

Redeeming Beowulf:

The Heroic Idiom as Marker of Quality in Old English Poetry

Abstract: Although it has been fashionable lately to read Old English poetry as being critical of the values of heroic culture, the heroic idiom is the main, and perhaps the only, marker of quality in Old English poetry. Considering in turn the ‘sacred heroic’ in *Genesis A* and *Andreas*, the ‘mock heroic’ in *Judith* and *Riddle 51*, and the fiercely debated status of Byrhtnoth and Beowulf in *The Battle of Maldon* and *Beowulf*, this discussion suggests that modern scholarship has confused the measure with the measured. Although an uncritical heroic idiom may not be to modern critical tastes, it is suggested here that the variety of ways in which the heroic idiom is used to evaluate and mark value demonstrates the flexibility and depth of insight achieved by Old English poets through their apparently limited subject matter.

A hero can only be defined by a narrative in which he or she meets or exceeds measures set by society—in which he or she demonstrates his or her quality. In that sense, all heroic narratives are narratives about quality. In Old English poetry, the heroic idiom stands as the marker of quality for a wide range of things: people, artefacts, actions, and events that are good, respected, desirable, and valued are marked by being presented with the characteristic language and ethic of an idealised, archaic warrior-culture.¹ This is not, of course, a new point; it is traditional in Old English scholarship to associate quality with the elite, military world of generous war-lords, loyal thegns, gorgeous equipment, great acts of courage, and

¹ The characteristic subject matter and style of Old English poetry is referred to in varying ways by critics. I adopt the term ‘heroic idiom’ from Koppinen 2009. For discussion of the heroic idiom as a code, see pp. 94-8.

social joys.² Yet recently critics have interpreted Old English texts as being critical of the values of heroic culture.³ In what follows, I shall argue that heroic narratives are narratives about quality and that the choice to tell a heroic narrative is a choice to debate and define quality through readings of *Genesis A*, *Andreas*, *Judith*, *Riddle 51*, *The Battle of Maldon*, and *Beowulf*. My contention is that interpretations that view these texts as critiques of heroic culture confuse the measure with the measured.

The Sacred Heroic

Perhaps the strongest evidence for the use of the heroic idiom as a marker and guarantee of quality is its use, right up to the end of the Anglo-Saxon period, to represent God and his saints: just as gold was a suitable medium with which to adorn the cross, so the heroic idiom was a suitable medium with which to adorn the ineffable power of the creator as well as his most loyal and worthy followers. This use of the heroic idiom for Christian topics is a well known characteristic of Old English poetry,⁴ but it is worth scrutinising before accepting it as an inevitable aspect of it. Representing God is a notoriously tricky business. Given that human language is fallen and flawed,⁵ it is probably easiest—and safest—to resort to inexpressibility tropes when attempting to describe God.⁶ Yet Old English poetry generally does not resort to inexpressibility tropes when describing the actions of God. Although *The*

² For a useful overview, see Bremmer 2005. See also, however, the qualifying discussion in Wogan-Browne 2002.

³ Notable examples include Clark 2003, Gwara 2008, and Herbison 2010.

⁴ See, for example, Hill 1981; Greenfield and Calder 1986, pp. 158- 82 and 183-205; Cherniss 1972, p. 255. Cf. discussion in Hermann 1989, p. 17.

⁵ See, for example, Augustine's exploration of temporal nature of language in book 11 of his *Confessions*. For a useful discussion of this idea, see Ferguson 1975, especially p. 856.

⁶ The technique is not specifically Christian or restricted to the divine; see the discussion of 'inexpressibility topoi' in Curtius 1953, pp. 159-62. Cf. also the approach known as apophatic theology or the *via negativa*; for a brief definition, see Bowker 1997, p. 81, and see the discussion in Williams 1996, pp. 4-6 and in more detail on pp. 23-48.

Dream of the Rood employs paradox to convey the enormity of the crucifixion,⁷ elsewhere the heroic idiom apparently seemed adequate on its own to indicate the great power of God.

Thus, when God defeats the fallen angels in *Genesis A*, he does so without any protestation from the poet that mere words cannot comprehend the extent of his power.

Pa he gebolgen wearð,
 besloh synsceaþan sigore and gewealde,
 dome and dugeðe, and dreame benam
 his feond, friðo and gefean ealle,
 torhte tire, and his torn gewræc
 on gesacum swiðe selfes mihtum
 strengum stiepe. Hæfde styrne mod,
 gegremed grymme, grap on wraðe
 faum folmum, and him on fæðm gebræc
 yrre on mode; æðele bescyrede
 his wiðerbrecan wuldorgestealdum. (*Genesis A* 54-64)⁸

[When he became enraged, he struck away victory and power, glory and prosperity from those sinful warriors, and he deprived his enemy of gladness, peace, bright honour, and all joys. And with his own might he avenged his insult hard on his opponents with a violent downfall. Grimly provoked, he had a stern mind; in wrath he gripped the evil one with his hand, and, angry in

⁷ See, among others, Wolf 1970, Graybill 1984, and Finlay 1986.

⁸ Quotations from Old English poetry other than *Beowulf* are taken from *The Anglo-Saxon Poetic Records* and will be cited parenthetically by title and line number only. All translations are my own.

mind, he broke him in his embrace; he sheared his adversary of nobility and the realms of glory.]

Significantly, as has been noted before, the language chosen to describe the awesome nature of divine fury recalls Beowulf's heroic struggles: like Beowulf (and, indeed, like Grendel), God attacks *þa he gebolgen wearð* 'when he became enraged' (*Genesis A 54b*).⁹ Among other things, this passage provides a strong validation of the right to vengeance. God avenges the insult against himself violently, in anger, and the audience is presumably meant to celebrate the successful destruction of his foes. In contrast, the rebel angels are reviled because of their failure to carry out their stated intention of subdividing heaven with God. On both sides, therefore, the heroic idiom is used as a measure: God's omnipotence is indicated by his absolute fulfilment of the expectations of heroic action in a situation requiring vengeance, and the rebel angels' weakness is indicated by their inability to fulfil their boast and prevent their enemy from depriving them of *torhte tīre* 'bright honour' (*Genesis A 58a*).

Elsewhere, the quality of God's saints is similarly asserted through the use of the heroic idiom. For example, in *Andreas*, we are introduced to the twelve apostles in the following passage:

Hwæt! We gefrunan on fyrndagum
twelfe under tunglum tīreadige hæleð,

⁹ This is not an isolated incident; see also *Genesis* 299b, 430b, 552a, 558b, and 1257a, as well as *Resignation* 79a and *The Paris Psalter* 138.18. Grendel's state of mind parallels the divine mood only once (723b), but the hero enacts it more often (709a, 1539b, 2401b, and 2550b). The dragon (2220b, 2304a), the sea-monsters in Grendel's mere (1431a), and Heremod (1713a) also share this mood. Sharma's recent discussion of this term focuses on the instances in which this mood is attributed to monstrous or demonic characters and thus ascribes moral ambiguity to it, but he does not explain how that moral ambiguity operates in the eight instances in which it is ascribed to God. See Sharma 2005, p. 251.

