiv, xv, xxxi (Boston, 1899); Lumiansky, *Of Sondry Folk: The Dramatic Principle in the Canterbury Tales* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1955), 94. W.W. Lawrence wrote that the *Melibee* 'is an implied rebuke to narrowness of literary taste' (250) and that Chaucer the pilgrim meant to 'attack the Host in his most vulnerable spot—as a henpecked husband' (251). 'The Marriage Group in the *Canterbury Tales*,' *Modern Philology* 11.2 (1913): 247–258.

opposition of positive forgiveness versus negative revenge, suggests it could be. The sheer verbosity of the *Melibee* can lead one to gloss over the twists and turns of the actual arguments and simply look to the conclusion for the tale's 'lesson' on the issue. A close reading, however, reveals that although Prudence stresses the Christian virtues of forgiveness and mercy in the course of her debate with Melibeus, she makes critical concessions to his more temporal, honor-based concerns. While she encourages peaceful, Christian courses of action, she likewise gives attention to authorities who are neither Christian nor pacifist and many of her arguments are remarkably pragmatic ones that have nothing to do with a moral or spiritual life. What emerges from the debate between Prudence and Melibeus is a complex discussion of revenge and justice, and, surprisingly, it includes the acknowledgement of the legitimacy of revenge as well as a picture of how to exact that revenge without making the Reeve's mistake and turning into the villain oneself.

Prudence's allegorical name implies that she 'discriminates between good and evil in courses of action in this world.'<sup>249</sup> The former part of this definition is apparent in her high-minded appeals to Melibeus that 'o vengeance is not warissed by another vengeance' (VII 1286) and her repeated exhortations that he be merciful and forgiving with his adversaries. Prudence, however, is decidedly a more human than allegorical figure in Chaucer's tale,<sup>250</sup> and she proves to place no small emphasis on the realities of *this* world. Her first attempt to check Melibeus' rush to revenge gives an indication of this aspect of her character. Prudence

---

<sup>249</sup> Collette, 420.

<sup>250</sup> Ibid., 424. Collette writes that in 'his version of the *Melibee* Chaucer's alterations to his source seem deliberately to fashion *Prudence* as something more than an allegorical character representing a virtue.'

fears the effects of her husband's hastiness and reminds him of the proverb of 'Piers Alfonse':<sup>251</sup> 'Whoso that dooth to thee oother good or harm, haste thee nat to quiten it, for in this wise thy freend wole abyde and thyn enemy shal the lenger lyve in drede' (VII 1053). More calculating than Christian, this advice is concerned with maintaining a position of power from which to operate. In subsequent arguments Prudence continues to press Melibeus to question whether he is powerful enough, in one form or another, to avenge himself in the way he proposes. For example, she asks her husband to consider his own familial relationships versus those of his enemies, putting the case to him that he does not have the extensive kinship group necessary for an effective and absolute revenge:

For al be it so that ye be myghty and riche, certes ye ne been but allone, / for certes ye ne han no child but a doghter, / ne ye ne han bretheren, ne cosyns garmayns, ne noon oother neigh kynrede, / wherfore that youre enemys for drede sholde stinte to plede with yow or to destroye youre persone. / Ye knowen also that youre riches mooten been dispended in diverse parties, / and whan that every wight hath his part, they ne wollen taken but litel reward to venge thy deeth. / But thyne enemys been thre, and they han manie children, bretheren, cosyns, and oother ny kynrede. / And though so were that thou haddest slayn of hem two or three, yet dwellen ther ynowe to wreken hir deeth and to sle thy persone. / And though so be that youre kynrede be moore siker and stedefast than the kyn of youre adversarie, / yet nathelees youre kynrede nys but a fer kynrede; they been but litel syb to yow, / and the kyn of youre enemys been ny syb to hem. And certes, as in that, hir condicioun is bet than youre. (VII 1366–1376)

Because his enemies are greater in number and have larger, more closely connected families, any revenge that Melibeus takes will surely come back to him, Prudence argues. Here, the argument against Melibeus' planned course of action has nothing to do with morals or virtues, but simply with the practical considerations of how or whether one can guarantee

---

<sup>251</sup> The reference is to Petrus Alfonsi, author of the *Disciplina Clericalis*, a twelfth-century work of aphorisms, fables and exempla meant to impart wisdom to its readers. Chaucer cites Alfonsi five times in the *Melibee*, and Alfonsi is one of only two medieval writers whom Prudence and Melibeus quote. See John Tolan, *Petrus Alfonsi and His Medieval Readers*, (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1993).

both satisfaction and self-preservation in the process of taking vengeance. She is similarly practical when Melibeus later says that his great wealth will enable him to avenge himself:

I kan nat seen that it myghte greatly harme me though I took vengeaunce. / For I am richer and moore myghty than myne enemys been; / and wel knowen ye that by moneye and by havynge grete possessions been alle the thynges of this world governed.' (VII 1547–1549)

As is her wont, Prudence speaks at length about the correct getting and spending of money, but she finally comes to her simple point that Melibeus' wealth does not suffice: 'I conseille yow that ye bigynne no werre in trust of youre riches, for they ne suffisen noght werres to mayntene' (VII 1650). These sorts of issues regarding wealth and kinship abound in Icelandic family sagas, in which violent bloodfeuds are the norm as an integral part of the society's justice system; however, in a work that many view as 'Christian to the core,'<sup>252</sup>

Prudence's remarks are striking in their implicit acceptance of the institution of revenge.

Perhaps such acceptance is most evident in her attempts to deter Melibeus on legal grounds:

Thanne lat us considere also if the conseillying of hem that conseilleden yow to taken sodeyn vengeaunce, wheither it accorde to resoun. / And certes, ye knowe wel 'nay.' / For, as by right and resoun, ther may no man taken vengeaunce on no wight but the juge that hath the jurisdiccoun of it, / whan it is graunted hym to take thilke vengeaunce hastily or attemprely, as the lawe requireth. / . . . / And certes rightfully ne mowe ye take no vengeaunce, as of your proper auctoritee. / Thanne mowe ye seen that youre power ne consenteth nat, ne accordeth nat, with youre wilfulnesse. (VII 1377–1386)

Prudence says that Melibeus cannot avenge himself because he does not possess the proper authority. Rather, the judge who has jurisdiction may—and importantly, *should*, according to law and reason—administer corrective justice by punishing the wrongdoer. She is especially preoccupied with this point about licit, sanctioned revenge; twice more she stresses

---

<sup>252</sup> Ruggiers, 86.



the importance of a judge's authority when Melibeus argues that his vengeance constitutes a necessary evil (VII 1429–1432):

And yet seye I moore, that right as a singuler persone synneth in takynge vengeance of another man, / right so synneth the juge if he do no vengeance of hem that it han disserved. / . . . / And Seint Paul the Apostle seith in his Epistle, when he writeth unto the Romayns, that the 'juges beren nat the spere withouten cause, / but they beren it to punysse the shrewes and mysdoers and for to defende the goode men.' / If ye wol thanne take vengeance of youre enemys, ye shul retourne or have youre recours to the juge that hath the jurisdiccion upon hem, / and he shal punysse hem as the lawe axeth and requireth. (VII 1435–1443)<sup>253</sup>

I graunte yow that over-muchel suffraunce is nat good. / But yet it folweth it nat therof that every persone to whom men doon vileynye take of it vengeance, / for that aperteneth and longeth al oonly to the juges, for they shul venge the vileynyes and injuries. (VII 1467–1469)

In her insistence on leaving vengeance to judges, it is significant that Prudence does make reference to the 'sovereyn Juge that vengeth alle vileynyes and wronges' (VII 1458). She tells Melibeus that since he is unwilling to pursue vengeance according to the law (that is, through secular judicial means) and since Fortune, whom he is willing to trust, is fickle, he has no recourse but to rely on God, who, she promises, 'shal venge yow after that hymself witnesseth, where as he seith, "Leveth the vengeance to me, and I shal do it"' (VII 1459–1460). Prudence does not immediately shift her focus to a Christian imperative to forbear and leave punitive action to God, however. Rather, she returns to and elaborates on her arguments about a lawful, earthly revenge, first in the passage quoted above at VII 1467 and then again some sixty lines later when she says to Melibeus: '. . . ye shul venge yow

---

<sup>253</sup> Missing from Chaucer's text are translation of the following lines, printed in brackets in the *Riverside*, which indicate the shift in conversation from Melibeus' voice to Prudence's: *Et a ce respont dame Prudence, "Certes," dist elle, "je t'ottroye que de vengeance vient molt de maulx et de biens; / Mais vengeance n'appartient pas a un chascun fors seulement aux juges et a ceulx qui ont la juridicion sur les malfaitteurs.* Kennedy argues that Chaucer purposefully omitted these lines, which 'may be an example of authorial revision from the French source' (176 n 14). I follow the *Riverside* suggestion that the 'lines seem necessary to the sense' (explanatory notes, 926) and take the quotation as Prudence's words.

after the ordere of right; that is to seyn, by the lawe and noght by excesse ne by outrage' (VII 1529). While Prudence tries to channel her husband's anger towards acceptable action, her emphasis on vengeance in the context of the law has the effect of rendering the practice of vengeance itself acceptable. In the words of David Aers: 'She is thus telling Melibee that it *is* legitimate for Christians to seek revenge. All they need to do with their murderous feelings is make sure that they are exercised within the framework of current secular power, "as the lawe axeth."' <sup>254</sup>

Prudence and Melibeus find themselves at an impasse. While she has rejected vengeance in some portions of her speeches, she has contradicted herself and granted, in the ways outlined above, that it can be a viable course of action under certain circumstances. Thus, even though it is clear that Melibeus and his family are victims deserving of justice, <sup>255</sup>

---

<sup>254</sup> Aers, 77. John Alford gives a useful and succinct analysis of medieval thought concerning law in 'Literature and Law in Medieval England,' *PMLA* 92.5 (1977): 941–951. He writes: 'The classic exposition is that of St. Thomas Aquinas. . . . In its simplest form the theory holds that there are three main divisions of law: divine, natural, and positive. The definition of divine or eternal law is almost always taken from St. Augustine, the chief authority: "The eternal law is the divine order or will of God, which requires the preservation of natural order, and forbids the breach of it." The law is not directive in the sense of human law but is rather the principle or essence of law, without which all particular laws would be meaningless. . . . Natural law . . . comprises those fundamental notions of right and wrong to which (it was felt) all reasonable men are bound to assent; and it would have been adequate in itself to govern men's conduct if the light of reason had not been obscured by sin. After the Fall men required the guidance of a supplementary law, positive law, so called because it is "posited" or legislated, whether by God, the Church, or the state. It may vary in time and place according to a society's level of progress, but, in any event, its validity rests upon natural law and through it upon eternal or divine law. . . . Aquinas' analysis represents the formalization of that attitude which, perhaps more than anything else, separates Medieval from modern jurisprudence: namely, the feeling that the laws of man derive their sanction from an authority higher than man himself' (942–943). While this theory of law eventually breaks down, giving way to the view that 'the source of law [is] not in reason but in will: law is whatever the state says it is' (949), it seems evident that medieval Englishmen viewed legality and morality as linked entities, if not inseparable ones, and thus that a lawful vengeance was in line with God's will.

<sup>255</sup> The opening of the *Melibee* clearly establishes the details of the crime:

Upon a day bifel that [Melibeus] for his desport is went into the feeldes hym to pleye. / His wyf and eek his doghter hath he left inwith his hous, of which the dores weren faste yshette. / Thre of his olde

there seems no satisfactory way to attain that justice. Melibeus is unwilling to pursue sanctioned methods, and Prudence maintains that he will be unsuccessful in the violent, talionic method he proposes. Hence, only fifty lines from the end of the tale (and after many times that number of lines of Prudence's agitating for forgiveness of his enemies), they are stalled where they began with Melibeus yet asserting that he will take a harsh vengeance on his enemies. He plans on disinheriting them of all their possessions and exiling them forever (VII 1834–1835), despite having already agreed to follow the more merciful steps prescribed by Prudence (VII 1773–1777). Lee Patterson writes that this is 'a devastating moment, whose effect upon all that has gone before can have escaped readers only because of their commitment to an unproblematic view of the *Melibee*—or because their attention has by this point been “overcome” by Prudence's unremitting pressure.'<sup>256</sup> It is true that this moment puts in question what has gone before, as it should also problematize what comes afterward.

---

foes han it espied, and setten ladders to the walles of his house, and by wyndowes been entred, / and betten his wyf, and wounded his doghter with five mortal woundes in five sundry places— / this is to seyn, in hir feet, in hire handes, in hir erys, in hir nose, and in hire mouth—and leften hire for deed, and wenten away. (VII 968–972)

Kennedy (167–168) further explains how Chaucer makes evident the 'capital nature of these crimes' to his English audience:

Because the doors were shut fast, the enemies were forced to use ladders to enter through the windows; Melibee's foes are housebreakers and therefore felons. Moreover, the fact that the foes “espyed” that Melibee had left implies premeditation, which appears in court records as *ex malicia precogitata* and seems to have denoted a more severe offense, “aggravated,” if you will. In battering Prudence, the felons add a count of trespass to their offenses, and in wounding Sophie, and particularly by wounding her mortally, the felons add a second count of felony. Like the housebreaking, the wounding (*vulneravit*) is described in legal detail with particular resonance for English audiences. Under English law, the victim of a felony had to be named in the indictment, and Chaucer gave Sophie a name missing in the French original. The number and placement of injuries also had to be indicated, and after noting the “five sondry places” quoted above, Chaucer follows his French source in naming the injuries individually (VII 972). All this legal specificity serves to alert English audiences to the felonious nature of the “outrages” perpetrated on Melibee's household.

<sup>256</sup> Patterson, 157.

The ultimate and complete forgiveness by Melibeus of his enemies, which relies on the ‘grete skiles and resouns of dame Prudence’ (VII 1870), feels too abrupt and inconsistent a reversal to stand unquestioned. Indeed, Melibeus’ sudden emphasis on Christ’s mercy and repentance for one’s ‘giltes’ (VII 1884) and the resulting dissonance between his final words and all that precedes them calls to mind the puzzling relationship of Chaucer’s *Retraction* to the rest of the *Tales*. Both challenge the reader to question the speaker’s change of heart—its motivation, its sincerity, its ramifications.

So, when Melibeus finally says to his enemies, ‘it constreyneth me to doon yow grace and mercy’ (VII 1880), what really compels him to follow this course of action rather than the vengeance he initially proposes and relentlessly pursues through the rest of the tale? Melibeus explicitly attributes it to the enemies’ ‘grete humylitee’ and that they are ‘sory and repentant’ (VII 1878–1879), but certainly there is more to it; as we have seen, his prior acknowledgement of their penitence, which they express in utterly groveling terms,<sup>257</sup> leads not to such magnanimous forgiveness but first to the plan to disinherit and exile them. The answer, I want to suggest, lies in Prudence’s final pieces of advice, which show us how

---

<sup>257</sup> Thanne the wiseste of hem thre answered for hem alle and seyde, / “Sire,” quod he, “we knowen wel that we been unworthy to comen unto the court of so greet a lord and so worthy as ye been. / For we han so greatly mistaken us, and han offended and agilt in swich a wise again youre heigh lordshipe / that trewely we han disserved the deeth. / But yet, for the grete goodnesse and debonairetee that al the world witnesseth of youre persone, / we submytten us to the excellence and benignitee of youre gracious lordshipe, / and been redy to obeie to alle youre comandementz, / bisekyng yow that of youre merciable pitee ye wol considere oure grete repentaunce and lowe submyssioun / and graunten us foryevenesse of oure outrageous trespass and offense. / For wel we knowe that youre liberal grace and mercy stretchen hem ferther into goodnesse than doon oure outrageous giltes and trespass into wikkednesse, / al be it that cursedly and dampnably we han agilt agayn youre heigh lordshipe.” (VII 1816–1826)

Melibeus' actions heed a different set of considerations and allow him to exact a different sort of revenge on his enemies.

In her last efforts to convince Melibeus to do as she wishes—that is, to forgive his enemies and make peace—Prudence begins by speaking against covetousness, but it quickly becomes apparent that she is focused on other matters. She stresses the importance of keeping one's good name, saying, ' . . . for better it is to lessen good with worshipe than it is to wyne good with vileynye and shame. / And everi man oghte to doon his diligence and his bisynesse to geten hym a good name' (VII 1841–1842). She goes on:

And as touchynge that ye seyn ye wole exile youre adversaries, / that thynketh me muchel agayn resoun and out of mesure, / considered the power that they han yeve yow upon himself. And it is writen that 'he is worthy to lesen his privilege that mysuseth the might and the power that is yeven hym.' / And I sette cas ye myghte enjoyne hem that payne by right and by lawe, / which I trowe ye mowe nat do; / I seye ye mighte nat putten it to execucioun peraventure, / and thanne were it likly to retourne to the werre as it was biforn. / And therefore, if ye wole that men do yow obeisance, ye moste deemen moore curteisly; / this is to seyn, ye moste yeven moore esy sentences and juggementz. / For it is writen that 'he that moost curteisly comandeth, to hym men moost obeyen.' / And therfore I prey yow that in this necessitee and in this nede ye caste yow to overcome youre herte. / For Senec seith that 'he that overcometh his herte overcometh twies.' / And Tullius seith, 'Ther is no thyng so comendable in a greet lord / as whan he is debonaire and meeke, and appeseth him lightly.' / And I prey yow that ye wole forbere now to do vengeance, / in swich a manere that youre goode name may be kept and conserved, / and that men mowe have cause and mateere to preyse yow of pitee and of mercy, / and that ye have no cause to repente yow of thyng that ye doon. (VII 1847–1865)

In the heart of her speech, Prudence asks Melibeus to consider the power that his enemies have granted to him and how he can best maintain that power. She reminds him that even if he does have the right to punish them in the way he desires, he may not be able to accomplish it ('ye mighte nat putten it to execucioun peraventure')<sup>258</sup>—likely for the reasons related to kin and money that they have already discussed—and then they would find themselves in the

---

<sup>258</sup> As we will see in both the sagas and the excerpt from *Konungs skuggsjá* discussed in the next chapter, the prospect of success is one of the most important considerations before vengeance-taking in the Norse material.

same untenable situation with a ‘retourne to the werre as it was biforn.’ She therefore asks Melibeus to pass ‘esy sentences and juggementz’ on his enemies, but she does not expect him to be so merciful out of a sense of charity. Rather, this is another calculated move, one that takes into account the psychology of how to get people to respect one’s will (apparently a specialty of Prudence’s, as we have witnessed through the course of her debate with her husband); she argues that ‘if ye wole that men do yow obeisance, ye moste deemen moore curteisly’ since ‘he that moost curteisly comendeth, to hym men moost obeyen.’ By granting judgments that are so much more generous than the enemies deserve—by their own admission, made at the end of the tale when they ask mercy of Melibeus: ‘For we han so greatly mistaken us, and han offended and agilt in swich a wise agayn youre heigh lordshipe / that *trewely we han disserved the deeth*’<sup>259</sup> (VII 1818–1819)—Melibeus keeps them indebted to him, and the form of what they owe becomes the good will he has ostensibly extended versus the violence he once received at their hands. The first ‘payment’ they make to him, then, is their deference to his judgment and authority. Moreover, Melibeus can remain free of the fear of reprisal since he has not retaliated in kind, and any aggressive action on the part of his enemies after being forgiven would simply compound their troubles and heighten his public image as a ‘debonaire and meeke’ lord. In these climactic moments, Prudence is essentially advising Melibeus to keep the moral high ground and the upper hand by retaining his status as a victim. By remaining the last one wronged in the conflict, he does not effect

---

<sup>259</sup> My emphasis.

the transformation of any of his enemies into the victim he once was<sup>260</sup>—as we have previously seen the Reeve do to his own detriment with the Miller. Prudence persuades Melibeus that such restrained action as the forgiveness of his enemies does not leave him in a position of weakness but rather places him in one of power and sympathy; any temporary damage to his pride or honor is worth the benefits that being merciful will generate. It is only after hearing these overwhelming arguments and ‘considerynge hir trewe entente’ (VII 1871) that Melibeus finally takes action. He seems convinced that that ‘trewe entente’ includes the protection and promotion of his honor, which she has adamantly claimed is a priority to her: “Certes, sire, sauf youre grace, I love your honour and youre profit as I do myn owene, and evere have doon; / ne ye, ne noon oother, seyn nevere the contrarie’ (VII 1688–1689). Melibeus therefore shrewdly agrees to forgive his enemies—at least outwardly. As Kennedy writes, the ‘trewe entente’ of his own final speech ‘is almost impossible to ascertain.’<sup>261</sup> She insightfully points out that ‘future concord is not Melibee’s goal, whatever his “trewe entente” might be; he makes no mention of ceasing hostilities and promises no future amity.’<sup>262</sup> Melibeus’ words of forgiveness, like the Miller’s insults, are subject to interpretation and turn out to be subtle yet powerful weapons as well.

---

<sup>260</sup> Kerrigan, 6.

<sup>261</sup> Kennedy, 172.

<sup>262</sup> Ibid., 173. Turner argues that the peace agreement is dubious on both sides: ‘Prudence’s words on the limits of punishments that Melibee can exact suggest that the episodes in court are entirely staged—both parties know that it is in their best interests at this time to make peace, but the enemies’ declaration that they will submit to Melibee is false: they will only submit if the penalties suit them. There is no guarantee of their future behaviour; nor of Sophie’s future safety. Prudence has effected a short-term solution that has prevented Melibee from losing life or money, but we have no promise that peace and profit will remain in the long term’ (188).

Melibeus' ultimate revenge differs from what he at first envisions. Nevertheless, he succeeds in moving the balance of power back in his favor, and he suffers neither dishonor nor further injury through the process. With the backing of the larger community, which he wisely obtains from the group of counselors and friends before proceeding with his plans to 'forgive' his enemies (VII 1777–1790), he has arguably risen in stature through his actions. By combining the pragmatic advice and Christian rhetoric of his wife, Prudence, Melibeus avoids the pitfalls of talionic retribution and savors vengeance of another kind.

## Conclusions

Neither the *Melibee* nor the *Reeve's Tale* offers easy judgment on the issue of vengeance. More than anything, Chaucer's treatment of vengeance in these tales addresses its problematic nature. Instead of simplifying the issue and unambiguously condemning it as an un-Christian or unethical, he plays with its complexities and shows that there are satisfactions in and justifications for retributive action at the same time as there are strong arguments against it. He also illustrates the fundamental difficulties of knowing exactly what constitutes and differentiates just punishment and vengeance. The revenge in the *Reeve's Tale* is based on a consistent logic of talionic justice, and the Reeve openly declares his purpose to even the score. Yet he crosses a line somewhere in his preoccupation with justice. He comes off as villainous and vindictive and does not earn the sympathy of his audience.



Few would call his vengeance ‘justice.’ Meanwhile, there is no constant and identifiable ‘resoun’ underlying Prudence’s counsel as there is in the Reeve’s actions, and Melibeus’ vengeance is achieved despite his statements embracing its opposite. There are few who would consider Melibeus ‘villainous’ at the end of his tale, even though the revenge he exacts is more insidious than that of the Reeve in being so calculated and indirect. There is a disconnect between his words and his intentions, and the ‘forgiveness’ of his enemies is a sham.

