

POWER AND LORDSHIP IN OLD ENGLISH HEROIC
POETRY

Jari Hult
University of Tampere
School of Language, Translation and Literary Studies
English Philology
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Tarkastelen tässä tutkielmassa muinaisenglantilaista sankarirunoutta, keskittyen teoksiin *Beowulf*, *The Battle of Maldon* ja *The Battle of Brunanburh*. Pyrkimyksenäni on osoittaa teoksissa piilevät valtarakenteet ja tavat, joilla sankarirunoudessa esiintyvät valtiaat sekä rakentavat että ylläpitävät valtaansa ja otettaan alaisistaan. Käyttämäni teoria pohjaa Alisa Mannisen esittämään kaksijakoiseen käsitykseen kuninkaallisesta vallasta ja auktoriteetista.

Oma tutkimukseni keskittyy sankarirunoudessa esiintyvän valtiaan arkkityypin ympärille. Pyrin esittämään, että valtiaan oli kyettävä omaksumaan kaksi vallankäytön kannalta olennaista naamiota pysyäkseen vallassa: *eorl* (”sankari” tai ”soturi”) ja *beahgifa* (”sormustenjakaja”). Oli ensiarvoisen tärkeää, että valtiasta kykeni esittämään seuraajilleen omaavansa molemmat piirteet, sillä sankarirunouden eetoksen mukaan toisen tai molempien puuttuminen johti onnettomuuteen ja tuhoon.

Tutkielmaan on sisällytetty kuvaus anglosaksien historiasta, tavoista ja eettisistä ominaispiirteistä. Sankarirunoudessa esiintyvät käsitykset anteliaisuudesta, uskollisuudesta ja väkivallasta poikkeavat suuresti myöhemmistä, ja teosten valtarakenne rakentuu erittäin vahvasti niiden varaan, joten niiden kuvaaminen on olennainen osa tätä tutkielmaa.

Avainsanat: muinaisenglanti, sankarirunous, valta, auktoriteetti, uskollisuus

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1. Introduction

*Swa sceal geong guma gode gewyrcean,
fromum feohgiftumon fæder bearme,
þæt hine on ylde eft gewunigen
wilgesipas, þonne wig cume,
leode gelæsten; lofdædum sceal
in mægþa gehwære man geþeon.*

*And a young prince must be prudent like that,
Giving freely while his father lives
So that afterwards in age when fighting starts
Steadfast companions will stand beside him
And hold the line. Behaviour that's admired
Is the path to power among people everywhere.*

- *Beowulf* (l. 20–25)

1.1 Introduction

This thesis concentrates on the power structures present in Anglo-Saxon heroic poetry. According to medieval sources like *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* and Bede's ecclesiastical history, as well as scholars like Bruce Mitchell and C.J. Arnold, the political organization of Southeast Britain was drastically transformed at the onset of the Middle Ages, with a tribal, proto-feudal society replacing Roman bureaucracy and provincial government. In the Dark Age Anglo-Saxon world power was mostly held by warrior aristocracy. It was an era in which the Post-Roman British Isles were torn by the warfare and unrest of the Migration Age and the following Viking invasions, and the local populace relied on the Anglo-Saxon warlords for protection and justice. According to the Old English poems, that social structure, its order and its hierarchy, hinged on the bond between a lord and his (or at times her) warriors.

The historical Anglo-Saxon governing methods – especially in the 10th and 11th centuries – are fairly well documented and detailed, such as in Richard Abels' *Alfred the Great*, but that is not the focus of my research. I aim to investigate the subtler patterns of gaining and wielding power; the ways in which influential men and women controlled and manipulated their subjects via generosity and displays of force. Old English poems are more useful than historical documents in this respect, since

they present us with idealised characters and events which offer a better view on Anglo-Saxon mores.

Old English poems present paragon-like, exemplary lords, but they also depict how these rulers retained their thrones. It is my firm belief that the patterns of power are deeply imbedded in heroic poetry, and can be made visible by analysing the way in which lordly characters interact with their followers. Epics and poems provide a better ground for this research than historical documents, since they portray exaggerated images of both ideal and less-than-ideal lords. Through these characters it is possible to picture a paradigm of power that reaches from the very beginning of the Anglo-Saxon era all the way to its end, even lasting well beyond the Norman Conquest (*The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* recounts events to the year 1154, almost a century after the Battle of Hastings). They illustrate the ways in which Anglo-Saxons hoped power should be used, and they show numerous examples of the fateful consequences of abandoning the society's moral tenets.

1.2 The Aim of the Thesis

How did Anglo-Saxon lords justify their right to rule? There seems to be little to no inclination towards a concept of divine right in the documents and poems dating from the Christian era. The divine mandate of kings was an especially popular idea in Renaissance England and 18th-century France, and is acutely present in works such as Shakespeare's *Richard II* and "On the Divine Right of Kings" by King James I, but the lords in heroic poems did not seem to rely heavily on God to justify either their status or their decisions. According to Bede and Nennius, pagan Anglo-Saxon kings traced their lineages back to deities like Woden and Seaxneat, but, due to the lack of

documents and poems dating from the heathen period, we can only guess how deeply this supposed divine ancestry was embedded in early power structures. In Scandinavia (where people worshipped similar gods) the Yngling dynasty used their divine heritage to justify their right to rule Norway, but their control over the lesser nobles and free farmers was often only as strong as their ability to make the local magnates obey their commands (Myklebust 1997, 15). This was probably the case in England as well. Claims of divine heritage gave a semblance of aristocracy to the invading Germanic warlords, but their power was more dependent on their prowess and leadership, and on the support of their followers. In the warlike days of the Anglo-Saxon Conquest, skill in battle often outranked royal blood. What then, if not God's favour or god's blood,¹ kept an Anglo-Saxon lord on his throne in the mead-hall?

The aim of this thesis is to prove that an ideal Anglo-Saxon lord had to assume two images – disguises, if you will – if he wished to reign successfully and protect the surrounding society from chaos and strife. He had to portray himself as a *beahgifa* (“ring-giver”), and as an *eorl* (“warrior” or “hero”). These Old English terms will be consistently used to denote and symbolize these different aspects of authority. My wish is to show that *both* qualities were needed; a lord lacking in one of these necessary qualities invited disaster and destruction upon himself and his subjects. Both concepts will therefore receive their own segments for further analysis.

I also wish to emphasize the highly personalised nature of the concepts of power, authority and loyalty. Anglo-Saxon poems place the lord as the absolute centrepiece of the society, making him a near-symbolic figure, connected to the order and prosperity of the whole society. His central role is somewhat reminiscent of the

¹ The royal ancestor-gods were given the status of mortal men in Christian times. However, descent from them did not seem to be an especially important factor in the “heroic mindset”. The names of the old gods, or their new identities as royal ancestors, are never mentioned in heroic poems.

later court of Louis XIV of France, wherein the whole courtly life revolved around the king (Burke 1992, 2). The Anglo-Saxon lord, however, was a far cry from a distant absolute monarch. The bond between a lord and his (aristocratic) subjects was intimate and personal; it is crucial to understand the nature of Anglo-Saxon loyalty and honour if one wishes to comprehend the entirety of their power structure. This thesis aims to depict how the lord-warrior bond was essential in retaining a lord in power and keeping the society together, which makes an in-depth description of Anglo-Saxon loyalty necessary.

The gifting process, intimately connected to the concept of *beahgifa*, is of enormous importance in regards to the subject of this thesis. It is a mean of persuasion and manipulation, but an individual can also base his/her power on received and given gifts. By playing the game of gifting, a warrior could rise in power and authority, by receiving his share of land and wealth from a grateful lord. This is another important factor in power constructing in the heroic society,² one which I aim to prove, with the assistance of Stephen Pollington's and Marcel Mauss' thoughts about gifting.

These works will be analysed according to Alisa Manninen's theory about royal power and authority, although with slight modifications. The power theory of Michel Foucault and Marcel Mauss' analysis about the nature of gifts will also be employed in the analysis.

² When I use the terms 'heroic society', 'heroic mindset' or 'heroic power structure' during this thesis, I am referring to the idealised societies and power structures found in heroic poems, not to the actual Anglo-Saxon society, although the two may sometimes overlap.

1.3 The Poems

I have chosen three poems on which to focus in this thesis. *Beowulf*, the longest and most well-known and influential Anglo-Saxon heroic poem, has the central role. It is followed by *The Battle of Maldon*; no other text can better describe the intimate bond between a warrior and his lord than *Maldon*, making the tale of Byrhtnoth and his followers an essential piece of source material. *The Battle of Brunanburh* illustrates the more ruthless and conniving facet of the Anglo-Saxon power structure, and emphasizes the importance of playing with images and conceptions. *Brunanburh* also displays the importance of poems and song in regards to real-life Dark Age politics.

Beowulf presents the ultimate Anglo-Saxon lord in its demi-godlike protagonist. Since the concept of an ideal lord is extremely important in the depicted power structures, *Beowulf* is invaluable in portraying the desired paragon figure, the true lord who upholds the whole society upon his shoulders. The epic also gives us other excellent examples of Anglo-Saxon power structure, evident in the characters and deeds of Hrothgar and Hengest, Wealhtheow and Mordtryth, to name a few. *Beowulf* portrays the whole array of rulers and power wielders, from wise but weak statesmen to blood-thirsty tyrants and vengeful kinsmen. The poem depicts the methods of gaining power and authority, but also the means for losing them. The Anglo-Saxon power structure is visible in almost every action performed by the characters; their authority and status changes with every material gift and act of courage (or cravenness). Fred Robinson has written extensively about the morality and ethos of *Beowulf*, and therefore his thoughts about the epic will be used to clarify several aspects of the poem and its world.

The poem also contains a small story within a story, the Finnsburh episode, which is closely related to the so-called *Finnsburg Fragment* – a separate and

incomplete poem. This episode will be analysed in its own segment, since the story of Hengest the Renegade presents a multitude of interesting paradoxes regarding the concepts of loyalty, honour, and power.

Each poem also symbolises a distinct period in Anglo-Saxon history. *Beowulf* is not set in England at all, but it is still an excellent tool in portraying the early pagan domains of the Anglo-Saxon Conquest. The warring, diverse and distinctly tribal kingdoms of Scandinavia can be seen as mirroring the multitude of invading people that settled in Britain. *Beowulf* illustrates the early heroic culture, poetry and society with its pagan religion,³ fatalism and materialism. The epic's raw and harsh world is plagued by blood-feuds and tribal warfare, which are contrasted by colourful depictions of life in the mead-hall, and its power structure is basic and simple. Like the Anglo-Saxon Conquest itself, it builds a foundation for further progress.

The Battle of Brunanburh is the least significant of this thesis' three focus poems, and is accordingly given the least attention, but it does deserve to be scrutinised to an extent. The other two poems deal with noble and doomed characters, but *Brunanburh* is an unapologetic victory song, designed to be a propaganda piece in the 10th century Anglo-Saxon politics. The illusion of strength and authority may turn a lesser man into a Beowulf, and the poem shows how this mirage can be created, conveyed, and exaggerated through poetry. Anglo-Saxon power construction does have its share of manipulation and masquerade, which are all well evident in *Brunanburh*. Bruce Mitchell, whose *An Invitation to Old English and Anglo-Saxon England* is used extensively to elaborate on Anglo-Saxon loyalty and moral codes, has

³ Debate about the characters' religious background has been quite vigorous. Some scholars argue for distinctly pagan characters and morality, while others maintain that both the characters and the ethos are clearly Christian, or something in between. I share an opinion similar to the one expressed by Robinson in *Tomb of Beowulf* (1993, 45–47). This viewpoint argues that the characters are pagan, but the overall worldview and morality is strongly Christian, with slight throwbacks to the heathen warrior ethos.

clearly illustrated the propaganda-like subtext in the poem, which will be analysed further in later chapters.

The Battle of Brunanburh comes from the dying days of the Anglo-Saxon Heptarchy and *Danelagen*. Under Alfred the Great and his descendants, England was slowly transforming into a single realm ruled by the royal house of Wessex (Abels, 169), but the memory of the “seven kingdoms” still lingers. Therefore, *Brunanburh* symbolises the Heptarchy: its landscape is a world ruled by ambitious kings with dreams of power and conquest. The days of the Heptarchy were violent and chaotic, with alliances and enmities being born and abandoned quickly. In that period, the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms allied and fought with each other, Norsemen, Britons, Scots and Picts. *The Battle of Brunanburh* is a symbol of the ruthless and opportunistic mindset which was at times required of a Heptarchy king.

Beowulf presents the principles, ideals and pitfalls embedded in the Anglo-Saxon power structure, but *The Battle of Maldon* shows how far-reaching and dramatic the consequences of power may be. *Beowulf* may have the ideal lord, but *Maldon* illustrates the ideal followers. It also displays the highly personal notions of Anglo-Saxon martial loyalty, and underlines the importance of the bond between a lord and a warrior.

The Battle of Maldon is perhaps the most idealistic of the three poems, with its lengthy elaborations of the bonds and virtues that unify the Anglo-Saxon world. Slight notions of more modern concepts such as patriotism and social egalitarianism begin to emerge in the poem. Like *Beowulf* and *The Battle of Brunanburh*, it acts as a representative of an era in Anglo-Saxon England’s history. *Maldon* comes from the last Anglo-Saxon period; the age of unified England, ruled by the royal house of Wessex. *The Battle of Maldon* emphasizes the importance of social commitment and

unity along with lord-loyalty, which can be interpreted as representing the idea about a single realm originally laid down by Alfred the Great, who was the first to call himself “King of the Anglo-Saxons” (Abels 1998, 169).