þeodnes þegnas. No hira þrym alæg
 camprædenne þonne cumbol hneotan,
 syððan hie gedældon, swa him dryhten sylf,
 heofona heahcýning, hlyt getæhte.
 Pæt wæron mære men ofer eorðan,
 frome folctogan ond fyrðhwate,
 rofe rincas, þonne rond ond hand
 on herefelda helm ealgodon,
 on meotudwange. (*Andreas* 1-11a)

[Listen! We have heard of twelve victory-blessed heroes in days long past,
 thegns of the prince under the stars. Their power in warfare did not weaken
 when banners clashed, after they parted (from each other), just as the lord
 himself, the high-king of the heavens, assigned them their lot. They were men
 famous across the world—leaders bold and keen for war, strong warriors when
 shield and hand defended the helmet on battlefields and plains of war.]

Of course, the heroic action here is metaphorical, not literal: it is battle against spiritual, not physical foes.¹⁰ Yet it is worth noting the absence of any other indicators of quality. There is no mention of the apostles' piety, faith, or mercy; their heroic status is enough to assert their quality. Thus, even in a context in which other attributes might be considered an essential indicator of these characters' status, the heroic idiom serves as a sufficient measure of their quality.

¹⁰ Note also that many critics have been dissatisfied with *Andreas*' use of the heroic idiom. Irving 1983 notes that the poem is 'most often' taken as 'an embarrassing misapplication of the heroic style to the wrong subject' (p. 215). Cf. Hill 1981, pp. 72-4; Cherniss 1972, pp. 171-93; Shippey 1972, pp. 114-26.

The Mock Heroic

The examples discussed thus far have been those that show narratives of undisputed quality: the heroic narratives of God and the apostles are stories of unqualified success. Again, it is important to note that these narratives do not seek any other measure of quality to magnify or modify their characters and events; the heroic idiom on its own is already superlative, already the highest indication of quality. The heroic idiom can also, however, be used in narratives of disputed quality, in stories of the failure to live up to the measure of the heroic idiom. In extreme cases, these narratives might be labelled ‘mock heroic’. The mock heroic has been defined as a text ‘written in an ironically grand style that is comically incongruous with the “low” or trivial subject treated’.¹¹ The classic example is Alexander Pope’s tale of a man snipping a lock of hair from a vain young woman:

The meeting points the sacred hair dissever
 From the fair head, for ever, and for ever!
 Then flash’d the living lightning from her eyes,
 And screams of horror rend th’ affrighted skies.
 Not louder shrieks to pitying heav’n are cast,
 When husbands, or when lapdogs breathe their last;
 Or when rich China vessels fall’n from high,
 In glitt’ring dust and painted fragments lie!

(The Rape of the Lock, 153-60)

¹¹ Baldick 1990, p. 139.

Here the trivial is treated with all the pomp of events of the greatest importance, and thus the deaths of lapdogs, husbands, and china vessels all occasion the same enormous grief. Yet the key thing is that the heroic style is used to mock things that are not heroic. Heroic action itself is not mocked, and so the heroic remains the measure of quality, against which, in this case, 18th century aristocrats fail to measure up.

The central issue in such cases is, of course, irony. Many critics accept that irony is a major feature of Old English poetry.¹² Roberta Frank, for example, has shown that irony is a particular feature of heroic speech.¹³ Yet it is impossible to prove that irony exists in any particular case.¹⁴ Shippey argues that the ambiguity inherent in irony is a characteristic quality of Old English poetry and that the Anglo-Saxons had a ‘liking for barely perceptible statement, to be caught only by the wise or the alert’.¹⁵ Nevertheless, while we cannot prove that irony exists in any particular instance, we can evaluate, as Anglo-Saxon audiences must have done, albeit with better precision, whether deeds measure up to words and whether the people in question satisfy the demanding requirements of heroic action.

Judith

A useful case-study in irony is *Judith*, the unfortunately incomplete poem that follows *Beowulf* in the manuscript. This poem is a retelling of the Biblical story of Judith, a young widow who saves the Hebrews from an invading army by seducing the Assyrian general, Holofernes and then beheading him. The Old English poem is remarkable in many ways,

¹² See, for example, Ringler 1966, pp. 59-61.

¹³ Frank 2006.

¹⁴ There is considerable scholarly debate over the issue of irony in *Beowulf*, for example. See the overview and cogent discussion in DeGregorio. The issue will be discussed further below.

¹⁵ Shippey 2000, p. 44.

notably its ‘poetic exuberance’¹⁶ and its sword-wielding heroine.¹⁷ In this discussion, however, the focus will rest on the male company that she keeps.

At what is now the beginning of the poem, and, indeed, throughout most of the poem, Holofernes and his Assyrian army enjoy all the attributes of a great heroic *comitatus*: Holofernes is a *mæran þeodne* ‘famous prince’ (3a), and his men are *bealde byrnwiggende* ‘bold warriors’ (17a), bearing weapons as heroes do. Given that they are the villains of this text, such characterisation requires some explanation; the villains of *Genesis A*, in contrast, do not receive the benefit of the heroic idiom.¹⁸ For example, the heroic presentation of the Assyrians could be interpreted as building up a strong opposition in order to increase the glory of the Hebrews who ultimately vanquish them. However, the description of the Assyrians reveals itself to be mock heroic, not heroic.¹⁹ Hints of irony surface as early as line 9 of the text, where the poet begins to describe the great feast to which Holofernes invites his *yldestan ðegnas* ‘leading thegns’ (10a). The poem does not make any critique of the Assyrians explicit at this point; even so, their heroic feast, which might at first seem to be a perfect enactment of what a feast should be, quite quickly reveals itself to be not quite right.²⁰ First, there is too much alcohol: Holofernes is generous to his men, as a good *goldwine* ‘gold-friend’ (22a) should be, but his provision of drink is excessive, leading his men to being *oferdrencte* ‘over-drenched’ (31a) and *agotene goda gehwylces* ‘drained of every virtue’ (32a). Second, the party lasts too long, extending *ofer ealne dæg* ‘over the whole day’ (28b), until the men lie *swylce hie wæron deaðe geslegene* ‘as if they struck down in death’ (31b).

¹⁶ Chickering 2009.

¹⁷ See, for example, the discussions in Lucas 1992; Belanoff 1993; Lochrie 1994; and Magennis 2002.

¹⁸ Battles 2000, p. 47.

¹⁹ For previous discussions of the ironic presentation of the Assyrians, see Godden 1991, pp. 220-22; Griffith 1997, pp. 65-7; Herbison 2010, pp. 13-17. The latter interprets the irony in the poem as applying to the heroic idiom itself, not simply to the Assyrians.

²⁰ Magennis 1983; Magennis 1996, p. 84.