Perhaps it is to be expected that Chaucer would make the most of these complexities. As I concluded in my last chapter on *Beowulf*, the success and legitimacy of revenge is a matter of perspective; a single act of revenge contains various possibilities depending on one’s position. Thus, revenge can be simultaneously good or evil, just or unjust, valid or indefensible. Such inherent multiplicity lends itself perfectly to Chaucer’s own eschewal of judgment regarding the morality of his characters and their actions (discussed above, see pages 8–9). Mann concludes that in the *General Prologue* the ‘overall effect of this method is rather to sharpen our perceptions of the basis of everyday attitudes to people, of the things we take into account and of the things we willingly ignore.’<sup>263</sup> Chaucer achieves a similar end here; by refusing to pass judgment on the Reeve and on Melibeus, he leads us to question why and how we pass the judgments that we do on those same characters and actions. In the case of the Reeve, Mann argues that ‘our impression of [his] malice and harshness derives at

---

<sup>263</sup> Mann, 191.

least as much from his appearance . . . as from any evidence of fraud or cruelty.’<sup>264</sup> Does his unpleasant appearance and lack of ‘sociability’<sup>265</sup> equally inform our opinion of his ‘vengefulness’? Likewise, does the fact that Chaucer ‘himself’ tells the *Tale of Melibeus* lead us to assume more charity in the story than actually exists? Do we ignore the many justifications for revenge in the tale because we think—and want to think—that Chaucer the man would not have condoned action that to modern minds seems so primitive and unthinking? Much like the *Beowulf* poet, who reflects the diversity in feud in the heteroglossia of his poem, Chaucer takes advantage of the multiple perspectives in revenge to challenge us to discover our own standards of judgment.

---

<sup>264</sup> Ibid., 165.

<sup>265</sup> Ibid.

### 3.

#### Writing Wrongs:

##### Author as Avenger in *Ljósvetninga saga*

#### Introduction

One of the categories of advice in the Old Norse handbook *Konungs skuggsjá*, or *King's Mirror*, concerns 'The Activities and Habits of a Merchant.' In it, the wise father imparts to his son information useful to the seafaring trader, including occupational tips on the best times to travel, the importance of watching the heavenly bodies, when to tar one's ship, and what essential items to keep on board. Interspersed with these more physically oriented items are guidelines on right conduct for the trader, who will necessarily come into contact with many different kinds of people in his business. Towards the end of this section, the father makes a few comments on the topic of revenge. He says:

Enn ero þeir luter i smaco er hugleiða þarf hvært sinne er þu fær. i haf þa hafðu t/au hunndrat /aðmala eða þriu mæð þer askip þau er til sæglbota se fallen æf til þarf at taka. Nalar margar oc þræðr ærna. eða s/iptingar þo at slict se sma]-a-æ'gt at geta þa er þat þo opt er til slices þarf at taka. Saum þarftu oc mykenn askip at hafa iafnan mæð þer s/a storan sëm þ/i skipi hæfir er þa hæfir þu hvart/æggia ræcsoum oc noðsaum. Socnir goðar oc smiða ærna. skolpa oc nafra. oc oll annur þau tol er til skips smiðar þarf at hafa. þæssa luti alla er nu hæfi ec næfnda þa skaltu minnaz at hafa askipi mæð þer er þu fær kaupfarar oc attu sialfr skip. En æf þu kæmr til kaupstaðar oc skaltu þar d/æliazt þa tac þer þar hærbærge sëm þu spyrr spakaztan hu(s)bonnda oc /insælaztan. bæðe við borgar mænn oc konongs mænn. Haf þec oc iafnan /æl at mat oc at klæðum æf þu att þæss koste. hafoc allðri u spaca mænn eða s/arfsama i matuneyti mæð þer eða i s/æit. Vær þu sialfr sëm spacaztr || [ok þo sva at eigi þoler þu scemðir eða stora brigzla staðe firi obbleyðe sacar. En þo at navzynligar sacar þreyngve þec til uspectar þa gersc þu eigi braðr ihemndom fyrr en þu ser at uel uerði framgengt ok þar come niðr sem maklect er. en eigi / scaltu lauprifr geraz ef þu ser at eigi má framkvemt uerða ok leitaþu þinat sçmðar þo at siðarr verði nema hinn bioðe sva attv ser uel sçmðr.]<sup>266</sup>

<sup>266</sup> Ludvig Holm-Olsen, ed., *Konungs Skuggsjá*, 1<sup>st</sup> ed., Gammelnorske Tekster nr. 1 (Oslo: Norsk Historisk Kjeldeskrift-Institut, 1945), 6.

There remain a few minor matters that ought to be mentioned. Whenever you travel at sea, keep on board two or three hundred ells of wadmal of a sort suitable for mending sails, if that should be necessary, a large number of needles, and a supply of thread and cord. It may seem trivial to mention these things, but it is often necessary to have them on hand. You will always need to carry a supply of nails, both spikes and rivets, of such sizes as your ship demands; also good boat hooks and broadaxes, gouges and augers, and all such other tools as ship carpenters make use of. All these things that I have now named you must remember to carry with you on shipboard, whenever you sail on a trading voyage and the ship is your own. When you come to a market town where you expect to tarry, seek lodgings from the innkeeper who is reputed the most discreet and the most popular among both kinsmen and boroughmen. Always buy good clothes and eat good fare if your means permit; and never keep unruly or quarrelsome men as attendants or messmates. Keep your temper calm though not to the point of suffering abuse or bringing upon yourself the reproach of cowardice. Though necessity may force you into strife, be not in a hurry to take revenge; first make sure that your effort will succeed and strike where it ought. Never display a heated temper when you see that you are likely to fail, but be sure to maintain your honor at some later time, unless your opponent should offer a satisfactory atonement.<sup>267</sup>

This passage reveals several simple but important points about vengeance in thirteenth-century Scandinavia. That it was practiced and common is apparent from the nonchalance with which it is included under the heading of ‘minor matters.’ Revenge functioned as another practical tool for guarding one’s safety and advancing one’s interests; just as extra wadmal and good boat hooks might be necessary for maintaining and repairing one’s ship, so too was retribution needed at times to maintain and repair one’s honor and status in a conflict. The passage also stresses that there are rules and limitations regarding vengeance. Far from the wild, impulsive action that the word often conjures up in modern minds, the prescribed revenge in *Konungs skuggsjá* is calm, deliberate, and more importantly, not necessarily taken if atonement is made in another way or if there is no prospect of success. Though revenge might have been so natural in this society as to be simply a ‘minor matter,’ it clearly was not a thoughtless reflex.

---

<sup>267</sup> Laurence Marcellus Larson, ed. and trans., *The King’s Mirror (Speculum Regale—Konungs skuggsjá)*, (New York: The American-Scandinavian Foundation and London: Humphrey Milford, 1917), 84–85.

These observations about revenge in the excerpt from *Konungs skuggsjá* are applicable to the Old Icelandic family sagas or *Íslendingasögur*, though revenge is far from a ‘minor matter’ in the latter body of works. Written during the tumultuous Sturlung Age (c. 1200–1262) and depicting the equally turbulent, formative times of the Saga Age (c. 870–1050), the family sagas are well known for being a ‘conflict-hungry literature,’<sup>268</sup> where even seemingly minor disputes ‘are described in loving detail.’<sup>269</sup> Almost all of the forty<sup>270</sup> family sagas center on the far-reaching and violent bloodfeuds that spring from these disputes, and vengeance is at the heart of the social and legal systems that enabled both the progression and resolution of these feuds. Vengeance itself was considered a practical necessity and duty, and the man who took a proper revenge gained honor. Though it may have been an automatic response in Icelandic society to consider vengeance for any offense or harm suffered, that is not to say that it was an unthinkingly accepted institution. Saga authors—and their characters—often show ambivalence about the morality of revenge killings especially, and they raise many questions about the process of feud and the costs of vengeance in their society.

In this chapter, I will focus on the details of *Ljósvetninga saga* to examine its treatment of vengeance and those who resolutely pursue it. It is representative of saga

---

<sup>268</sup> Alan Berger, ‘Lawyers in the Old Icelandic Family Sagas: Heroes, Villains, and Authors,’ *Saga-Book* 20.1–2 (1978–1979): 70–79 at 79.

<sup>269</sup> Judith Jesch, “‘Good Men’ and Peace in *Njáls saga*,’ in *Introductory Essays on Egils saga and Njáls saga*, ed. John Hines and Desmond Slay (London: Viking Society for Northern Research, 1992), 80.

<sup>270</sup> For a complete list of family sagas, see *The Complete Sagas of Icelanders*, ed. Viðar Hreinsson (Reykjavík: Bókaútgáfan Leifur Eiríksson, 1997).

conventions in its vivid depictions of many compelling aspects of vengeance and feud found in the family sagas—including violent killings, secret dealings, fierce incitements, legal wrangling, and both hard-fought and broken settlements—as it chronicles hostilities between two generations of the leading families of Ljósavatn and Møðruvellir. At the same time, in its particular attitudes towards the figure of Guðmundr inn ríki, the saga exhibits the kind of ambivalence about revenge that I mention above.<sup>271</sup> It offers a perfect opportunity to explore the sophisticated ways that the author uses his narrative to expose, contemplate, and comment on ‘the paradox at the heart of the revenge imperative.’<sup>272</sup>

### The Case of Guðmundr

The first half of *Ljósvetninga saga* is largely concerned with the revenge of Guðmundr inn ríki, a powerful *goði* or chieftain, on his adversaries, Þórir Helgason and Þorkell hákr. The

---

<sup>271</sup> Before I proceed, I should address the issue of textual transmission, which has been the basis of most of the previous criticism and study of *Ljósvetninga saga*, and which Andersson and Miller (introduction, 63–74) cover in some detail. Two fragmentary parchments contain different redactions of the saga, referred to as the A- and C-texts. The A-text is much shorter than the C-text (which is known in full from 17<sup>th</sup>- and 18<sup>th</sup>-century paper manuscripts) and opinions have varied on which represents the ‘original’; some scholars have viewed C as an expanded version of A [Björn Sigfússon (1940), Hallvard Magerøy (1956)] while others have seen A as an abridgement of C [Adolfine Erichsen (1919), Theodore Andersson (1964), Cecilia Borggreve (1970)]. Miller and Andersson note that ‘[a]mong the family sagas, *Ljósvetninga saga* is the only instance of such a doublet transmission. There are a few other cases of differing redactions . . . but the differences in these cases can be understood in terms of editorial abridgement. The versions of *Ljósvetninga saga* have proved much more difficult to reconcile with each other’ (65). The biggest difference between the two texts is the inclusion in C of three *þættir*; there is no consensus on whether they are an interpolation. For the purposes of this chapter, I follow the text of the *Íslensk fornrit* edition, which does not include the *þættir* in the main text and which supplements the very fragmentary A-text with the C-text. Where both texts run parallel, I will note which text supplies quotations.

<sup>272</sup> Vésteinn Ólason, ‘Family Sagas,’ in *A Companion to Old Norse-Icelandic Literature and Culture*, ed. Rory McTurk (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), 111.

trouble for Guðmundr ostensibly begins at a wedding feast where his wife, Þórlaug, and Þórir's wife, Geirlaug, share a bristly exchange that begins with veiled bickering over status and ends with openly slanderous remarks.

Kona fór með vatn fyrir pallinn ok hafði dúk á ǫxl ok fór fyrir Geirlaugu, því at hon hafði verit með henni inn fyrra vetrinn. Geirlaug tók til orða: “Þú ferr með góðum vilja, en eigi með nógum álitum. Færðu Þórlaugu fyrr vatnit. Svá á at vera.” Hon gerði nú svá. Þórlaug drap við hendi ǫfugri ok mælti: “Bjóð eigi beinann, Geirlaug, því at sjá kona gerir rétt. Eigi býr þat í mínu skapi, at mér leiki á þessu ǫfund. Er sýnt, at ǫnnur sé kona ǫfugri en þú í heraðinu?” sagði hon. Geirlaug mælti: “Greiddr er beininn, Þórlaug. En hefir þú metnað til at vera mest metin; hefi ek engan hlut til jafns við þik nema gjaforð.” Þórlaug svarar: “Víst hygg ek þik vel gefna. En nú er þar komit, at ek veit eigi aðra framar gipta en mik.” Geirlaug svarar: “Þá værir þú vel gefin, ef þar væri einmælt um, at bóndi þinn væri vel hugaðr eða snjallr.” Þórlaug svarar: “Þetta er illa mælt, ok muntu fyrst manna mæla.” Hon svarar: “Satt mun þat, fyrir því at fleiri mæla it sama, en Þorkell hákr hefir haft þetta fyrst fyrir mér ok þeir Þórir bóndi minn, en hverr maðr mælir þat sama, er tungu hrærir.” Þórlaug mælti: “Ber hingat vatnit, kona, ok hætum tali þessu.” Siðan hneig hon upp at þilinu ok mataðisk ekki.<sup>273</sup>

A woman brought water before the cross-bench and had a towel over her shoulder, and she brought it first to Geirlaug because she had stayed with her last winter. Geirlaug said, “You go with good will, but not with enough consideration. Take the water to Þórlaug first. It should be so.” She did so now. Þórlaug waved with the back of her hand and said, “Do not offer hospitality, Geirlaug, because this woman does right. That is not in my mind, to be envious. Is it clear that there is another more worshipful woman in the district than you?” Geirlaug answered, “The hospitality is paid out, Þórlaug. And you have the honor to be most highly esteemed; I am in no part your equal except in my marriage.” Þórlaug answered, “I certainly think you well-married. But as far as that’s concerned, I know of no other woman better married than me.” Geirlaug answered, “Then were you well married, if there were one opinion about it, that your husband were very courageous and manly.” Þórlaug answered, “This is evilly said, and you are likely to be the first of people to say it.” She answered, “It is likely to be true, because more say the same, and Þorkell hákr and my husband, Þórir, first told that to me and each person who moves his tongue says the same.” Þórlaug said, “Bring the water here, woman, and let us leave off this talk.” Afterward she leaned against the wall and ate nothing.

Þórlaug's reaction testifies to the seriousness of Geirlaug's words; shortly afterward, she feigns illness in order that she and her husband may immediately leave for home. The insults against Guðmundr are twice repeated in the saga, each time with increasing explicitness and effect. The first comes at the assembly, where Guðmundr has steadily refused a settlement

<sup>273</sup> Björn Sigfússon, ed., *Ljósvetninga saga, Íslensk fornrit*, vol. 10 (Reykjavík: Híð Íslenska Fornritafélag, 1940), 17–18. Further references will be made in the text by page number.

with Þórir arbitrated by his own brother, Einarr. Þórir decides to force the issue and makes a challenge at the Law-Rock:

Þá mælti Þórir hátt: “Eigi mun ek enn láta þrjóta boðin við þik, Guðmundr, því at ek veit, at þér þykkir annat miklu stórligar við mik en um haframerkingina Þóris Akraskeggs, því at ek veit, at þú kennir mér þat einum, er margir mæla,—ok eru þó eigi aðrir minna af valdir—, at ek hafa mælt ragliga við þik. Vil ek þat nú reyna, hvárt þetta er sannmæli eða eigi, því at ek vil skora á þik til hólmgöngu, at þú komir á þriggja náttu fresti í hólmi þann, er liggr hér í Øxará, er menn hafa áður vanir verit á hólmi at ganga, ok berjumsk þar tveir, svá sem forn lög liggja til. Ætla ek, áður en þeim fundi lúki, at færask skal af tvímælit, hvárt sannara er, at þú sér maðr snjallr ok vel hugaðr, eða sé hinn veg, sem vér höfum áður til komit ok allmargir hafa sagt fyrir oss, at þú sér eigi snjallr.” (39-40; C-text)

Then Þórir said loudly, “I will not yet let the offers come to an end with you, Guðmundr, because I know that it seems to you another much greater thing with me than about the marks of the goats of Þóris Akraskegg, because I know, that you impute that to me alone, which many say—and yet others are not less guilty—that I have spoken cravenly about you. I wish now to test that, whether that is true or not, because I wish to challenge you to a duel, that you come in the space of three nights to that islet which lies here in the Øxar river, where men have before been accustomed to fight duels, and let us two fight there according to old laws. I think, before that meeting should end, that doubt shall be removed whether it is more true that you are a manly man and very courageous, or the other way, as we have before charged and very many have said before us, that you are not manly.”

The same insults are most rudely put by Þorkell hákr, just before Guðmundr and his men kill him:

Þú hafðir bratta leið ok erfiða, ok trautt kann ek at ætla, hversu rassinn myndi sveitask ok erfitt hafa orðit í þessi ferð. (52)

You had a steep and difficult way, and I am scarcely able to think, how your ass is likely to have sweated and been exhausted on this journey.

When Guðmundr tries to dodge blows during the fight and stumbles into a vat of milk,

Þorkell laughs:

Nú kveð ek, [at] rassinn þinn hafi áður leitat flestra lækjanna annarra, en mjólkina hygg ek hann eigi fyrr drukkit hafa.” (52)

Now I declare, [that] your ass has sought out most other brooks, but I think it has not drunk milk before.

While they may seem benign enough or even silly to the modern reader, these types of insults, classified as *níð*, were particularly dangerous in the context of the shame culture of



medieval Iceland. According to *Grágás*, as well as the earlier Norwegian laws of the *Gulaping*,<sup>274</sup> certain words were considered offensive enough to warrant full compensation, outlawry, or even death. Concerning *ef maðr níðir annan* [if a man insults another], the *Gulaping* laws state:

Engi maðr skal gera tungu nið um annan. ne trenið. En ef hann verðr at því kunnr oc sannr. at hann gerir þat. þa liggr hanom utlegð við. syni með settar eiði. fellr til utlegðar ef fellr. Engi skal gera yki um annan. æða fiolmæle. þat heiter yki ef maðr mælir um annan þat er eigi ma væra. ne verða oc eigi hever verit. kveðr hann væra kono niundu nott hveria. oc hever barn boret. oc kallar gylvin. þa er hann utlagr. ef hann verðr at því sannr.<sup>275</sup>

No man shall utter tongue slander or carve wood slander about another. And if he is accused and convicted of doing this, the penalty shall be outlawry. Let him deny the charge with an oath taken with five others, and if the oath fails, [the failure] leads to outlawry. No one shall circulate loose talk or make an exaggeration about another. That is called an exaggeration which a man tells about another, but which is not, or cannot be, or never has been true; as if he says that the other man is a woman every ninth night and that he has borne a child, or if he calls him a she-wolf. If he is convicted of this, he shall be outlawed.<sup>276</sup>

These proscriptions are revisited in another section, *um fullrettes orð* [concerning speech that calls for full compensation], which further details the consequences of such insults:

Orð ero þau er fullrettis orð heita. þat er eitt ef maðr kveðr at karlmanne oðrom, at hann have barn boret. þat er annat. ef maðr kveðr hann væra sannsorðenn. þat er hit þriðdia ef hann iamnar hanom við meri. æða kallar hann grey. æða portkono. æða iamnar hanom við berende eitthvert. þa skal hann bota hanom fullum rette firi. þar ma han oc viga um. at utlogum þeim manne i gegn þeim orðom er nu hevi ec talt. ef hann skirskotar undir vatta.<sup>277</sup>

These are [the kinds] of insulting remarks that call for full atonement. The first is when a man says of another that he has given birth to a child. The second is when he says that the man has been used as a woman. The third is when he likens him to a mare or calls him a slut or a whore or likens him to any kind of a female beast. For these [remarks] he shall pay the man a full atonement; *but the man may*

<sup>274</sup> *Gulapingslög* is based on two redactions, the first attributed to the reign of Ólafr Haraldsson (r. 1015–1028), and the second comprising revisions made during the reign of Magnús Erlingsson (r. 1156–1184). Phillip Pulsiano, ed., *Medieval Scandinavia, An Encyclopedia* (New York and London: Garland Publishing, 1993), 385.

<sup>275</sup> *Gulapingslög, Norges gamle love indtil 1387*, ed. R. Keyser and P.A. Munch (Christiana, 1846), I, 57.

<sup>276</sup> Laurence M. Larson, trans., *The Earliest Norwegian Laws* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1935), 123. Translation is Larson's with a few emendations.

<sup>277</sup> *Gulapingslög, Norges gamle love I*, 70.

also seek satisfaction in blood and outlawry for the sayings that I have now enumerated, if he has asked witnesses to take note of them.<sup>278</sup>

*Grágás* is similarly harsh concerning *níð*. While its laws refer more specifically to insults composed in verse, they share the motivation and force of the *Gulaping* laws:

Ef maðr bregðr manne brigzlom eða mælir honum aliót þott hann segi satt oc varðar fiorbaugs garð. . .  
 . Ef maðr gefr manne nafn anat en hann eigi aðr. oc varðar fiorbaugs garð ef hann vill reiðaz við. . .  
 Ef maðr mælir við man háðung eða gørir ýki um oc varðar fiorbaugs garð. . .<sup>279</sup>

If a man reproaches someone with taunts or asserts some disfigurement in him, even if he speaks the truth then the penalty is lesser outlawry. . . . If a man gives someone a name he did not have before, then the penalty is lesser outlawry. . . . If a man speaks mockery of someone or makes an exaggeration about him, then the penalty is lesser outlawry. . . .<sup>280</sup>

Ef maðr heyrir iscallidscap orð þat er maðr a vígt um. at hann se ragr eða stroðen. hefnir hann víge eða averkom oc scal hann um ill mæle sækia.<sup>281</sup>

If someone hears in poetry words of a kind for which a man has the right to kill—that he is womanish or has been buggered—and avenges it by killing or inflicting injuries, then he shall avenge it with killing or injuries, and (then) he shall bring a suit for slander.<sup>282</sup>

Performing *níð* constitutes a serious infraction of the law, warranting the same punishments that homicide or adultery would. The laws quoted above punish the types of insults that involve an attack on a man's reputation as a man, ones which imply an 'essential impotence . . . or lack of masculinity.'<sup>283</sup> The words for which one is legally sanctioned to kill emphasize this. The term *argr* (as well as its metathesis, *ragr*, and the related nouns *ergi* and *regi*) is a

<sup>278</sup> Larson, *The Earliest Norwegian Laws*, 143. My emphasis.

<sup>279</sup> *Grágás*, ed. Vilhjálmur Finsen, *Konungsbók* (Copenhagen, 1852) 183.

<sup>280</sup> Andrew Dennis, Peter Foote, and Richard Perkins, eds. and trans., *Laws of Early Iceland, Grágás II* (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2000) 196-7.

<sup>281</sup> Ibid., 183-4.

<sup>282</sup> Ibid., 198.

<sup>283</sup> Roberta Frank, *Old Norse Court Poetry: The "Dróttkvætt" Stanza* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1978) 126. Such a lack of masculinity is exactly what Geirlaug and her husband, Þórir, insinuate when they say that Guðmundr is not *snjallr*. I have translated the term as 'manly' above, but this is admittedly a more functional than precise definition. Its range of meanings include 'eloquent, well-spoken,' 'good, excellent,' and 'valiant, doughty.' Richard Cleasby and Gudbrand Vigfusson, eds., *An Icelandic-English Dictionary*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. with supplement by W.A. Craigie (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1957), s.v. "snjallr." The term encompasses the idea of what a man ought to be in early Icelandic culture.

highly abusive one. As Folke Ström states: '[I]t is scarcely an exaggeration to say that no other Norse word was able to provoke such violent feelings and reactions.'<sup>284</sup> Its use as an ultimate insult can be seen in the Eddic poem *Lokasenna* where Loki spars verbally with other Norse gods, and both Óðinn and Loki accuse each other of 'unmanly' deeds:

*Óðinn kvað:*

Veiztu, ef ek gaf  
þeim er ek gefa né skylda,  
enom slæverom, sigr,  
átta vetr  
vartu fyr iqrð neðan  
kýr mólkandi ok kona,  
ok hefir þú þar [börn of] borit,  
ok hugða ek þat args aðal.