I will mostly ignore the religiously-themed Anglo-Saxon poems such as *Guthlac* and *The Dream of the Rood*, although their language and mentality often share decided similarities with the heroic tradition.⁴ The subject of this thesis is earthly power, and Anglo-Saxon religious poetry tended to condemn its futility and temporariness. Material gifts and battle-glory – of utmost importance in heroic poetry and Anglo-Saxon power structure – are mostly dismissed as a mortal man’s folly in religious poems, which emphasize the importance of God’s grace and the delights of afterlife. Thus, they are not very useful in this case. However, the power of the church will be briefly analysed during the thesis, but it will mostly remain in the background. *Judith* is the only biblical poem that receives some attention due to its central female character.

This thesis focuses on the glorified society and power structure found in heroic poetry, and does not intend to accurately mirror the actual politics and events of the Anglo-Saxon era, due to the period’s timespan and complexity. Nevertheless, some material from (quasi-)historical documents – such as *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* and *The Ecclesiastical History of the English Peoples* – will be used to support and illustrate my arguments. The weight of history and contemporary events cannot be completely ignored when dealing with texts like *Brunanburh* and *Maldon*. The vast age of the poems links them intimately to the political climate and events of the Early

⁴ Christ in *Dream of the Rood* and Satan in *Genesis* have distinctly heroic features; their rhetoric, morals and characteristics are fairly similar to the ones encountered in secular poetry. The tree in *Dream of the Rood* acts in many ways like a loyal *heorhgeneat*, and Satan in *Genesis* – much like the cowardly warriors in *Beowulf* and *Maldon* – betrays his lord and shatters the unity of the shield-wall, thus bringing about the destruction of an ideal society.

Middle Ages, and this connection also displays the significance of these texts regarding differing political situations and rulers. Analysing the importance of *Maldon* for King Aethelred the Unready, or that of *Brunanburh* for Aethelstan the Glorious, helps us to further understand how power, authority, and public image were handled by the Anglo-Saxon aristocracy.

Other heroic poems, such as *The Wanderer* and *Finnesburh*, may be referred to at times, but they should be considered supporting works. The focus is on *Beowulf*, *The Battle of Maldon* and *The Battle of Brunanburh*.

1.4 Theoretical Basis

My theory in analysing both the explicit and implicit power structures is heavily indebted to the one Alisa Manninen uses in *Royal Power and Authority in Shakespeare's Late Tragedies*. The vast age of the researched poems requires an approach that takes into account the specific power paradigms and manipulative sense of power.⁵ Michel Foucault argued that medieval monarchy was embodied by the idea of sovereignty and absolute power:

[Monarchy] developed in the Middle Ages against the backdrop of the previously endemic struggles between feudal power agencies. The monarchy presented itself as a referee, as a power capable of putting an end to war, violence and pillage and saying no to these struggles and private feuds. It made itself acceptable by allocating itself a juridical and negative function, albeit one whose limits it naturally began at once to overstep. Sovereign, law and prohibition formed a system of representation of power which was extended during the subsequent era by the theories of right: political theory has never ceased to be obsessed with the person of the sovereign. (Foucault 1980, 121)

⁵ *The Battle of Maldon* and *The Battle of Brunanburh* come from the 10th century (*Maldon* may have been composed in the 11th century). The age of *Beowulf* is under debate. The earliest estimations place the date of its composition at the 7th century, while others argue for a date as late as the 11th century.

Foucault preferred to concentrate on either modern or post-renaissance societies. His observance about the role of monarchy is nonetheless an accurate one, as Anglo-Saxon kings like Alfred the Great certainly sought to curb the power of their vassals, but Foucault tends to define these kingly functions as restrictive, punitive and authoritarian. That, however, is not the case, as I aim to prove in this thesis. Anglo-Saxon power structure is far more intricate, and relies more on hope of reward than fear of punishment. Especially in the early days, lords rarely had the outright power to simply force their subjects into submission, and had to rely on other means to retain their respective statuses (Pollington 2006, 34–36). Additionally, heroic poetry is not interested in the “capillary” fringes of power, but in the person and close circle of the sovereign. Therefore, Foucault’s theories are not entirely applicable to the heroic power structure.

Alisa Manninen is mostly interested in the 16th century royal power patterns, but her theory is still extremely useful in regards to this thesis. Like Foucault, she emphasizes the central role of the sovereign’s capability and persona, and the importance of a ruler’s influence over his/her close circle, in regards to medieval power. Unlike Foucault, Manninen defines royal authority as manipulative rather than disciplinary or authoritarian, which makes her theory an excellent foundation for this thesis. Anglo-Saxon lords may not have been attributed a similar gloss of divine right as later monarchs, but their individual persona was still of critical importance.

Still, the societies depicted in Shakespearean drama are decidedly different from the ones represented in Dark Age verse. The courtly plays of Shakespeare were influenced by the Renaissance world, its political events and moral values. Therefore, I will add slight modifications to her theory, to better fit the Early Middle Age

worldview and the atmosphere of heroic poetry. The attitudes towards fate, violence, loyalty and kinship are different, although they do share many similarities. For example, parallels between the fatalism of *Macbeth* and the impending doom echoed in the Anglo-Saxon concept of *wyrd* are not hard to find. The Old English word can be clearly heard in Shakespeare's "weird sisters". Additionally, Macbeth constructs his authority and claim for kingship heavily on his battle-prowess, thus being a close equivalent to an Anglo-Saxon *eorl*. The first act of *MacBeth* displays the admiration of war-heroism, which was shared a shared quality among Dark Age Anglo-Saxons and Renaissance Englishmen.

A minor deviation from Manninen's theory is the preference of the term 'lordly power' over 'royal power', since not every ruler appearing in Anglo-Saxon poems is a king or a queen. Earl Byrhtnoth, for example, is a servant of a king, while also being a powerful lord in his own rights. Terms such as *hlaford*, *frea*, *freawine* and *þeoden* – which all mean 'lord' or 'chieftain', although with different connotations – are far more prevalent in Old English poetry than *cyning*, 'king'. Also, Manninen's approach to lesser nobility makes my approach to her theory deviate somewhat from the original (Manninen 2010, 10):

I examine how issues such as greatness, heroic or sacred virtue, and heritable right all participate in strengthening a belief in the separateness of royalty that can raise it above the petty struggles for power undertaken by the lesser nobility.

I do not separate royal power from that of the lesser nobility, which makes the term 'lordly power' doubly useful. The "kings" of early Anglo-Saxon England were often closer to tribal chieftains than to monarchs in the modern (or renaissance) sense (Pollington 2006, 36). Even the different regions of unified England, which was nominally ruled by the House of Wessex or Danish kings, had their own local leaders,

to whom loyalty belonged first. The Essex warriors of *Maldon* follow and swear fealty to Earl Byrhtnoth, not King Aethelred. The Scandinavian kings encountered in *Beowulf* ruled over comparatively small territories, and their society was a close equivalent to the early centuries of the Anglo-Saxon era, when England was still a patchwork of minor dominions. Their holdings did not differ much from those owned by lesser nobles (Ashley 1982, 22–23).

The means of gaining and retaining power and authority were also similar for both royalty and lesser nobility. Every ruler had to construct their image via generosity in the mead-hall and deeds in the battlefield. It did not matter whether the lord was a king, an earl or a thane – the loyalty of his subjects and retainers was earned through similar methods. A mead-hall was a mead-hall and a shield-wall was a shield-wall, although the scale and resources involved could vary greatly. Earl Byrhtnoth commands his men via gift-distribution and battlefield leadership in the same way as the kings in *Beowulf* and *The Battle of Brunanburh*.

Manninen makes a clear distinction between power and authority, separating them as two different elements of subject control. The following paragraph explains the basics of this Janus-like concept (Manninen 2010. 7):

Power consists of the ability to enforce the royal will. The central means through which it is expressed in the plays are control over law and judgment, the redistribution of titles and property, and the use of martial violence either personally or by the armed forces under the ruler's command. All these are based on material realities and lead to immediate, clearly observable consequences. Royal power is constructed out of combination of these resources; they offer valuable protection against any challenges to the privileges of royalty.

In brief, authority refers to how the ruler imposes his will *without* force. Authority is not inherent to the ruler (though the ruler may seek to present it as such). It is marked by certain qualities and practices that are reinforced by the presence of power, but even in the absence of power it may endure. By power, I refer to government by force; by authority; I refer to government by persuasion... The ruler is presented as inherently exceptional.

The most obvious use of resources in constructing power lies in gift-giving; this is the very moment when a lord assumes the role of a *beahgifa*. In the Anglo-Saxon world, this was a revered tradition heavily embedded with symbolism and importance; simply perceiving a lord's reward to his subject as a "gift" in the modern sense would be a drastic understatement. A gift always required a counter-gift, and a warrior was expected to repay his lord's generosity with loyalty in battle. These ritualistic awards created an informal bond between a liege and a vassal, although that connection could be (and often was) formalized by taking of an oath of fealty. Lordly generosity – along with the ability to cajole people into accepting gifts for creating a lord-retainer bond – is certainly a form of persuasion that both bolstered a lord's authority and acted as a reminder of his/her superior status. Marcel Mauss' theory of gifts is invaluable in this regard. Mauss inspected the immaterial obligations and debts embedded within the gifting process, which are closely connected to promoting one's image and authority as a *beahgifa*. His theory about gifts being used as a form of authority can easily be linked to Manninen's theory.

Gift-giving accentuated the difference of rank between a regent and a subject, and inspired a warrior to serve dutifully and strive for distinction in the battlefield. Noticeable martial prowess prompted a lord to yield greater rewards to a successful fighter in order to keep that man's service and loyalty. Awarding skilled persons with greater generosity was not limited to warriors: poets, artisans and guests would also be gifted for outstanding performance as a testimony of the lord's *largesse*, wealth and power (Pollington 2006, 37–39). The tradition of gift-giving and the importance of appearing as a *beahgifa* will be inspected in detail in their own chapter.

An important deportation from Manninen's guidelines is the definition of martial skill as authority. Manninen tends to generally treat the use of violence as an

exercise of power, but in heroic poetry it certainly gives an image of lordly quality, and is an integral part of authority. The violent Dark Age world was reflected in the contemporary art, and Anglo-Saxon poetry was certainly not an exception to this rule. The ability to fight and to lead men in battle were considered important, even necessary, qualities for a good leader. High-ranking lords such as Byrhtnoth and Beowulf are supposed to stand in the shield-wall and take part in its mini-society, and to wage war against the *fiend*. Thus, martial prowess can be viewed as an integral part of lordly authority as a tool used to sway subjects, in addition to being simply a mean of enforcement. The fulfilment of the *eorlic* code inspires a ruler's followers to act in a similar way to Byrhtnoth's doomed men in Maldon, which in itself counts as persuasion. Manipulation via invoking a lord's status as an exemplary soldier, and as a member of the close-knit *heorthwerod*, will also be analysed further in its own chapter, where I elaborate the *eorlish* facet of lordly authority.

It is tempting to simply state that the *beahgifa* concept embodies the quality of authority, while *eorl* equates to power, but that would once again be an oversimplification. A *beahgifa* certainly relies more on subtle persuasion and the power of images than the fairly straightforward concept of *eorl*, but these nominations involve both power and authority. Power, in the sense of resources to distribute property and (at times) titles, was required to successfully perform the role of a *beahgifa* in a mead-hall. An *eorl* was required to persuade through deeds, presence and imagery. Physical prowess and grasp of battle strategy are also connected to authority as well as power. Royal power, as described by Manninen, is the ability to wield and direct the physical violence of others, not personal battle-might, which is more akin to authority in Anglo-Saxon poetry.

Though I hesitate to call my approach to Anglo-Saxon poetry outright historicism, it undoubtedly is indebted to that mode of thinking as well, especially New Historicism. I do not intend to view heroic poems as windows to the past, nor is the historical Anglo-Saxon society, but an idealised one, under scrutiny. However, the environment, mores and rhetoric of the poems are intimately connected to a long-bygone era, which was exceedingly different from the 21st century. The Anglo-Saxon Conquest, the Viking invasions, and the transformation of England from a patchwork of scattered kingdoms into a single realm had a very tangible impact on the atmosphere and topic of Old English poems. The poems often likely served an actual function in their contemporary society. For example, Mitchell states that *The Battle of Brunanburh* gives “the impression that the poem is the work of an Anglo-Saxon publicity man, whose aim was to glorify the royal family of Wessex” (1995, 300). The kings of Wessex were striving to unite all of England at the time – a goal which they ultimately reached – so they may well have employed a poet to spread their propaganda and to increase their house’s prestige. Such details serve a function in my research, especially when conceptualising tools that construct power. New historicists such as Greenblatt in *Renaissance Self-Fashioning* and Stephen Orgel in *The Illusion of Power* argued that Shakespeare and other playwrights should not be read only as autonomous artists, but also as representatives of the Renaissance age, its traditions and mores. A similar approach is useful in regards to Old English heroic poetry as well. Thus, a certain historicist “view to the past” mentality must be assumed, in order to coherently understand the stratagems of power from a bygone era.