And, third, Holofernes is too merry, shouting and laughing so loudly that *mihten fira bearn feorran gehyran* ‘the sons of men could hear him from far away’ (24), until he falls unconscious into his bed, *swa he nyste ræda nanne / on gewitlocan* ‘as if he did not know any wisdom in his mind’ (68b-69a). The situation here may be familiar to current urban youth culture, but it jars with a narrative of heroism.

The unease caused by the excessive feast may serve as a cue to look a bit more closely at what at first glance seems to be the standard, poetic language of heroic culture. On closer examination, the heroic epithets which are generously bestowed upon Holofernes and the Assyrians seem less than innocent. Holofernes, for example, is designated as *se rica* three times in the poem:

... ðæs *se rica* ne wende,
egesful eorla dryhten... (*Judith* 20b-1a)

[The powerful man, the terrible lord of men, did not expect this.]

...lædan ongunnon
þa torhtan mægð to træfe þam hean,
þær *se rica* hyne reste on symbel... (*Judith* 42b-4)

[They began to lead the beautiful woman to the lofty tent where the powerful man always slept.]

Gefeol ða wine swa druncen

se rica on his reste middan, swa he nyste ræda nanne
on gewitlocan. (*Judith* 67b-9a)

[Then the powerful man fell into the middle of his bed so drunk that he knew
no sense in his head.]

Although the modern reflex of the word, ‘rich’, is probably relevant to the word’s meaning in many contexts, *se rica* here means the ‘powerful man’ or ‘ruler’.²¹ It is a word used to depict God as the creator in the Old English *Genesis A* (158b); it is applied to the effective kings Hrothgar and Higelac, as well as the hero himself in *Beowulf* (310b, 1975b, 399a); and it describes Nebuchadnezzar at the height of his power in *Daniel* (595a). It is a word that seems entirely appropriate for a successful Assyrian general about to annihilate his foes, but the specific instances in which it is used in *Judith* should make us pause, for Holofernes is called *se rica* ‘the powerful one’ when the poet states that he is ignorant of his army’s imminent fate (20b), when he is sleeping in his tent (44a), and when he lies unconscious on his bed (68a). That is, Holofernes is called ‘powerful’ specifically when he is not in a position of power—when, in fact, he is increasingly helpless. References to him as *se rica*, therefore, create an increasing sense of irony.

This interpretation of *se rica* finds resonance with Shippey’s evaluation of the Anglo-Saxons’ sardonic sense of humour. As already mentioned, Shippey argues that the Anglo-Saxons laughed both at those who laugh too early and at those who fail to see subtle distinctions.²² Holofernes is a good candidate for scorn on both counts, given that he has been laughing very loudly all day and that now, as Judith approaches his bed, he fails to see the subtle difference

²¹ See Bosworth 1898-1921, *s.v.* *rica*. This work will henceforth be referred to as B-T.

²² Shippey 2000, p. 44.

between a helpless object of desire and an assassin. It is possible, in fact, to make a case for irony in almost all his epithets. For example, Holofernes is dubbed the *egesful eorla dryhten* ‘terrifying lord of men’ (21a) when his army is *fæge* ‘doomed’ and *ðæs se rica ne wende* ‘the powerful man did not expect that’ (20b). He is *stiðmoda* ‘fierce’ (25a) and *modig* ‘courageous’ (26a) when he is shouting drunkenly. He is a *swiðmod sincebrytta* ‘proud distributor of treasure’ (30a) and *gumena baldor* ‘prince of men’ (32b) when he drowns his men in drink. He is a *modiga* ‘brave man’ when he is lurking in his tent so no one can see him.²³ And he is a *byrnwigena brego* ‘leader of armed warriors’ (39a), *se brema* ‘the famous one’ (57b), and a *pearlmod ðeoden gumena* ‘stern-hearted lord of men’ (66a) when he is waiting for Judith to be delivered to his bed. None of these actions seems particularly laudable in our society, but they are certainly not consistent with the kind of behaviour praised as powerful, courageous, generous, or famous in Old English heroic poetry elsewhere: Beowulf would not have received praise if he had derived his courage from drink and spent his time lurking in a tent, nor would Hrothgar if his generosity extended only to providing excessive amounts of drink.²⁴

At some point during the reading or hearing of *Judith*, therefore, a discerning audience becomes aware of the discrepancy between language and action and begins to approach each new heroic epithet critically. Such an audience is likely to notice some interesting things about Holofernes’ Assyrian soldiers as well. For example, these men are described as *niðerofra ... rinca* ‘warriors strong in malice’ (53a-4a). Such an epithet should indicate that they are formidable foes, but in this case they bear this attribute not as they face their enemies, but as they fearfully await an appointment with Holofernes. One of their number is called a

²³ Cf. Tyler 1992, p. 17.

²⁴ Some critics have, however, viewed Hrothgar as an ironic figure; see, for example, Irving 1987; Dockray-Miller 1998; DeGregorio 1999, pp. 314-34.

stercedferðe ‘fierce-hearted’ (55b) warrior, but his role is to announce not battle-tidings but ‘love’-tidings—the arrival of Judith, an event which normally would require little fierceness. In addition, these *hæleða bearna* ‘sons of heroes’ (51a), like many in the literature, are *rondwiggende* ‘shield-bearers’ (11a), but they seem to carry those shields into strange places, where they do not belong. For example, although Beowulf and his men were obliged to leave their shields outside when they arrived at Heorot (*Beowulf* 397-8), the Assyrians seem to bring them along to the feast:

To ðam het se gumena baldor
ealle ða yldestan ðegnas; hie ðæt ofstum miclum
ræfndon, rond-wiggende, comon to ðam rican þeodne
feran, folces ræswan. (*Judith* 9b-12a)

[To this (feast) the prince of men called all his leading thegns. They obeyed the call with great speed; bearing shields they came to the powerful prince, to the leader of the people.]

It requires a determinedly literal-minded reading of the text to see this breach of proper hall-etiquette, especially near the beginning of the poem. However, if Shippey is correct about Anglo-Saxon humour, this seemingly innocent description may well have made the Assyrians look ridiculous.

Later in the text, less effort in discernment is necessary, as the discrepancy between the heroic language and the task at hand becomes increasingly obvious. Thus the Assyrians seem

to have armed themselves to the teeth, shields and all, for the terrifying task of accompanying Judith to Holofernes' tent:

... ða fromlice

lindwiggende lædan ongunnon

þa torhtan mægð to træfe þam hean... (*Judith* 41b-3) [

[Then the shield-bearers bravely began to lead the beautiful woman to the lofty tent.]

Overall, it seems that the Assyrians carry their weapons with them in every circumstance, with one exception: the battlefield.²⁵

It could, of course, be argued that the poet did not expect such a literal-minded audience, and that the text merely refers to the Assyrians as men who are generally possessors of weapons. Perhaps we should read *lindwiggende* as 'men who often carry shields, even if they are not doing so right now'—as opposed to 'men carrying shields at this very moment'. Such an interpretation would remove much of the humour that I see in the poem, but it would not invalidate the overall argument. The point is that the poet applies heroic epithets to these men at the specific moments when they are not doing anything that warrants them—or indeed, when they are doing things unworthy of heroes, such as drinking beyond moderation or bullying an unarmed woman.²⁶ The references to the bravery and battle-gear of the Assyrians constitute a great deal of sound and fury about nothing, since the battle has not yet

²⁵ For analysis of the Assyrians' preparations for battle and flight as a mock-heroic approach-to-battle type scene, see Heinemann 1970.