*Loki kvað:*

En þik siða kóðo  
Sámseyio í,  
ok draptu á vétt sem vqlor.  
Vitka líki  
fórtu verþiód yfir,  
ok hugða ek þat args aðal.

*Óðinn said:*

You know, if I gave  
whom I should not have given  
—the less valiant—the victory,  
eight winters  
you were under the earth  
a milker-of-cows and a matron  
and there you've borne babies—  
and that I thought an unmanly nature.

*Loki said:*

But you, they said, did sorcery  
on Sámsey  
and tapped on a tub-lid like the shamanesses.  
In wizard's guise  
you went over the world of men—  
and that I thought an unmanly nature.<sup>285</sup>

<sup>284</sup> Folke Ström, 'Níð, Ergi, and Old Norse Moral Attitudes' (The Dorothea Coke Memorial Lecture in Northern Studies, University College London, May 10, 1973), 4.

<sup>285</sup> Ursula Dronke, ed., *The Poetic Edda: Mythological Poems*, vol. 2 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), 338. Dronke's translation.

Various dictionary definitions of *argr* include ‘effeminate,’ ‘emasculate,’ ‘cowardly,’ and ‘craven.’<sup>286</sup> Though it is a difficult term to define precisely, the implications of its use are clear: the *argr* man was no man at all. He was a passive, weak, and deviant member of a community that valued the active pursuit of honor and the appropriate performance of one’s duty, particularly in the matter of vengeance. A proverb from *Grettis saga* highlights this sentiment: *þræll einn þegar hefnisk en argr aldri* [Only a thrall avenges himself at once, but the *argr* never].<sup>287</sup> A man accused of being *argr* who did nothing to avenge the insult only confirmed the accusation; in a shame culture such inaction could “bring about a kind of social death as one passed from the ranks of the shamable [sic] to the oblivion of the shameless.”<sup>288</sup>

The insults leveled against Guðmundr in *Ljósvetninga saga* are thus among the worst kinds of words and indeed weapons one could use against another in medieval Iceland, and as the laws stipulate, they incur the severest penalties. Guðmundr has the legal imperative—and in this society, the moral one—to prosecute, outlaw and/or kill both Þórir Helgason and Þorkell hákr, even if what they said were true. The saga makes abundantly clear by reporting the insults in full detail and direct speech that he does not act precipitously or randomly in seeking revenge. Þórir himself admits as much in his conversation with Einarr:

---

<sup>286</sup> Cleasby and Vigfusson, s.v. ‘argr.’

<sup>287</sup> Guðni Jónsson, ed., *Grettis saga, Íslensk fornrit*, vol. 7 (Reykjavík: Híð Íslenska Fornritafélag, 1936) 44.

<sup>288</sup> William Ian Miller, *Humiliation: And Other Essays on Honor, Social Discomfort, and Violence* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993), 121.

Eitt sinn á þinginu spurði Einarr Þórir, hverja meðferð hann ætlaði at hafa. “Eða hví ætlar þú, at Guðmundr þingi svá fast um þetta? Kann vera, at honum þykki þér framarliga talat hafa? Þórir mælti: “Eigi hefi ek varorðr verit við Guðmund, sem margir aðrir.” (38; C-text)

One time at the thing Einarr asked Þórir what conduct he intended to have. “And why do you think, that Guðmundr consults so hard about this? Can it be that to him it seems you have spoken too much?” Þórir said, “I, like many others, have not been wary in my words about Guðmundr.”

Hence, Guðmundr’s refusal of settlements until he is awarded self-judgment against Þórir Helgason<sup>289</sup> and his pursuit of petty cases until he has amassed enough cash to compensate the killing of Þorkell hákr with the money of Þórir’s own þingmen (a plan advised by Einarr Konálsson, described by the narrator as a *spekingr mikill* [very wise man] (19–20)) should be recognized as a legitimate revenge, perhaps even admired for its design.

The saga, however, as clearly as it lays bare the reasons why Guðmundr should desire and deserve to take revenge, equally devalues that revenge. When the saga reports that he gains some honor by sentencing Þórir to lesser outlawry,<sup>290</sup> it immediately undercuts that honor by telling how Þórir, without much ado, returned every spring to Iceland<sup>291</sup> to resume

<sup>289</sup> Guðmundr’s judgement of lesser outlawry for Þórir is in fact less than that specified by the law codes. Aside from the insults themselves, *Grágás* prohibits *níð* in the very place where Þórir speaks the insults: *Ef maðr queðr níð um man at logbergi oc varðar scog gang. . . .* (184) [If a man recites shaming slander about someone at the Law-Rock, then the penalty is full outlawry. . . .] (Dennis, Foote, and Perkins, *Grágás II*, 198).

<sup>290</sup> *Svá komsk þar orðrómr á, at Guðmundr hefði haft mestan sæmdarhlut af málum þessum* (43; C-text) [So there (was) circulated a rumor, that Guðmundr had had the greatest portion of honor from this suit].

<sup>291</sup> When Guðmundr sentences Þórir he says: *Hann skal ok sekr ok vera utan þrjá vetr svá sem fjörbaugsmaðr. En fyrir hvern vetr, ef hann er hér á landi, skal hann gjalda hundrað silfrs* [He shall also be outlawed and be abroad for three vetr just as in lesser outlawry. And for each vetr, if he is here in the country, he shall pay one hundred and twenty ounces of silver] (43; C-text). *Vetr* can be translated either as ‘winter’ or as ‘year.’ Lesser outlawry would stipulate that Þórir be out of the country for three years, but he returns to Iceland each winter with no apparent penalty imposed by Guðmundr. Miller and Andersson translate the first *vetr* as ‘year’ and the second as ‘winter.’ They write: ‘By returning each summer Thorir makes a mockery of the author’s “just as in lesser outlawry.” But it also seems rather strange that Gudmund [sic] would do nothing about Thorir’s [sic] self-serving understanding of the word *vetr* if that was not part of the the terms of the settlement’ (*Law and Literature in Medieval Iceland*, 186 n 113). It seems to me that Þórir’s distortion of Guðmundr’s sentence—for it is *his* words, rather than the narrator’s, that specify lesser outlawry—is precisely the point. Þórir’s actions show how Guðmundr’s ‘revenge’ against him fails.

his life and business and was considered a *skorungr mikill* (44; C-text) [very outstanding man]. His trips abroad seem more like pleasant trading voyages than any kind of exile, and the tranquility of the rest of his life in no way points to hardships suffered at the hands of his enemy:

Þat sumar fór Þórir Helgason útan í Skagafirði, en bú hans stóð eptir á Laugalandi. Hann var vetr þann í Orkneyjum. En eptir um várit kom hann út aptr til Íslands í Eyjafirði, er þrjár vikur vátu af sumri, ok reið þá heim til Lauglands ok réð sér hjú. Reið hann eptir um sumarit til alþingis. Ok svá var hann á Vöðlaþingi, ok heldu þeir Einarr saman flokkum sínum. Hann var heima um sumarit at bússýslu sinni ok fór útan um haustit, ok þá til Nóregs, litlu fyrir vetrnætr, ok var þó í Orkneyjum þann vetr. En eptir um várit fór hann til Íslands, ok fór hann alla sǫmu leið sem it fyrra sumarit. Fór hann enn útan um haustit ok var í Nóregi þann inn þriðja vetr ok fekk sér húsaviðu. Stýrði hann skipi sínu aptr til Íslands ok kom í Eyjafjörð. Fór hann þá heim til bús síns á Laugaland ok bjó þar til elli ok þótti vera skorungr mikill. (43–44; C-text)

That summer Þórir Helgason went abroad from Skagafjörður, but his farm remained at Laugaland. He was in Orkney that winter. And afterward during the spring he came back to Iceland at Eyjafjörður, three weeks into the summer, and then he rode home to Laugaland and hired help for himself. Afterward he rode during the summer to the althing. And so he was at the Vöðlathing, and he and Einarr held their companies together. He was at home during the summer seeing to his household business, and he went abroad in the autumn, and then to Norway a little before the winter nights, although he was in Orkney that winter. And afterward in the spring he went to Iceland, and he behaved the same way as he had the previous summer. He departed again in the autumn and was in Norway that third winter, and he got for himself house-timbers. He steered his ship back to Iceland and arrived in Eyjafjörður. Then he went home to his farm at Laugaland and lived there until old age and was considered a very outstanding man.

Consequently, Guðmundr's revenge is 'robbed of its full impact.'<sup>292</sup> In fact, the calmness of Þórir's life after the outlawry provides a stark contrast to the eventfulness of Guðmundr's own. For him, the remaining episodes of the first half of the saga present a downward trajectory. They involve foreboding dreams and portents regarding Guðmundr's sons who will not escape the feud he began<sup>293</sup>; an encounter with Ófeigr Járngerðarson (a member of

<sup>292</sup> Andersson and Miller, 103.

<sup>293</sup> Guðmundr's visit to Þórhildr Vaðlækkja to discover his fate and that of his sons is itself damning. As Lönnroth writes, 'In the sagas it is usually only villains who take part in *seiðr* and other types of magic. . . .' 'The Noble Heathen: A Theme in the Sagas,' *Scandinavian Studies*, 41.1 (1969): 1–29 at 16.

the Ljósavatn clan who is very favorably portrayed in the saga) in which Guðmundr is intimidated out of the high seat and proves that he is no more powerful than he was before winning the suit against his rivals; and finally, his death scene—called by Turville-Petre ‘one of the most memorable in the lesser family sagas’<sup>294</sup>—which makes a point of what a cold man he was and how others wished him dead.

In a similar fashion the episodes narrating Guðmundr’s much-desired revenge on Porkell hákr and its aftermath seem only to reassert the basis of the insults against him, rather than restoring his good name and status. To accomplish the killing he relies on the help of the unsavory henchman, Þorbjörn rindill,<sup>295</sup> who himself is open to the charge of being *argr* on account of his own lack of bravery; while he agrees to spy on Porkell, he is unwilling to fight or risk his own life in any way. When Þorbjörn arrives at Porkell’s farm in the guise of a worn-out man in need of shelter, Porkell proves to be decent enough, extending hospitality despite his wife’s repeated warnings against it. In return, Þorbjörn violates the tacit obligations of the guest-host relationship, unbolting the door in the night so that Guðmundr and his men may attack his unsuspecting host. Porkell defends himself vigorously in the

---

<sup>294</sup> G. Turville-Petre, *Origins of Icelandic Literature* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1953), 239.

<sup>295</sup> Þorbjörn’s very name, *rindill* or wren, carries with it connotations of sexual immodesty as certain birds were associated with promiscuity. Svala (or ‘swallow’) in *Bandamanna saga*, for example, is forward in engaging the troublesome Óspakr and arranges her own marriage with him. When he disappears for a long period of time, she remarries, only to have Óspakr return and kill her new husband out of jealousy. Óspakr himself is wounded; he is later found dead in a cave, alone and honorless. See Guðni Jónsson, ed., *Bandamanna saga, Íslensk fornrit* vol. 7 (Reykjavík: Hið Íslenska Fornritafélag, 1936), 363. Chaucer also seems to refer to such associations in his *General Prologue* when he writes that ‘smale foweles maken melodye, / That slepen al the nyght with open ye / (So priketh hem Nature in hir corages)’ (9–11). Benson writes: ‘If Chaucer does refer to nightingales, *slepen . . . with open ye* may be a sort of litotes meaning “sleep not at all,” since nightingales were said to sing continuously day and night in the mating season.’ Explanatory notes to the *General Prologue* in *The Riverside Chaucer*, 799.

ensuing fight, despite being greatly outnumbered, and manages twice to insult Guðmundr again.<sup>296</sup> Guðmundr, on the other hand, twice *hopaði undan* [drew back, retreated], once causing his fall into the vat of milk. It is notable that the saga reports that *þeir* [they]—not ‘Guðmundr’—kill Þorkell in the end.

Alongside the accusations of cowardice underlying this episode are those of homosexuality in the next one. Guðmundr is fiercely protective of and overly loyal to Þorbjörn rindill in a way that signals some intimacy between them.<sup>297</sup> In his zealous pursuit of vengeance for Þorbjörn’s death, Guðmundr twice threatens to burn alive those sheltering his killers. The second time he nearly sacrifices his own family; Þórlaug and his eldest son, Halldórr, happen to be in the same house as Þorbjörn’s killers and refuse to exit due to their kinship with some inside. The laws stipulate a punishment of outlawry for this action, as it does for other certain types of homicide, but the literature makes clear that there is something particularly egregious about house burnings.<sup>298</sup> In *Njáls saga* the burning of Njáll and his family at Bergþórshvoll is acknowledged by both sides to be a desperate and dishonorable

---

<sup>296</sup> See page four above.

<sup>297</sup> Gísli Sigurðsson, ‘\*The Immanent Saga of Guðmundr ríki,’ in *Learning and Understanding in the Old Norse World: Essays in Honour of Margaret Clunies Ross*, ed. Judy Quinn, Kate Heslop, and Tarrin Wills, Medieval Texts and Cultures of Northern Europe vol. 18 (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols Publishers, 2007), 211.

<sup>298</sup> The laws (section K 109, ‘On Burnings’) stipulate the following: It is prescribed that if a man asks another to go with him to burn a building with people or a people’s property in it, the penalty is lesser outlawry; and the same applies to anyone who promises to go, and nine neighbors of each one of them are to be called locally. If they set out and have fire with them, then neighbors are to be called from the place where they took the fire. But once fire is taken for burning they fall with forfeit immunity and the penalty is outlawry. But if they burn a building with people or people’s property in it, the penalty is outlawry, and neighbors [of the place burnt] are to be called locally. Dennis, Foote, and Perkins, *Grágás I*, 169.



act. When Njáll tells his family to go into the house to defend themselves as Gunnarr once did, Skarpheðinn, his son, says:

Gunnar sóttu heim þeir höfðingjar er svá váru vel at sér at heldr vildu frá hverfa en brenna hann inni. En þessir munu sækja oss með eldi, ef þeir megu eigi annan veg, því at þeir munu alt til vinna, at yfir taki við oss. Munu þeir þat ætla, sem eigi er ólíkligt, at þat muni þeira bani, ef oss dregr undan.<sup>299</sup>

The chieftains who attacked Gunnarr at home were so noble-minded that they wished rather to turn away than to burn him in his house. But these men will attack us with fire, if they are not able to another way, because they will do anything to get the better of us. They will think, as is not unlikely, that that will be their death if we escape.

Flosi, the leader of the burners, himself says:

Nú er þat sét, at vér getum þá eigi með vápnum unnit. Er sá nú margr, at eigi gengr jafnskarpliga at sem ætluðu. En þó munu vér nú verða at gera annat ráð fyrir oss. Eru nú tveir kostir, ok er hvárgi góðr, sá annarr, at hverfa frá, ok er þat várr bani, en hinn annarr at bera at eld ok brenna þá inni, ok er þat þó stór ábyrgð fyrir guði, er vér erum kristnir sjálfir. En þó munu vér þat bragðs taka.<sup>300</sup>

Now it is seen that we are not able to overcome them with weapons. Now there are many who do not go as boldly as they intended. Yet we will now have to devise another plan for ourselves. There are now two choices, and neither is good, that is one, that we turn away and that is our death, and the other to set fire and burn them in, and that is a great responsibility before God, as we are Christians ourselves. But even so we shall have recourse to that (last resort).

Afterwards, the saga reports:

Þeir Flosi váru við eldana, þar til er mjök var morgnat. Þá kom þar maðr ríðandi at þeim. Flosi spurði hann at nafni; hann nefndisk Geirmundr ok kvezk vera frændi Sigfússoða ok mælti: “Þér hafið mikit stórvirki unnit.” Flosi svarar: “Bæði munu menn þetta kalla stórvirki ok illvirki. Ok þó má nú ekki at hafa.”<sup>301</sup>

Flosi and his men were with the fire until it was very nearly morning. Then a man came there riding towards them. Flosi asked him his name; he said he was named Geirmundr and that he was a kinsman of the Sigfússons and said, “You have performed a great deed.” Flosi answered, “Men will call that both a great deed and an evil deed. But nothing may be done now.”

<sup>299</sup> Einar Ól. Sveinsson, ed., *Brennu-Njáls saga*, *Íslensk fornrit*, vol. 12 (Reykjavík, 1954), 326.

<sup>300</sup> *Ibid.*, 327–328.

<sup>301</sup> *Ibid.*, 334.

Another famous burning in the saga corpus, that of Flugumýrr in *Íslendinga saga* in

*Sturlunga saga*, is described in terms that convey the magnitude of such an event. The

narrator says:

Þá er brenna var á Flugumýri, var liðit frá Önundarbrennu fjórum vetrum fátt í sex tigu vetra, en frá Þorvaldsbrennu hálfr þriði tigr vetra.

Þessi tíðendi spurðust brátt, ok þótti öllum vitrum mönnum þessi tíðendi einhver mest hafa orðit hér á Íslandi, sem guð fyrirgefi þeim, er gerðu, með sinni mikilli miskunn ok mildi.<sup>302</sup>

When Flugumýrr was burned, fifty-six winters had passed since Önund was burned and twenty-five winters since Þorvald was burned. These tidings spread quickly, and the news seemed to all the wise men one of the greatest events there had been here in Iceland, may God forgive them, who did it, with his great mercy and kindness.

In *Ljósvetninga saga*, Guðmundr's attempted burning is called an úhæfa, 'enormity';<sup>303</sup>

Miller and Andersson translate the word as 'atrocious.'

Síðan kómu þeir í Gnúpufell ok gengu at durum. En hurðir vóru aptr, ok stóð Eilífr fyrir innan hurð með skeyti sín. Þá mælti Guðmundr: "Sel þú fram, Brúni, Eilífr ódádámanninn, ella munu vér leggja eld at bænum." Hann svarar: "Þá skal hart eptir ganga. Ok kynligt er, at þér sýnisk at hafa stórvirki á várum frændum ok leita eptir svá frekt um menn slíka, er einskis eru verðir." Guðmundr mælti, at eldinn skyldi at bera. Þá var svá gørt. Þá gekk kona til hurðinnar ok mælti: "Má Guðmundr heyra mál mitt?" Hann kvezk heyra,—"eða er Þórlaug þar? Ok er einsætt at ganga út." Honn svarar: "Eigi mun ek skilja við Álfðísi, frændkonu mína, en hon mun eigi skilja við Brúna." [Guðmundr mælti]: "Ef þú vill kjósa heldr at deyja við skómm hér en lifa með mér með sœmð ok virðingu, þá skal þó verkit eigi fyrir farask." Þá gekk maðr í dyrrnar ungr ok mælti: "Hvárt má Guðmundr heyra mál mitt?" Hann kvazk heyra,—"eða er Halldórr þar, sonr minn?" Hann kvað svá vera. Guðmundr mælti: "Gakk þú út frændi." Hann svarar: "Eigi þarftu þess mik at eggja, því at þér skal engi verri en ek, ef móðir mín brennr hér inni." Síðan áttu menn hlut at við Guðmund, at hann gerði eigi svá mikla óhæfu. Ok svá varð, at hann lét teljask ok fór í brottu. Síðan varð aldri vel með þeim. Guðmundr sat yfir metorðum mestum í heraðinu. (57)

Afterward they came to Gnúpufell and went to the doors. And the doors were shut, and Eilífr stood inside the door with his spear. Then Guðmundr said, "Brúni, hand over the criminal, Eilífr, or else we will set fire to the farm." He answered, "Then shall it be pursued hard. And it is strange, that you seem to have great undertakings against our kinsmen and look so attentively after such men, who are worth nothing." Guðmundr said that fire should be brought. Then it was done. Then a woman went to the door and said, "Can Guðmundr hear my speech?" He said he could hear,—"but is that Þórlaug there? It is the only thing to be done that you come out." She answered, "I will not part from Álfðís, my kinswoman, and she will not part from Brúni." [Guðmundr said,] "If you prefer to die with shame

<sup>302</sup> Guðni Jónsson, ed., *Íslendinga saga in Sturlunga Saga*, vol. 2 (Reykjavík: Íslendingasagnaútgáfan, 1953), ch. 174, 444.

<sup>303</sup> Cleasby and Vigfusson, s.v. 'úhæfa.'

here than live with me with honor and esteem, then the deed still shall not come to nought.” Then a young man went to the door and said, “Can Guðmundr hear my speech?” He said he could hear,—“but is that Halldórr, my son?” He said it was so. Guðmundr said, “Come out, kinsman.” He answered, “You need not urge this of me, because no one shall be worse for you than me, if my mother burns to death here.” Afterward men confronted Guðmundr, that he not carry out such a great enormity. And so it happened, that he let himself be dissuaded and went away. Afterward it never went well with them. Guðmundr held sway over everyone in the district.

Parallels in the language of the burning scenes invite us to contrast Flosi’s behavior at

Bergþórshvoll with Guðmundr’s at Gnipufell. Although Flosi does end up burning the

house and those inside, he allows the women and children to exit first and tries to persuade

Njáll and Bergþóra to do the same:

Nú taka öll húsin at loga. Þá gekk Njáll til dyra ok mælti: ‘Er Flosi svá nær, at hann megí heyra mál mitt?’ Flosi kvezk heyra. Njáll mælti: ‘Villt þú nokkut taka sættum við sonu mína eða leyfa nokkurum mönnum útgöngu?’ Flosi svarar: ‘Eigi vil ek taka sættum við sonu þína, ok skal nú yfir lúka með oss ok eigi frá ganga, fyrr en þeir eru allir dauðir. En þó vil ek lofa útgöngu konum ok börnum ok húskörlum.’

...

Flosi gekk þá at dyrunum ok mælti, at Njáll skyldi ganga til máls við hann ok svá Bergþóra; þau gerðu svá. Flosi mælti: ‘Útgöngu vil ek þér bjóða, því at þú brennr ómakligr inni.’ Njáll mælti: ‘Eigi vil ek út ganga, því at ek em maðr gamall ok lítt til búinn at hefna sona minna, en ek vil eigi lifa við skömm.’ Flosi mælti til Bergþóru: ‘Gakk þú út, húsfreyja, því at ek vil þik fyrir engan mun inni brenna.’ Bergþóra mælti: ‘Ek var ung gefin Njáli, ok hefi ek því heitit honum, at eitt skyldi ganga yfir okkr bæði.’ Síðan gengu þau inn bæði. (329–330)

Now the whole house began to burn. Then Njáll went to the door and said: ‘Is Flosi near enough that he is able to hear my speech? Flosi said he could hear. Njáll said: ‘will you accept any settlement with my sons or allow any people an exit?’ Flosi answered: ‘I will not accept a settlement with your sons, and now it must end with us and we will not go from here before they are all dead. But I will allow an exit to the women and children and servants.’

...

Flosi went then to the door and said that Njáll and also Bergþóra should come to speak with him; they did so. Flosi said: ‘I wish to offer you an exit, because you do not deserve to burn.’ Njáll said: ‘I do not wish to go out, because I am an old man and little prepared to avenge my sons, and I do not wish to live with shame.’ Flosi said to Bergþóra: ‘Come out, lady, because I do not wish for anything that you burn.’ Bergþóra said: ‘I was young when given to Njáll, and I have promised to him that we should both share one fate.’ Afterward they both went in.