Since knowledge and familiarity of Dark Age England and Anglo-Saxon society is of utmost importance in this thesis, several experts of Anglo-Saxon literature and history will have a major role. Historical and archeologic data is mostly reliant on

Pollington, Ashley and Mitchell, although other scholars of history will be used to provide additional data about specific events of the Anglo-Saxon age. Stephen Pollington's *The English Warrior from earliest times till 1066* gives valuable information about the Anglo-Saxon warrior culture and courtly rituals. *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* is employed to an extent, although its reliability as a historical document has sometimes been questioned, and thus its role as a historical source should be considered secondary to the aforementioned works. Robinson's *The Tomb of Beowulf* is used as a source of literary analysis on both *Beowulf* and *Maldon* as well as the heroic ethos in general.

1.5 The Structure of the Thesis

An introduction to Anglo-Saxon history and culture begins this thesis, since it is important to understand the heterogenic and complex nature of the 600-years long Anglo-Saxon era, and its changing aristocratic and martial customs. "The Anglo-Saxon World" chapter contains detailed information about the concepts of Anglo-Saxon honour, loyalty, and kinship. Either imitating or adhering to these virtues is necessary in constructing authority and power, so their exact nature must be comprehended before attempting to further analyse Anglo-Saxon power. Heroic loyalty, honour and kinship also differ from the way in which these concepts are viewed today, making a clarification of the Anglo-Saxon warrior code essential, so the ways in which authority is constructed in heroic poetry can be understood more clearly.

This text mostly concentrates on the concepts of *beahgifa* and *eorl*; they both will be given their own, sizable chapters, which form the core of the thesis. The

advantages and difficulties in assuming these roles will be analysed in further detail in their respective chapters. The *beahgifa* chapter illustrates the logic behind the Anglo-Saxon gift-giving process, and the importance of lordly appearances. The part detailing the concept of *eorl* explores the importance of martial values and violence in Dark Age England. Strength, ferocity and brutality were often required of an Anglo-Saxon lord alongside more civilised characteristics. War – or the threat of war – was often present in the Anglo-Saxon world (pronouncedly so in heroic poetry, especially *Beowulf*), at least according to the accounts of Bede and *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, and thus it played an important role in Dark Age politics.

The connection between a lord and his dominion could be described as almost mystical. A land prospers under a lord who is at the same time generous and fierce, but the realm is also doomed at the moment of his death. The entwining fate of a lord and his land/people also has a chapter dedicated to it. Bauschautz in *The Well and the Tree* and Enright in *Lady with a Mead Cup* explored the mystical qualities of Anglo-Saxon lordship, but my research is concerned with the patterns of power emerging from this connection, so Manninen's theory will have a larger part in that analysis than those of the aforementioned authors.

Gender roles in the Middle Ages tended to be harshly patriarchal. Anglo-Saxon women enjoyed considerable liberties and rights compared to many other medieval societies, but Dark Age England was still largely ruled by men. Even so, strong female rulers were not unheard of. The role that women play in the power games of heroic poetry deserves therefore to be analysed further. It is not the main focus of this thesis, but certainly remains an important factor in constructing power and authority. The religious poem *Judith* plays a small part in analysing female power, as well as Kathleen Herbert's *Peace-Weavers and Shield-Maidens*, in which

she divides female characters into two separate categories, much as I have done with the terms *beahgifa* and *eorl*.

2. The Anglo-Saxon World

In this chapter, the history, morality and warrior culture of the Anglo-Saxon people and heroic poetry will be scrutinised. This description provide the basis for further analysis about the tenets and workings of lordship, since without elaboration the heroic society and mindset can easily be misunderstood.

2.1 The Anglo-Saxon Era

*Engle and Seaxe up becoman
ofer brad brimu Brytene sohtan,
wlance wigsmithas, Wealas ofercoman,
earlas arhwate eard begeatan.*

*...Angles and Saxons came over,
across the wide sea, searching Britain,
the proud war-smiths overcame the Welsh,
the glorious heroes took the land.*

- *The Battle of Brunanburh*, (l. 70-3)

...the fierce and impious Saxons, a race hateful both to God and men...

- Gildas, *De Excidio et Conquestu Britanniae*

According to the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, the brothers Hengest and Horsa were invited to Britain as mercenaries in 449 AD. This is sometimes perceived as the artificial onset of the so-called Anglo-Saxon era, although Germanic people had probably been settling in Roman Britain around half a century earlier, “as mercenaries or *foederati*, like poachers turned gamekeepers, to ward off other barbarians” (Ashley 1982, 17). Anyhow, invaders from a multitude of tribes usurped power from the Romano-Briton natives, gradually claiming an area roughly corresponding to modern day England. Their various dialects, the ancestors of modern English, replaced the Celtic languages and Latin spoken by the former rulers. Tales of the Romano-Briton struggle against Anglo-Saxon invaders gave rise to the Celtic legend of King Arthur, who was later ironically transformed into the ideal “English” king.

Such, at least, used to be the common view of the Anglo-Saxon Conquest. The exact nature and events of this early Germanic immigration to the British Isles remains nowadays somewhat in doubt. *The Battle of Brunanburh* (l. 70–3) describes it as a violent and bloody war, and *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* and Gildas' *De Excidio Britanniae* recount a large number of battles between the invaders and the Romano-Briton natives, but some scholars – such as Francis Pryor⁶ – have argued that the migration was largely peaceful or even near non-existent. The scarcity of Celtic loan words in Old English supports the theory of a Briton exodus, but a DNA-analysis of British genes conducted by Oppenheimer, which he described in his 2006 book *The Origins of the British*, suggests that Anglo-Saxons did not wipe out or drive away the natives, but may have instead formed a new ruling class. Cerdic, the semi-legendary founder of the royal family of Wessex, may himself have been of Brythonic origin, with his name being connected to Celtic names Ceretic and Caradoc (Jackson 1953, 554, 557, 613, 680). My personal conclusion about the Anglo-Saxon Conquest's nature and events is that of subjective circumstances; there was peaceful interaction and cultural influence, but also violent invasion, depending on time and place. I argue that the most likely outcome of the conquest is the imposition of a new aristocracy over Romano-Briton subjects. That, however, is mostly beside the point of this thesis. Whether the Anglo-Saxon Conquest was the bloodbath described in *Brunanburh* or the cultural loaning process suggested by Pryor is irrelevant; the world and morality of heroic poems are discrete from the Dark Age reality.

⁶ Pryor's book. *Britain AD: A Quest for Arthur, England and the Anglo-Saxons* (2005) contains rather radical theories about the Anglo-Saxon Conquest. Pryor argues that Anglo-Saxons did not really come to Britain at all, but that Britons simply copied and imitated Germanic languages and traditions.

The multitude of tiny territories and strongholds ultimately solidified into the so-called Anglo-Saxon Heptarchy⁷ of seven powerful kingdoms; Wessex, Sussex, Essex, Mercia, Northumbria, East Anglia, and Kent. A nominal high king called the *Bretwalda* (“broad-ruler” or “wielder of the Britons”, depending on the translation) was sometimes chosen, but the kingdoms remained largely independent for centuries. They were often engaged in warfare against each other, and also fought and allied with the Britons of Wales, Cumbria and Cornwall.

Mitchell (1995, 81–85) briefly describes how Christianity was introduced to England in two different forms. In 597, Pope Gregory sent a mission, led by Augustine, to evangelize the pagan Anglo-Saxons to the Roman Catholic dogma. Aethelberth of Kent was the first king to convert to the new faith, and other monarchs followed suit as the 7th century progressed. Canterbury became the centre of Roman Catholicism in England. Elsewhere, Celtic Christianity arrived from Ireland and Scotland via the northern kingdom of Northumbria, where King Edwin was baptised in 627. The monastery of Lindisfarne – whose sacking in the late 8th century is sometimes seen as the beginning event of the Viking Age – became the base of the Celtic dogma.

Bede Venerabilis describes the successes and difficulties encountered by the missionaries in *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*. Pagan backlashes and resurgences surfaced in almost every Anglo-Saxon kingdom, and local non-Christian traditions probably lasted quite long among the general populace. However, it is fairly

⁷ There were other minor Anglo-Saxon kingdoms during the so-called age of the seven kingdoms, which is based on the writings of Henry of Huntingdon in *Historia Anglorum*, so the idea of Heptarchy is not exactly accurate. However, for the sake of clarity, I will use the term ‘Heptarchy’ to refer to the period between the Anglo-Saxon Conquest (c. 449-600) and the unified Kingdom of England (953-1066)

safe to assume that the region nowadays known as England was more or less Christian by the time a new wave of heathen invaders arrived in the form of the Vikings.

As described by Ferguson in *The Vikings: A History*, the Viking Age brought the Scandinavian longships to English shores. The Norsemen originally concentrated on raiding monasteries and coastal villages, but fairly soon they arrived to conquer and settle. These “Danes” overtook large parts of northern England, which ultimately solidified into the region known as *Danelagen*, “Dane-law”. The Norsemen’s languages and customs influenced the Anglo-Saxons greatly, especially in the former kingdom of Northumbria. The Viking Age also saw the unification of England under the House of Wessex, whose kings – most notable among them being Alfred the Great – led the fight against the Norsemen. The Anglo-Saxon struggle against the Nordic invaders inspired the poems *The Battle of Maldon* and *The Battle of Brunanburh*.

As is told in *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* and *Carmen de Hastingae Proelio*, the Anglo-Saxon era came to its end in 1066, with the defeat and death of King Harold Godwinson at the Battle of Hastings, after which England was ruled by William of Normandy and his descendants. The new aristocracy spoke Norman French and introduced continental feudalism to England, transforming the country in a dramatic and permanent fashion. Although William retained some Anglo-Saxon customs and institutions, the new realm was now more intimately connected to French and Continental culture and politics.

The Anglo-Saxon period therefore consisted of over 600 years of history, a vast time gap, which makes a clear definition of any Dark Age “English” culture a near impossibility. Pollington and Ferguson describe some evolution in warfare, armament and shipbuilding during the Dark Ages, but no great leaps in science or technology were truly made during the Early Middle Ages. The society of the 5th

century pagan invaders was nevertheless markedly different from the one conquered by Duke William. The scattered kingdoms and waves of heathen immigrants of the early centuries were gradually replaced by a unified realm under one god, one law and one king, the process which is described in detail by Abels in *Alfred the Great*. The various inhabitants and conquerors also left their mark in the society; the late Anglo-Saxon *Engla lond* was a heterogenic combination of Germanic and Scandinavian culture,⁸ which was influenced by both Roman Catholic and Celtic Christianity, as well as the remaining vestiges of the Roman Empire. A unified, all-encompassing system of Anglo-Saxon lordship and power distribution would therefore be exceedingly difficult, if not impossible, to accurately pinpoint and describe, due to the era's cultural complexity and vast timespan.

Still, there are some consistencies to be found throughout the Anglo-Saxon age. The importance of a lordly figure stands paramount in heroic poetry, always the centrepiece of the surrounding society. The lord was surrounded by his bodyguards and retainers, who were an instrumental part of his/her power. This group of sworn men had various nominations according to Pollington (2006, 34): *heorthgeneats* ("hearth-companions"), *heorthwerod* ("hearth-troop"), and even *huscarls* (a term from Old Norse; "house-men").⁹ In this thesis, the term *heorthwerod* will be used to refer to them as a group, and *heorthgeneat* to denote an individual warrior. As stated before, the relationship between a lord, his *heorthwerod*, and his other subjects, is of critical importance to this thesis. Order and power in the Anglo-Saxon world depended on the lord's ability to control and manipulate his followers and vassals. He was a leader in

⁸ 'Germanic' refers to the early invaders of the Anglo-Saxon Conquest. Bede lists the three "major" tribes as Saxons, Angles and Jutes in *Ecclesiastical History of the English People* (Book I, Ch. 15).

⁹ *Huscarls* are somewhat different from *heorthgeneats*, although the terms were sometimes interchangeable. "True" *huscarls* were semi-mercenary bodyguards who received a monthly pay. They were instituted after the coronation of Canute the Great, a Danish king. See Larson (1902, 159–160).

war and peace, and had to be able to master both fields, or at least appear to be mastering them. This pattern of power is far more evident in heroic poetry than in the long and diverse – and often obscure – history of the Anglo-Saxon era.

Gesta Herewardi, the tale of Hereward the Wake, who rebelled against William the Conqueror, comes from the 12th century, and is written in Latin, although it has been claimed to have been translated from an Old English original text. The scripture contains many of the features evident in earlier poetry, mixed with the characteristics of a High Middle Age adventure tale. Hereward, an Anglo-Saxon champion living under Norman rule, possesses the same qualities as the likes of Beowulf and Byrhtnoth, and controls his followers in a similar way: through a combination of generosity, battle-prowess and reputation. *Gesta Herewardi* can be interpreted as an Anglo-Saxon rallying cry, with a “Marsh Beowulf” – the last true lord, a man embodying the old heroic virtues – leading his *heorthwerod* against the ruthless and authoritarian King William, a representative of the new feudal order. The tale of Hereward the Wake is a small reminder of the resilience of heroic ideals. Hereward, like Beowulf and Byrhtnoth before him, is nonetheless ultimately doomed to fail in his struggle in a true heroic fashion.