²⁶ Cf. Tyler 1992, p. 16.

begun. Yet their irony become particularly pointed as the text proceeds, for when the battle does begin, we find that it is not simply that the Assyrians are ‘too big for their boots’—or, in this case, for their weapons and epithets. Rather, they are unworthy to bear the language and equipment of heroism at all.

These heroic epithets thus point to the Assyrians not as worthy opponents but rather as an inversion of a heroic people.²⁷ The evidence for what has up to now been subtle contempt comes when these *hæleða bearna* ‘sons of heroes’ (51a) find their leader and treasure-giver dead. Unlike Byrhtnoth in *The Battle of Maldon*, Holofernes does not take anyone down with him when he dies; rather he dies *bysmerlice* ‘shamefully’ (100a), without any struggle (or, indeed, any consciousness). Similarly, unlike Byrhtnoth’s retainers, the Assyrians do not resolve to avenge their lord; rather, they throw down their weapons and run:

Hi ða hreowigmode
wurpon hyra wæpen ofdune, gewitan him werigferhðe
on fleam sceacan. (289b-291a).

[Sorrowful in mind, they threw down their weapons and, weary-hearted, they
left to hasten in flight.]

The emphasis on the Assyrians’ state of mind is characteristic of the poem; as Tyler has noted, the density of reference to words for ‘heart’ and ‘mind’ in this poem is comparable to

²⁷ Cf. Griffith 1997, p. 67.

that in *The Wanderer* and *The Seafarer*.²⁸ Such emphasis underlines the difference between the Assyrians' heroic appearance and the Hebrews' heroic hearts.

When the battle finally begins, the ironic use of heroic epithets ceases. Although the Assyrians still constitute an army, comparatively few military words are used to describe them. Instead, the text refers to them as hated enemies: *ealdfeondum* 'ancient enemies' (315a), *fynd* 'enemies' (319a), and *ealdhettende* 'ancient enemies' (320b). In addition, the text increasingly describes the Assyrians as *lað* 'loathsome'—a term that, before line 224, was applied to Holofernes alone.²⁹ After line 224, however, the Assyrians are described as *lindwerod laðra* 'a shield-troop of loathed ones' (297a), *laðra gemong* 'a multitude of loathed ones' (303a), *laðan cynnes* 'a loathed race' (310a), *laðestan* 'the most loathed ones' (314b), and *laðost* 'the most loathed' (322b). In contrast, terms for warrior and even terms for weapon-bearing are used almost exclusively of the Hebrews. The following passage provides a good example of how heroic diction, previously bestowed liberally, if ironically, on the Assyrians, is now reserved almost exclusively for the Hebrews:

Flugon ða ðe lyfdon,
 laðra lindwerod. Him on laste for
 sweot Ebreas sigore geweorðod,
 dome gedysod; him feng dryhten god
 fægre on fultum, frea ælmihtig.
 Hi ða fromlice fagum swyrdum,
 hæleð higerofe, herpað worhton
 þurh laðra gemong, linde heowon,

²⁸ There are 31 instances of forms of *mod* and *ferhð* in 350 lines (Tyler 1992, p. 17).

²⁹ *Judith* 45b, 72a, 100b, and 178b.

scildburh scæron. Sceotend wæron
 guðe gegremede, guman Ebrisce;
 þegnas on ða tid þearle gelyste
 gargewinnes. Þær on greot gefeoll
 se hyhsta dæl heafodgerimes
 Assiria ealdorduguðe,
 laðan cynnes. (296b-310a)

[Those who lived (from among that) shield-troop of loathsome ones fled. Honoured with victory and exalted with glory, the corps of the Hebrews advanced upon them from behind. The Lord God Almighty justly helped them. Then with their bloody swords those brave-hearted heroes boldly made a war-path through the crowd of the loathsome ones; they hewed down shields, cut down the shield-wall. The archers, the Hebrew men, were angered in battle; the thegns dearly wanted a spear-struggle on that occasion. There the majority of the nobility of the loathsome Assyrian race fell in the dirt.]

The Hebrews, *hæleð higerofe* ‘brave-hearted heroes’ (302a) and *sceotend* ‘archers’ (304b) who *þearle gelyste / gargewinnes* ‘dearly wanted a spear-struggle’ (306b-7a), are *sigore geweorðod* ‘honoured with victory’ (298b), and *dome gedysod* ‘exalted with glory’ (299a). They bear *fagum swyrdum* ‘bloody swords’ (301b), cut a *herpað* ‘war-path’ (303b) through their enemies by cutting down their enemies’ *scildburh* ‘shield-wall’ (305a), and fight *fromlice* ‘boldly’ (301a). In contrast, the Assyrians are a *laðra lindwerod* ‘shield-troop of loathsome ones’ (297a), a *laðra gemong* ‘crowd of the loathsome ones’ (304a), and a *laðan cynnes* ‘loathsome race’ (310a) that flees and *on greot gefeoll* ‘fell in the dirt’ (307b). The

strong emphasis on the Assyrians' loathsomeness derives from their failure of quality: their decidedly unheroic actions, performed in the context of their own heroic epithets, mark them out for derision and disgust even more than their heathen status, which is not even mentioned in this passage, although it features three times in the depiction of Holofernes.³⁰

Judith provides perhaps the most straightforward example of the mock heroic in Old English poetry.³¹ The text is rife with irony, but, like *The Rape of the Lock*, the target of that irony is not heroism itself, but those who fail to live up to its standards.³² The heroic idiom serves as the measure and guarantee of quality: both Assyrians and Hebrews reveal their quality by the respective appropriateness of the heroic language applied to them.

Riddle 51: Sending Up the Scribe

While critics may disagree regarding the interpretation of *Judith's* irony, there is, at least, some consensus that irony exists in the poem. In other texts, however, the presence of irony is much less certain. *Riddle 51*, for example, has not previously been identified as an ironic text; its use of the heroic idiom has been taken to indicate the value associated with writing. If, however, the heroic idiom provides criteria against which to measure quality, the poem may contain some unexpected humour at the expense of the scribe.

Ic seah wrætlice wuhte feower
samed sipian; swearte wæran lastas,

³⁰ The Assyrians are only designated as 'heathen' at line 216a. Holofernes is called heathen at 98b, 110a, and 179a.

³¹ *Andreas* provides a rather more complicated example. For discussion, see, for example, Hamilton 1972, pp. 156-7; Irving 1983, pp. 229-30; and Wilcox 2003.