Flosi, who turns out to be an honorable and noble man at the end of *Njáls saga*, is most

interested in punishing those he holds responsible, namely the sons of Njáll. Guðmundr,

however, is willing to sacrifice his closest relations in the name of revenge. His extreme actions privilege his relationship with Þorbjörn over those with his wife and son (even if he is talked out of actually setting fire to the house, the fact that he threatens it is sufficiently damaging), and thus reiterate the charges of homosexuality laid against him.<sup>304</sup>

Guðmundr's behavior in the attempted burning episode further attests to the charge that he is *argr*, but not simply for the passion that Þorbjörn's death elicits. For while sexual and gendered elements supply the force of *níð* in many instances, some critics argue for a broader interpretation of *níð*. Ström, for example, does not prioritize the sexual aspect of *argr*, but rather places it alongside others in a complex of meanings: 'The sexual meaning cannot be isolated from the other elements which go to make up the *ergi* concept. *Ergi* in its

---

<sup>304</sup> It is interesting to note that the charges occur elsewhere in the saga corpus, which makes it seem as though even the saga author is merely reporting what is common knowledge. In *Ölkofra þáttur* Guðmundr is one of six chieftains outsmarted in a lawsuit by the aptly named Broddi Bjarnarson (*broddr* means 'spike' or 'shaft', and Broddi is himself a goad or prick to spur others to behave more honorably). Guðmundr ominously tells Broddi to be sure he rides home by way of the Ljósavatn pass, to which Broddi responds:

Efna skal þat, eða ætlar þú, Guðmundr, at verja mér skarðit? Allmjök eru þér þá mislagðar hendr, ef þú varðar mér Ljósavatnsskarð, svá at ek mega þar eigi fara með förunautum mínum, en þú varðar þat eigi it litla skarðit, sem er í milli þjóa þér, svá at ámælislaust sé. (94)

I shall do that, but do you intend, Guðmundr, to hold the pass against me? Your hands are very much misplaced, if you close the Ljósavatn pass to me, so that I may not travel there with my companions, but you do not defend that little pass which is between your buttocks, so that it might be without shame.

Jón Jóhannesson, ed., 'Ölkofra þáttur,' *Íslensk fornrit*, vol. 11 (Reykjavík: Hið Íslenska Fornritafélag, 1950). In *Njáls saga* Guðmundr is one of the chieftains Skarpheðinn insults while he and his brothers make their rounds in the pre-trial scenes of chapters 119–120. He says:

Veit ek, at þú þykkisk til mín mæla, ok er eigi einn veg farit ógæfu okkarri. Ek hefi ámæli af vígi Hǫskulds Hvítanessgoða, sem várkunn er. En þeir gerðu illmæli um þik Þorkell hákr ok Þórir Helgason, ok hefir þú af því ámæli. (302)

I know, that you think to blame me, but our ill-luck is not gone one way. I have reproach for the killing of Hǫskuldr Hvítanessgoði, as is to be excused. But Þorkell hákr and Þórir Helgason slandered you, and you have reproach from that.

In the end Guðmundr supports the Njalssons, and eventually Kari, but only after he hears that Þorkell hákr endures worse insults and humiliation from Skarpheðinn. For more on Guðmundr's appearances in other sagas and þættir see Gísli Sigurðsson; Miller and Andersson, 85–90.

narrower sexual sense merely constitutes the physical side of a personality type that was regarded as deeply contemptible.’<sup>305</sup> Ármann Jakobsson similarly argues for a more expansive understanding of *ergi*, particularly in the context of his investigation of the concept’s relationship to magic:

Even though *ergi* does mean sexual deviance, and ‘queerness’ is thus a good translation, this meaning may not have more primacy than that related to witchcraft. In fact, I think that *ergi* may have more to do with a world view than with sexuality, in that it indicates everything unbecoming, villainous and deviant: incest, bestiality, homosexuality, the blurring of gender role, aggressive female lust, shape-shifting and sorcery.<sup>306</sup>

Alison Finlay points out that ‘[e]ven the laws do not support [an] exclusive concentration on sexual symbolism, since non-sexual insults such as calling a free man a thrall or a troll are equally strongly condemned by the law.’<sup>307</sup> It is true that both the Norwegian and Icelandic laws quoted above include penalties for *yki* [exaggeration], for example, not necessarily of a sexual kind; *yki* would even include forms of excessive praise if it made someone the subject of satire. In this more expansive semantic range of *argr*, the implied perversity includes any behavior—whether sexually aberrant, cowardly, or dishonorable in some other way—that deviated from what was expected from a man in this society. In the case of Guðmundr, *Ljósvetninga saga* has been methodically revealing the perversity in his character, and it only

---

<sup>305</sup> Ström, 18. Contrast Preben Meulengracht Sørensen, for example, who argues in his study of *níð* that the overarching sense of effeminacy and moral corruption of *argr* derive from the sexual sense of the word. To say that a man was *argr* was to imply that he was ‘willing or inclined to play . . . the female part in sexual relations’ (18). This in turn suggested that if he were willing to ‘subject himself to another in sexual affairs [he would] do so in other respects’ (20). *The Unmanly Man*, trans. Joan Turville-Petre (Odense: Odense University Press, 1983).

<sup>306</sup> Ármann Jakobsson, ‘The Trollish Acts of Þorgrímr the Witch: The Meanings of *Troll* and *Ergi* in Medieval Iceland,’ *Saga-Book* 32 (2008): 39–68 at 63.

<sup>307</sup> Alison Finlay, ‘*Níð*, Adultery, and Feud in *Bjarnar Saga Hítðlakappa*, *Saga-Book* 23.3 (1991): 158–178 at 159.

reaches its peak in this episode. The irony in his demand that Þórlaug do the ‘honorable’ thing by leaving her kinsmen and joining him as he burned them proves that he does not know what honor truly means.<sup>308</sup> It is fitting that he is dissuaded here from committing an *úhæfa*, a term which has its root in *hóf*, ‘moderation, measure’; it is moderation that Guðmundr sorely lacks, and this is his primary flaw from which others spring. References to Guðmundr’s immoderation and his overbearing nature—typical markers of a villain in the sagas—punctuate the first half of the saga:

Fátt var með þeim bræðrum, Einari ok Guðmundi, því at Guðmundr sat mjök yfir metorðum manna norðr þar. (16)

There was a coolness between those brothers, Einarr and Guðmundr, because Guðmundr greatly held sway over others in the north there.

Þórir svarar: “Eigi kanntu nú hófi þínu um áganginn.” (35; C-text)

Þórir answers: “You [Guðmundr] now do not know moderation in your aggression.”

Guðmundr sat yfir metorðum mestum í heraðinu. (57)

Guðmundr held sway over others in the district.

One consequence of such immoderation is a dangerous disregard of kinship bonds, the most important and binding ties in early Icelandic society. Besides alienating his wife and son, Guðmundr is perpetually on poor terms with his brother, Einarr, who is depicted positively as

---

<sup>308</sup> The situation calls to mind that in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* entry on Cynewulf and Cyneheard where first Cynewulf’s and then Cyneheard’s men refuse offers of safety from their kinsmen who fight for the opposing side. This is standardly cited as an example of the priority given to lordship over kinship in Anglo-Saxon England, which seems the opposite of what Þórlaug and Halldórr choose. In both the chronicle entry and the saga, however, the key idea is that honorable action involves remaining loyal despite the consequence of death.

a loyal friend, wise man, and the more intelligent of the two.<sup>309</sup> The one time Guðmundr seems to ask for rapprochement, he simply exploits their relationship in an attempt to oblige Einarr to himself before he can side with his best friend, Þórir Helgason.<sup>310</sup> Both Guðmundr's initial appeal (notable for its careful diction which includes calling Einarr *broðir* rather than by name<sup>311</sup> and the repeated use of the dual pronouns) and his reaction when Einarr withdraws his support make a mockery of the natural responsibilities and feelings that kinship demands—particularly in his use of the same words and concepts so relevant to the burning scene:

---

<sup>309</sup> In chapter fifteen of the C-text, the saga narrates a flashback—a rarity in the corpus [O'Donoghue writes that 'there are no flashbacks in saga narrative' (45)]—which drives home the difference in their intelligence and pinpoints the beginning of the animosity between them:

Þat er sagt frá þeim bræðrum, þá er þeir váru ungir, at Guðmundr átti sér fóstura skollóttan, ok unni hann honum mikit. Ok einn dag, er hann svaf úti í sólskini, settisk mý mart á skalla honum. En Guðmundr rakaði á brott með hendi sinni, ok þótti honum sem fóstura sínum myndi mein at verða. Einarr mælti: “Hogg þú til øxi þinni, vinr, í skalla karlinum.” Hann gerði svá, at hann tók øxina ok nartaði í skallann, svá at skallinn blæddi, en mýit hófsk upp. Þá vaknaði karlinn ok mælti: “Erfitt er nú, Guðmundr, er þú vinnr á mér.” Hann svarar: “Nú finn ek í fyrsta sinni, at ráðin Einars eru eigi af heilu við mik. Má ok vera, at at því komi optar.” Ok heldr eldisk þeim hér langr óþokki af, bræðrum. (37–38; C-text)

That is said about those brothers, when they were young, that Guðmundr had for himself a bald foster-father, and he loved him greatly. And one day, when he slept outside in the sunshine, many a midge landed on his bald head. And Guðmundr swept them away with his hand, and it seemed to him that his foster-father may be harmed. Einarr said, “Strike with your axe, friend, on the old man's bald spot.” He did so, that he took his ax and nicked his skull, so that the bald spot bled, and the midge flew away. Then the old man woke up and said, “It is hard now, Guðmundr, when you do harm to me.” He answered, “Now I discover for the first time, that Einarr's advice to me is not well-meant. And that may be, that that come about again.” And rather long dislike between the brothers grew from this.

Although Einarr's trick on Guðmundr seems uncalled for, Guðmundr appears dull-witted in the story. This is in keeping with the generally negative portrait of him conveyed by the saga.

<sup>310</sup> This friendship between Einarr and Þórir Helgason is reminiscent of that between Njáll and Gunnarr in that their bond allows them to support one another despite the conflicts that arise with one another's kin. Of Einarr and Þórir the saga reports: *Þeir veittusk at qllum málum* [They supported each other in all matters] (16). Njáll and Gunnarr make frequent statements and gestures of friendship before the feud between their families becomes overwhelming.

<sup>311</sup> ‘The recitation of a kinship term was a usual part of the diction of request and admonishment. . . . It was also used as a marker of solidarity once the obligation was admitted and the request accepted, a constantly recited sign of connectedness.’ Miller, *Bloodtaking and Peacemaking*, 157.

Setjumsk niðr, bróðir, ok tölumsk við. En svá er mál með vexti, at fátt hefir verit með okkr um frændsemi, ok vilda ek því meir leita minnar sœmðar en gæta frændsemi við þik. . . . Ok ef vit værim báðir at einu ráði ok samhuga, þá ætla ek, at fátt skyldi við haldask. Nú vilda ek, at betr væri með okkr. . . . Tökumsk nú í hendr at guðs vitni. . . at vit veitumsk at öllum málum, því at þat er makligast. (26-7; C-text)

Let us sit down, brother, and talk. And thus is the matter come, that it has been chilly between us with respect to kinship, and I wished more to look after my honor than to take care of kinship with you. . . . And if we were both of one counsel and opinion, then I think that few should compare with us. Now I wish, that it were better between us. . . . Let us now join hands with the witness of God . . . that we support each other in all matters, because that is most fitting.

En Einarr fór á fund Guðmundar ok hafði skikkjuna með sér. Þá mælti hann: “Ek vil bjóðask til þess, frændi, at sætta ykkar Þóri ok mæla til vinmæla í milli ykkar. Ok munu menn þat mæla, at þínu máli sé framar komit, þó at á þetta sé var sæzk.” Guðmundr svarar: “Ek mun nú hafa vilja liðveizlu þá til mála okkarra Þóris, sem þú hefir áðr heitit mér at guðs vitni. Væri þat þó in mesta óhæfa at verða mér ekki at liði ok fulltingi, þótt frændsemi eina væri til at telja, en nú er þat ógeranda, með því át þú hefir áðr til guðs skotit ok þegit af mér dýrgrip.” (35–36; C-text)

And Einarr went to meet Guðmundr and had the cloak with him. Then he said: “I wish to volunteer myself for this, kinsman, to reconcile you with Þórir and to speak friendly words between you. And men are likely to say that, that your suit is advanced even though it is settled.” Guðmundr answers: “I will now wish to have the support in my suit with Þórir, as you have before promised to me with god as witness. That were yet the greatest enormity not to become a help and assistance to me, although it were to count kinship alone, and now that cannot be done, because you have already called on god as a witness and accepted from me a thing of great value.

The hypocrisy in Guðmundr’s interactions with Einarr only furthers the saga’s case against him. He consistently shows a willingness to cross the accepted social limits and behaves in ways that do not conform to honorable ideals, thus making him worthy of the insults and charges of perversion leveled against him. His revenge, therefore, no matter how justified it might have been legally or morally in the culture of saga Iceland, is not endorsed by the narrative. Like the ancient skald who composed *níðvísur* [libel poetry] in order to influence events and perhaps even correct some wrong or offense,<sup>312</sup> the author composes his saga in a

---

<sup>312</sup> The belief that the skald harnessed magical or supernatural power in his satire or invective was widely held. Roberta Frank writes that ‘the first Norse satirists are more interested in gaining power over events, in launching words like spears toward their goal, than in achieving a logical narrative or coherent meaning.’ *Old Norse Court Poetry: The ‘Dróttkvæt’ Stanza*, *Islandica XLII* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1978), 125.



way that enacts a sort of revenge on Guðmundr by disallowing his own hard-fought vengeance—in effect, correcting it by recording his own flaws and transgressions and making them central to the story. Indeed, the words of Guðmundr’s wise counselor, Einarr Konálsson—*Ok verði því meiri hefndin sem lengr er* (20; C-text) [And the vengeance becomes greater, the longer it takes]—take on a special irony in relation to Guðmundr’s own ‘literary legacy,’<sup>313</sup> created centuries after the man himself lived and died.<sup>314</sup>

## Part Two: Peacemakers as Protagonists

According to Andersson, the saga’s hostility is not reserved for Guðmundr alone but extends to all the Mǫðruvellingar, and its whole point is to establish the moral superiority of the Ljósvetningar. He writes:

The thematic thrust of the second part of *Ljósvetninga saga* conforms to the first part. In both generations the author erects a contrast between a dominant chieftain with unrivaled resources and a disadvantaged but courageous resistance group. It is almost a foregone conclusion that the powerful chieftain will prevail, but that is not the point the author wishes to make. The reader’s attention is focused rather on the conduct of the antagonists and their moral stature. The winners are

---

Regarding their purpose, Robert C. Elliott’s description of the Greek satirist, Archilochus, could equally apply to these skalds: ‘invective is attached to a feeling of moral mission; the satirist . . . is . . . concerned with punishing vice.’ *The Power of Satire: Magic, Ritual, Art* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1960), 11.

<sup>313</sup> Theodore M. Andersson, *The Growth of the Medieval Icelandic Saga (1180-1280)* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006), 128. G. Turville-Petre writes that ‘[f]ew leading characters of any saga are described with such contempt as he. He is rich and powerful, but cruel, cowardly, and immoral, and he earns the hatred of his neighbours.’ *Origins of Icelandic Literature* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1953), 238–239.

<sup>314</sup> W.A. Craigie places Guðmundr inn ríki’s death in 1025 A.D. *The Icelandic Sagas* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1913), 44. Gísli Sigurðsson traces his chronology to ‘[s]ome time after 1030, according to *Bolla þáttur* (ch. 5), [when] Guðmundr invites Bolli Bollason to a feast’ (212). *Ljósvetninga saga* itself is traditionally dated to the mid-thirteenth century, around 1260 (Pulsiano, 392); Andersson argues for a slightly earlier date, ‘perhaps in the 1220s’ (*The Growth of the Medieval Icelandic Sagas*, 119).

discredited—in Gudmund’s case, with palpable malice—and the losers are exalted. It is the losers who display political acumen and forceful policy, as well as religious humility.<sup>315</sup>

It is true that the second half of the saga repeats patterns set in the first half. Part two also opens with a seemingly unrelated dispute over a woman, and it too shows the leaders of the opposing clans at first cooperating with one another. Despite their best intentions, however, enmities between the Ljósvetningar and Mǫðruvellingar quickly flare up again, this time escalating to a pitched battle at Kakalahóll. Among the Mǫðruvellingar, certain behaviors resurface as well. Guðmundr’s son, Eyjólfur, like his father before him, seems in competition with his brother, and he selfishly tries to keep both halves of their inheritance. He, too, is more than once accused of displaying *ofsi* [overbearing behavior], and his stubborn refusal to abide by the settlement for his brother’s death at Kakalahóll recalls Guðmundr’s own relentless prosecution of the wrongs done to him. This ‘special quality [in] the saga’s distribution of the feud over two generations so that it is doubled’<sup>316</sup> might be understood—as it is by Andersson—to highlight the litigious and vengeful natures of the Mǫðruvellingar. Perhaps such bias is to be expected in a saga whose very title leads us to identify with the other clan.<sup>317</sup> But while it may be fair to say that the Mǫðruvellingar are generally portrayed more harshly than the Ljósvetningar, the second half of the saga does more than recapitulate

---

<sup>315</sup> Ibid., 131.

<sup>316</sup> Theodore Andersson, *The Icelandic Family Saga: An Analytic Reading* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1967), 260.

<sup>317</sup> At least one manuscript of the A-text (Reykjavík, AM 561 4<sup>to</sup>, 32 verso) contains the title we know the saga by today. See <<http://www.am.hi.is/WebView/VefHandritalisti.aspx>>. Many later copies also use the title ‘*Ljósvetninga saga*’ or some variation prioritizing Ljósavatn or Þorgeirr over Mǫðruvellir or Guðmundr. Two late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century copies, however, begin with a title citing Guðmundr’s name first. For a useful list of these manuscripts and titles as well as links to digitized images of many of them, see <<http://sagnanet.is/saganet/?MIval=/ManuscriptSagasB&STitle=Lj%F3svetninga%20saga&language=english>>.

their shortcomings, and I would argue that Andersson's division of 'winners' and 'losers' along clan lines does not account for other patterns in the saga and one crucial aspect that emerges most clearly in its latter half.

If the Ljósvetningar are the protagonists of the story, they are certainly not without their faults. For example, they are as prone to infighting as the Mǫðruvellingar. Þorvarðr, this generation's leader of the Ljósavatn clan, and his son, Hǫskuldr, are said to have somewhat chilly relations, *því at þeir vǫru óskaplíkir, frændr, í sumum háttum* (63) [because those kinsmen were dissimilar in temperament in some respects]. After the trouble over the paternity of Friðgerðr's child has escalated to involve Eyjólfur Guðmundarson, Hǫskuldr consults with his nephew, Hrafn, rather than his father, and the two decide to keep the matter from him in order to assert their own power among the Ljósvetningar. Hrafn chafes at the thought that *þeim þykkir ekki til vár koma, nema til Þorvarðs eins* (70) [to them it seems we amount to nothing, except for Þorvarðr alone]. Only when it is clear that they will be overcome without his support do they fully disclose the situation to Þorvarðr, who himself agrees to help only after being fiercely goaded by his wife. Indeed, the Ljósvetningar here show a pattern of jockeying for position among themselves: the first major conflict in part one of the saga shows Þorgeirr goði's sons opposed to their father after they take vengeance on Sǫlmundr, whom Earl Hákon had sent to both Þorgeirr and Guðmundr inn ríki for protection. Each side stubbornly refuses to settle despite the fact that they are repeatedly told and reminded that fathers and sons should not stand against one another. When Arnórr learns

of Þorgeirr's siding with Guðmundr instead of his sons, he says it is a *kynlig veizla, ok at illu mun verða* [a strange backing, and it will turn out badly] (8). Þórðr, Þorgeirr's brother, *kvað Þorgeiri mjök missýnask, er hann gekk í mót sonum sínum í orrustu* [said to Þorgeirr he was greatly mistaken, when he went against his own sons in battle] (9). Þorgeirr's four sons are also chastised for breaking with their closest kin. Ófeigr agrees to help Hǫskuldr and his brothers but says it is *ófallit at deila við föður sinn* [unfitting to quarrel with one's own father] (10). Neither are the Ljósvetningar without their examples of cowardice, disloyalty, and spitefulness. After the battle at Kakalahóll, no one dares at first to invite Hallr Ótryggsson, now a marked man after killing Koðrán Guðmundarson, to his home. During the battle itself, the saga reports that Hrafn was frightened by the fight and considered possible avenues of escape:

*Þá sǫgðu menn, at Hrafn gætti eigi miðr skógarins en fundarins. . . .* (81)

Then men said that Hrafn thought no less of the woods than of the fight. . . .

*Hrafn hafði verit um nóttina á Hálsi ok kom útan ór Flateyjardal. Ok var þat meir af atburð en at honum þætti þar allgott.* (81)

Hrafn had been during the night at Háls and came down from Flateyjardal. And that was more eventful than seemed to him very good.

Hǫskuldr later refers to this cowardly behavior by sarcastically asking whether the feast's seating should reflect *mannvirðing* [rank] or *framganga* [courage]; Þorvarðr responds, '*Hrafn*

*skal mér næstr sitja*’ [Hrafn shall sit next to me] (83). Shortly afterward, Hrafn accepts gold from Eyjólfur in exchange for his agreement not to take part with Þorvarðr.<sup>318</sup>

Just as the one clan’s characterization cannot be entirely positive, neither can the other be entirely negative. The Mǫðruvellingar are not without their own representatives of moderation and moments of peaceable and honorable action. Guðmundr’s youngest son, Koðrán, is introduced in terms typical of a saga hero, as *manna vænstr, efniligr ok vinsæll* (61) [most handsome of men, promising, and popular]. He is mortally wounded while trying to separate the men fighting at Kakalahóll, but he hides the seriousness of the injury from Eyjólfur in order that the combat might stop. When he is struck, an unidentified voice from the crowd announces, “*Þar fór nú einn bezti maðr ór Eyjafirði*” (81) [There went now the best man from Eyjafjorð]; nothing in his portrayal contradicts this assessment, which could come from either side, and the loss of such a brother helps to explain, even if it does not excuse, Eyjólfur’s inability to accept paid compensation rather than blood vengeance for his death. Even Eyjólfur himself makes gestures of friendship toward Þorvarðr before the hostilities resume between the two clans. The saga reports:

*Eyjólfur sendi menn á fund hans ok bauð honum heim til sín, ok þann kost tók hann. Eyjólfur tók vel við honum ok mælti: “Undir þínum þokka þykki mér mest af þínum frændum. Ok þótt fátt hafi verit um með oss af inum fyrrum atburðum, þá vil ek nú vingask við þik, ok skalt þú þiggja at mér stóðhest. Sjá*

---

<sup>318</sup> *Eyjólfur sendi menn þangat, ok [skyldu] gista at Hrafn’s at Lundarbrekku, ok mælti til vináttu við hann ok kunni hann ekki um sakar, ef hann skilðisk við ok væri í engri ráðagörð með Þorvarði, ok sendi Hrafn hálfs eyris gull. Ok er sendimenn kómu, tók hann þenna kost.* (84).