2.2 The Shield-wall: Anglo-Saxon Aristocracy and Warrior Culture

<p><i>Gehyrst þu, sælida, hwæt þis folc segeð? Hi willað eow to gafole garas syllan, ættrynne ord and ealde swurd, þa heregeatu þe eow æt hilde ne deah. Brimmanna boda, abeod eft ongean, sege þinum leodum miccle laþre spell, þæt her stynt unforcuð eorl mid his werode, þe wile gealgean eþel þysne, æþelredes eard, ealdres mines, folc and foldan.</i></p>	<p><i>Do you hear, seafarer, what these men say? They want to send you spears as payment, deadly point and ancient sword, a heriot which will be of no use to you in battle. Seamen’s messenger – take this message back, tell to your people more unwelcome tidings; here stands an accomplished eorl with his troop who means to defend this land, Aethelred’s kingdom, my lord’s people and territory.</i></p>
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- *The Battle of Maldon* (l. 45–54)

Richard Abels writes about King Alfred's thoughts on society in the following fashion (1998, 33. The paragraph is an adaptation from *Alfred's Boethius*, ed. Sedgefield 1899, 40):

King Alfred, meditating upon the tools and responsibilities of kingship, observed that no king could govern effectively or honourably without a well-populated land: the service of praying men, fighting men, and working men: and the wealth and resources to maintain all three with land, gifts, weapons, food, ale, clothing and other necessities.

Alfred the Great was a king, not a poet (although he can certainly be called a scholar). In heroic poetry, working men and praying men were almost exclusively ignored, although the "land, gifts, weapons" part is certainly in chord with the heroic ethos. *Beowulf* focuses on life in kingly mead-halls, and *The Battle of Brunanburh* is not concerned with priests or farmers. *The Battle of Maldon* has only one distinctly commoner character, the *ceorl* Dunnere, and even he is depicted more as a warrior than as a worker.¹⁰ He is a representative of the lower class soldiers of the *fyrð*.¹¹ The fighting men are the protagonists of Anglo-Saxon epics, and the virtues praised in heroic poetry are often quite martial by nature. The tools of their trade are also given a loving treatment; Old English verse may at times seem stark and brusque, but weapons and pieces of armour are often described in lavish detail.

The most professional fighters usually came from the upper classes. According to Pollington (2006, 23–27), entry to *heorthwerods* was in practice restricted to noblemen, since basically only aristocratic males could afford the time and wealth

¹⁰ *Ceorls* were free commoners. The degree of their freedom varied with time and place; in the late Anglo-Saxon era some of them were akin to feudal serfs, as described by Ashley (1982, 23)

¹¹ *Fyrð* was originally a militia that was mustered at the time of war. Alfred the Great re-organised it into something resembling a standing army, as described by Abels in *King Alfred: War, Kingship and Culture in Anglo-Saxon England* (1998, 194–207). During this thesis, the former concept is used. *Fyrð* is also used to specifically refer to the whole army in question, in contrast to the elite force of noblemen and their *heorthgeneats*.

required for warrior's training and armament. The main protagonists of *Beowulf*, *Maldon* and *Brunanburh* are all high noblemen with prestigious lineages. Dark Age nobles were certainly *bellatores*.¹² Noblemen were expected to arm themselves according to their station; with iron mail, helmet and sword, the symbols of Dark Age aristocracy. More prestigious nobles naturally also had a *heorthwerod* of similarly armed warriors at their beck and call.

Commoners such as Dunnere certainly fought and died in the Anglo-Saxon armies, but their triumphs and woes are left largely unmentioned. Although *ceorls* were an important and the most numerous part of the *fyrð*, poets were not especially interested in their deeds. The Anglo-Saxon *ceorl* received a treatment similar to that often "enjoyed" by footmen and archers in later medieval romances; their viewpoint of the battle was largely ignored, while the storyteller concentrated on the duels and destinies of highborn men. Thus also happens to the *unorne* ("lowly" or "humble") Dunnere; his brief words are heard but his ultimate fate remains unknown.¹³ His short speech, however, is surprisingly similar in style to the ones delivered by the *thegns* and *heorthgeneats* of the remaining *fyrð*, although the depiction of his weapon may somewhat underline his status. Dunnere wields a *darod* ("dart"), a light javelin, a less prestigious weapon than the aristocratic sword or the heavy thrusting-spear (*gar*, *spera*, *franca* or *ord*). His part is detailed in the following paragraph (*Maldon*, 255–9. Adapted from Stephen Pollington's translation):

¹² Gerard of Cambrai, quoted in Georges Duby's *The Three Orders* (1982, 5), divided the High Middle Age society into *Oratores* ("Those who pray", priests), *Laboratores* ("Those who work", commoners) and *Bellatores* ("Those who fight", nobles). Although an anachronistic term from an Early Middle Age viewpoint, it is fairly accurate, and bears a striking resemblance to the thoughts of Alfred the Great described at the beginning of this chapter.

¹³ What remains of *Maldon* is a fragment of the original poem. It is possible that Dunnere's death was actually detailed in the complete version.

*Dunnere þa cwæð, daroð acwehte,
unorne ceorl, ofer eall clypode,
bæd þæt beorna gehwylc Byrhtnoð wræce:
"Ne mæg na wandian se þe wrecan þenceð
freat on folce, ne for feore murnan."*

*Then Dunnere spoke and shook his dart,
the humble ceorl called out over all,
bade each warrior to avenge Byrhtnoth:
"He must not draw back who thinks to avenge
his lord on foe, nor care for his life."*

Since those five lines are the only mention of a commoner in the three poems, it is not surprising that the world of heroic poetry can be described as somewhat un-egalitarian. Farming, herding and craftsmanship – the domains of *ceorls* – were certainly critically important functions of everyday life, but they were far too prosaic for the purposes of heroic poetry. The mead-hall, not the farmstead, was the stage for heroic events: the lordly shows of generosity, *ofermod*-filled battle-boasts and songs of poets.

Ceorls do not have a major part to play in the analysed power structure. In heroic poems, a lord's gifts and manipulation via authority were directed towards other aristocrats. Commoners most often felt the effects of their lord's power; the direct and apparent means of domination, rather than the manipulative authority. *Ceorls* did rely – to an extent – on their lord for the dispensation of justice and the maintenance of order, but these lordly duties do not play any major part in the heroic power structure. As was often the case for commoners in the Middle Ages, so it is in this thesis: the unhappy lot of the *ceorls* is to be left largely ignored and forgotten.

Byrhtnoth used the word *heregeatu* in an ironic fashion in the paragraph from *Maldon* found at the beginning of this chapter. The term is often translated as heriot. In Anglo-Saxon times, a heriot was a gift of horse, weapons and armour, used to cement the bond between a lord and a retainer. It was required to be returned or repaid after the recipient's death, unless the retainer was killed fighting for his lord (Mitchell 1995, 110). Heriot should not be confused with gift-giving and generosity, although it

did have an important feature in giving a formal and concrete evidence about the lord-warrior bond.

Oaths of loyalty could often be accompanied by additional gifts. However, these rewards were not heriot, but were instead meant as displays of generosity (and *beahgifa* manipulation) and signs of trust (Pollington 2006, 37). The post-mortem obligations of heriot may have also made the prospect of a violent death slightly less terrifying, since it saved the retainers' kinfolk from the financial burden of repayment. This can certainly be interpreted as morbid manipulation and power game; via heriot, a lord appealed both to lord-loyalty and kin-loyalty in hopes of cajoling warriors to act more bravely in the battlefield.

Heriot is not often mentioned in heroic poetry. Byrhtnoth uses it only as a sarcastic reply to the Viking messenger's threats, by implying that the Anglo-Saxons will return their tributary weapons in a more forceful fashion than is expected. It is possible that the legal wrangling and financial obligations embedded in the custom of heriot made it seem tainted, or at least unappealing, to poets composing heroic verse. Shows of lordly generosity are a more attractive subject than the collection of heriot from corpses and/or grieving relatives. No heriot collection is depicted in any heroic poem encountered so far, and it would have certainly diminished the illustrious glory of these supposedly ideal lords had they been depicted engaging in such behaviour. In the heroic ethos, the only required compensation for a lord's gift was loyalty and service to death and beyond, untainted by legal wrangling.

The shield-wall is a term which appears often in connection with Anglo-Saxon warfare and heroic poetry. In this battle formation, each warrior connected his shield with that of his comrades, protecting both himself and his brothers-in-arms. The lord, surrounded by his *heorthwerod*, was the very heart of this formation. The shield-wall

often broke at the time of his death or retreat, resulting in a resounding defeat, as was apparent in *The Battle of Maldon*, and in the real-life Battle of Hastings. However, the Anglo-Saxon shield-wall, while not being an especially sophisticated stratagem, retained its functionality to the very end. According to *Carmen de Hastingae Proelio*, not even the charge of the feared Norman knights could break the formation at Hastings, and Duke William had to employ feigned retreats and other subtle tactics to dismantle the formidable obstacle.

This formation can be interpreted in a symbolic fashion in addition to its utilitarian purpose. Pollington elaborates on shield and shield-wall (Pollington 2006, 141): *“The shield is perhaps the most culturally significant piece of defensive equipment. Once the shieldwall is drawn up, by implication all those on the same side of the wall are classified as ‘us’, and all those beyond it are ‘them’...”*

The shield-wall is a powerful symbol of unity, brotherhood and order. A fleeing man would often throw away his burdensome shield, thus forsaking his warrior trapping and branding himself an unworthy traitor. Not only does he abandon the warrior virtue of courage, but he also breaks his oath of loyalty, which is an ultimate offense in Anglo-Saxon minds (Robinson 1993, 119–120). As long as warriors stayed loyal and protected their lord, the bond between lord and retainer remained intact, and everyone was (relatively) safe from harm. But when warriors abandoned the ideal of loyalty and left their post at the shield-wall, all was lost. They endangered the lives of their lord and their fellows, and invited disaster to strike upon the orderly community symbolised by the battle formation. This symbolic feature of the shield-wall will be elaborated in more detail in a later chapter.

Shield-wall can also be linked to the practises of power and authority. Byrhtnoth reinforces his status as an *eorl* in the following segment, where he inspects and

organises the battle formation. Byrhtnoth is not only improving the men's morale by walking among them and giving encouraging words. The earl reaffirms his connection to the men protected by the "linden-boards", reminding them of the shared burdens and bonds inherent in the formation. He acts as one of them, while still appearing as their superior and their lord; the warriors protect themselves, their comrades, and their lord with the shield-wall, combining self-preservation with duty. This is an act of persuasion and manipulation, and also an example of Byrhtnoth assuming the warlike image of an *eorl* (*Maldon*, l. 17–24. Adapted from Stephen Pollington's translation):

<i>ða þær Byrhtnoð ongan beornas trymian, rad and rædde, rincum tæhte</i>	<i>Then Byrhtnoth began to assemble the warriors. He rode along and advised them, showed the men</i>
<i>hu hi sceoldon standan and þone stede healdan, and bæd þæt hyra randas rihte heoldon</i>	<i>how they ought to stand and keep their place and bade them to hold the shields the right way,</i>
<i>fæste mid folman, and ne forhtedon na.</i>	<i>firm with their fists, and to have no fear.</i>
<i>þa he hæfde þæt folc fægere getrymmed, he lihte þa mid leodon þær him leofost wæs,</i>	<i>When he had rightly arrayed the force he then alighted among the men dearest to him,</i>
<i>þær he his heorðwerod holdost wiste.</i>	<i>where he knew his heorthwerod was most steadfast.</i>

The breaking of a shield-wall is of momentous importance. Not only does it present a huge tactical disadvantage, but it also signifies that the warriors have failed to protect each other and their lord. They have not only shown themselves to be unworthy of the heriot given to them by their lord, but they have also let down one of their own and caused social upheaval.

2.3 To Death and Beyond: A Treatise on Anglo-Saxon Loyalty

<i>Hige sceal þe heardra, heorte þe cenre, mod sceal þe mare, þe ure mægen lytlað.</i>	<i>Mind shall be the harder, heart the keener, courage the greater, as our strength dwindles.</i>
<i>Her lið ure ealdor eall forheawen, god on greote. A mæg gnornian</i>	<i>Here lies our leader, cut down, the good man in the dirt. May he ever grieve</i>
<i>se ðe nu fram þis wigplegan wendan þenceð.</i>	<i>who now thinks to turn from this war-play.</i>
<i> Ic eom frod feores; fram ic ne wille, ac ic me be healfe minum hlaforde, be swa leofan men, licgan þence.</i>	<i> I am old in life: I do not wish to leave, but rather beside my lord, – beside so dear a man – do I think to lie.</i>

- *The Battle of Maldon* (l. 312–9)

The Anglo-Saxon notion of the bond shared by a lord and a subject needs to be defined in order to completely grasp the way in which power and authority work in heroic poetry. The virtue known as loyalty possesses pronouncedly martial overtones in this genre, and its importance is often manifested in violent situations. The broad concept of loyalty needs to be therefore narrowed down. In my thesis, I am referring to the bond that connects a lord and a warrior retainer whenever I use the word ‘loyalty’. The retainer in question might be a subject noble, a member of the lord’s *heorthwerod*, or a lowborn fyrdman like Dunnere. It should be noted that this connection did not possess only one-way obligations; lords were (theoretically) required to support and defend their subjects as well as vice versa, as is described by Mitchell (1995, 200). Loyalty bound the *heorthwerod* and the whole shield-wall together, and in an ideal situation the lord fought side by side with his subjects. Historically, this varied according to the place and person in question. *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* gives many accounts of kings being killed in battle, so the warlike ideal seems to have been often upheld, as was the case in 655 AD:

A.D. 655. This year Penda was slain at Wingfield, and thirty royal personages with him, some of whom were kings. One of them was Ethelhere, brother of Anna, king of the East-Angles.