³² Note, however, the very different conclusions in Herbison 2010: the fact that the hero is female 'leads inevitably to a questioning of traditional heroic expectations' (p. 22).

swaþu swiþe blacu. Swift wæs on fore,
 fuglum framra; fleag on lyfte,
 deaf under yþe. Dreag unstill
 winnende wiga se him wegas tæcneþ
 ofer fæted gold feower eallum. (*Riddle 51*)

[I saw four creatures travel strangely together; their tracks were dark, their footprints extremely black. The one bolder than birds was swift on the journey; it flew aloft and dove under the wave. The *unstill* one *dreag*—that striving warrior who showed the ways over the gold ornamentation to all four of them.]

Leaving *unstill* and *dreag* (5b) untranslated for the moment, and leaving aside the well recognised signs of literacy in lines 2-3,³³ the discussion here will focus on the stranger in the midst of this scriptorium context: the *winnende wiga*, the ‘striving warrior’ (6a). Of course, as already noted, Old English poetry characteristically employs the heroic idiom metaphorically: warrior-saints fight spiritual battles against the devil, using spiritual weapons. In the *Exeter Book Riddles*, the battle trope receives even more varied development. For example, a storm is a warrior advancing into battle (*Riddle 3*); an anchor stands firm in its war with the wind and waves (*Riddle 16*); the sun drives the moon into exile (*Riddle 29*); and fire is a warrior that must be carefully watched (*Riddle 50*). It is perhaps not so strange, then, to find a warrior in the scriptorium, even if this *wiga* ‘warrior’ is notably lacking in heroic equipment, companions, attitude, and action.

³³ For discussion see Bitterli 2009, p. 176.

It is possible, and, indeed, most common to assume that the riddle's use of the heroic idiom constitutes an appropriation of the value associated with heroic action for what might otherwise have been thought of as the rather unheroic act of writing. That is, although stationary and devoid of danger, writing is exalted as an activity equivalent to glorious warfare, and thus appropriately associated with *fæted gold* 'gold ornamentation' in the last line.³⁴ The value associated with the heroic idiom is thus ascribed to the world of writing. Underlying this transferral of value is the idea of the scribe, the *winnende wiga* 'striving warrior' (6a), as a *miles Christi* 'soldier of Christ' doing battle against the devil through the labour of copying sacred texts,³⁵ and there is evidence elsewhere that suggests that some scribes were indeed seen as fighting for God in this way.³⁶ Yet, while this understanding is possible, the text provides nothing to ensure that such a connection is made, for there is no mention of the conflict itself, of demonic enemies, or of even the spiritual value of the words in the manuscript. The results of this labour remain *lastas* 'tracks' (2b); they are not even words, much less sacred words, and even less blows against the devil. Indeed, the warrior's labour is limited to *wegas tæcneþ* 'show[ing] the ways' to his fingers and pen. Elsewhere, the situation is quite different: as we have already seen in the opening to *Andreas*, for example, spiritual battles include weapons, courage, violence, and, in particular, explicitly specified glory. Although the weapons and the acts of violence are metaphorical, they are,

³⁴ Treasure can be an icon of moral worth in the context of the heroic idiom; see Tyler 2006, p. 13; cf. Leisi 1952-3.

³⁵ Teele 2004, p. 92.

³⁶ See, for example, Cassiodorus' *Institutiones* I.30: *Felix intentio, laudanda sedulitas, manu hominibus praedicare, digitis linguas aperire, salutem mortalibus tacitum dare, et contra diaboli subreptiones illicitas calamo atramentoque pugnare* 'it is a happy effort, a painstaking to be praised, to preach to men with the hand, to open tongues with the fingers, to give health to mortals silently, and to fight against the unlawful thefts of the devil with pen and ink'.

significantly, present. In contrast, while it is possible that the scribe in *Riddle 51* is waging a war against the devil, the war is entirely absent from the text.³⁷

As a result, the warrior-scribe here seems incongruous, rather like *Judith*'s Assyrians carrying their shields to the banquet. As a warrior, he should fight battles of some kind, resist metaphorical or literal enemies, and, of course, perform deeds of courage to earn glory, but here he merely gives directions and *dreag unstill*. This half-line is awkward to translate, for it does not seem appropriate either to the disguising heroic idiom or to the literal action of writing. The situation would be simpler if the verb were transitive, for a warrior-scribe could, for example, 'perform [deeds of courage]', 'endure [struggle]', 'carry out [his lord's command]', 'experience [battle]', or 'enjoy [victory]'. All these would be suitable activities for both literal and spiritual warriors.³⁸ Without an object for *dreag*, however, the warrior-scribe can only 'act', 'be busy', 'suffer', or, perhaps, 'wander'.³⁹ 'Act' and 'be busy' are reasonable, if vague, possibilities for a scribe or warrior, but neither should 'wander'. If the import is 'suffer', the cause and import of the suffering is unexplained: it may refer to the stiff back, shoulder, neck, and arm caused by long hours of writing, but such suffering, however real, is hardly worthy of a *wiga* 'warrior'.

Unstille encompasses similarly uncomfortable connotations: neither a scribe nor a warrior should be 'uneasy' or 'restless' but rather *anræd* 'resolute', whether for glory in battle or

³⁷ Note, however, the claim that 'the briefest reference to *fyrngelut* evidently could summon up an extensive chain of associations' with Ephesians 6.11-16 and thus the concept of battle against the devil (Hermann 1989, p. 39).

³⁸ See Cameron et al 2003, *s.v.* *dreogan*.

³⁹ *Ibid*, but for 'wander' see Hall 1960, *s.v.* *dreogan*. B-T suggests only 'to be employed' and 'be busy' as intransitive meanings.

faith in God's word.⁴⁰ The phrase is less troubling if we interpret the *winnende wiga* not as the scribe but rather as his hand (or arm), as some modern readers do.⁴¹ The motion of the hand across the page does supply a suitable image of restless wandering. It does not, however, supply a suitable analogy for military conflict. That is, with a little effort, a scribe writing a book may be labelled a 'warrior' because of the possible connection to the idea of the *miles Christi* fighting an invisible, spiritual battle. A hand or arm moving across a manuscript page, although making sense of the idea of 'wandering', requires a much larger effort to justify being labelled a 'warrior'. 'Hand' may be a synecdoche for the scribe, which can then be connected with the *miles Christi*, but the process seems over-extended, tenuous, and a little bit ridiculous; in fact, it begins to remind me of Pope's belaboured comparison of Belinda's preparations with those of Homeric epic. It is certainly possible to make the comparison, and it is not unmeaningful, but it seems to have been pushed a little too far.

Overall, then, in *Riddle 51*, the heroic idiom may not elevate the scribe's work to the level of heroic champion so much as over-inflate it. Whether the text describes a 'wandering' hand or an 'acting' scribe, this motion does not constitute heroic performance, and dressing it in the heroic idiom, without the concurrent justification of an encoded spiritual meaning, makes it seem potentially ridiculous. It is, once again, impossible to prove that an Anglo-Saxon audience would have seen irony here,⁴² but, as mentioned earlier, Anglo-Saxon humour often seems to have turned on subtlety so fine that the majority do not perceive it.⁴³ The

⁴⁰ Williamson 1977 interprets *unstill* as an adverb (p. 457), but B-T does not list an instance of it being used adverbially, and my own searches have not discovered any, so I take it as an adjective modifying the *wiga* 'warrior' in the following line (6a).