Eyjólfur sent men that way, and they should pass the night at Hrafn’s at Lundarbrekka, and he declared friendship with him and that he would make no case against him, if he parted company with and were in no designs with Þorvarðr, and he sent Hrafn half an ounce of gold. And when the messengers came, he took those terms.

*er hér beztr í heraðinu.” Þorvarðr svarar: “Þiggja mun ek hestinn, ok haf þökk fyrir. Ok hlýða mun okkr, ef eigi spilla aðrir menn um.” (62-3)*

Eyjólfr sent men to meet him and invited him to his home, and he accepted that offer. Eyjólfr received him well and said: “It seems to me your opinions are worth most among your kinsmen. And although it has been cool between us because of those old events, yet I wish now to be friends with you, and you shall receive from me a stud horse. This is the best here in the district.” Þorvarðr answers: “I will accept the horse, and have thanks for it. And it will suffice between us, if other men do not spoil our arrangement.”

After Hǫskuldr and Brandr begin the trouble with Friðgerðr, Eyjólfr is not quick to violence or ultimatums. Clearly distinguishing his character from his father’s is his repeated wish to deal moderately and justly with the Ljósvetningar and to come to a settlement if possible: *Ek vilda víst undan eira við Ljósvetninga* (66) [I certainly wish to yield to the Ljósvetningar]; *Pá eru þér tregari en vér myndim vilja, en ek mun hógliga til mæla* (68) [Then are you more difficult than we would wish, but I will proceed calmly]; *Þat mun í lysask, at ek vil sættask . . .* (68) [That will be shown in it, that I wish to settle . . .]. And while Þorvarðr is credited for his explicitly Christian refusal to continue the feud near the end of the saga,<sup>319</sup> Eyjólfr similarly cites religious grounds in his refusal to attack Hǫskuldr and renew the feud when the opportunity presents itself. He says, “*Eigi skal ek launa svá Guði, er hefir á sét vandræði vár*” (104) [I shall not repay God thus, who has watched over our troubles].

Except for Guðmundr who is so caricatured in his negative portrayal, both the Ljósavatn and Mǫðruvellir clans turn out to be mixtures of good and not so good people who

<sup>319</sup> “*Langt er nú ǫxanna várra í milli ok þeira Mǫðrvellinga. Ok þat vilja þeir enn, at þær takisk til, ef ek kem til Íslands.—Ok verði nú sem Pétur postoli vill. Ætla ek þó, at betra væri, at ek kæma eigi út apr.*” (103)

It is a long way now between our axes and those of the Mǫðrvellingar. And they would wish that still, that they be taken up, if I come to Iceland.—And now let it be as the apostle Peter wishes. I think yet, that it were better, that I do not come back there. It is notable, however, that the saga reports that Þorvarðr only went a few more miles before he felt a pain in his eyes and died. His death, perhaps attributable to the intervention of St. Peter, saves him from losing face since he is duty bound to return to Iceland and take vengeance for Þórarinn’s death.

individually display a range of honorable and dishonorable behavior in different situations. The moral oppositions of the clans are more ambivalent than Andersson would have them. Perhaps this is best summed up by the series of short episodes that close the saga after the last mention of Eyjólfur. Interestingly, they all deal with men with cross-allegiances: both Oddi Grímsson from Ljósavatn and Skegg-Broddi from Møðruvellir did not follow their clan and joined the opposing side at and after Kakalahóll; Hárekr remained loyal to the Ljósvetningar, but as one of Skegg-Broddi's thingmen, he, too, initially faced a conflict of interests.<sup>320</sup> The concluding episodes do not discriminate between clans but in fact just the opposite: they praise men who act nobly and honorably regardless of what their family loyalties dictate. It is worth quoting the episodes in full here:

*Oddi Grímsson gekk útan ok fór suðr ok kom sunnan félauss á fund Knúts konungs ins ríka. Hann gekk fyrir konung, kvaddi hann ok mælti: “Féþurfi eru vér, herra.” Konungr mælti: “Gefið þeim þrjár merkr silfrs.” Oddi mælti: “Eigi höfu vér fyrr svá ríkjan mann heim sótt. Ok hæfir oss eigi at sjá eigi í mót þessari gjöf, ok vil ek gefa þér fé.” Konungr mælti: “Þykki þér lítit féit?” Oddi svarar: “Einum þætti mér þat vel gefit, herra, en vér erum tólf.” “Svá mun ok satt vera,” sagði konungr, “ok gefið þrjár merkr hverjum þeira.” Þá mælti konungr: “Hvart barðisk þessi Oddinn við frændr sína á Íslandi?” Oddi svarar: “Þar váru þeir menn, er mér váru skyldir, en ek vægja í móti.” Hann fór út síðan til Íslands ok þótti ræsimaðr, hvar sem hann var.*

*Hann var faðir Guðmundar, er augat stakk ór Katli byskupi. Ok svá barsk at því, at óvinir Guðmundar báru þat í eyru Katli, þá er hann bjó á Møðruvellum, at hann fíflði konu hans, dóttur Gizurar byskups. Fundusk þeir á fornum vegi, ok veitti Ketill honum tilræði. Varð þó sá munr, at Guðmundr varð efri ok stakk ór honum augat. Síðan vildi Ketill fram færa mál á hendr honum, en síðan urðu nokkurir til at lemja því niðr, ok jóksk af því óvirðing. En síðan er Guðmundr varð félauss ok þurfti annarra, þá bauð Ketill honum til sín ok veitti honum, meðan hann lifði. Snerisk Katli síðan hverr hlutr til sóma. En at lýkðum var hann til byskups kørinn, ok galzk honum svá sitt góðræði.*

*En er Þorsteinn skuldarmaðr, sem fyrr gátu vér í sögunni, varð félauss, fór hann til Odda Grímssonar. Þá mælti Oddi: “Mikit er þat um góðan dreng, at engi forlög verða. Ok þó at þú værir nokkut motsnúinn mér ok litaðir á mér skallann, þá mun ek leggja til með þér.” Síðan fekk hann honum bústað ok þat með, er hann þurfti. Ok sýndisk þat í þessu, hverr drengur hann var.*

*En þat er at segja frá Háreki, at hann fór at finna Skegg-Brodda ok mælti: “Forvitni er mér á, hversu sterkr þú ert, því at mikit er af því sagt. En ek em kallaðr aflmaðr; mun ek þó eigi við þér hafa. Vit þú fyrst, hvárt þú kemr hǫndum ór hǫfði mér.” Skegg-Broddi svarar: “Óskylt ætla ek þat.” Tók hann þó til ok svipti þegar í brott hǫndum hans. En er hann gekk at Skegg-Brodda, þá stóð hann fyrir*

<sup>320</sup> In fact, Hárekr is the one charged by Þorvarðr to request Skegg-Broddi's help for the Ljósvetningar.

*kyrr ok hafði hendr í hofði sér, ok kom Hárekr þeim hvergi í brott, er hann reyndi til. Mátti af því sjá, hvárr þeira meiri maðr var. Þá mælti Skegg-Broddi: “Eigi þykki mér þú maðr sterkr, en drengr góðr ertu.” (105–106)*

Oddi Grímsson went abroad and went south on pilgrimage to Rome and came north penniless to meet King Canute the Mighty. He went before the king, greeted him and said: “We are in need of money, lord.” The king said, “Give them three marks of silver.” Oddi said: “We have not before called on so powerful a man. And it is unbecoming of us not to see to repayment of this gift, and I want to give you back the money.” The king said: “Does it seem to you too little money?” Oddi answers: “That seems to me well given to one, lord, but we are twelve.” “So it is likely to be true,” said the king, “and give them three marks of silver.” Then the king said: “Are you this Oddi who fought with his own kinsmen in Iceland?” Oddi answers: “There were those men, who were related to me, but I gave way to them.” Afterward, he went from Norway to Iceland and was thought to be a worthy man, wherever he was.

He was the father of Guðmundr, who put out Bishop Ketill’s eye. And that happened because the enemies of Guðmundr whispered that to Ketill, when he lived at Mǫðruvellir, that he seduced his wife, the daughter of Bishop Gizurr. They met on the high road, and Ketill attacked him. It happened then that Guðmundr got the upper hand and put out his eye. Afterwards Ketill wished to bring an action against him, but later some came forth to suppress that, and his dishonor increased from that. But afterwards when Guðmundr became penniless and in need of others, then Ketill invited him to his home and helped him, while he lived. Afterwards every thing turned out as an honor for Ketill. And finally he was chosen as bishop, and so his goodness was repaid to him.

And when Þorsteinn debt-slave, whom we mentioned before in the saga, became penniless, he went to Oddi Grímsson. Then Oddi said: “That is a serious thing about a good man, that he have no provisions for living. And although you were somewhat opposed to me and dyed my skull, I will provide for you.” Afterwards he got him a household and that also, which he needed. And that may be seen in this, what a good man he was.

And that is to tell about Hárekr, that he went to meet Skegg-Broddi and said: “I am curious, how strong you are, because much is said about that. And I am called a powerful man; yet I am not likely to be a match for you. Find out first, whether you may bring my hands from my head.” Skegg-Broddi answers: “I think that unnecessary.” Yet he went and pulled away his hands at once. And when he went at Skegg-Broddi, then he stood still and had his hands on his head, and Hárekr brought them away not at all, when he tried. It might be seen from that, which of them was the greater man. Then Skegg-Broddi said: “You do not seem to me a strong man, but you are a good one.”

According to these passages, acting nobly and honorably involves showing humility and generosity and forgiving one’s enemies. These qualities make one, according to the narrator and to Skegg-Broddi, a *drengr*. I have translated *drengr* as ‘good man,’ but this is certainly an understatement.<sup>321</sup> *Drengr* is yet another difficult term to define exactly; Cleasby and

Vigfusson write that ‘this is a most curious word, and exclusively Scandinavian . . . [its]

<sup>321</sup> Miller and Andersson variously translate the term here as ‘excellent man’ and ‘sound [man].’ *The Saga of the People of Ljosavatn in The Complete Sagas of Icelanders*, ed. Viðar Hreinsson (Reykjavík: Bókauktgáfan Leifur Eiríksson, 1997), 255.



usual sense [is a] bold, valiant, worthy man.’<sup>322</sup> Richard Bauman writes of the related noun *drengskapr* that it is ‘one of the most ideologically salient and value-laden terms in early Icelandic discourse’:

The concept, and code, of *drengskapr* underwent a complex evolution over several centuries preceding the 13th, but in the usage of that period at least it was perhaps the most embracing cover term for the ideal complex of manly virtue and honor. An exemplar of this ideal is called a *drengr*. . . . And it is by displaying the qualities of a *drengr* that one wins honor and is esteemed to be a man of worth.<sup>323</sup>

The phrase ‘manly virtue and honor’ in a culture famous for its violence evokes images of valor in physical combat or bravery in the face of death. These may also be part of the concept, but it is clear that to be *drengr* in *Ljósvetninga saga* means being assertive in showing charitable and chastened behavior: yielding rather than fighting, repaying violence with goodness instead of more violence. For the way that these closing episodes convey this, it is not too much to call them parables. Indeed, the story of Ketill (the great-grandson of Guðmundr inn ríki) is called that very thing, a *dæmisaga* [parable, fable], where it appears in *Porgils saga ok Hafliða*; Ketill himself tells the story to Hafliði to encourage him to reconcile with his enemies.<sup>324</sup> Parables or *dæmisögur* are a narrative form rarely found in the family sagas,<sup>325</sup> and they are a striking feature of *Ljósvetninga saga*, especially for their focus on attitudes and actions that necessarily spell the end of the conflicts and feuds so well

---

<sup>322</sup> Cleasby and Vigfússon, s.v. *drengr*.

<sup>323</sup> Richard Bauman, ‘Performance and Honor in 13<sup>th</sup>-Century Iceland,’ *Journal of American Folklore* 99 (1986): 131–150 at 140.

<sup>324</sup> Guðni Jónsson, ed., *Porgils saga ok Hafliða* in *Sturlunga saga* (Reykjavík: Íslendingasagnaútgáfan Haukadalsútgáfan, 1954), 11–100. Ketill tells the story in chapter 29, ‘*Dæmisaga Ketils prests*.’ Ursula Dronke (née Brown) notes that the ‘phraseology of the two accounts is closely similar, and as Björn Sigfússon has suggested, the account in *Ljósvetninga Saga* is probably taken from *Porgils Saga*.’ Ursula Brown, ed., *Porgils Saga ok Hafliða* (London: Geoffrey Cumberlege and Oxford University Press, 1952), xliii.

<sup>325</sup> Jesse Byock, *Feud in the Icelandic Saga* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), 99.

represented in the saga. Some would dismiss any moral connections in the closing episodes, arguing that in a saga ‘[e]verything containing information about a given feud or its participants was included, no matter how the source differed in form or content from the family sagas.’<sup>326</sup> It is true that family saga endings commonly contain material which, as Kathryn Hume writes, ‘we instinctively feel to be . . . “post-ending”; not integral in the sense of not contributing to the conflict story, and yet apparently considered necessary to the saga aesthetic. . . .’<sup>327</sup> In the case of these parables, it is precisely their opposition to the conflict story (in form and in content) that is so important, for they retrospectively emphasize the fact that the most admirable figures—those who most embody *drengskapr*—in both parts of the saga are identified not by their clan but rather by their role. The true heroes of *Ljósvetninga saga* are its most moderate men: its peacemakers.

Numerous scenes in the saga, especially in its latter half, show men stepping in to restrain others in a conflict. Many are small moments, such as when Starri (another example of a man with dual ties at Kakalahóll) holds back Þorvarðr from rushing at Eyjólftr even though he fights on the side of the Ljósvetningar (79); when Koðrán tries to push apart the fighting men at Kakalahóll (80); when Einarr hinders Eyjólftr from pursuing Þorvarðr at a crucial time in order to prevent another large-scale battle (86); or when Hárekr restrains Hǫskuldr from one last attempt to kill Eyjólftr (104). In these kinds of scenes, the

---

<sup>326</sup> M.I. Steblin-Kamenskij, *The Saga Mind*, trans. Kenneth H. Ober (Odense: Odense University Press, 1973), 79.

<sup>327</sup> Kathryn Hume, ‘Beginnings and Endings in the Icelandic Family Sagas,’ *The Modern Language Review* 68.3 (1973): 593–606 at 593.

peacemakers (who are often elsewhere privileged in the text for being ‘wise,’ or ‘popular,’ or otherwise good) are the subjects of sharp focus and quiet approval. The same holds true in more protracted episodes in the saga, especially ones depicting the process of reaching a settlement. The saga rarely omits comment on this aspect of a given conflict in the feud, and besides giving prominence to the peacemakers themselves, it elaborates on the reasons underlying their actions. The dispute between Þorgeirr goði and his sons occasions the first settlement, and it sets the tone for many following in the saga. As mentioned above, Ófeigr Jarngerðarson agrees to help Hǫskuldr and his brothers. Although his support for them is not conditional to a settlement, this goal forms a constant refrain in his conversations with them: *ok vilda ek, at þú sættisk á málin með jafnaði, ok er sá baztr* [and I wish, that you settle the suit with fairness, and that is best] (10); *en leita mun ek um sættir fyrst með yðr . . . . En þat ræð, at þér farið vægliga* [but I will seek a settlement first between you . . . . And I advise that, that you proceed forbearingly] (10); *Leitum heldr um sættir* [Let us seek a settlement instead] (13); *Sættask munu vér Þorgeirr, þó at Guðmundr vili eigi sættask* [We will settle with Þorgeirr, although Guðmundr should wish not to settle . . . .] (13). Ófeigr has already been established in the saga as an authority figure by his composed and decisive rescue of Qlvir’s daughter from the *ójafnaðarmenn* [overbearing men], Sǫlmundr and Sǫxólfr, and his advice clearly marks the proper course of action. Still, the recalcitrant Þorgeirssons refuse to back down: they circulate a false report that Hǫskuldr is severely wounded in order to pressure Þorgeirr to withdraw; they attempt to wrest their father’s share of the *goðorð* from

him; and they welcome armed conflict with not only Guðmundr but their father as well.

Many others then join in to intervene so that reconciliation can take place. Snorri

Hlíðarmannagoði's speech provides some insight into the motivations behind the settlement:

*Þá gekk at Snorri Hlíðarmannagoði með fjölmenni ok mælti: "Óvæns efnis horfisk hér til. Nú eru tveir kostir fyrir hendi, at láta þá Hǫskuldr dæma mál sín,—ok kann vera, at þeir komi því fram með sínum afla, at Þorgeirr missi goðorðsins;—hinn er annarr, at sættask. Ok eru vér þess fúsari, því at með kappi váru málin upp tekin, ok kann vera, at af þeim aukisk vandræðin. Er þat nú einráðit at sættask." Váru nú þetta ráð tekit, ok gerðu þeir þat mest fyrir bænastað vina ok frænda. (15)*

Then Snorri Hlíðarmannagoði went forward with a large following and said: "The matter looks unpromising. Now there are two choices in hand, to allow Hǫskuldr to judge his case,—and it may be, that they bring that about with their power, that Þorgeirr lose his goðorð;—that is the other, to settle. And we are more eager for this, because the suit was taken up with such zeal, and it may be, that trouble may increase from that. The only thing to do now is to settle." That plan was now taken, and they did that mostly on account of the requests of friends and kinsmen.

Snorri's main concern is an utterly practical one: to contain the dispute. There is no

discussion of who has the moral high ground or of who is right according to the law. He

identifies the Þorgeirssons' *kapp* [zeal, eagerness] as problematic in its immoderation and

likeliness to cause further trouble, with the implied meaning that the trouble would spread to

the wider community—namely, the unnamed *fjölmenni*, *vinir*, and *frændr* who preemptively

involve themselves in pushing for a settlement before they get dragged in by the escalating

violence and widening circles of obligation.

A similar scenario plays out in part two of the saga when Skegg-Broddi and Gellir

work together to effect a settlement between Þorvarðr and Eyjólftr, and the saga recounts the

minutiae of the conversations among these major players. At this point, the battle has been

fought at Kakalahóll, and each side is actively recruiting support for the next assembly and

possible eruption of hostilities. As people arrive at the assembly grounds and position themselves with either side, the saga reports:

Ok var þá rætt um við Skeggja, hversu fúss hann myndi ganga í móti Skegg-Brodda, ef saman lysti liðinu. “Þat ætla ek,” segir Skeggi, “at meir endisk mér afl við Skegg-Brodda eða þó hugr, en hamingju uggir mik, at ek hafa eigi við hann.” Síðan var rætt við Skegg-Brodda þetta sama mál. Hann svarar: “Mikil ván er mér á, at Skeggja skorti eigi afl. En þat ætla ek þó, ef svá væri til skipat í váru liði sem hér er, at Þorvarðr yrði eigi afluanni.” Morgininn eptir gekk Skegg-Broddi til búðar Eyjólfss, ok var engi blíða við hann af Eyjólf. Skegg-Broddi mælti: “Er eigi þat vænst, at sættask, Eyjólf?” (88-9)

And that was discussed with Skeggi, how eagerly he would oppose Skegg-Broddi, if the hosts came to blows. “I think that,” says Skeggi, “that my power and courage would more than hold out against Skegg-Broddi, but I fear that with respect to luck, that I am not a match for him.” Afterwards this same matter was discussed with Skegg-Broddi. He answers: “I greatly expect that Skeggi is not lacking in strength. Still I think that, if it were so arranged in our host as it is here, that Þorvarðr would not be overpowered. The morning after Skegg-Broddi went to the booth of Eyjólf, and he was received with no friendliness by Eyjólf. Skegg-Broddi said: “Is that not most promising, to settle, Eyjólf?”

Skeggi and Skegg-Broddi have both been portrayed as each respective company’s most impressive man; their arrivals grab the attention of all at the assembly. Despite the fact that each man has confidence in his own strength and readiness to fight, each expresses pessimism about the outcome. Skeggi talks of luck, an unknowable force that renders his own strength meaningless. Skegg-Broddi places their contest in the framework of the larger one and also speaks of an element he cannot control, noting that not everyone in the Ljósavatn group is as prepared as his own party. Skegg-Broddi thus wastes little time in approaching Eyjólf to encourage a settlement. When he is summarily refused, he appeals to Gellir:

—ok gengr til ok hittir Gelli, vin sinn. Þá mælti Skegg-Broddi: “Fastliga horfir ræða Eyjólfss.” Gellir mælti: “G—— hluta.”<sup>328</sup> Skegg-Broddi svarar: “Þat samir vel, enda væri þá nokkurs staðar. Eru

<sup>328</sup> There is a lacuna in the text here.

*með okkr þeir menn, er eigu hér í hlut, at aukask munu vandræði, ef þeir verða sekir, ok mun þá meiri vandræði um at tala en fyrrum. Sækjum nú báðir eitt ráð ok firrum mennina óhöppum.” (89)*

—and he goes to meet Gellir, his friend. Then Skegg-Broddi said: “Eyjólf’s talk looks unwavering.” Gellir said: “— — —.” Skegg-Broddi answers: “That befits well, then were it to end somewhere. There are with us those men who are involved here, and the difficulties would increase if they became outlawed, and then there will be more trouble to talk about than before. Let us now both seek one counsel and save men from misfortune.”

Just as Snorri did earlier in the saga, Skegg-Broddi shows apprehension about how far-reaching the feud will become. As mentioned above, although he has aligned himself with the underdogs, the Ljósvetningar, he is—by his marriage to Guðrún, the granddaughter of Einarr of Þvera—more properly of the Mǫðruvellir clan; his eagerness to mediate a settlement is made more urgent by that fact. Gellir is also of the Mǫðruvellingar by marriage, and although he has promised to support Eyjólf, he, too, acknowledges the practical necessity of containing the feud. Continued hostilities would cause too much collateral damage, pitting many friends and kinsmen against one another (an untenable situation, as we have already seen), including Skegg-Broddi and Gellir, and likely sacrificing many good men, such as Skeggi and Skegg-Broddi, who are far removed from the initial conflict over the paternity of Friðgerðr’s child but have yet become inextricably involved in its resolution. Gellir readily accompanies Skegg-Broddi in approaching Eyjólf once more.

*Síðan hittu þeir Eyjólf, ok þá mælti Skegg-Broddi: “Óráðligt er at vilja eigi sættask, því at eigi munu allir í móti Þorvarði ganga. Láttu mæla um Gelli ok sannvini hans.” Eyjólf svarar: “Eigi sé ek þat, at ek munu skyldr til vera at virða þinn vilja.” Skegg-Broddi svarar: “Svá lítit er mitt traust, at ek hefí nú [ekki] vígsgengi at veita mínum mönnum. En þó skulu nokkurir tannsárir verða, áðr en Þorvarðr er drepinn.” Gellir svarar: “Þá ferr illa málahlutrinn várr, ef vandræðin aukask. Ok þó at Skegg-Broddi hafí nú fá menn, þá sómir eigi at fyrirlíta hann.” (90)*

Afterwards they met Eyjólf, and then Skegg-Broddi said: “It is inadvisable to wish not to settle, because all will not go against Þorvarðr. Let Gellir and his true friends mediate.” Eyjólf answers: “I do not see that, that I will be obliged to honor your wishes.” Skegg-Broddi answers: “So little is my power, that I have now no backing in battle to grant to my men. Nevertheless some shall become sore

about the teeth, before Þorvarðr is killed.” Gellir answers: “Then our side of the case goes badly, if troubles increase. And although Skegg-Broddi now has few men, still it does not befit to abandon him.”