The ideal of warrior lords is even more prominent in heroic poetry, where rulers rarely see a peaceful end. The deaths of Beowulf and Byrhtnoth are witnessed by the grieving men of their respective *heorthwerods*, whose laments are full of sorrow, as if they had lost one of their own. This fraternal bond is probably the reason why Byrhtnoth’s men sometimes refer to him as *wine* (“friend”) instead of *hlaford* or some other lordly denomination.

The highly personal and intimate nature of Anglo-Saxon loyalty cannot be stressed enough. C. S. Lewis stated that it cannot be understood “if we think of it in

the light of our moderated and impersonal loyalties... The feeling is more passionate and less ideal than our patriotism..." (1936, 9–10). Anglo-Saxon loyalty was certainly based on formal oaths of loyalty and other codified modes of behaviour, but it had an exceptionally strong emotional aspect to it, which Lewis likened to love. These features also appeared in the knightly traditions of High and Late Middle Ages, but chivalrous fidelity rarely possessed the same "loyalty beyond death" aspect that is often idealised in Old English poetry, and lord-loyalty often clashed with the devotion that a knight felt towards his courtly lover in later medieval texts (Painter 1964, 30). The following paragraph from *The Wanderer* has a depiction of the love-like side of Anglo-Saxon loyalty (*The Wanderer*, 41–4):

*þinceð him on mode þæt he his mondryhten
clyppe ond cysse, ond on cneo lecge
honda ond heafod, swa he hwilum ær
in geardagum giefstolas breac.*

*In his mind it seems to him that he clasps and embraces his lord and lays
on his knee hands and head, just as from time to time he used to make use
of the throne in days of old.*

Lewis' statement about Anglo-Saxon loyalty's differences compared to modern patriotism is an especially accurate one: oaths were sworn to a person, not to a country. The battle boasts uttered during the last stand in Maldon emphasize this in an impressive fashion. Byrhtnoth's warriors go to great lengths to speak about their personal commitment to the dead earl, and about their burning desire to wreak bloody havoc among his killers, yet not a single one of them mentions England – or even their native Essex – in their epitaph speeches. Their decision to pursue violent death is more connected to their lord's death than personal pride or glory-craving. Loyalty and loyalty-inspired vengeance are the overriding motivators behind the warriors' suicidal actions. The old retainer Byrhtwold (l. 312–9, found at the beginning of this chapter)

and *Dunnere* (l. 255–9, whose origins were discussed in the previous chapter) describe their grief and desire for vengeance with their speeches. They portray the emotional and personal aspect of Anglo-Saxon loyalty, the love-like bond described by Lewis.

Leofsunu’s approach to Byrhtnoth’s dead certainly has features of personal sorrow and desire for vengeance, but his speech in lines 244–53 also mirrors the importance of honour and reputation, the formal side of the Anglo-Saxon warrior code:

<p><i>Leofsunu gemælde and his linde ahof, bord to gebeorge; he þam beorne oncwæð: "Ic þæt gehate, þæt ic heonon nelle fleon fotes trym, ac wille furðor gan, wrecan on gewinne minne winedrihten. Ne þurfon me embe Sturmere stedefæste hælæð wordum ætwitan, nu min wine gecranc, þæt ic hlafordleas ham siðie, wende fram wige, ac me sceal wæpen niman, ord and iren."</i></p>	<p><i>Leofsunu spoke and lifted his linden-board as protection. He said to the warriors: "I promise that from here I do not mean to flee one footstep, but I will go forward to avenge my friendly lord in the fight. Steadfast warriors of Sturmere need not blame me, now that my friend is fallen, that I am going home lordless, fleeing from war; rather shall a weapon take me, spearpoint and iron sword."</i></p>
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The shame in being *hlafordleas*, “lordless”, is acutely present in *The Wanderer*, where an outcast laments his miserable fate. Such one was deprived of the security and livelihood afforded by life in the mead-hall, while also receiving a stigma of dishonour (Mitchell 1995, 202). Ideally, a warrior did not outlive his lord in a battle, and Leofsunu is clearly intent on following that requirement. Abandoning his lord, even a dead lord, would bring him dishonour and the contempt of his peers. Thus, the commitment towards vengeance was not only purely emotional, but also codified in the patterns of Anglo-Saxon society. It can therefore be assumed that the Anglo-Saxon understanding of loyalty consisted of two parts, one informal and the other formal:

- 1) The personal bond between a lord and a warrior. This is the intimate, love-like emotion described by C. S Lewis, the one that prompts Leofsunu to call Byrhtnoth *wine* and *winedrihten*. It inspires Byrhtwold to wish to lie beside his dead lord and makes the humble Dunnere act like a *heorthgeneat*.

- 2) The structured code of honour. A warrior's oath of loyalty obliged him to fight fearlessly for his lord. In an ideal situation, a man was able to repay his heriot with a violent death. The "steadfast warriors of Sturmere" mentioned by Leofsunu obviously follow this hard code of conduct. The pressure of society forced warriors to stand their ground to the very end and hold on to their shields, lest they be cursed like the cowardly Godric (*Maldon*, 237–8): "*Us Godric hæfð, earh Oddan bearn, ealle beswicene... Abreoðe his angin*", "Godric has betrayed us, the cowardly son of Odda... may what he begin be destroyed!"

The shame embedded in outliving one's lord stays present even after a victorious battle. After Beowulf has been slain by the dragon – having also dealt the monster its death in turn – his young retainer and kinsman Wiglaf still perceives dishonour in surviving (*Beowulf*, l. 2890–1):

Deað bið sella *Death is better for a warrior*
eorla gehwylcum þonne edwitlif! *than a life of disgrace.*

and (l. 2650–2):

God wat on mec *God knows of me*
þæt me is micle leofre þæt minne lichaman *that it is my preference by far*
mid minne goldgyfan gled fæðmie. *to burn with my gold-giver.*

These codes may seem overly harsh and demanding, and it is very unlikely that such suicidal behaviour was required of every single man – *thegn* or *ceorl* – serving an Anglo-Saxon lord. Mitchell states (1995, 199) that "such self-sacrifice would soon

have resulted in a pointless destruction of any army if practised whenever any leader fell in battle, but may have sometimes been embraced by a close-knit personal bodyguard". Thus it seems quite absurd that this multitude of men, from various backgrounds and social classes, is ready to perform actions expected only of a highly committed *heorthwerod*. Indeed, *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* makes a sober and laconic testament of the Battle of Maldon: *A.D. 991. This year was Ipswich plundered; and very soon afterwards was Alderman Britnoth slain at Maldon.* The curt tone of the chronicle is a far cry from the grim and passionate spirit of the poem. Compared to this cold factualism, the warriors of *The Battle of Maldon* seem to be stuff of legends. Which they are meant to be.

The paragon status attributed to these characters must therefore be emphasized and evaluated. As stated before: ideals, not historical facts, are under scrutiny in this thesis. Wiglaf and the last warriors of Byrhtnoth's *fyrð* are given exemplary characteristics; they symbolise the highest pinnacle of the heroic ethos, showing Achilles-like disdain for a long and happy life, and – like Achilles in *Iliad* – they are ready to go to great lengths out of personal outrage and desire for vengeance. They are employed in the poem to embody the unwavering loyalty so valued by Anglo-Saxon warriors.

It is my firm viewpoint that loyalty was the most prized virtue in heroic poetry; it ranked even above courage, though was often intermingled with it. This loyalty was also the main objective of Anglo-Saxon lords in their manipulation for authority. Loyal subjects gave their ruler a stable realm, a formidable fighting force, and an image of justified rule. Lords who were unable to inspire such devotion in their warriors – either due to weakness or stinginess – soon became objects of revile. Those unfortunate and/or evil lords are the warning examples encountered in *Beowulf*.

What of English patriotism then, the value which C. S Lewis described as “moderate and impersonal” compared to the intense Anglo-Saxon loyalty? It is certainly nowhere to be found in *Beowulf*, with its setting of pagan Scandinavia and tribal kingdoms. Lord-loyalty is of paramount importance in *Beowulf*, and the abstract concept of a “nation” is certainly not present in the distinctly Dark Age world of that epic.

The Battle of Brunanburh may be seen as striving to give birth to patriotism out of regional lord-loyalties. The poem does come from an age in which the Anglo-Saxon Heptarchy was being transformed into a single (if not exactly centralised) kingdom. *Brunanburh* concentrates on glorifying the might of the Wessex dynasty, portraying them as the foremost rulers among Anglo-Saxon kings. The birth-pangs of a unified Anglo-Saxon realm can perhaps be heard to a small degree in the poem’s celebration of a united past and the ancestors who overcame the Welsh and took the land.

However, *Brunanburh* is far from being a celebration of “Englishness”. The English war effort is highly personalised in the form of Aethelstan and Edmund, the two victorious brothers, and their enemies’ defeat is certainly not contributed to the valour and unity of the Anglo-Saxon people. The deeds of Mercians may be briefly applauded in the poem (*Brunanburh*, 24–5): *Myrce ne wyrndon heardes hondplegan* “The Mercians did not refuse hard hand-play”, but they are distinctly separate from the *Wesseaxe* instead of being counted as the same people.

The front stage of *Brunanburh* clearly belongs to the conquering grandsons of Alfred the Great and the West Saxon tribe. It is even possible that the briefness of the “Mercian segment” in *Brunanburh* – in contrast to the loving detail given to Aethelstan, Edmund and their warriors – is used to make them seem inferior and

subordinate to the House of Wessex, their future lords. *The Battle of Brunanburh* concentrates on lord-glorification in a true heroic fashion, rather than on any perceivable patriotic sentiment.

The Battle of Maldon is perhaps the best source in the search for unified Anglo-Saxon patriotism. It, like *Brunanburh*, features “English” warriors defending their land from invading Norsemen, but this time the poem takes place in unified England. These men come from various social classes, ranging from high-born thanes with falcons on their wrists to dart-wielding *ceorls*, and the host even includes the Northumbrian hostage Aeschferth among those making the last stand.¹⁴ Mitchell argues (1995, 201) that in the following paragraph “a burgeoning feeling of patriotic loyalty to a king and country is apparent” (*Maldon*, 49–54. Bruce Mitchell’s translation):

*Brimmanna boda, abeod eft ongean,
sege þinum leodum miccle laþre spell,
þæt her stynt unforcuð eorl mid his werode,
þe wile gealgean eþel þysne,
æþelredes eard, ealdres mines,
folc and foldan.*

*Messenger of the Seamen, take back this reply, give thy people a much
grimmer message, that here stands with his army a warrior of good
reputation who will defend this land, the homeland of Aethelred my lord,
the people and the earth.*

I disagree with Mitchell slightly. The speech of Byrhtnoth can certainly be read as showing commitment towards the idea of England as a single political entity, with its mentions about the people and the earth, but there are other elements to be found in it. I argue that Byrhtnoth actually expresses his loyalty towards his lord in the aforementioned segment, rather than to his country. He identifies the defended soil as

¹⁴ Northumbria had long been the centre of the old *Danelagen*, and men such as Aeschferth may well have preferred Danish kings to West Saxon ones, which might explain the warrior’s hostage status.

“the homeland of Aethelred my lord”, not as his own. Also, the words *Engla lond* or *Aenglisc* “English”, are nowhere to be seen in the poem: the men gathered under the earl’s banner are describes as *Eastseaxena ord*, “East Saxon force”. Byrhtnoth sees England as something belonging to his lord, not as his own possession or fatherland. Lord-loyalty, not patriotism, is what motivates the earl to do battle. Indeed, at the moment of his death, Byrhtnoth is referred to as *æpelredes eorl*, “Aethelred’s warrior”. The protagonist of *Maldon*, the poem’s ideal lord, is bound by his loyalty to go to his death – much like his followers are after his demise.

The men participating in the last stand do not mention Aethelred, England, or Essex at all. Their only motivation for dying a warrior’s death is connected to their loyalty to Byrhtnoth. Mitchell describes this sentiment and the whole concept of Anglo-Saxon loyalty beautifully in the following comparison (1995, 202):

...epitaph for those who fell is not that pronounced by Horace:
 Dulce et decorum est pro patria mori
 It is sweet and fitting to die for one’s native land

but (line 294)

He læg ðegenlice ðeodne gehende
 He lay thane-like close to his lord

2.4 Kinship and Justice in Anglo-Saxon England

*Nealles him on heape handgesteallan,
 æðelinga bearn, ymbe gestodon
 hildecystum, ac hy on holt bugon,
 ealdre burgan. Hiora in anum weoll
 sefa wið sorgum; sibb æfre ne mæg
 wiht onwendan þam ðe wel þenceð.*

*No help or backing was to be had then
 from his highborn comrades; that hand-picked troop
 broke ranks and ran for their lives
 to the safety of the wood. But within one heart
 sorrow welled up: in a man of worth
 the claims of kinship cannot be denied.*

- *Beowulf* (l. 2596–601)

As stated by Mitchell (1995, 203) Kinship was exceedingly important in Anglo-Saxon England. The retainers serving in a *heorthwerod* were often their master's relatives, and family ties helped to enhance the bond between a lord and his warriors. This is the situation between Beowulf and Hygelac, and Beowulf and Wiglaf. Blood connection creates a formal obligation to obey the family leader, and can therefore be used to persuade subjects and followers. Invoking kinship is not exactly use of power (unless the lord is also the family leader, like Hygelac or Beowulf), but more of a tool of persuasion. A large and influential family can certainly be counted as a form of power, since kinsmen were theoretically honour-bound to help each other in troubles related to poverty or war. A lord can always appeal to his relatives easier than to non-related subjects of allies, due to the near-sacred Anglo-Saxon duty to stand beside kith and kin.