⁴¹ Williamson 1977, p. 294.

⁴² Cf. Wilcox 2000, p. 5 for the difficulty of detecting incongruity.

⁴³ See Shippey 2000, pp. 42-4 for examples from *Durham Proverbs*, *Wulf and Eadwacer*, and *Deor*.

incongruity of the abrupt, unsupported application of the heroic idiom to the scribe suggests to me, at least, that there may be irony here.

If this is true, then *Riddle 51* is, like *Judith* and *The Rape of the Lock*, a mock-heroic text that uses the heroic style to mock those who fail to live up to that measure of value. This identification may come as a surprise, since, of course, the person copying out this text was indeed a scribe ‘showing the way’ to his (or her) pen.⁴⁴ We would not normally expect a scribe to mock his or her own importance, and we certainly would not expect, say, a monk to treat the idea of combat against the devil with levity. The *Riddles* specialise, however, in presenting the unexpected: they mention the unmentionable, speak the unspeakable, and even make us think the unthinkable.⁴⁵ In this case, the situation is much less shocking than talking openly about female masturbation, as we find in the notorious *Riddle 12*, but *Riddle 51*’s content is nevertheless both funny and risky, for it casts doubt on the value that scribes would, we presume, normally ascribe to their own work. Just as bearing a sword does not guarantee that the bearer will perform heroic deeds,⁴⁶ writing in itself cannot claim heroic status.

This reading of *Riddle 51* may never be widely accepted. It may be that the Cassiodorian tradition of writing as a battle against the devil is considered pervasive enough to need no explicit reference to it to justify the language of heroic performance.⁴⁷ Whether the scribe is mocked or glorified by his association with the warrior, however, the heroic idiom

⁴⁴ Although most scribes in Anglo-Saxon England were probably male, see the discussion in Brown 2001.

⁴⁵ See my discussion of *Riddle 12* in Neville 2012. Cf. also my discussion of the *Riddles*’ unthinkable challenges to authority in Neville 2011.

⁴⁶ Cf. the discussion of the Assyrians in *Judith* above and *Beowulf* 249b-50a: the coastguard is aware that the possession of weapons can disguise a man unworthy of them.

⁴⁷ We have evidence for four manuscripts of the first book of Cassiodorus’ *Institutiones* in Anglo-Saxon England; see Lapidge 2006, p. 296. The depiction of the letters of the *Pater Noster* fighting against the devil may also be relevant here (*Solomon and Saturn I* 84-149b); see discussion in Hermann 1989, pp. 32-6.

nevertheless serves as the measure of value in this text. *Riddle 51* thus provides a useful point of comparison for the discussions of *The Battle of Maldon* and *Beowulf* that follow, for it demonstrates first, how the presence or absence of irony may be debatable and perhaps indeterminable, and second, how the status of the heroic idiom as a marker of value remains intact regardless. The failure of the measured does not cast suspicion on the measure itself.

The Battle of Maldon

Roberta Frank, citing E. V. Gordon, has more than once called *The Battle of Maldon* ‘the only purely heroic poem extant in Old English’.⁴⁸ Although Byrhtnoth has had several strong supporters,⁴⁹ scholarship of *Maldon* often sees the poem glorifying the performance of the loyal thegns and criticising the selfish pride of their lord, Byrhtnoth. This, at least, is Tolkien’s view, but he is certainly not alone.⁵⁰ However, if we accept the premise that the heroic idiom is the mark and guarantee of quality, it is difficult to argue that Byrhtnoth fails to measure up. In the course of the poem, Byrhtnoth exemplifies heroic virtues, just as his men do. He fights bravely, without fear, to the end (130-68a); during the battle he is described as *anræd* ‘resolute’ (132a), *frod* ‘wise’ (140a), and *modi* ‘brave’ (147a); and unlike Holofernes, he is not so easy to kill: four assailants wound him before he falls to the ground, upon which an unspecified number of *hæðene scealcas* ‘heathen warriors’ (181b) hack him to pieces. Two of his attackers, at least, pay for their attack on him with their lives. Byrhtnoth’s critics—like *Beowulf*’s—argue that different criteria apply to a leader of men; Byrhtnoth’s brave performance in his last stand on the battlefield, they say, is outweighed by his lack of

⁴⁸ Gordon 1949, p. 25; Frank 1991a, p. 196; Frank 1991b, p. 106.

⁴⁹ See, for example, Irving 1961, Elliott 1962, Samouce 1963, Clark 1968, Clark 1979, Kirby 1992, and Halbrooks 2003.

⁵⁰ Tolkien 1953, pp. 15-16. Clark 1968 identifies this as the ‘orthodox’ reading of *Maldon*, although he does not agree with it himself (p. 52). An example of the rejection of Byrhtnoth (and, indeed, of his men) may be found in Stuart 1982. Cf. also the more recent, full discussion in Gwara 2008, pp. 311-50.

wisdom, his disregard for his men, and his over-confident pride in giving up a superior tactical position before the battle begins. This view of Byrhtnoth is based for the most part on one word, *ofermod*, the meaning of which is disputed, although the scholarly consensus is that its meaning is negative.⁵¹

As Baker notes, the most obvious way to settle the issue of *ofermod* would be to contextualise its meaning through comparison with its appearance in other texts.⁵² Baker's conclusion is that the word means "pride" with its various shades of meaning', but he qualifies his findings by stressing that the context for *ofermod* in *Maldon* is very different from the context in which the word appears elsewhere;⁵³ it is possible that the negative value that the word undoubtedly has in religious context does not pertain to secular contexts such as in *Maldon*. Given the lack of certainty to be gained from instances outside the poem, then, the evidence for the poet's view of Byrhtnoth within the poem should be granted more weight. Other than *ofermod*, it is difficult to find fault in Byrhtnoth.⁵⁴ The poem praises Byrhtnoth's wisdom in battle (140a), documents his concern for the arrangement and encouragement of his men (16-22, 101b-3a, 127b-9, 168b-70), and emphasises his piety (147b-8, 172-80). Yet the main point to be made here is that, based on the texts examined thus far, even these attributes are unnecessary. No criteria beyond the challenging strictures of the heroic idiom are needed—or, perhaps, available—to establish Byrhtnoth's quality. Just as Andreas and the apostles are not (initially, at least) defined by their piety and faith, neither are they praised for their prudent approach to battle. God's performance in battle in *Genesis A* requires no divine wisdom, or, indeed, any superhuman characteristics, to mark its

⁵¹ A major study is Gneuss 1976. For a recent overview of the debate, see Halbrooks 2003.

⁵² Gneuss 1976 provides this contextualising, pp. 125-30.

⁵³ Gneuss 1976, p. 130.