As the Þorgeirssons did before, Eyjólfur and Þorvarðr refuse to submit, and both parties come to court ready to fight. Skegg-Broddi and Gellir persevere in their peacemaking efforts, and they continue reasoning with the men until Gellir is allowed to arbitrate a settlement:

*Síðan gengu þeir at dómum með liði sínu, áðr en málaferli færi fram. En þá var svá komit, at hvárirtveggju váru búnir at berjask. Þá mælti Skegg-Broddi: “Má Eyjólfur heyra mál mitt?” “Heyri ek,” segir hann. Skegg-Broddi mælti: “Hér horfir óvænt, at menn skulu berjask hér fyrir þitt tilstilli. Kalla ek þat heldr beztr ráð, at hvarr sætti sína menn.” Gellir segir: “Öllum er þat auðsætt, at sjá er verstr hlutrinn, at berjask, ok mun ek bjóðask til at gera um málin.” Eyjólfur svarar: “Mun eigi þeim at duga, sem drengirnir er beztr? Ok gef ek þér eigi fé til afarkosta.” Gellir svarar þá: “At þessu er mjök ráð vandanda, er þú bersk nú fyrir,”—ok snýsk í mót Þorvarði: “Hvat vili þér nú gera? Geystir fari þér nú mjök.” “En fríðarmenn skulu vér.” Gellir mælti þá: “Meir hyggr þú nú á ofrkapp en forsjá, er þú gengr at, slíkt ofrefli sem fyrir er. Gangið eigi at dómum, svá at þröng verði at yðr.” Þorvarðr svarar: “Þat er eigi órvænt, at þeir unni oss eigi jafnaðar um hoggit. En verra er þó, at vér sém fyrst sakteknir ok síðan drepnir.” Skegg-Broddi svarar: “Mun eigi annat ráðliga en færa menn í slík vandræði?—ok sættask heldr.” Þorvarðr svarar: “Óvanr em ek at láta draga alla sæmð ór hendi mér.” Skegg-Broddi mælti: “Hyggr þú nokkut at þessu, hvat at er? Þótt ek veita þér lið, þá eru þó margir í móti. Sýnisk mér nú svá betr, at þú játir várum ummælum.” Hann svarar: “Ek skal játa.” Síðan stöðvaðisk liðið, ok var fram gengit. (91-2)*

Afterwards they went to the courts with their forces, before the lawsuits were brought forward. But then it had reached that point, that each of two sides were prepared to fight. Then Skegg-Broddi said: “Is Eyjólfur able to hear my speech?” “I hear,” he says. Skegg-Broddi said: “Here it looks unpromising, that men shall fight each other here on account of your actions. I call that rather the best counsel, that each reconcile his men.” Gellir says: “By all is that easily seen, that that is the worst position, to fight each other, and I will offer to arbitrate the case.” Eyjólfur answers: “Does one not help him, who is the best man? I did not give money to you for hard terms.” Gellir says then: “This plan is very difficult, which you now intend,”—and he turns to Þorvarðr: “What do you now wish to do? Now you are proceeding very hastily.” “But we shall be peaceful men.” Gellir said then: “You think more now of stubbornness than foresight, when you attack, such an overwhelming force as is before you. Do not go against the court, so that it becomes difficult for you.” Þorvarðr answers: “That is not unexpected, that they grant us not fairness in the fight. But worse is it yet, that we be first convicted and afterwards killed.” Skegg-Broddi answers: “Will not another thing be more advisable than to bring men into such trouble?—and rather you should settle.” Þorvarðr answers: I am unaccustomed to let all honor be drawn from my hands.” Skegg-Broddi said: “Do you think at all about this, what is at stake? Although I grant you support, then are there yet many against you. It seems to me now better, that you say yes to our words.” He answers: “I shall say yes.” Afterwards the hosts stopped, and it was brought about.

The mediation is skillful in that neither Eyjólfur nor Þorvarður is wholly blamed or exculpated. While Skegg-Broddi holds Eyjólfur responsible for drawing men into the conflict, Gellir criticizes the hot-headedness that clouds the judgment of Þorvarður, who is initially noted in the saga to be a *vitr maðr ok stilltr* (62) [wise and calm man]. By putting both men in the wrong, they level their positions so that neither would in effect be bowing to the other and losing honor by accepting a settlement. Both Skegg-Broddi and Gellir reiterate that it is not fair that many good men should die on account of the two, which would certainly happen given how badly Þorvarður's side is outnumbered, another point that both peacemakers repeat. When Eyjólfur tries to argue that he should have Gellir's support on moral grounds since he is the *beztr drengur*, Gellir concentrates on Eyjólfur's contrary actions over his self-proclaimed attributes. Similarly, when Þorvarður tries to clothe his intractability in the discourse of honor, Skegg-Broddi keeps the focus firmly on the practicalities of the situation. When he asks, "*Hyggr þú nokkut at þessu, hvat at er?*," he is essentially asking Þorvarður to consider the price of his actions, to weigh the loss of men against the loss of some portion of his personal honor. Only then can Þorvarður assent to the sensible entreaties that he settle.



## Conclusions

A few important observations about peacekeepers and peacemaking might be made from the emphasis on how settlements happen in *Ljósvetninga saga*. The first concerns the ‘peace in the feud,’ or the idea that

peace arises from the existence of many kinds of relationships, and the values attached to them all by custom. These ties divide men at one point; but this division in a wider group and over a longer period of time leads to the establishment of social order. In separated districts men can quarrel. The smaller the area involved, the more numerous the social ties. But as the area narrows the occasions which breed quarrels between men multiply; and here it is that their conflicting ties both draw them apart, and bring them into relationship with other people who see that settlement is achieved. In this way custom unites where it divides, co-operation and conflict balancing each other.<sup>329</sup>

The dynamic that Gluckman describes can well be found within the saga. On the one hand, men cannot help but become involved in a feud because of the demands of support implicit in their relationships. When Þorvarðr pledges friendship with Eyjólfur and says, ‘*Ok hlýða mun okkr, ef eigi spilla aðrir menn um*’ (63) [And it will suffice between us, if other men do not spoil it], he wishes for the impossible. Quarrels and clashes among their kin and *þingmenn* are inevitable, and both the rapidity and ease by which a seemingly isolated dispute (Sǫlmundr’s refusal to pay Sigurðr for his goods, for example, or the questioned paternity of Friðgerðr’s child) becomes a region-wide conflict highlight the chain of connections and corresponding obligations that entangle even the most reluctant parties. Þorvarðr and Eyjólfur may be friendly on one set of terms, but on another they are duty-bound to men who are

---

<sup>329</sup> Max Gluckman, *Custom and Conflict in Africa* (Glencoe, IL: The Free Press, 1959), 23. Miller expresses the opinion that this ‘influential anthropological theory of the benign feud . . . is a bit too optimistic to explain the Icelandic feud adequately. The force of the differences separating the principal disputants would often greatly exceed the force of the ties binding them to their unfortunately situated middle man. Nor were all people caught in the middle motivated to make peace’ (*Bloodtaking and Peacemaking*, 265). While Miller’s statement certainly holds truths, it is interesting to note that *Ljósvetninga saga* elaborates on the situations where the middle men *are* interested in making peace and *are* strong enough to effect it.

already at odds. In the intimate society of Iceland—what Byock has called ‘Iceland’s great village’<sup>330</sup>—it seems no agreement can exist between two people alone, and no two people can expect their actions not to have repercussions within the community at large. On the other hand, the multiplicity of social ties is exactly what allows such escalating disputes to be resolved instead of developing into interminable feuds.<sup>331</sup> I mentioned in my discussion of *Beowulf* that the duty of revenge clashing with the obligations of kinship or other strong attachments makes for compelling storytelling and was therefore, in Whitelock’s words, a ‘favourite theme in Germanic literature.’<sup>332</sup> The sagas are replete with illustrative cases. Þórdís, who identifies her brother as her husband’s killer in *Gísla saga* but later tries to avenge him, or Bolli in *Laxdæla saga* who kills his foster-brother, Kjartan, only to cradle him as he dies, provide two famous examples of saga characters who must navigate the kinds of contradictory pressures that are often the crux of saga and feud narratives. Here in

---

<sup>330</sup> Jesse L. Byock, ‘Feuding in Viking-Age Iceland’s Great Village,’ in *Conflict in Medieval Europe: Changing Perspectives on Society and Culture*, ed. Warren C. Brown and Piotr Górecki (Aldershot, England: Ashgate Publishing, 2003), 229–241. Byock argues that cultural features including the development of a dialect-free language and a centralized legal system fostered a ‘great village mentality’ in Iceland, which was based on a ‘conscious sense of community’ (230) and a basic need (due to geography and economics) for cooperation. This in turn functioned to limit feud and encourage moderation and compromise.

<sup>331</sup> Social anthropologists disagree on whether feud is by definition interminable. Jacob Black-Michaud and E.L. Peters, for example, believe it is interminable. Peters writes, ‘[A]ny homicide between two secondary sections is regarded as one in a series, whether the details or even the name of the victim of the previous homicide is known or not. I recall discussing a double homicide with a close kinsman of the slayer, and the only way he could account for it was by telling me that his kinsman had to kill because his victims were of such and such a group. The feud knows no beginning, and it has no end. It is a form of behaviour associated with a specific structural order, and it is as persistent as the structural order itself; in this sense it is eternal.’ *The Bedouin of Cyrenaica: Studies in personal and corporate power*, ed. Jack Goody and Emanuel Marx (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 67. Christopher Boehm conversely argues that ‘it is precisely a recognition of the potentially interminable nature of feuding that drives parties in a feud to pacify.’ *Blood Revenge*, 206. According to Miller, the ‘Icelandic model combines elements of both views, but the feud as practiced in Iceland is distinctly closer to Boehm’s formulation than to Black-Michaud’s. *Bloodtaking and Peacemaking*, 186.

<sup>332</sup> Whitelock, *The Beginnings of English Society*, 39.

*Ljósvetninga saga*, counter-obligations and cross-allegiances generate drama, but they are essential in their practical capacity of leading to settlements. It is not a coincidence that many of the major peacemaking figures are those men for whom clan lines are blurred by their conflicting loyalties to kin, spouse, friends, *goði*, and/or *þingmenn*. Indeed, the more ties they have, the more incentive to settle, for the settlements enable them to maintain those relationships despite the progression of a feud. For those men, keeping the peace provides more honor than helping one side or the other could. The feuding parties may even rely on the fact that these peacemakers will search out honor in this way, allowing them to push to the brink (as the Þorgeirssons, Þorvarðr, and Eyjólfir all do), all the while knowing that they will not have to take extreme action nor suffer the dishonor of giving in to the other party on its terms.<sup>333</sup>

As Gluckman's analysis points out, the device for controlling conflict in a feuding society where there is no executive body to enforce norms and laws can be found within the mechanisms of feud itself. For the system to work, however, the members of society must implicitly agree to adhere to the feud's norms of behavior. In the Icelandic situation, that involves abiding by the legal rules specifying who can kill or avenge whom for what and when and where and how, as well as the tacit ones whose observance help make one a *drengr*; both types stress society over self (although self-preservation or benefit may be concomitant with what is good for the community in a given situation). The latter set of

---

<sup>333</sup> 'In societies where feuds function [as Gluckman describes], peacemaking becomes an expected and integrated part of the feud process.' Netterstrom, 'The Study of Feud in Medieval and Early Modern History,' 10.

‘rules’ might include exercising self-control and moderation or *hóf*; acting generously and compassionately; and being willing to compromise.<sup>334</sup> Peacemakers like Ófeigr and Skegg-Broddi, for example, who have the strength and confidence to fight if necessary but instead choose a more moderate path that serves the interests of more men, exemplify those who live by this code and who therefore receive the saga’s approval.

It is further significant that the settlements discussed above and indeed almost all of the saga’s settlements are achieved by mediation and arbitration rather than adjudication or violence.<sup>335</sup> The narrative does not show a preoccupation with legal proceedings despite the involvement of men like Þorgeirr goði, Iceland’s Lawspeaker from 985 to 1001. It certainly has the opportunity to report the specifics of legal procedure, as *Njáls saga* does in great detail for example, but it usually glosses over court proceedings. Nor does the saga depict numerous instances of bloody action; even with the pitched battle, an unusual feature in the

---

<sup>334</sup> Several critics, while taking different approaches, underscore the importance of *hóf* or restraint, as well as reconciliation in saga ethics. Lönnroth, ‘The Noble Heathen: A Theme in the Sagas,’ 14–15; Theodore M. Andersson, ‘The Displacement of the Heroic Ideal in the Family Sagas,’ *Speculum* 45 (1970): 575–593; Hermann Pálsson, *Art and Ethics in Hrafnkel’s Saga* (Copenhagen, 1971). For a useful comparison of the three, see Claiborne W. Thompson, ‘Moral Values in the Icelandic Sagas,’ in *The Epic in Medieval Society: Aesthetic and Moral Values*, ed. Harald Scholler (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer Verlag, 1977), 347–360. See also Marlene Ciklamini, ‘The Concept of Honor in *Valla-Ljóts Saga*,’ *Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 65 (1966): 303–317; Judith Jesch, ‘“Good men” and peace in *Njáls saga*,’ 1992. Peter Foote’s article, ‘*Skömm Er Óhófs Ævi*: On Glaucia, Hrafnkell and Others,’ considers the term *óhóf* in a more specific context but gives helpful information as well. *Idee Gestalt Geschichte: Festschrift Klaus Von See*, ed. Gerd Wolfgang Weber, *Studien zur europäischen Kulturtradition* (Odense: Odense University Press, 1988), 285–298.

<sup>335</sup> I use these particular terms after William Ian Miller who defines them as follows: “In *adjudication* a third party has the power to use a decision and is so empowered independent of the principals’ wishes. This is the mode of the formal legal process in which judges of the courts at the thing adjudicate. In *arbitration* a third party is also empowered to issue a binding decision, but he derives his power from the parties, who agree beforehand to accept the arbitrator’s decision. . . . Like arbitration and adjudication, *mediation* involves the intervention of a third party, but the third party is without authority to impose a decision. Mediators might be little more than go-betweens bearing offers and counteroffers between sides, or they could be quite forceful and intrusive, using tactics ranging from cajoler to threats in order to convince principals to agree to an arbitrated settlement.” *Law and Literature in Medieval Iceland*, 23.

family sagas,<sup>336</sup> the number of slain men remains relatively low.<sup>337</sup> Accordingly, while peacemakers such as Ófeigr, Snorri, Skegg-Broddi, and Gellir are held up as exemplars of moderate and indeed, moral behavior, their express concern is not how to act in line with legal rules or moral principles, but how to bring a swift and effective end to conflicts and disputes. It is important that they state their interest in pragmatic action and that their most prominent and pragmatic actions take the form of words. Their speeches encouraging and negotiating for peace are what they ‘do’ in the saga, and they thereby offer an alternative to the idea that honor is best acquired by acting on an unyielding desire for vengeance.

Taking these elements into consideration, the treatment of Guðmundr in *Ljósvetninga saga* can be understood in a context other than one based on clan identity. He is not the villain of the story because he is the leader of the Mǫðruvellingar but because he epitomizes the opposite of the peacemakers, the real ‘heroes’ of the saga, in almost every way. They understand how subordinating their personal interests to those of the community in a given situation can lead to the best outcomes for all involved, including themselves. They also know how to manipulate their power and place in society so that they can agitate for peace without losing honor or the respect of others. In contrast, Guðmundr wields his power as a blunt object. He refuses to recognize the precedence that the expectations of kinship and leadership in his society should take over his own ambitions, and he does not take care of the

---

<sup>336</sup> Andersson, *The Growth of the Medieval Icelandic Sagas*, 129; Byock, *Feud in the Icelandic Saga*, 101.

<sup>337</sup> Of one hundred twenty-five named characters in the saga (Miller and Andersson, 85), the total number of men killed in the saga includes seven named men (Sǫlmundr, Arnórr, Þorkell hákr, Þorbjörn rindill, Koðrán, Otrygg, and Þórarinn) and three unnamed men.

people and relationships that link him to that society.<sup>338</sup> In his willingness to break social norms and contracts, as seen in his willingness to burn his wife and son for example, he poses a real threat to the community and its ability to maintain equilibrium through conflict. If the blackness of his character seems absolute in *Ljósvetninga saga*, I would argue that it reflects the seriousness with which peace, settlements, and their violations—and similar social violations—were considered in saga Iceland. The *griðamál* [peace-speech] (sometimes called the *trygðamál* [truce-speech]) which can be found in *Grettis saga*, *Heiðarvíga saga*, and *Grágás* is particularly resonant in its absolute rejection of the *griðníðingr*, or one who breaks his peace agreement:

Sé sá griðníðingr, er griðin, rýfr eða tryggðum spillir, rækr ok rekinn frá guði ok góðum mönnum, ór himinríki ok frá öllum helgum mönnum, ok hvergi hæfr manna í milli ok svá frá öllum út flæmðr sem víðast varga reka eða kristnir menn kirkjur sækja, heiðnir menn hof blóta, eldr brennr, jörð grær, mælt barn móður kallar ok móðir mög fæðir, aldir elda kynda, skip skríðr, skildir blíka, sól skínn, snæ legggr, Finnir skríðr, fura vex, valr flýgr, várlangan dag, ok standi honum beinn byrr undir báðá vængi, himinn hverfr, heimr er byggðr, ok vindr veitir vötn til sjávar, karlar korni sá; hann skal firrask kirkjur ok kristna menn, heiðna hólða, hús ok hella, heim hvern, nema helvíti.<sup>339</sup>

Let that truce-breaker, who breaks the pledge or spoils the truce, be rejected and driven from god and good men, from the kingdom of heaven and from all holy men, and nowhere fit to be among men and thus from all places driven out wherever wolves are driven furthest or Christians attend church, heathen men sacrifice in temples, fire burns, earth grows, a speaking child calls its mother and a mother gives birth to a son, men kindle fires, a ship sails, shields gleam, the sun shines, snow falls, a Lapp skis, a fir-tree grows, a falcon flies for a spring-long day and a fair wind blows beneath both wings, heaven turns, the world is settled, and wind conveys waters to the sea, men sow grain; he shall be kept away from churches and Christians, heathens, houses and caves, every home, except hell.

<sup>338</sup> In a discussion with Þórir, Einarr says of his brother: “*Pat ætla ek, at Guðmundr hyggi at reka þess fjándskapar við þik, er honum er sagt frá orðum þínum, meira en honum gangi siðvendi til við heraðsbyggð. . .*” [I think that, that Guðmundr intends to take vengeance against you for this hostility, which is communicated to him by your words, more than moral conduct toward the community might compel him to. . .] (35; C-text).

<sup>339</sup> *Grettis saga*, 232-3.

The description of excommunication from Church and society calls to mind that of Grendel's home in *Beowulf* and similarly circumscribes the truce-breaker to a terrible place beyond the realm of men.

Hie dygel lond  
 warigeað wulfhleoþu, windige næssas,  
 frecne fengelad, ðær fyrgenstream  
 under næssa genipu niþer gewiteð,  
 flod under foldan. Nis þæt feor heonon  
 milgемearces, þæt se mere standeð;  
 ofer þæm honigað hrinde bearwas,  
 wudu wyrtum fæst wæter oferhelmað.  
 Þær mæg nihta gehwæm niðwundor seon,  
 fyr on flode. No þæs frod leofað  
 gumena bearna, þæt þone grund wite.  
 Ðeah þe hæðstapa hundum geswenced,  
 heorot hornum trum holtwudu sece,  
 feorran geflymed, ær he feorh seleð,  
 aldor on ofre, ær he in wille,  
 hafelan [beorgan]; nis þæt heoru stow! (1357b–1372b)

They occupy a secret land, wolf-inhabited slopes, windy cliffs, a terrible fen-tract where a mountain stream goes down under darkness of cliffs, the flood under ground. That is not far from here in the measure of miles that that mere stands; frost-covered groves hang over that, a wood with firm roots overshadows the water. Every night one is able to see there a fearful wonder, fire in the water. There lives no one of the children of men so wise that he knows the bottom. Although the stag harassed by dogs, a hart with strong horns, should seek the wood, put to flight from afar, he sooner gives up his life on the shore than he would wish to hide his head [in the water]; that is not a good place!

Inasmuch as he transgresses important social and ethical norms, Guðmundr is himself something monstrous—a *níðingr*,<sup>340</sup> the opposite of a *drengr* and everything good and admirable according to the saga.<sup>341</sup>

<sup>340</sup> The term can be found in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* in the entry for the year 1049, when Cnut declares Earl Swein a *níðing* for the treacherous murder of his own kinsman, Earl Beorn.

<sup>341</sup> Cleasby and Vigfusson note that the terms *níðingr* and *drengr* are opposed in *Norges gamle love* ii. 420 [s.v. *drengr*, 3, p. 105]. Sørensen writes of the term: It signifies in a general sense a wretch, one who has contravened important ethical rules: e.g. engaged in treachery or broken his word. It is also used of a man who has committed shameful acts, such as killing kinsmen or defenceless people, and finally it is used . . . of the coward. . . . We can assume that the activities that branded a man as *níðingr* were able to evoke a whole spectrum of morally undesirable qualities. . . . *The Unmanly Man*, 32.

In this saga so concerned with the efficacy of words and especially how they can start and end conflict, the *níð* perpetrated against Guðmundr offers the perfect example of the former. If he makes a mistake in his attempt for revenge, it is perhaps that he does not allow words to settle his grievance, obviously the authorized course of action in this saga. His blind insistence on legal and bloody recourse, however justified in a sociohistorical sense, marks his downfall in this story. Thompson writes that ‘some saga characters realize that a social system based on inflexible honor and vengeance is out-of-date, self-defeating, and foolish’<sup>342</sup>; unfortunately for Guðmundr and his literary legacy, he is not one of them.

---

<sup>342</sup> Thompson, 359.



## Epilogue

In his discussion of vengeance, Peter French writes that revenge ‘is, in very large measure, an act of communication.’<sup>343</sup> Though he makes this claim specifically about the importance of ensuring the target’s clear awareness that ‘he or she is paying the penalty because of his or her specific prior harming or injuring of someone or of the avenger himself or herself,’<sup>344</sup> his statement is more broadly applicable in the consideration of what vengeance is and how it functions. It is particularly fitting for my own study of medieval revenge and narrative, as I have attempted to show how each avenger literally has a story to tell regarding the wrongs done to him or others close to him and why he thus deserves the vengeance he so badly desires. Yet his story is one of many in a given narrative, and he has no monopoly on ‘truth’; the voices with which he competes can be as persuasive and have as much claim as his own. Moreover, the avengers’ words and deeds, in as much as they are ‘an act of communication,’ are open to misperception and misunderstanding. There is no guarantee that what one *intends* to say or do will be received as such, and there may—and will—be numerous interpretations of even the simplest of statements. Revenge, therefore, while it can seem a straightforward action of giving tit for tat and getting even, becomes a complicated thing for everyone involved: wrongdoer, avenger, witness. It is this complexity that Chaucer and the respective anonymous authors of *Beowulf* and of *Ljósvetninga saga* capture so well in the treatment of their subjects. There are no absolutes when it comes to feud and revenge.

---

<sup>343</sup> French, 12.

<sup>344</sup> Ibid.