Aelfwine's outcry in Maldon after Byrthnoth's death mirrors this attitude: *Me is þæt hearma mæst; he wæs ægðer min mæg and min hlaford* "It is the greatest of griefs to me: he was both my kinsman and my lord" (*Maldon*, l. 223–4). His family connection to the slain earl creates an actual blood feud between him and the Vikings, a double motivation to die avenging the fallen man. In the Anglo-Saxon mind, a person can be disgraced for not following the responsibilities imposed upon him/her by kinship, and enforcing a blood feud upon enemies can be counted as one of them.

Blood feud is another particularly strong theme in Anglo-Saxon heroic poetry. It was a custom actually codified in law: murders and other crimes could be settled with *wergild* ("blood money"), but if this compensation was withheld or refused, a blood feud ensued. A summary of *wergild* prices (according to social class) in various realms can be found in Whitelock's *English Historical Documents* (2002, 468–470). It should be noted that Grendel and his mother are actually engaged in a blood feud with

humans in *Beowulf*. The poet mentions that Grendel refuses to pay *wergild* for his killings (156), and later Grendel's mother attacks his son's slayer (l. 1546–7): *wolde hire bearn wrecan, angan eaferan* “now she would avenge her only child”. Beowulf also slays her to satisfy a need for vengeance; the giantess had killed Aeschere, King Hrothgar's counsellor, while pursuing her family obligations.

The dragon that later attacks the West Geat kingdom is also seeking payment for a stolen goblet, but the *wyrm* oversteps its legal rights by exceeding the value of the goblet with the accumulated *wergild* of its victims. Beowulf is thus justified in slaying the monster, and Wiglaf is allowed to collect *wergild* from the dragon-hoard for the death of his king and kinsman. Beowulf and Wiglaf are therefore actually doing their duties by punishing the monstrous law-breakers and following the blood feud between Monsters and Men.

A lord's duty (and an essential part of his authority and power) is the punishment of criminals. Hrothgar shows a clear lack of power in not being able to collect *wergild* for the slain Danes, which is why he can be seen as failing his kingly duties. His surrogate, Beowulf, on the other hand, proves that he deserves to be a lord by enforcing the laws of Men upon lawless fiends. He shows that he has the power to be a king: Hrothgar may possess the authority, but he lacks the power to protect his people, who are his extended family, according to the idea of king as a family chieftain (Pollington 2006, 39).

Byrhtnoth possessed enough authority after death to “manipulate” his retainers to fight and die for his sake. In heroic poetry, the dead still possess means to command the living, as was also the case with King Froda and his son Ingeld. The wedding of Freawaru and Ingeld in *Beowulf* shows how blood feuds and family ties played an important part in Anglo-Saxon politics. In this scene, an old warrior

persuades a young man to break the laws of his lord's household and murder a guest because of a blood feud, thus creating a power vs. authority conflict. The grizzled man has no power whatsoever to command the youth, being his social equal, and the power and authority of Prince Ingeld should compel the boy to desist from killing in his master's mead hall. However, in speaking for the youth's slain father, the grizzled warrior can employ all the authority that family relations and slain kinsmen carry in the Anglo-Saxon world. Even without any concrete power, the authority embedded in blood ties can command a warrior to oppose a lord's power and authority, and to breach the laws of hospitality.

Interestingly, the youth's lord Ingeld, the groom, forgives this insult to his power and authority at his own wedding. He certainly could outlaw or kill the youth, but instead he proceeds to pursue the very same Heathobard-Dane blood feud because of his own slain father, King Froda: *ne wæs hit lenge þā gēnþæt se ecg-hete āðum-swerian æfter wæl-nīðe wæcnan scolde* "That doom abided, but soon it would come: the killer-instinct unleashed among in-laws, the blood-lust rampant." (*Beowulf*, l. 83–85)¹⁵ Froda still possesses the authority of a king and a family chieftain, though the ashes of his funeral pyre may already be cold and his power long gone.

Anglo-Saxon kings actually attempted to suppress kin-loyalty in relation to lord-loyalty, since it deteriorated their power and authority. They could not afford conflicting loyalties amongst their warriors and retainers, especially in the Dark Ages, when the practice of blood feud was widespread and family ties were highly regarded. Mitchell describes a law given by King Alfred the Great, which reflects the

¹⁵ Heaney's translation implies that Heorot, King Hrothgar's hall, was destroyed by Ingeld, but at least one other translation (by Grummere) separates the burning of Heorot and Ingeld's attack.

imposition of lord-loyalty over kin-loyalty. The law also shields a lord's warriors from blood-feuds and *wergild* that his occupation might incur upon him (1995, 110):

Also we decree that a man be permitted to fight alongside his lord without becoming liable to a charge of homicide if someone attacks the lord. Similarly the lord may fight alongside the man. In the same way a man may fight alongside his kinsman by birth if someone attacks him wrongfully – except against his lord. That we do not allow.

It is not surprising that Anglo-Saxon lords attempted to curb clan loyalties in relation to lordly power, although Alfred's law still recognises the importance of family. If kin-loyalty can incite a warrior to break the peace of his lord's hall, it is a serious threat to their authority. The shield-wall cannot be held together if some its men are unsure about their loyalties. Therefore, loyalty to a lord must be more important than love towards kinfolk, although at times they can certainly complement each other, as was the case between Wiglaf and Beowulf, and Aelfwine and Byrhtnoth.

Sometimes lord-loyalty did not need to be decreed by law to be more important than kin-loyalty. *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* recounts an instance when the power and authority of a lord face those of kinship, in the description of the year 755 AD. King Alfred the Great lived in the 9th century, so this happened well before he could impose the aforementioned law. Back in 755, we had a group of men out to avenge their slain lord, King Cynewulf, whom Prince Cyneheard has murdered (and kinslain). The king's thanes have surrounded the prince's hall and call out to their relatives, who serve under Cyneheard:

The gates, however, were locked against them, which they attempted to force; but he (Cyneheard) promised them their own choice of money and land, if they would grant him the kingdom; reminding them, that their relatives were already with him, who would never desert him. To which they answered, that no relative could be dearer to them than their lord, and that they would never follow his murderer. Then they besought their relatives to depart from him, safe and sound. They replied, that the same request was made to their comrades that were formerly with the king; “And we are as regardless of the result,” they rejoined, “as our comrades who with the king were slain.” Then they continued fighting at the gates, till they rushed in, and slew the prince and all the men that were with him[...]

The authority commanded by a dead lord can motivate people into quite extreme actions in Old English poetry, as it would seem to have done in real life as well. Here it actually incites the thanes to commit kinslaughter in the name of their lord’s cadaver, which to them seems a lesser evil compared to letting the king die unavenged. Family relations could be a powerful tool – as well as a liability – in the Anglo-Saxon political environment, but the power and authority commanded by a lord could at times overcome the ties of blood.

The heroic atmosphere of *Beowulf* favours blood feuds and vengeance. No royal laws restrict the vendettas, and peace agreements and political marriages do little to calm revenge-seekers. This is a way for men such as the glory-hungry Beowulf and the vengeful Ingeld to improve their authority via warlike deeds, by proving that they are true *eorls*. However, King Onela does not follow Beowulf’s route, but actually rewards his nephew’s killer,¹⁶ Weohstan, with the slain man’s war-gear. The gift contains an *eald sweord etonisc* “an old sword of giants”, a valuable Swedish heirloom. Weohstan is Onela’s retainer at the time, so the king’s duty to gift a successful and loyal warrior is more overriding than his desire for vengeance, making

¹⁶ The nephew, Eanmund, was also Onela’s enemy. Eanmund was killed fighting Swedish raiders, while living in exile among West Geats. This partly explains the Swedish king’s crime against his family.

him ignore the blood feud. This shows not only Onela's ruthlessness, but also the importance of being a *beahgifa*, and the strength of the lord-warrior bond. Weohstan may have killed Onela's kinsman, but he has also served him dutifully in battle and slain his enemy. The duty of a *beahgifa* to reward a warrior overrides family obligations (and the *eorlish* need to assert authority by killing everyone who harms a lord's kin). It is a way to persuade Onela's warriors and subjects to follow him, since he shows them that he clearly values their loyalty and courage more than his own blood ties.

2.5 Religion and Church

Let the Word of God be read when the clergy are at their meal. It is seemly to hear a reader there, not a harper; to hear the sermons of the Fathers of the Church, not the lays of the heathen. For what has Ingeld to do with Christ? The house is narrow: it cannot contain them both; the King of Heaven will have no part with so-called kings who are heathen and damned...

– Alcuin of York, letter to Bishop Higbald of Lindisfarne (Garmonsway, G. N. and Simpson 1968, 242)

Alcuin of York chastised the monks of Lindisfarne for their interest in heroic poems, deeming them unsuitable for men of God.¹⁷ This strain of Old English poetry was certainly steeped in highly unchristian and unclerical notions: blood-feuds, material wealth, violence, vengeance and earthly glory. The characters in *Beowulf* were also probably pagan, and the poem includes funeral pyres and the depiction of a heathen ritual (which is condemned by the poet). Also, according to Robinson, the concept of *wyrd* seems to have possessed certain pagan undertones (1993, 51).

¹⁷ The condemnation of Ingeld, a character from *Beowulf*, also gives credence to the theory that the characters in the poem are pagans. Alcuin's fiery attack against the "heathenish" and Scandinavian-influenced heroic poetry may also be due to the Viking attack on Lindisfarne a few years prior to this letter.

As was mentioned in the chapter 1.2, Anglo-Saxon lords did not especially rely on divine right to justify their status. Bede Venerabilis, in his *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, portrays converted kings as being guided by heavenly visions and the wisdom of the evangelists, but the role of lordship itself does not seem to be invested with any sort of transcendental status, nor are there any hints about God-given right to rule. The greatest achievement of the early Anglo-Saxon kings is the introduction of Christianity to their domains; the true heroes of Bede's document are the converting priests. Penda, the pagan king of Mercia, receives an especially rough treatment from Bede.

The mundane and secular world was somewhat looked down upon by the clergy. It is possible that the world-weary dismissals of mundane glory found in *Beowulf* and *The Wanderer* are the echoes of priestly voices. According to Anglo-Saxon churchmen, true rewards and joys awaited in Heaven, not in a lord's mead-hall – life was *laene*, “transitory”. If the aforementioned parts of *Beowulf* and *Wanderer* are interpreted as the attempt of priests to voice their opinions, they become interesting subjects from this thesis' viewpoint. This reading would make these passages attempts to manipulate the Anglo-Saxon audience into placing their faith on the Church rather than the temporal secular lords. Such a persuasion is an attempt to wrest power and authority from nobility to clergy.

The Roman Catholic Church and clergy certainly did have considerable sway over mundane matters during the Anglo-Saxon era, especially so in the later years. This influence was not only due to the authority gained by clerical membership, or the ways to control common people and rulers with promises of salvation or damnation, or the authority and power commanded by the Church. Churchmen owned large amounts of land and property and had warriors following them, since secular lords

were often quite willing to gift the Church in return for God's grace (Mitchell, 229). These factors gave the clergy actual, tangible power. However, the absence of priestly characters and power in heroic poetry is quite distinct; the main focus is on earthly lords and warriors, especially in *Beowulf*, with its setting of pagan Scandinavia. Priests are more or less ignored as important actors in heroic poems.

This does not by any means attest that Anglo-Saxon poets were resistant or judgmental of Christian and clerical worldview. The *Beowulf* poet often uses his/her narrator's voice to praise God, and on one occasion laments the pagan ignorance of the Danes. Although a heroic epic with heathen characters, the Christian subtext in the poem is quite clear, and the poet (or at least the narrator) certainly does make his/her own religious allegiance quite clear. In *Maldon*, Byrhtnoth gives a vocal testimony of his devoutness with his death speech, and the good earl's piety and generosity to the Church are mentioned in *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*. A Christian warrior, he describes the enemy Vikings as "heathens" at one point, making them seem more alien to his followers. However, regarding power structures and the use of authority, God and Church are quite absent. The power of the church was certainly prominent in the Anglo-Saxon world, but it does not appear in any significant sense in heroic poetry.

3. The Concept of Lordship

In this chapter I intend to analyse the core subject of my thesis: the concepts of *beahgifa* and *eorl*, and the way in which they are employed to portray a lord as an ideal and essential leader of the heroic society. Both qualities include different methods of using power and resources, as well as increasing one's authority. I also aim to prove that both qualities were portrayed as necessary for both the lord and the people in heroic poetry.

3.1 *Beahgifa*

... *Cyning sceal on healle
beagas dælan...*

...*in the hall a king must
hand out rings...*

- *Exeter Book*, Gnostic Verses (l. 28–9)

Beahgifa is the first aspect in the twofold concept of lordship. Generosity and gifts played a huge part in the heroic power structure: they provided the basis for social advancement and means for retaining status. Without gift-giving, a lord had no warriors. Without warriors, he had no power. Gifts gave the fighting motivation and battle-gear for warriors, they retained a lord on his “ring-seat”, and they provided security for *ceorls* in the form of a powerful lord and loyal warriors. Gifts upheld the Anglo-Saxon world, and that is why a *beahgifa* was needed on the throne.