⁵⁴ Yet some have strikingly different views. See especially Stuart 1982, who finds nothing heroic or praiseworthy in the poem.

quality. Similarly, in *Judith*, although the Assyrians are tarred by their heathenism, the poem's main strategy for defining their lack of quality, which is developed at length throughout the poem in a way quite distinct from the Old Testament original, is to present them as a mock-heroic army—to present their failure to live up to the expectations of the heroic idiom. In contrast, the Hebrews apparently make no effort at strategy and simply launch themselves whole-heartedly at their enemies, with the poet's evident approval;⁵⁵ their quality is marked by their heroic action and requires no reference to their piety or faith.

Despite the strong arguments of past and present critics, then, I would argue that, when we come to *Maldon* and talk about criticism of Byrhtnoth, it is important to note that the resources of Old English poetry present only one, clear measure of quality: the heroic idiom. This is not to say that other things (wisdom, piety, etc) are not valued in Old English poetry, of course, but, as the introduction to *Andreas* makes clear, *the* mark of quality in Old English poetry, whatever the context, is always the heroic idiom. Criticism of Byrhtnoth, then, should be couched in terms of his failure to perform heroic deeds. Given the example of *Judith*, for example, we might expect an ironic narration of Byrhtnoth's performance on the battlefield. Yet the text contains no indication that Byrhtnoth is unworthy of his noble equipment, which he uses successfully until overwhelmed by the cumulative effect of his many attackers. *Maldon* also does not echo *The Battle of Brunanburh*'s technique of heaping scorn upon a presumptuous combatant through litotes; we do not hear that Byrhtnoth *gelpan ne þorfe...bilgeslehtes* 'had no need to boast of the sword-clash' (*The Battle of Brunanburh*

⁵⁵ Cf. Greenfield 1976.

44b-45b).⁵⁶ Although it is never possible categorically to deny the presence of irony in any text, it is telling that most critics do not interpret *Maldon* as an ironic text.⁵⁷

Beowulf

Beowulf, however, is another story, and various parts of it have been identified as relying upon irony.⁵⁸ Irony is clearly an important facet of the poem, to the point that a recent critic of *Beowulf* has argued that the poem is systematically ironic and that its irony builds up to a profound criticism of the hero, the Danes, and heroic society in general.⁵⁹ In effect, this is an argument for *Beowulf* as a mock-heroic poem. Although the importance of irony in *Beowulf* is undeniable, I still believe that viewing the poem as mock-heroic confuses the measure with the measured. First, as noted in the discussion of *Judith* and *Riddle 51* above, it is important to recall that the mock heroic does not mock the heroic; rather, it mocks people and events that fail to live up to the standards of the heroic. Second, as explored above in the examples of the ‘sacred heroic’, Old English poetry betrays few hints that the heroic idiom was considered insufficient to convey the highest levels of quality: even in contexts in which other criteria are pertinent, such as in explicitly Christian texts, the heroic idiom remains the mark of quality.

Thus, once again, if we start with the premise that the heroic idiom is the mark and guarantee of quality, does *Beowulf* measure up? Does the narrative of his life show him failing to live

⁵⁶ Cf. also the uses of *ne þurfan* in *Beowulf* 157-8a, 1071, 2873-4a, 2363-4a, 2995b-6, all of which are ironic.

⁵⁷ Stuart 1982 is an exception, but her analysis of, for example, Byrhtnoth’s death does not provide convincing support for her view that Byrhtnoth is condemned by the poet’s depiction of his actions and attitudes.

⁵⁸ See, for example, Shuman and Hutchings 1960; Ringler 1966; Schaefer 1996, pp. 113-15; Tripp 2000; Ridsden 2000. Note especially the important article by deGregorio 1999.

⁵⁹ See Clark 2003.

up to the expectations of heroic action? Although some critics have disagreed,⁶⁰ when I survey the poem I cannot find any instance in which Beowulf fails to fulfil a boast, refuses to engage in heroic action, or emerges from a conflict without triumphing over his foe. Yet, as many have noted, *Beowulf* is not so easy to pin down, and thus, despite my assertions here, the poem is not a simple encomium for a hero. As a result, while I do not agree that *Beowulf* is a mock-heroic poem, there are sound reasons for readings of the poem that find criticism of the hero and his world. In what follows I will briefly outline how *Beowulf* works within the very stark, restricted scheme that I have posited for the definition of quality within Old English poetry.

De Gregorio has provided a convincing account of the irresolvable, polyphonic irony that attends the poem's presentation of Hrothgar. A similarly irresolvable polyphony can be found in a short, relatively simple passage near the end of the poem:

... him eft gewat Ongenðioes bearn
 hames niosan, syððan Heardred læg,
 let ðone bregostol Biowulf healdan,
 Geatum wealdan. Þæt wæs god cyning! (2387-90)⁶¹

[Ongentheow's son (Onela) went home again, after Heardred lay dead, (and) allowed Beowulf to hold the throne (and) rule the Geats. That was a good king!]

⁶⁰ Recently, for example, Gwara 2008 has argued powerfully for a narrative of Beowulf's life in which he fails to live up to his early potential.

⁶¹ Quotations from *Beowulf* are taken from Fulk, Bjork, and Niles 2008 and will be cited parenthetically by line references.

There is some basic ambiguity here: it is not entirely clear whether the *god cyning* is Onela, who only a few lines previously is described as the *selestan sæcyninga / þara ðe in Swiorice sinc brytnade* ‘best of the sea-kings who distributed treasure in Sweden’ (2382-3), or Beowulf, who, in the lines that follow, supports Eadgils’ successful killing of Onela.⁶² If the *god cyning* is Onela, the narrator seems to be praising his action in killing Beowulf’s own young king, Heardred. If the *god cyning* is Beowulf, the narrator apparently approves of his killing of the *selestan sæcyninga* ‘best of kings’ in vengeance for the killing of Heardred. Either way, the narrator speaks here with an ‘authenticating voice’⁶³ that provides explicit approval for events in a long line of acts of violence that, in the end, is predicted to lead to the end of the Geats.

How is a reader to interpret this passage? One possibility is to interpret the phrase *þæt wæs god cyning* as ironic, an indication that the poem criticises Onela for killing Heardred and allowing Beowulf to rule the Geats. Such a reading means that we have to interpret the poem’s earlier description of Onela as the best king in Sweden as ironic, too. There is a similar problem if we take *þæt wæs god cyning* as being an ironic comment on Beowulf: if this phrase is taken to be ironic, Beowulf’s long rule over the Geats, Wiglaf’s speech about what Beowulf’s companions owe their lord for his generosity to them (2633-60), and the affection expressed by the Geats at his funeral (3171-82) also require urgent scrutiny. That scrutiny, however, finds little support for ironic readings, and thus *þæt wæs god cyning* seems unlikely to be ironic or part of a mock-heroic depiction of the Geats or Swedes. Taken at face value, whether we choose to apply it to Onela or to Beowulf, the phrase indicates explicit approval, and this approval is fully in agreement with the other Old English texts

⁶² It has been argued that the *god cyning* is Beowulf; see Greenfield 1985, p. 399. Fulk, Bjork, and Niles 2008 state that most critics assume that it is Onela (p. 244).