I do not mean to say, however, that the avengers accomplish nothing simply because we cannot be definitive about their words and actions. For example, one of the most important and powerful aspects of the vengeance-takings of Beowulf and many saga characters in particular is the honoring of the bonds of kinship and friendship. When the vengeance is taken on behalf of another, it can be an expression of loyalty, respect, and deep affection. Especially when the vengeance is for one no longer living, the act takes on a commemorative purpose and functions as an acknowledgement that even after death, one deserves to have things set right. Such is the case when Beowulf hunts down Grendel's mother after she kills Æschere (or indeed, when Grendel's mother avenges her own son by this deed); or when Þorsteinn goes all the way to Constantinople to avenge his brother, Grettir; or when Gísli makes his way through the snow to Sæból to avenge his friend and brother-in-law, Vésteinn. Though revenge is more often thought of as a selfish act, there can be something selfless about it. This subordination of oneself to the memory and well-being (even after death) of another is what Shakespeare draws on with such effect in *Hamlet*:

[*Ghost.*] Adieu, adieu, adieu! remember me.

*Ham.* O all you host of heaven! O earth! What else?  
 And shall I couple hell? O fie, hold, hold, my heart,  
 And you, my sinews, grow not instant old,  
 But bear me [stiffly] up. Remember thee!  
 Ay, thou poor ghost, whiles memory holds a seat  
 In this distracted globe. Remember thee!  
 Yea, from the table of my memory  
 I'll wipe away all trivial fond records,  
 All saws of books, all forms, all pressures past  
 That youth and observation copied there,  
 And thy commandment all alone shall live  
 Within the book and volume of my brain,

Unmix'd with baser matter.<sup>345</sup>  
(I.v.91–104)

For Hamlet, the duty to perform the revenge his father craves gives him a higher purpose; all else is 'trivial' and 'baser matter.' Still, despite the positive, even beautiful aspects that are a part of revenge-taking, the negatives are all too apparent. It is this paradox that the authors of these works grapple with and that remains so compelling for us today.

---

<sup>345</sup> G. Blakemore Evans, ed., *The Riverside Shakespeare*, vol. 2 (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1974), 1150.

## Appendix 1

### Definitions of Feud

Christopher Boehm offers a 'list of distinctive features' of feud in *Blood Revenge*.<sup>346</sup> He posits:

1. Feuding involves the indigenous assumption that retaliatory homicide is a righteous act and that one homicide legitimately deserves another.
2. Regulation of feuding comes through established rules, which are understood by both sides. This implies a mutual relationship between the feuding parties.
3. Feuding involves the idea of scorekeeping.
4. Feuding most often is alternating, in that the two sides take turns at offense and defense. This alternating status is determined by a score that is known by both sides.
5. Some means is available for permanently or temporarily stopping the conflict. This is done either automatically, by reaching parity, by truce, or by payment of material wealth for blood, and is based on precise scorekeeping.
6. Feuding is motivated and rationalized in terms of need for manly esteem or "honor," but more fundamentally it has to do with dominance relations.
7. Feuding involves notions of dominance between groups as well as between individuals: a homicide that is accepted passively invites further aggression toward both the person and the group that fails to retaliate. This is the practical disadvantage that accompanies "dishonor."
8. Feuding, in essence, involves the notion of controlled retaliation, which is directed at an aggressor and/or his close associates. The degree of control is determined by how much the particular groups stand to lose by being at feud.
  - a. Within a very closely cooperating group, feuding is generally outlawed by definition: the group cannot exact blood from itself; therefore, potential feuds are precluded.
  - b. With groups that are separate but cooperate usefully, a potential feud is tightly controlled and is resolved with dispatch because of practical concern for loss of benefits. In such cases, strong community pressure helps to outweigh the demands of honor.
  - c. When feuding groups do not ordinarily cooperate and are not part of the same cohesive community, then termination of feuding becomes problematical although conformity to the general pattern of feuding does limit escalation of the conflict.
9. Feuding is retarded to the degree that the hostile groups are connected by cross-cutting social ties such as marriage alliances or economic relationships.
10. Feuding can be used as a means of avoiding warfare, because feuding allows people to retaliate for homicide in a controlled way such that the conflict is not likely to escalate to warfare.
11. Feuds tend to be very difficult to resolve, because the game tends to be one with a less-than-zero sum insofar as honor is concerned. Thus, feuds, in fact can be long-lasting or all but "interminable" unless some strong force militates for pacification.

---

<sup>346</sup> Boehm, 218–219.

12. From an evolutionary standpoint, feuding seems to correlate with a high-enough population density relative to natural resources so that avoidance mechanisms become politically unfeasible or economically too costly as a means of controlling serious conflicts.

In his discussion of Icelandic feud, William Ian Miller bases his description partially on

Boehm's, with borrowings from Black-Michaud, S.F. Nadel, and Andreas Heusler as well.<sup>347</sup>

1. Feud is a relationship (hostile) between two groups.
2. Unlike ad hoc revenge killing that can be an individual matter, feuding involves groups that can be recruited by any number of principles, among which kinship, vicinage, household, or clientage are most usual.
3. Unlike war, feud does not involve relatively large mobilizations, but only occasional musterings for limited purposes. Violence is controlled; casualties rarely reach double digits in any single encounter.
4. Feud involves collective liability. The target need not be the actual wrongdoer, nor, for that matter, need the vengeance-taker be the person most wronged.
5. A notion of exchange governs the process, a kind of my-turn/your-turn rhythm, with offensive and defensive positions alternating after each confrontation.
6. As a corollary to the preceding item, people keep score.
7. People who feud tend to believe that honor and affronts to it are the prime motivators of hostilities. Cross-culturally, there appears to be a correlation between the existence of feud and a culture of honor.
8. Feud is governed by norms that limit the class of possible expiators and the appropriateness of responses. For instance, most feuding cultures recognize a rough rule of equivalence in riposte, the *lex talionis* being but one example.
9. There are culturally acceptable means for making temporary or permanent settlements of hostility.

Jesse Byock offers these 'seeds for a definition of feud' applicable in a 'wide variety of cultural situations'<sup>348</sup>:

1. Feud is characterized by animosity leading to exchanges of insults and/ or recurrent violent acts against property or person. Exchanges involve individuals or groups, the latter often families, clans, or tribes, but also gangs and political and/or religious groups. Feud is both an ancient and modern phenomenon.
2. Animosity, shame, and claims for revenge may be transmitted to subsequent generations. Injurious exchanges continue until the parties wear themselves out, seek settlement, or are forced into settlement by others.
3. Temporary settlements are often enacted, but lasting peace is more difficult. Peace often requires stifling animosity among individuals and groups that hate each other. Hate and acrimony do not easily end. A basic rule of peacemaking is that one does not make peace with one's friends. In other words, one must trust one's enemies in order to terminate a feud. In many cases it is easier to continue feuding than to trust such people.

---

<sup>347</sup> Miller, 180–181.

<sup>348</sup> Jesse Byock, 'Defining Feud: Talking Points and Iceland's Saga Women,' in Netterstrøm and Poulsen, *Feud in Medieval and Early Modern Europe*, 96–99.

4. Time works its effect. In many instances commitment to the animosities of the feud dissipate over time or generations, and the feud ends. Marriages between descendants of previously feuding groups are frequently recorded. They do not always work.
5. At its simplest, feud is a contest involving reciprocal giving and receiving of ill-intended actions, escalating at times to injury and in some instances manslaughter. Feud between individuals or groups exists principally where policing or centralising authorities with the coercive power to intervene do not exist, are too weak to control private exchanges, or openly or tacitly allow conflict.
6. Feud's behavioural crucible is that someone, whether through violence, insult, shaming, dishonouring, etc., wants to hurt someone else. The pain that the perpetrator of the last act inflicts (however justified) hurts the psyche and pride of those that have taken the hit, calling for vengeance. Usually there is the choice of stopping when a fresh act avenges a previous 'wrong.' Hence frequent attempts by mediators, peacemakers, and people of goodwill whose services often become temporary and who are pushed aside if the feud continues. Third party interveners, whether successful or not, frequently gain status, honour, respect, power, access, and wealth as part of the process of mediating. Feud can be costly, generating a redistribution of wealth.
7. If a dispute is settled after a few rounds (however violent), it is not a feud, only a dispute that was settled. Feud is distinguished by the sense of longevity.
8. Feud tends to ratchet up rapidly in the early stages. At this time, the subject of the conflict is often understood in quasi-economic terms, especially competition over the access to resources and the gain or loss of something valuable, including intangibles such as reputation. After several rounds of insult, reprisal, or violence, the feud carries forward almost on its own, and the importance of initial reasons fade into the background.
9. The basis for conflict and animosity is often understood within a context of honour. Feud can occur between individuals, but bloodfeud, by its nature of wounding or killing individuals, removes participants, leaving vengeance to new parties. New action, even when not initially endorsed by one or even both groups, can set in motion reprisals, propelling conflict through numerous additional rounds.
10. Bloodfeud, or vendetta as it is sometimes called, is restricted, managed conflict, undertaken mostly in situations where open warfare is not tolerated. Examples are inter- and intra-tribal reprisals in simple (primitive and egalitarian) societies and gang conflicts within modern, complex communities, such as cities and within small states and regions such as in parts of the Middle East. Modern political and nationalistic struggles, share many of these aspects. In bloodfeud, the group aspect of animosity is decisive, resulting in acts of self-sacrifice and destruction that otherwise might not seem rational.
11. Hatred plays a large role, providing identity and cohesion to the opposing sides by distinguishing 'them' from 'us.' Both sides and onlookers keeps score of injuries and dishonour. In traditional societies, the tally-keepers and goaders are often women. The accountings, which are mostly public, take the form of lamentations, tallies, and narrative stories which fuel humiliation and long-term animosity.
12. Although subterfuge often occurs during feud or vendetta, rarely is there complete secrecy surrounding the identities of people who are the source of injurious actions or insults. People know or suspect who is responsible and participants think and speak in terms of retribution for wrongs committed; that is, in-kind punishment according to rules of honour: 'an eye for an eye.'
13. Shaming and the removal of shame are fundamental to feud. The terminology surrounding shame often refers to justice, demands of honour, duty of vengeance, and the sweetness of revenge. Feuding societies or social groups can frequently be labelled shame societies.
14. Feud extends time horizons. The importance of the initial offences diminish. Each new offence becomes a fresh affront in the minds of victims even after considerable time has passed since the last exchange.

15. Feud meanders. Along the way, third parties, often women and other tally-keepers in traditional societies, escalate and de-escalate the action. Such individuals retain memory. They remind of honour and dishonour. Animosity and shame can be inherited, lasting for generations.
16. Historically (something that may be changing in the modern world) men have mostly inflicted the violence. As elsewhere in traditional and tribal societies, gender roles are often distinct. The intervention of women is frequently in the background and sometimes private. It occurs mostly within family or clan context, where women influence the flaring up and dying down of the exchanges through their often ritualised roles in mourning and as guardians of the history and the animosity of the conflict. In these contexts, women tend to act as keepers of the group's honour. Functioning both as escalators and de-escalators, they can play either the role of inciters or peacemakers.
17. Vengeance-seeking is not the same as blood-taking. Beyond seeking blood, vengeance-taking has more options. It is action that satisfies the needs of hatred, the calls of duty, and the debts of loss.
18. The end of feud is often marked by compromise, material compensation, banishment, or even limited manslaughter. Arbitration and negotiation enter the picture, and the language of peacemaking frequently focuses on satisfying honour.

Finally, Paul R. Hyams offers the following 'premises' regarding feud in his discussion of medieval England:<sup>349</sup>

1. Feud starts as an effort to avenge injury, generally violent injury, and often a killing.
2. It represents the injury as the act of an enemy and signals a lasting enmity between the man (or men) who inflicted it and the "victim."
3. The wrong that provokes and justifies feud is understood to affect a larger group that included the original victim but was in part known and even recruited in advance of trouble. Its solidarity has been set in doubt and may need reassertion.
4. Given a similar sense of the vicarious liability of the injuring party's associates, they were sometimes targeted for vengeance in the principal's stead.
5. The level of response is constrained by a notion of rough equivalence, requiring the keeping of a "score."
6. Emotions both fuel the response and determine its quantum and nature.
7. The response is ritualized in various ways to proclaim the acts to all as legitimate vengeance.
8. Action from the side of the "victim" nevertheless raises the high probability of further tit-for-tat from their enemies.
9. To dispel this and offer hopes of an end to the violence, something much more than the punishment of individual offenders is necessary, amounting to a veritable peace settlement between the wider groups involved.

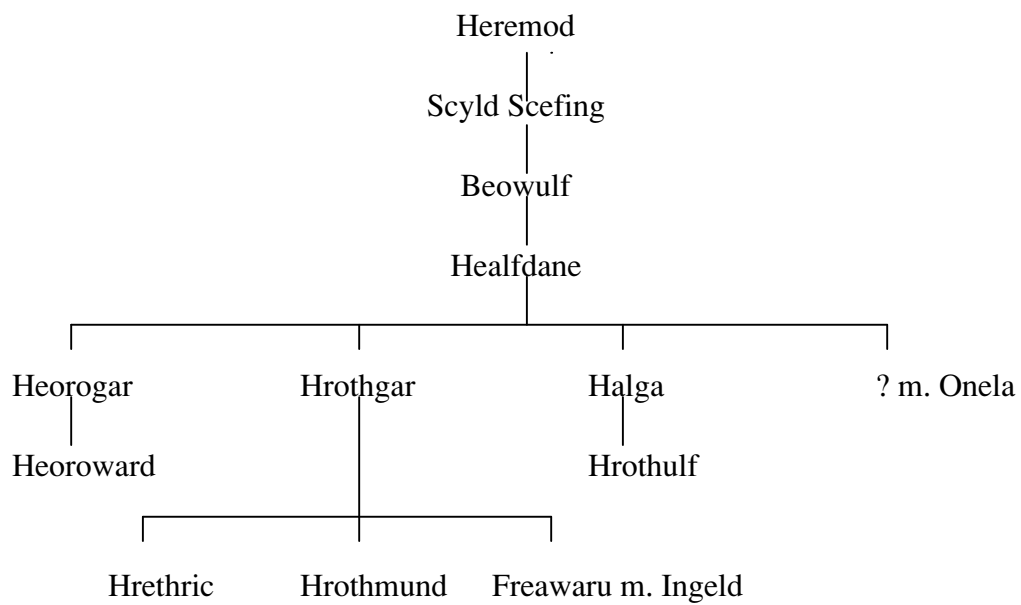
---

<sup>349</sup> Hyams, *Rancor & Reconciliation in Medieval England*, 8–9.

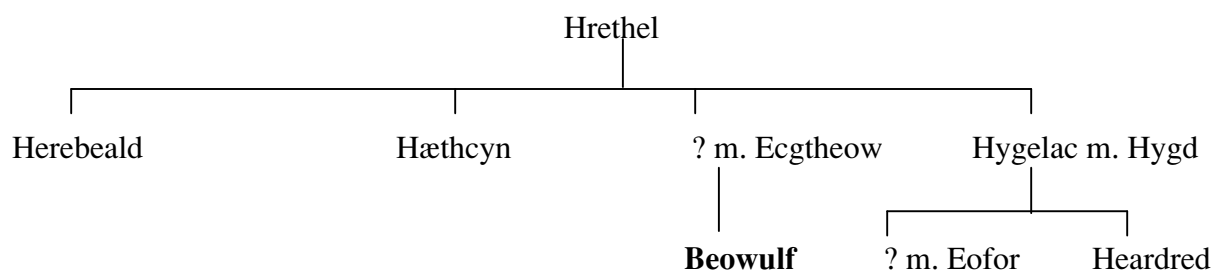
## Genealogical Tables

### *Beowulf*

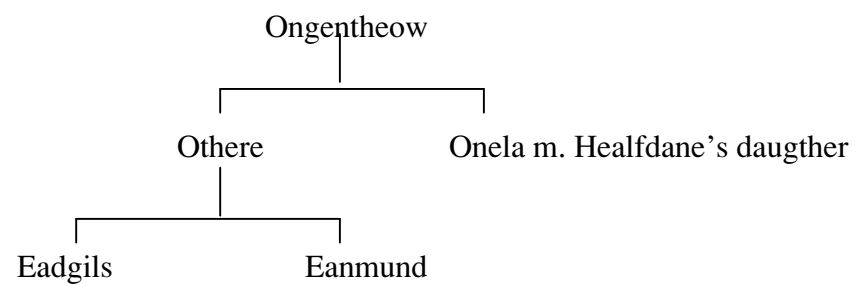
#### Danes



#### Geats





**Swedes**

## Bibliography

- Aers, David. 'Chaucer's *Tale of Melibee*: Whose Virtues?' In *Medieval Literature and Historical Inquiry: Essays in Honour of Derek Pearsall*, ed. David Aers, 69–81. Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2000.
- Alford, John A. 'Literature and Law in Medieval England.' *PMLA* 92, no. 5 (1977): 941–951.
- Andersson, Theodore M. *The Icelandic Family Saga: An Analytic Reading*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1967.
- . 'The Displacement of the Heroic Ideal in the Family Sagas.' *Speculum* 45 (1970): 575–593.
- . *The Growth of the Medieval Icelandic Saga (1180–1280)*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006.
- Arthur, Ross G. "'Why Artow Angry': The Malice of Chaucer's Reeve.' *English Studies in Canada* 13, no. 1 (1987): 1–11.
- Baird, Joseph L. 'Law and the *Reeve's Tale*.' *Neuphilologische Mitteilungen* 70, no. 4 (1969): 679–683.
- Balliet, Gay L. 'The Wife in Chaucer's *Reeve's Tale*: Siren of Sweet Vengeance.' *English Language Notes* 28 (1996): 1–6.
- Baumann, Richard. 'Performance and Honor in 13<sup>th</sup>-Century Iceland.' *Journal of American Folklore* 99 (1986): 131–150.
- Bennett, J.A.W. *Chaucer at Oxford and at Cambridge*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1974.
- Bennett, Josephine Waters. 'The Mediaeval Loveday.' *Speculum* 33, no. 3 (1958): 351–370.
- Benson, C. David. 'Their Telling Difference: Chaucer the Pilgrim and His Two Contrasting Tales.' *The Chaucer Review* 18, no. 1 (1983): 61–76.

- Benson, Larry D., ed. *The Riverside Chaucer*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1987.
- Berger, Alan. 'Lawyers in the Old Icelandic Family Sagas: Heroes, Villains, and Authors.' *Saga-Book* 20, no. 1–2 (1978–1979): 70–79.
- Berger, Harry, Jr., and H. Marshall Leicester, Jr. 'Social Structure as Doom: The Limits of Heroism in *Beowulf*.' In *Old English Studies in Honour of John C. Pope*, ed. Robert P. Burlin and Edward B. Irving, Jr., 37–79. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1974.
- Bethurum, Dorothy, ed. *The Homilies of Wulfstan*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1957.
- Biggs, Frederick M. 'The Naming of Beowulf and Ecgtheow's Feud.' *Philological Quarterly* 80, no. 2 (2001): 95–112.
- Bjork, Robert. 'Speech as Gift in *Beowulf*.' *Speculum* 69, no. 4 (1994): 993–1022.
- Black-Michaud, Jacob. *Cohesive Force: Feud in the Mediterranean and the Middle East*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1975.
- Boehm, Christopher. *Blood Revenge: The Anthropology of Feuding in Montenegro and Other Tribal Societies*. Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1984.
- Bowden, Muriel. *A Commentary on the General Prologue to the Canterbury Tales*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. New York: Macmillan Company, 1967.
- Braswell, Mary Flowers. *Chaucer's 'Legal Fiction': Reading the Records*. Madison, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press; London: Associated University Press, 2001.
- Brewer, Derek. 'The Reeve's Tale.' In *Chaucer's Frame Tales: The Physical and the Metaphysical*, ed. Joerg O. Fichte, 67–81. Tübingen: Gunter Narr Verlag; Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1987.
- Brewer, D.S., ed. *Malory: The Morte Darthur*. Parts 7 and 8. York Medieval Texts. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1974.
- Brinton, Laurel J. 'Chaucer's "Tale of Melibee": A Reassessment.' *English Studies in Canada* 10, no. 3 (1984): 251–264.
- Brodeur, Adrien. *The Digressions in 'Beowulf'*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1950.

- Brontë, Charlotte. *Jane Eyre*. London: Penguin Books, 2006.
- Brooks, Nicholas. 'Introduction: How Do We Know About St. Wulfstan?' In *St. Wulfstan and His World*, ed. Julia S. Barrow and N.P. Brooks, 1–21. Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing, 2005.
- Brown, Ursula, ed. *Porgils saga ok Haflíða*. London: Geoffrey Cumberlege and Oxford University Press, 1952.
- Burnett, Anne Pippin. *Revenge in Attic and Later Tragedy*. Sather Classical Lectures, Vol. 62. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998.
- Byock, Jesse. *Feud in the Icelandic Saga*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982.
- . *Medieval Iceland: Society, Sagas, and Power*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988.
- . 'Feuding in Viking-Age Iceland's Great Village.' In *Conflict in Medieval Europe: Changing Perspectives on Society and Culture*, ed. Warren C. Brown and Piotr Górecki. 229–241. Aldershot, England: Ashgate Publishing, 2003.
- Campbell, James. *The Anglo-Saxons*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1982.
- Ciklamini, Marlene. 'The Concept of Honor in *Valla-Ljóts Saga*.' *Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 65 (1966): 303–317.
- Colgrave, Bertram and R.A.B. Mynors, eds. *Bede's Ecclesiastical History of the English People*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969.
- Collete, Carolyn P. 'Heeding the Counsel of Prudence: A Context for the *Melibee*.' *The Chaucer Review* 29, no. 4 (1995): 416–433.
- Cooper, Helen. *Oxford Guides to Chaucer: The Canterbury Tales*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996.
- Copland, M. 'The Reeve's Tale: Harlotrie or Sermonyng?' *Medium Aevum* 31, no. 1 (1962): 14–32.
- Craigie, W.A. *The Icelandic Sagas*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1913.

- Curry, Walter Clyde. *Chaucer and the Mediaeval Sciences*. New York: Barnes & Noble, 1960.
- Darlington, Reginald R., ed. *The Vita Wulfstani of William of Malmesbury*. London, 1928.
- Davies, R.R. 'The Survival of Bloodfeud in Medieval Wales.' *History* 54 (1969): 338–357.
- Davis, Craig. *'Beowulf' and the Demise of Germanic Legend*. New York and London: Garland Publishing, 1996.
- Day, David. 'Hwanan sio fæhð aras: Defining the Feud in *Beowulf*.' *Philological Quarterly* 78, no. 1–2 (1999): 77–95.
- Delany, Sheila. 'Clerks and Quitting in the *Reeve's Tale*.' *Medievalia* 29 (1967): 351–356.
- Dennis, Andrew, Peter Foote, and Richard Perkins, trans. *Laws of Early Iceland: Grágás*. 2 vols. Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2000.
- Dictionary of Old English*. Ed. Antonette diPaolo Healey, et al. Toronto: 1986—. <http://www.doe.utoronto.ca/index.html>.
- Dobyns, Ann. 'Chaucer and the Rhetoric of Justice.' *Disputatio* 4 (1999): 75–89.
- Douglas, David C. and George W. Greenaway, eds. *English Historical Documents: 1042–1189*. Vol. 2. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. London: Eyre Methuen, 1981.
- Downer, L.J., ed. and trans. *Leges Henrici Primi*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972.
- Dronke, Ursula, ed. and trans. *The Poetic Edda: Mythological Poems*. Vol. 2. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997.
- Elliott, Robert C. *The Power of Satire: Magic, Ritual, Art*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1960.
- Ellis, Deborah S. 'Chaucer's Devilish Reeve.' *The Chaucer Review* 27, no. 2 (1992): 150–161.
- Evans, G. Blakemore, ed. *The Riverside Shakespeare*. 2 vols. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1974.