The analysis of the *beahgifa* aspect employs the theories of Alisa Manninen, Marcel Mauss and Stephen Pollington. Although Mauss is more concerned with ‘archaic’ Polynesian and Native American cultures, his thoughts on the general concept of gift and gift-giving are combined with Pollington’s definitions about the Anglo-Saxon gift culture. They provide the necessary elaboration about gifts, which is then applied to Manninen’s theory about power and authority. The importance of gifts in regards the heroic power structure is integral to this thesis, and therefore it is

necessary to understand the logic and nature of gift-giving to fully realise their connections. Gifts such as weapons, rings and pieces of armour carried considerable value and meaning in the Anglo-Saxon world, and they were imbedded with responsibilities and double meanings. A sword or an armlet given by an Anglo-Saxon lord carried with it his power and authority, and both items had discrete, different meanings.

3.1.1 The Logic of Gifting

*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
þæt he to Gifðum oððe to Gardenum
oððe in Swiorice secean þurfe
wyrsan wigfrecan, weorðe gecypan.
Symle ic him on feðan beforan wolde,
ana on orde, ond swa to aldre sceall
sæcce fremman, þenden þis sweord þolað*

*The treasures that Hygelac lavished on me
I paid for when I fought, as fortune allowed me
with my glittering sword. He gave me land
and the security land brings, so he had no call
to go looking for some lesser champion,
some mercenary from among the Gifthas
or the Spear-Danes or the men of Sweden.
I marched ahead of him, always there
at the front of the line; and I shall fight like that
for as long as I live, as long as this sword shall last.*

- *Beowulf* (l. 2490–9)

Pollington gives a schematic representation of the difference in rank in relation to gift-giving, wherein he describes the correct counter-gifts according to the recipient's social status in relation to the donor (2006, 38). Below is my rendition of that representation:

Recipient's status:	Counter-gift:
Higher	Favour
Same	Gift of equal value
Lower	Loyalty

Gifts and counter-gifts needed not be material objects, land or wealth. A warrior "gifting" his lord with military accomplishments could expect a favoured place in the *heorthwerod* and more riches compared to his fellows. This led to

retainers currying for the favour of their lord in the field, which he more than likely intended. A lord's authority was reinforced when warriors competed for his attention. The ultimate counter-gift a warrior could give his lord was the kind of loyalty Byrhtnoth received from his men; they would follow their lord even after his death, offering their lives to compensate for his generosity.

In pre-Christian times, this relationship extended even to otherworldly powers. According to Pollington (2006, 38), the king's offerings to the gods constituted a petition which they could not requite except with favours (the king was not their social equal, after all). This can be seen in Christian practices as well. Anglo-Saxon lords built houses of worship and donated land and wealth to the clergy, expecting a counter-gift from God or the Church. The religious practice of god-gifting is actually performed in *Beowulf* (l. 175–80), although the pagan rituals are heavily disapproved of by the poet. The Danes attempt to bargain with the gods; their offerings and prayers are gifts, and they hope the indebted deities will drive Grendel away in return. One could argue that the arrival of Beowulf shortly after the sacrifices is a proof that the gods chose to distribute a counter-gift.

Gifts should not be confused with heriot. They certainly do carry unwritten obligations, but the concrete legal responsibilities imposed by *heregeatu* (described in chapter 2.2) are not attached to them. They are both essential parts of Anglo-Saxon society, but gifting is more closely connected to the ideas of loyalty and honour due to its connection to personal deeds and connections. Using Manninen's terms, a gift is a manifestation of authority, whereas heriot symbolises the use of (legal) power. Heriot denoted a lord's power to demand and coerce wealth and servitude from his retainers, due to the formal and legal debt carried within the received war-gear. The power inherent in a heriot could drive one to an early grave (or funeral pyre). A gift is more

embedded with authority, since the contract assigned to it is informal, and dependent on a lord's ability to persuade with the said gift. It does not directly enforce the recipient to counter-gift the donor, instead accomplishing this via social implications embedded within the exchange.

The motivation behind a gift need not always be the increase of wealth or authority; gifts between equals are meant to be gestures of friendship, perhaps to heal sour relationships between people. In such a situation, people can also be used as "gifts". King Hrothgar attempts exactly that by marrying his daughter Freawaru to Ingeld, in order to resolve a blood-feud. This is somewhat similar to Mauss' idea of total prestation, wherein everything – people, land, immaterial notions such as loyalty or valour – can basically be given as gifts. The logic behind Hrothgar's reconciliatory gift-marriage would be: Freawaru (gift) → peace (counter-gift). Unfortunately, as Beowulf cynically predicts, Ingeld chooses revenge over a happy marriage: "...generally the spear is prompt to retaliate when a prince is killed, no matter how admirable the bride may be" (*Beowulf*, l. 2029–31). Hrothgar's gift was not of a sufficient value to receive the desired counter-gift.

The mutual bond formed by gift-giving was the most important result of this procedure, on which an Anglo-Saxon lord's power was largely based. Although people were theoretically honour-bound to obey the king/earl/thane who was their lord, a stingy ruler could not expect to garner widespread support, at least among nobles. In heroic poetry, *ceorls* seem to have been excluded from aristocratic gift-giving in form of material wealth: a lord "gifted" them mostly with justice and protection. The *heorthwerod* and lesser nobles were the most common recipients of rings and war-gear; generosity to peers and subjects thus partly ensured mutual respect and non-aggression from equals, as well as loyalty from subjects.

Heorthwerod's faithfulness was especially important in the enforcement of power. They were basically the lord's private army, the only concrete mean with which to apply punitive and disciplinary means, aside from the forces commanded by his subject nobles, especially before the military reforms conducted by Alfred the Great (Abels 1998, 194–207). The scattered nature of power among several Anglo-Saxon magnates meant that the ability to ensure loyalty with fair words and liberal gift-giving could well prevent the emergence of usurpers. A wise notion, since *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* recounts a dangerously high amount of inner struggles within kingdoms, especially in the days of the Heptarchy.

The nature of gift-giving was by nature circulatory. Foucault stated that power is “employed and exercised through a net-like organisation” (Foucault 2003, 98), which is an accurate description of the gifting process and the relationships it forms between the donor and the recipient. Warriors gave booty earned in battle to their lord, who would distribute it back to them during a *symbel*, with mutual loyalty as a by-product. An excellent retainer and kinsman, like the exemplary hero Beowulf, would even give gifts received from outside sources to his lord. Beowulf straightaway feeds the rewards Hrothgar gave him for his heroism into the gift-current, by handing them to his king and uncle, Hygelac. Beowulf's gifts include ancestral Danish heirlooms, but there seems to be no stigma connected in giving away such personal rewards; it is something that a heroic paragon like Beowulf is expected to do. He is, of course, extravagantly counter-gifted with an heirloom sword, an enormous amount of land, a hall, and the eternal love of his people (which ultimately leads to his coronation, when the Geatish people demand that he accept the throne). Thus, he transforms material wealth into power by successfully manipulating the pattern of gifts and counter-gifts.

Land was, in a sense, the ultimate gift a warrior could receive; it gave him title and wealth and a *heorthwerod* of his own, at least if he received enough land. In other words, land meant power. Undoubtedly, lords were extremely hesitant to relinquish land and power to their subjects, so it would take truly Beowulfian efforts to receive such a grand present. This promise of magnificent generosity is one thing that drove warriors forward in heroic poetry, and a generous lord could expect his retainers to follow him out of hope for gifts.

According to Pollington (2006, 91) lords often rewarded old, loyal *heorthgeneats* with parcels of land after their lengthy services, in a manner reminiscent of the Roman Empire's policy of giving small holdings to retired legionnaires. This reward also attracted younger men to take the grizzled warrior's place in hopes of such rewards. As Anglo-Saxon armies grew more professional and bureaucracy became more organised, kings chartered land away more conservatively (Pollington 2006, 96–99). A king's holdings were often overseen by royal officers rather than distributed to old warriors, but the ideal of earning land through warlike deeds lived on in heroic poetry.

3.1.2 *Symbel* and the Ritualistic Connotations of Gifts

<p><i>...Beowulf gepah ful on flette; no he þære feohgyfte for sceotendum scamigan ðorfte, --- ne gefrægn ic freondlicor feower madmas golde gegyrede gummanna fela in ealobence oðrum gesellan.</i></p>	<p><i>So Beowulf drank his drink, at ease; it was hardly a shame to be showered with such gifts in front of the hall-troops. There haven't been many moments, I am sure, when men have exchanged four such treasures at so friendly a sitting.</i></p>
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- *Beowulf* (l. 1024–9)

Paul C. Bauschatz (1983, 74–78) gave the word *symbel* – which means simply ‘feast’ – religious and mystical overtones that hearken back to Anglo-Saxon pagan past.

Pollington agrees with him to an extent, although his interpretation mostly lacks Bauschatz's heavy-handed mysticism. I too use the term *symbol* to denote something more than a simple drinking bout or a banquet, but my reading is more connected to Manninen's theories of power and authority than to re-imaginings of pagan past. *Symbols* were a showcase for a lord's power and authority, an event in which to play the gifting game and to strengthen one's own position as the centrepiece of aristocratic society. In other words, to be a *beahgifa*.

The *symbol* also resembles the event which Mauss calls 'potlatch', which are essentially social gatherings where gifts are exchanged and contracts are formed (1966, 4):

...the whole clan, through the intermediacy of its chiefs, makes contracts involving all its members and everything it possesses. But the agonistic character of the prestation is pronounced. Essentially usurious and extravagant, it is above all a struggle among nobles to determine their position in the hierarchy to the ultimate benefit, if they are successful, of their own clans.

The *symbol* does not exactly share potlatch's "agonistic" nature, but Mauss' description is not as alien to Anglo-Saxon's mead-halls as one might at first expect. The feast does have a similar competitive aspect to it. A *symbol* is an event in which subject nobles and *heorthgeneats* compete against each other for their lord's generosity and a favoured place at the feasting table. Unferth's challenge to Beowulf could certainly be interpreted as such. In *Beowulf*, Queen Wealhtheow also serves the gathered warriors and guests in a strict order, which displayed individual status and royal favour among the gathered crowd.¹⁸ Her role was to cement the bonds between

¹⁸ In *Lady with a Mead Cup* (1996, 189–195) Michael Enright argues that queens acted as a sort of surrogate priestesses during a *symbol*, bestowing divine favour and blessing with the mead cup.

the gathered nobles, but also to make them compete for the queen's favour, in order to gain a more favoured position in the serving order.

According to Pollington (2006, 39–42) the distribution of gifts was far from informal, and the pomp and ceremony connected to it was a clear show of lordly authority. It was done in the lord's mead hall, surrounded by his whole retinue and family, to overawe the recipient with the noble's wealth and prestige. The lord both received pledges of loyalty from his followers and displayed his own generosity. The *symbol* was similar to later royal courts, in being an occasion for a ruler to reinforce one's status and authority as the central figure of the occasion, but the importance of the *heorthwerod* made a difference between these two.

The *symbol* was as much of a showcase for the retainers as well as their lord; the warriors were allowed to give boasts about their past and future service to their liege, and to present him with gifts, often battle-booty. Newcomers were also embraced into the *heorthwerod*; this event most likely always included a gift from the lord, a sign of their personal bond and friendship, in addition to an oath of fealty (Pollington 2006, 47–50).

The *symbol* was also the occasion on which an Anglo-Saxon lord's power hinged on. One who showed miserly behaviour could expect discontent and disloyalty, perhaps even betrayal, from his subjects and retainers. On the other hand, the kind of generosity that Hrothgar showed towards Beowulf not only impressed his own followers, but also spread his fame (and authority) further, especially when Beowulf recited tales of the Danish king's open-handedness at Hygelac's court. The most valued result of a successful *symbol*, however, was the loyalty of warriors and subject nobles. In an ideal situation celebrated in heroic poetry, a *beahgifa* could

expect death-defying commitment and political stability in return for the gifts he dealt out during a feast. Simply put, generosity led to authority.

The form and nature of given gifts also mattered. Although precious metals and jewels were valuable for purely material reasons, a gift's most valuable feature was its past – or *maphum*, as Pollington prefers to call this quality (2006, 38).

Hrothgar gives Beowulf ancient heirlooms with long and storied histories, which carry within them the weight and respect of their previous owners. Such gifts are deeply connected to the lord and people who produced them, and as such create an even firmer bond between the donor and the recipient. Hrothgar, by giving away an ancestral sword of Danish kings, is binding Beowulf both to himself and his ancestors with such a personal and impressive gift. It could be argued that the blade acts as a material surrogate for the king's authority over the Geatish warrior, which may be one reason why Beowulf himself gifts it away – to escape the responsibilities and commitments imposed by carrying such a weapon.

Giving away weapons and armour also accentuated the power differences between a lord and a subject. Items of martial trade are given as heriot to new warriors, or as gifts to cement their bonds to their lords. Hrothgar hands exactly such treasures to Beowulf: an ornamented banner (which more than likely bears a Danish insignia), a helm and a mailcoat, and “a sword carried high”. These are gifts given by a *beahgifa* to a loyal and distinguished servant, in reward for both past and future services. It is noteworthy that Hygelac also counter-gifts Beowulf with similar heirlooms as well as ever-precious land, perhaps in part to prove himself Beowulf's social superior.