⁶³ The term is taken from Greenfield 1976.

already discussed. Both Onela and Beowulf are shown here to live up to the expectation that heroes will take vengeance—as God did—for previous acts of violence against them. Yet, at the same time, there is clearly some kind of irony here, for the poem shows ideal kings, performing exemplary deeds, with ultimately tragic results—rather like Beowulf in his fight against the dragon, perhaps.

The important point to be made here is that the poem does not step outside the heroic idiom to offer additional or qualifying standards. Like the *Andreas*-poet, the *Judith*-poet, and the *Genesis*-poet, the *Beowulf*-poet uses the heroic idiom to define characters and events of the highest quality. Although all these poets could have used Christian values as criteria, they nevertheless chose to use the heroic idiom as their main or even only mark of quality. Unlike those other poets, however, the *Beowulf*-poet leaves us anxious about those things marked as being of the highest quality. Rather than simply presenting things to be mocked, the *Beowulf*-poet leaves us with the task of deciding what is wrong with what has already been shown to be the best.

Violence

It is dangerous to generalise about *Beowulf*,⁶⁴ but I shall attempt it and assert that, ultimately, everything in the poem circles around violence. Violence creates and maintains kingdoms for Scyld Scefing, Hrothgar, and Beowulf, among others. Violence allows heroes—not only Beowulf but also Sigmund, Hrothgar, and Hygelac—to achieve glory and fame. Violence deters violence: Scyld Scefing's, Hrothgar's, and Beowulf's warlike reputations defend their

⁶⁴ As J. D. Niles has noted, 'few critics have attempted to interpret the poem as a whole'; his own suggestion for the overall meaning of the poem, to which I am obviously indebted, is 'the possibility of peaceful human interaction in a world frequently subject to violence' (Niles 1983, pp. 224 and 228).

people from the attacks of neighbouring people. Violence stops violence when Beowulf kills Grendel's mother. Violence begets violence, as the convoluted path of the Swedish wars at the end of the poem attests. From the perspective of the definition of quality that has been developed throughout this article, the omnipresence of violence is not necessarily a bad thing. Indeed, within Old English poetry, at least, no hero could establish his quality without it. Yet *Beowulf* explores the side effects of violence in a way that, although not quite unique, is quite different from most other Old English poems. The disparate, even diametrical, critical responses to the poem come about, I believe, because of the poem's exploration of the very stark, simple equation between quality and heroic action that has been presented throughout this discussion. The poem's exploration cannot be reduced to criticism, rejection, or a mock-heroic narrative,⁶⁵ but it does leave modern readers—and, perhaps, Anglo-Saxon audiences—feeling anxious about what is, ultimately, a story about a very successful man.

Violence may be heroic and necessary, but it also has worrying side effects. We do not often hear about these side effects, for anxiety about violence is not especially common in Old English poetry. *The Battle of Maldon*, for example, despite narrating the violent deaths of all its protagonists, apparently approves of its characters' engagement in battle,⁶⁶ and thus the poet comments that Offa fulfilled his promise to his lord (i.e. by killing many Vikings) and then *læg ðegnlice ðeodne gehende* 'lay like a thegn close to his lord' (*Maldon* 294): violence leads to a worthy, valued death. Likewise, the terms with which the *Judith*-poet describes the Hebrews' victory over the Assyrians (*Judith* 291b-321a) leave no doubt that such action was meant to receive wholehearted approbation; there is no fear of reprisals, side-effects, or any negative consequences of having *domlice / on ðam folcstede fynd oferwunnen* 'gloriously overcome the enemy on the battlefield' (318b-19).

⁶⁵ Cf. deGregorio 1999, p. 320.

⁶⁶ Cf. Neidorf 2012, who argues that the poem seeks to approve of both sides of the conflict.

In *Beowulf*, however, there is a subtle unease with violence. The inescapable fact that violence begets violence underlies much of the action in *Beowulf*: just as the necessary and glorious killing of Grendel results in the much-mourned death of Æschere, so the killing of Hnæf results in the death of Finn (1063-1159a). Both these acts are victories to be celebrated, and, like the *Maldon*-poet, the *Beowulf*-poet apparently approves of the hero's participation in violent action: the explicit statement that *swa sceal man don* 'so shall a man do' (1534b), for example, follows Beowulf's second attack on Grendel's mother, after his sword has failed. Nevertheless, the endless critical argument over whether the poem rejects the hero and his world is not without foundation, for the poem conveys both approbation and sorrow in, for example, the story of Hildeburh, which, in its immediate context, is a story of Danish triumph told during a celebratory feast, even if it impresses most modern readers with its tragedy.⁶⁷ This and other embedded narratives suggest an uneasiness about violence, especially the way in which violence may become an ongoing chain that demands further acts of violence. At the same time, however, this uneasiness does not amount to a full-scale rejection of the hero and his world, or, indeed, of violence.⁶⁸ As the story of Hrethel's sorrowful death following the loss of his son at his other son's hand shows, the inability to pursue a feud can be equally fatal.⁶⁹ Feud, like violence in general, is glorious, necessary, and doomed to bring sorrow. The quality of the people involved in such actions is, inevitably, indicated by the poet's use of the heroic idiom.

⁶⁷ For an overview and rejection of the modern obsession with feud, especially in this passage, see Jurasinski 2006, pp. 79-111.

⁶⁸ Cf. Hill 2000, p. 15.

⁶⁹ For a thoughtful discussion of Hrethel's death and its implications for the poem as a whole, see Georgianna 1987, but see also Jurasinski 2006, pp. 113-48 for an important distinction between the 'craving' and 'duty' for revenge.

Conclusion

My argument has been focused on refuting the tendency among modern scholars to confuse the measure with the measured—to interpret Old English poetry as being critical of its heroes. Ultimately, however, my main interest lies in the use of heroic narrative in the Old English poetic tradition more generally. When I teach Old English poetry to undergraduate students, I sometimes feel embarrassed that my field is so small, so poor, so limited: I have so very few poems, and they all seem to be about only one thing. Yet, just as the strict confines of the sonnet may nevertheless contain amazingly profound insights, so the extremely limited range of options for the definition of quality in Old English poetry has resulted in a remarkable variety of texts. Thus we have *Judith*, with its gradual and devastating revelation of mock heroic villains. We have *Andreas*, which starts with battle as a glorious metaphor, but ultimately is also mock heroic, albeit in a much more complex way. We have *The Dream of the Rood*, with its paradoxical use of the heroic idiom to convey the enormity of Christ's triumphant passive sacrifice. We have *The Battle of Maldon*, with its valorising of a brave defeat. And finally we have *Beowulf*, with all its ambivalence. In the end, then, whether or not I have redeemed Beowulf, I hope that I have demonstrated the remarkable richness achieved by the use of the heroic idiom as a marker of value in Old English poetry.

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