- Finlay, Alison. 'Níð, Adultery, and Feud in *Bjarnar saga Hítðlakappa*.' *Saga-Book* 23, no. 3 (1991): 158–178.
- Finsen, Vilhjálmur, ed. *Grágás, Konungsbók*. Copenhagen, 1852.
- . *Grágás efter det Arnamagnæanske Haandskrift Nr. 334 fol., Staðarhólsbók*. Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 1879.
- Fletcher, Richard. *Bloodfeud: Murder and Revenge in Anglo-Saxon England*. London: Penguin Books, 2002.
- Foote, Peter. 'Skömm Er Óhófs Ævi: On Glaucia, Hrafnkell and Others.' In *Idee Gestalt Geschichte: Festschrift Klaus Von See*, ed. Gerd Wolfgang Weber, *Studien zur europäischen Kulturtradition*, 285–298. Odense: Odense University Press, 1988.
- Foster, Edward E. 'Has Anyone Here Read *Melibee*?' *The Chaucer Review* 34, no. 4 (2000): 398–409.
- Frank, Roberta. *Old Norse Court Poetry: The "Dróttkvætt" Stanza*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1978.
- . 'The *Beowulf* Poet's Sense of History.' In *The Wisdom of Poetry: Essays in Early English Literature in honor of Morton W. Bloomfield*, 53–65. Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 1982.
- . 'Germanic Legend in Old English Literature.' In *The Cambridge Companion to Old English Literature*, ed. Malcolm Godden and Michael Lapidge, 88–106. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986.
- French, Peter A. *The Virtues of Vengeance*. Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2001.
- Friedman, John Block. 'A Reading of Chaucer's *Reeve's Tale*.' *The Chaucer Review* 2, no. 1 (1967): 1–19.
- Furnivall, Frederick J., ed. *Robert of Brunne's Handlyng Synne*. Early English Text Society O.S. 119. London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner, 1901.
- Georgianna, Linda. 'King Hrethel's Sorrow and the Limits of Heroic Action in *Beowulf*.' *Speculum* 62, no. 4 (1987): 829–850.

- Girard, René. *Violence and the Sacred*. Trans. Patrick Gregory. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1972.
- Gluckman, Max. *Custom and Conflict in Africa*. Glencoe, IL: Free Press, 1959.
- Grace, Dominick. 'Telling Differences: Chaucer's *Tale of Melibee* and Renaud de Louens' *Livre de Mellibee et Prudence*.' *Philological Quarterly* 82, no. 1 (2003): 367–400.
- Haddan, A.W. and W. Stubbs, eds. *Councils and Ecclesiastical Documents relating to Great Britain and Ireland*. Vol. 3. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1871.
- Hall, G.D.G., ed. *The Treatise on the Laws and Customs of the Realm of England Commonly Called Glanville*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993.
- Halsall, Guy, ed. *Violence and Society in the Early Medieval West*. Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 1998.
- Harris, Anne Leslie. 'Hands, Helms, Heroes: The Role of Proper Names in *Beowulf*.' *Neuphilologische Mitteilungen* 83 (1982): 414–421.
- Hart, Walter Morris. 'The Reeve's Tale: A Comparative Study of Chaucer's Narrative Art.' *PMLA* 23 (1908): 1–44.
- Herzman, Ronald B., Graham Drake, and Eve Salisbury, eds. *Four Romances of England*. TEAMS Middle English Texts Series. Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 1999.
- Hill, John M. 'The Ethnopsychology of In-Law Feud and the Remaking of Group Identity in *Beowulf*: The Cases of Hengest and Ingeld.' *Philological Quarterly* 78, no. 1–2 (1999): 97–123.
- Howard, Donald R. *The Idea of the Canterbury Tales*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976.
- Hreinsson, Viðar, ed. *The Complete Sagas of Icelanders*. 5 vols. Reykjavík: Bókaútgáfan Leifur Eiríksson, 1997.
- Hume, Kathryn. 'Beginnings and Endings in the Icelandic Family Sagas.' *The Modern Language Review* 68, no. 3 (1973): 593–606.

- Hyams, Paul R. *Rancor and Reconciliation in Medieval England*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003.
- An Icelandic-English Dictionary*. Ed. Richard Cleasby and Gudbrand Vigfusson with supplement by W.A. Craigie. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1957.
- Irving, Edward B., Jr. *A Reading of 'Beowulf.'* New Haven: Yale University Press, 1968.
- Jakobsson, Ármann. 'The Trollish Acts of Þorgrímr the Witch: The Meanings of *Troll* and *Ergi* in Medieval Iceland.' *Saga-Book* 32 (2008): 39–68.
- Jesch, Judith. "'Good Men" and Peace in *Njáls saga*.' In *Introductory Essays on "Egils saga" and "Njáls saga,"* ed. John Hines and Desmond Slay, 64–82. London: Viking Society for Northern Research, 1992.
- Jóhannesson, Jón, ed. *Olkofra þáttir. Íslenzk fornrit*. Vol. 11. Reykjavík: Híð Íslenzka Fornritafélag, 1950.
- Jónsson, Guðni, ed. *Grettis saga. Íslenzk fornrit*. Vol. 7. Reykjavík: Híð Íslenzka Fornritafélag, 1936.
- , ed. *Sturlunga Saga*. 3 Vols. Reykjavík: Íslendingasagnaútgáfan, 1953.
- Jurasinski, Stefan. 'The Ecstasy of Vengeance: Legal History, Old English Scholarship, and the "Feud" of Hengest.' Chap. 3 in *Ancient Privileges*. Originally published in *Review of English Studies* 55 (2004): 641–661.
- . '*Feohleas Gefeoht*: Accidental Homicide and the Hrethel Episode.' Chap. 4 in *Ancient Privileges: 'Beowulf,' Law, and the Making of Germanic Antiquity*. Morgantown: West Virginia University Press, 2006.
- Justman, Stewart. '*The Reeve's Tale* and the Honor of Men.' *Studies in Short Fiction* 32, no. 1 (1995): 21–27.
- Kaeuper, Richard W. *War, Justice, and Public Order: England and France in the Later Middle Ages*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988.
- Kahrl, Stanley. 'Feuds in *Beowulf*: A Tragic Necessity?' *Modern Philology* 69, no. 3 (1972): 189–198.



- Kaminsky, Howard. 'The Noble Feud in the Later Middle Ages.' *Past and Present* 177 (2002): 55–83.
- Kamowski, William. 'Varieties of Response to *Melibee* and the *Clerk's Tale*.' In *Chaucer in the Eighties*, ed. Julian N. Wasserman and Robert J. Blanch, 193–207. Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1986.
- Karlsson, Gunnar. *The History of Iceland*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000.
- Kaske, Robert E. '*Sapientia et Fortitudo* as the Controlling Theme of *Beowulf*.' *Studies in Philology* 55 (1958): 432–456. Repr. in *An Anthology of Beowulf Criticism*, ed. Lewis E. Nicholson, 269–310. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1963.
- Kempton, Daniel. 'Chaucer's Tale of Melibee: "A Litel Thyng in Prose."' *Genre* 21 (1988): 263–278.
- Kennedy, Kathleen E. 'Maintaining Love Through Accord in the *Tale of Melibee*.' *The Chaucer Review* 39, no. 2 (2004): 165–176.
- Kerrigan, John. *Revenge Tragedy: Aeschylus to Armageddon*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996.
- Keyser, R. and P.A. Munch, eds. *Gulapingsløg, Norges gamle love indtil 1387*. Christiana, 1846.
- Klaeber, Friedrich, ed. '*Beowulf* and *The Fight at Finnsburg*.' 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. Boston: D.C. Heath and Company, 1950.
- Klintberg, Bengt af. 'Why Are There So Many Modern Legends About Revenge?' In *Contemporary Legend: A Reader*. Ed. Gillian Bennett and Paul Smith, 261–266. New York: Garland Publishing, 1996.
- Kolve, V.A. *Chaucer and the Imagery of Narrative: The First Five Canterbury Tales*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1984.
- Kratz, Dennis M., ed. and trans. *Waltharius and Ruodlieb*. New York: Garland Publishers, 1984.
- Larson, Laurence M., ed. and trans. *The King's Mirror (Speculum Regale—Konungs skuggsjá)*. New York: The American-Scandinavian Foundation and London: Humphrey Milford, 1917.

———, ed. *The Earliest Norwegian Laws*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1935.

Lawrence, W.W. 'The Marriage Group in the 'Canterbury Tales.' *Modern Philology* 11, no. 2 (1913): 247–258.

———. 'The Tale of Melibeus.' In *Essays and Studies in Honor of Carleton Brown*, 100–110. New York: New York University Press. 1940.

———. *'Beowulf' and the Epic Tradition*. New York and London: Hafner Publishing Company, 1963.

Lerer, Seth. "'Now Holde Youre Mouth': The Romance of Orality in the *Thopas-Melibee* Section of the *Canterbury Tales*.' In *Oral Poetics in Middle English Poetry*, ed. Mark C. Amodio and Sarah Gray Miller, 181–205. New York: Garland Publishing, 1994.

Liebermann, Felix. *Die Gesetze der Angelsachsen: hrsg. Im Auftrage der Savigny-Stiftung*. 1903. <http://www.archive.org/details/diegesetzedera01lifebuoft>.

Liggins, Elizabeth M. 'Revenge and Reward as Recurrent Motives in *Beowulf*.' *Neuphilologische Mitteilungen*, 74, no. 2 (1973): 193–213.

Lindahl, Carl. *Earnest Games: Folkloric Patterns in the Canterbury Tales*. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1987.

———. 'Beowulf, Old Law, Internalized Feud.' *Southern Folklore* 53, no. 3 (1996): 171–191.

Liuzza, R.M., ed. *Beowulf: A New Verse Translation*. Peterborough, ON: Broadview Press, 2000.

Lönnroth, Lars. 'The Noble Heathen: A Theme in the Sagas.' *Scandinavian Studies* 41, no. 1 (1969): 1–29.

Looze, Laurence N. de. 'Frame Narratives and Fictionalization: Beowulf as Narrator.' *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 26, no. 2 (1984): 145–156.

Lumiansky, R.M. *Of Sondry Folk: The Dramatic Principle in the Canterbury Tales*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1955.

- Malone, Kemp, ed. *Widsith*. Anglistica XIII. Copenhagen: Rosenkilde and Bagger, 1962.
- Mandel, Jerome. *Geoffrey Chaucer: Building the Fragments of the 'Canterbury Tales.'* Rutherford, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press and London and Toronto: Associated University Press, 1992.
- Mann, Jill. *Chaucer and the Medieval Estates Satire: The Literature of Social Classes and the General Prologue to the "Canterbury Tales."* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973.
- , ed., *The Canterbury Tales*. London: Penguin Books, 2005.
- Marsden, Richard, ed. *Cynewulf and Cyneheard. The Cambridge Old English Reader*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004.
- Mather, Frank Jewett. *Chaucer's Prologue, Knight's Tale, and Nun's Priest's Tale*. Boston, 1899.
- McDonald, Richard B. 'The Reve Was a Scendre Colerik Man.' In *Chaucer's Pilgrims: An Historical Guide to the Pilgrims in The Canterbury Tales*, ed. Laura C. Lambdin and Robert T. Lambdin, 288–299. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1996.
- McTurk, R.W. "'Cynewulf and Cyneheard" and the Icelandic Sagas.' *Leeds Studies in English* 12 (1981): 81–127.
- Melville, Herman. *Moby Dick, or The Whale*. New York: Hendricks House, 1952.
- Metzger, Bruce M. and Roland E. Murphy, eds. *The New Oxford Annotated Bible*. New Revised Standard Version. New York: Oxford University Press, 1991.
- Middle English Dictionary*. Ed. Frances McSparran, et al. Ann Arbor: 2001.  
<http://www.quod.lib.umich.edu/m/med/>.
- Miller, William Ian. *Bloodtaking and Peacemaking: Feud, Law, and Society in Saga Iceland*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1990.
- . *Humiliation: And Other Essays on Honor, Social Discomfort, and Violence*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993.
- . *Eye for an Eye*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006.

- Miller, William Ian and Theodore Andersson. *Law and Literature in Medieval Iceland: Ljósvetninga saga and Valla-Ljóts saga*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1989.
- Milton, John. *Paradise Lost*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004.
- Mitchell, Bruce and Fred C. Robinson, eds. *Beowulf: An Edition*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Ltd., 1998.
- Moore, Stephen G. 'Apply Yourself: Learning While Reading the *Tale of Melibee*.' *The Chaucer Review* 38, no. 1 (2003): 83–97.
- Morris, Christopher J. 'Marriage and Murder in Eleventh-Century Northumbria: A Study of 'De Obsessione Dunelmi.' Borthwick Paper no. 82. York: Borthwick Institute of Historical Research / University of York, 1992.
- Muir, Bernard J., ed. *The Exeter Anthology of Old English Poetry: An Edition of Exeter Dean and Chapter MS 3501*. Vol. 1. Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2000.
- Myers, Louis McCorry. 'A Line in the Reeve's Prologue.' *Modern Language Notes* 49, no. 4 (1934): 222–226.
- Netterstrøm, Jeppe Büchert and Bjørn Poulsen, ed. *Feud in Medieval and Early Modern Europe*. Aarhus: Aarhus University Press, 2007.
- Niles, John D. 'Maldon and Mythopoesis.' Repr. in *Old English Literature: Critical Essays*, ed. R.M. Liuzza, 445–474. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002.
- O'Brien O'Keefe, Katherine. 'Heroic values and Christian ethics.' In *The Cambridge Companion to Old English Literature*, ed. Malcolm Godden and Michael Lapidge, 107–125. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986.
- O'Donoghue, Heather. *Old Norse-Icelandic Literature: A Short Introduction*. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2004.
- Ogilvy, J.D.A. and Donald C. Baker. *Reading 'Beowulf': An Introduction to the Poem, Its Background, and Its Style*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1983.
- Ólason, Vésteinn. 'Family Sagas.' *A Companion to Old Norse-Icelandic Literature and Culture*, ed. Rory McTurk, 101–118. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2005.
- Oliver, Lisi. *The Beginnings of English Law*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2002.

- Olson, Glending. 'The *Reeve's Tale* as a Fabliau.' *Modern Language Quarterly* 35, no. 3 (1974): 219–230.
- Olson, Paul A. 'The *Reeve's Tale*: Chaucer's *Measure for Measure*.' *Studies in Philology* 52, no. 1 (1962): 1–17.
- Orchard, Andy. *A Critical Companion to 'Beowulf'*. Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2003.
- . 'Parallel Lives: Wulfstan, William, Coleman and Christ.' In *St. Wulfstan and His World*, ed. Julia S. Barrow and N.P. Brooks, 39–57. Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing, 2005.
- Osborn, Marijane. 'The Great Feud: Scriptural History and Strife in *Beowulf*.' *PMLA* 93 (1978): 973–981.
- Owen-Crocker, Gale. "'Gracious" Hrothulf, "Gracious" Hrothgar: A Reassessment.' *English Language Notes* 38, no. 4 (2001): 1–7.
- Oxford English Dictionary*. Ed. James A.H. Murray, *et al.* 13 vols. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1961.
- Pakkala-Weckström, Mari. 'Prudence and the Power of Persuasion—Language and *Maistrie* in the *Tale of Melibee*.' *The Chaucer Review* 35, no. 4 (2001): 399–412.
- Palomo, Dolores. 'What Chaucer Really Did to *Le Livre De Mellibee*.' *Philological Quarterly* 53 (1974): 304–320.
- Pálsson, Hermann. *Art and Ethics in Hrafnkel's Saga*. Copenhagen: Munksgaard, 1971.
- Patterson, Lee. "'What Man Artow?": Authorial Self-Definition in *The Tale of Sir Thopas* and *The Tale of Melibee*.' *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 11 (1989): 117–175.
- Peters, E.L. *The Bedouin of Cyrenaica: Studies in Personal and Corporate Power*, ed. Jack Goody and Emanuel Marx. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990.
- Poe, Edgar Allan. *The Complete Stories*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1992.
- Pollock, Frederick and Frederic William Maitland. *The History of English Law Before the Time of Edward I*. 2 vols. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1968.

- Posner, Richard. *Law and Literature*. Rev. ed. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998.
- Pratt, Robert A. 'Was Robyn the Miller's Youth Misspent?' *Modern Language Notes* 59, no. 1 (1944): 47–49.
- Pulsiano, Phillip, ed. *Medieval Scandinavia: An Encyclopedia*. New York and London: Garland Publishing, 1993.
- Roebuck, Derek. *Early English Arbitration*. Oxford: HOLO Books / The Arbitration Press, 2008.
- Rubin, Stanley. 'The Bot, or Composition in Anglo-Saxon Law: A Reassessment.' *The Journal of Legal History* 17, no. 2 (1996): 144–154.
- Ruggiers, Paul G. 'Serious Chaucer: The *Tale of Melibeus* and the *Parson's Tale*.' In *Chaucerian Problems and Perspectives: Essays Presented to Paul E. Beichner, C.S.C.*, ed. Edward Vasta and Zacharias P. Thundy, 83–94. Notre Dame and London: University of Notre Dame Press, 1979.
- Sawyer, Peter. "The Bloodfeud in Fact and Fiction." In *Tradition og historieskrivning*, ed. Kirsten Hastrup and Preben Meulengracht Sørensen, 27–38. Aarhus: Aarhus universitetsforlag, 1987.
- Scragg, D.G., ed. *The Battle of Maldon*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1981.
- Seaton, Ethel. 'Goode Lief My Wife.' *Modern Language Review* 41, no. 2 (1946): 196–202.
- Shaw, Brian A. 'The Speeches in *Beowulf*: A Structural Study.' *The Chaucer Review* 13, no. 1 (1978): 86–92.
- Shepherd, Stephen H.A., ed. *Ywain and Gawain*. In *Middle English Romances*, 75–173. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1995.
- Shippey, T.A. 'Principles of Conversation in Beowulfian Speech.' In *Techniques of Description: Spoken and Written Discourses*, ed. John M. Sinclair, Michael Hoey, and Gwyneth Fox, 109–126. London and New York: Routledge, 1993.
- Sigfússon, Björn, ed. *Ljósvetninga saga. Íslensk fornrit*. Vol. 10. Reykjavík: Híð Íslenska Fornritafélag, 1940.

- Sigurðsson, Gísli. ‘\*The Immanent Saga of Guðmundr ríki.’ In *Learning and Understanding in the Old Norse World: Essays in Honour of Margaret Clunies Ross*, ed. Judy Quinn, Kate Heslop, and Tarrin Willis, 201–218. Medieval Texts and Cultures of Northern Europe, vol. 18. Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols Publishers, 2007.
- Smail, Daniel Lord. ‘Common Violence: Vengeance and Inquisition in Fourteenth-Century Marseilles.’ *Past and Present* 151 (1996): 28–59.
- Sørensen, Preben Meulengracht. *The Unmanly Man*. Trans. Joan Turville-Petre. Odense: Odense University Press, 1983.
- . ‘Social Institutions and Belief Systems of Medieval Iceland (c. 870–1400) and Their Relations to Literary Production.’ Trans. Margaret Clunies Ross. In *Old Icelandic Literature and Society*, ed. Margaret Clunies Ross, 8–29. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000.
- Steblin-Kamenskij, M.I. *The Saga Mind*. Trans. Kenneth H. Ober. Odense: Odense University Press, 1973.
- Steele, Robert, ed. *Three Prose Versions of the ‘Secreta Secretorum.’* Early English Text Society E.S. 74. London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner, 1898.
- Stevens, Martin and A.C. Cawley, eds. *The Towneley Plays*. Vol. 1. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994.
- Ström, Folke. ‘*Níð, Ergi*, and Old Norse Moral Attitudes.’ The Dorothea Coke Memorial Lecture in Northern Studies, University College London, May 10, 1973.
- Sutherland, Donald. *The Assize of Novel Disseisin*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1973.
- Sveinsson, Einar Ól., ed. *Brennu-Njáls saga*. *Íslenzk fornrit*. Vol. 12. Reykjavík: Híð Íslenzka Fornritafélag, 1954.
- Thompson, Claiborne. ‘Moral Values in the Icelandic Sagas.’ In *The Epic in Medieval Society: Aesthetic and Moral Values*, ed. Harald Scholler, 347–360. Tübingen: Max Niemeyer Verlag, 1977.
- Thorpe, Benjamin, ed. *Diplomatarium Anglicum Ævi Saxonici*. London: Macmillan & Co., 1865.

- Tolan, John. *Petrus Alfonsi and His Medieval Readers*. Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1993.
- Troyes, Chrétien de. *Yvain, Le Chevalier au lion*. Ed. Claude-Alain Chevallier. Librairie Générale Française, 1988.
- Turner, Marion. 'Conflict Resolved?: The Language of Peace and Chaucer's "Tale of Melibee."' Chap. 6 in *Chaucerian Conflict: Languages of Antagonism in Late Fourteenth-Century London*. Oxford English Monographs. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2007.
- Turville-Petre, G. *Origins of Icelandic Literature*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1953.
- Vasta, Edward. 'The Devil in Chaucer's Reeve.' *American Notes & Queries* 22 (1984): 126–128.
- Wallace-Hadrill, J.M. *The Long-Haired Kings and Other Studies in Frankish History*. London: Methuen & Co., Ltd., 1962.
- Walling, Amanda. "'In Hir Tellyng Difference": Gender, Authority, and Interpretation in the *Tale of Melibee*.' *The Chaucer Review* 40, no. 2 (2005): 163–181.
- White, Stephen D. 'Feuding and Peace-Making in the Touraine Around the Year 1100.' *Traditio* 42 (1986): 195–263.
- . 'Kinship and Lordship in Early Medieval England: The Story of Sigeberht, Cynewulf, and Cyneheard.' Repr. in *Old English Literature*, ed. R.M. Liuzza, 157–181. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002.
- Whitelock, Dorothy. 'Beowulf 2444–2471.' *Medium Aevum* 8 (1939): 198–204.
- . *The Audience of 'Beowulf'*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1951.
- . *The Beginnings of English Society*. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1952.
- . *English Historical Documents, c. 500–1042*. Vol. 1. London: Eyre Methuen and New York: Oxford University Press, 1979.
- Wilson, Eric. 'The Blood Wrought Peace: A Girardian Reading of *Beowulf*.' *English Language Notes* 34, no. 1 (1996): 7–30.



Wormald, Jenny. 'The Blood Feud in Early Modern Scotland.' In *Disputes and Settlements: Law and Human Relations in the West*, ed. John Bossy, 101–144. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983. Originally published in *Past and Present* 87 (1980): 54–97.

Wormald, Patrick. *Legal Culture in the Early Medieval West: Law as Text, Image, and Experience*. London and Rio Grande: The Hambledon Press, 1999.

———. *The Making of English Law: King Alfred to the Twelfth Century*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1999.

Yeager, R.F. 'Pax Poetica: On the Pacifism of Chaucer and Gower.' *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 9 (1987): 97–121.