Hrothgar not only performs his duties as a grateful and generous host, but he also binds this promising and powerful warrior more closely to himself, as he does to

the Geatish realm itself. The debt of gratitude that Beowulf now owes the Danish king is also partially transferred to his own lord, Hygelac, since Beowulf hands him Hrothgar's gifts. After receiving Hrothgar's gifts via Beowulf Hygelac is at least partly beholden to the Dane for his generosity. This is similar to the Maori concept of *Taonga* described by Mauss (1966, 6–8), which basically means that every recipient of the same gift is somewhat indebted to its original contributor. Thus a single *symbol* can have far-reaching consequences beyond the borders of a lord's realm, as (at least in Beowulf) almost every piece of war-gear carries within itself both old friendships and old grudges. For a reminder of grudges carried within material objects, one needs to only look back at the grizzled warrior and the youth at Ingeld's wedding feast (*Beowulf*, l. 2035–56) and Hengest's reaction to Dazzle-the-Duel (l. 1142–5).

3.1.3 The Importance of Being *Beahgifa*

<p><i>scop him Heort naman se þe his wordes geweald wide hæfde. He beot ne aleh, beagas dælde, sinc æt symle.</i></p>	<p><i>Heorot was its name. He had settled on it, whose utterance was law. Nor did he renege, but doled out rings And torques at the table.</i></p>
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- *Beowulf* (l. 78–81)

The very title of *beahgifa*, which comes with supporting the (aristocratic) society via gift-giving, was also an important nomination in heroic poetry. Being called one – or one its alternative terms, such as 'holder of the ring-seat' or 'master of the mead-benches' – gave a lord respect and fame, something that would both attract followers and dissuade would-be traitors and usurpers. The status of a *beahgifa* gave a ruler the semblance of divine authority, the image of 'a good lord' who provided for his people. While an *eorl* could often expect to be treated with respect by his companions, fame earned as a warlord did not gloss a lord's character with similar authority. An

eorl's status was more closely connected to the idea of power; a warlike ruler's ability to enforce his will and defend his land did not confer the sense of statesmanship and wisdom that being named a *beahgifa* did. A *beahgifa* was also thought to be blessed with other redeeming qualities, such as sense of justice and compassion for their people.

This is less commonly the case with lords who tread the path of the *eorl*; the *ofermod* ('over-courage') connected to warrior ethos is what ultimately leads both Byrhtnoth and Beowulf to their deaths.¹⁹ Hrothgar, on the other hand, refrains from charging against monsters, yet no one accuses him of cowardice. On the contrary; Hrothgar is praised for his wisdom, and the poet outright proclaims that "he is a good king", even though he is incapable of protecting his people from the ravages of Grendel and his dam. Other possible interpretations of Hrothgar being named a good king will be explored in the chapter devoted to the *eorl* aspect of lordship.

Freed of the monsters' depredations, Hrothgar's hall Heorot transforms into an earthly paradise full of material splendour, liberal gift-giving and tales of heroism; a steading ruled by a true *beahgifa*. The status quo having been restored, Heorot is returned to what it is supposed to be. In *Beowulf*, the mead-hall is not only the home of a lord, his family and his followers; it is a reflection of the society as a whole. If the lordly hall is either ruled by an unworthy person or its integrity and security are threatened, then the whole tribe living under the lord's rule is in peril.

It is noteworthy that Grendel specifically chooses Heorot as a target for his nocturnal marauds, and later the dragon burns down Beowulf hall, "The throne-room

¹⁹ The word *ofermod* was given an extensive treatment by J.R.R. Tolkien in his essay of the same name. Tolkien described *ofermod* as a typical hamartia (a fateful, fatal flaw) of Anglo-Saxon heroes, and their imminent deaths as near-divine punishments for their overwhelming pride. Robinson (1993, 105–121) argues that Tolkien's interpretation has misled scholars, by giving a fairly straightforward word more weight and value than it originally possessed (in a similar manner to Bauschatz and *symbol*).

of the Geats”. A peaceful and prosperous mead-hall ruled by a *beahgifa* is an anathema to these monsters, who wage war against mankind and orderly society. If the mead-hall and its residents suffer, or if the lord is incapable of holding a *symbol* there, then everything is in danger of collapsing. Thus, a lord must also be able to protect his mead-hall (this will be elaborated further in the *eorl* section).

What dangers then face a lord who neglects his duties in the mead-hall and the *symbol*? As previously stated, stinginess and refusal to award followers with wealth and land could lead to revolts and unrest in actual both Dark Age England and Dark Age poetry. In the latter, the punishments for undue frugality include posthumous infamy, which is far more grievous punishment, at least according to the heroic mindset.

Beowulf includes a warning example of a ruler who can – to a degree – assume the image of an *eorl*, but lacks the qualities of a ring-giver: the king Heremod (his name means “war-spirited” or “battle-courage”), who fights against his own companions in his bloody-minded ferocity. He is described (*Beowulf*, l. 904–5) as “a burden, a source of anxiety to his own nobles”. The greatest sin of Heremod, though “eminent and powerful”, is the fact that he grew bloodthirsty and refused to bestow rings to the Danes. Though the king was an accomplished and fierce warrior, he failed to understand the other necessary role of lordship. According to the poet in Hrothgar’s court, Heremod is betrayed by the very people he neglected and slain in an ambush. He is mentioned as an antithesis of a good king, for refusing to perform the necessary role at the *symbol* and playing the part of a *beahgifa*. Hrothgar recounts his ancestor’s eventual demise with grim words (*Beowulf*, l. 1720–2):

<i>dreamleas gebad,</i>	<i>He suffered in the end</i>
<i>þæt he þæs gewinnes weorc þrowade,</i>	<i>For having plagued his people for so long:</i>
<i>leodbealo longsum</i>	<i>His life lost happiness.</i>

3.2 Eorl

<i>Hwæt! We Gardena in geardagum, þeodcýninga þrym gefrunon, hu ða æþelingas ellen fremedon! Oft Scyld Scefing sceaþena þreatum, monegum mægþum meodosetla ofteah, egsode eorlas, syððan ærest wearð feasceft funden; he þæs frofre gebad, weox under wolcnum weorðmyndum þah, oð þæt him æghwylc þara ymbsittendra ofer hronrade hyran scolde, gomban gylðan; þæt wæs god cýning!</i>	<i>The Spear-Danes in days gone by and the kings who ruled them had courage and greatness. We have heard of those princes' heroic campaigns. There was Scyld Scefing, scourge of many tribes, a wrecker of mead-benches, rampaging among foes. This terror of the hall-troops had come far. A foundling to start with, he would flourish later on as his powers waxed and his worth was proved. In the end each clan on the outlying coasts beyond the whale-road had to yield to him and begin to pay tribute. That was one good king.</i>
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- *Beowulf* (l. 1–11)

In the above quote – the very beginning words of *Beowulf* – an unabashed glorification of warrior-king Scyld's ruthless conquests is described. An ambitious man of low origins, he finds his place in the world via martial exploits and founds a royal dynasty. Despite his thuggish ways, Scyld is not a blasphemous bogeyman like the anti-*beahgifa* Heremod: he is an accomplished *eorl*, a role model for an Anglo-Saxon lord who wished to emulate the characters of heroic poetry and fulfil one aspect of ideal rulership.

Assuming the image of a warrior was exceedingly important in heroic poetry, and seems to have been so historically as well, at least according to the Battle of Wingfield mentioned in chapter 2.2. A lord was an instrumental part of the *heorthwerod* and the centrepiece of the whole *fyrð*: with his fall, the army was likely to turn and run, which is exactly what happens in *Maldon*. Although surrounded by his bodyguards, the most skilled and well-armed men in the army, he was far from impervious. A lord's death was the ultimate disgrace which could befall his retainers, and the self-sacrifice of Byrhtnoth's followers reflects this. Ideally, a warrior did not outlive his master in the battlefield.

This can be seen as a matter of authority: being a warrior was supposed to be as integral to an Anglo-Saxon lord as dealing out treasure in a *symbol*. Warlike

pseudonyms are used to praise lords in heroic poetry, as is evident in the quote about Scyld Scefing, “wrecker of mead-benches” and “terror of the hall-troops”. It is an image that confers a certain sense of justification for a ruler, for a leader capable of defending the people from the enemy is entitled to their loyalty. An *eorl* does not simply claim authority by sitting on a high seat; by being a part of the shield-wall he/she earns it. By staking his/her life among them, a ruler is effectively giving a counter-gift to the *heorthwerod* for their loyalty. Although closely connected to power in the sense of being able to punish and discipline subjects, competence in warfare was a quality that conferred an image of leadership; one who could not stand alongside the *heorthwerod* in battle was not doing an essential part of lordly duty, and was thus lacking the authority to call oneself a true lord.

In *The Battle of Brunanburh*, the kings of Wessex were promoting themselves and their ancestors as mighty *eorls* in order to gain the authority to claim the overlordship of England. Mitchell states that the poem “...celebrates a victory in panegyric terms... The tone of *Maldon* is of grim defiance; that of *Brunanburh* is one of scorn, exultation and grim triumph. This emerges... in the claim that it was the greatest of all English victories...” (1995, 300) The royal brothers, Aethelstan and Eadmund, can be seen as embodying the whole Anglo-Saxon army in the first eleven lines; it is they who drive the foemen away, not the soldiers fighting with them. This somewhat contradicts the spirit found in *Maldon* and *Beowulf*: in *Brunanburh*, the glory belongs to the lords, not the fraternity of the *heorthwerod*. The poem, and the promoted warrior image of the Wessex brothers, is a tool in a power struggle. They are very real and distinguishable political weapons. The harsh and merciless streak of Anglo-Saxon concept of heroism is visible in the poem; the last lines take pride in the Anglo-Saxon Conquest of Britain by Aethelstan’s ancestors. *Maldon* celebrates men

who defended their homes, but *Brunanburh* glorifies invasion and pillage with no *casus belli*, in a similar fashion to the passage from *Beowulf* about Scyld Scefing's rise to power.

A lord who could not act as a war leader was asking for trouble. In *Beowulf*, Hrothgar embodies a generous ring-giver who is unable to protect his people; the monster Grendel attacks his mead hall and prevents the Danes from using it. This is a double disgrace to the king, since he cannot perform his lordly role by holding a *symbel*, being thus stripped of authority. Grendel also strips Hrothgar of his power by killing his warriors, thus removing the king's means to enforce justice and defend his realm.

Although the poet is careful not to directly accuse Hrothgar of failing, the contrast between him and the youthful and vigorous Beowulf seems to be shrouded in irony. Hrothgar retreats to sleep with his queen while Beowulf keeps watch for the giant, and after Grendel is slain he emerges from the bedroom with his '*heorthwerod*' "...the king himself, guardian of the ring-hoard, goodness in person, walked in majesty from the women's quarters with a numerous train, attended by his queen and her crowd of maidens, across to the mead-hall." (*Beowulf*, l. 919–23) The Danes' praise of Beowulf also smacks of sarcasm towards Hrothgar, especially when remembering when any words about 'being a good king' were first uttered in the poem (*Beowulf*, l. 857–62):

*þætte suð ne norð be sæm tweonum
ofer eormengrund ofer nænig
under swegles begong selra nære
rondhæbbendra, rices wyrðra.
Ne hie huru winedrihten wiht ne logon,
glædne Hroðgar, ac þæt wæs god cyning.*

*Nowhere, they said, north or south
between the two seas or under the tall sky
on the broad earth was there anyone better
to raise a shield or to rule a kingdom.
Yet there was no laying of blame on their lord,
The noble Hrothgar; he was a good king.*

Irony is not the only method used in the poem for notifying Hrothgar's unheroic demeanour: Beowulf reprimands him about it with rough frankness. When a young

warrior states to a venerable king: “Endure your troubles today. Bear up and be the man I expect you to be” (*Beowulf*, l. 1395–6), it is quite evident that the lord is not behaving exactly as is expected of a ruler.

There are no truly unwarlike lords to be found in epic poetry,²⁰ and even the aforementioned Hrothgar is praised for his former deeds in protecting his people. Beowulf, Hygelac, Hrothgar, Hnaeff, Byrhtnoth, Aethelstan, Edmund... all these lords are portrayed as fighting men. In the world of heroic poetry (and often in early medieval reality) being a warrior was an integral and mandatory part of lordship, and the lords were expected to play the part. The foolhardy deeds of Beowulf and Byrhtnoth are not simply born out of overconfidence – an *eorl* was supposed to face his doom with unwavering courage, and thus either snatch victory from the jaws of certain defeat or perish in the attempt. Fittingly, the last Anglo-Saxon king of England, Harold Godwinson, died in the field of battle, and his realm fell to foreign invaders afterwards; a situation which resembles *Beowulf* with eerie accuracy.

3.2.1 The Bond between *Eorls* and Warriors

<p><i>Ɔa was on uhtan mid ærdæge Grendles guðcræft gumum undyrne; þa wæs æfter wiste wop up ahafen, micel morgensweg. Mære þeoden, æþeling ærgod, unbliðe sæt, þolode ðryðswyð þegnsorge dreah, syðþan hie þæs laðan last sceawedon, wergan gastes; was þæt gewin to strang, lað ond longsum!</i></p>	<p><i>Then as dawn brightened and the day broke Grendel's powers of destruction were plain; Their wassail was over, they wept to heaven And mourned under morning. Their mighty prince, The storied leader, sat stricken and helpless, Humiliated by the loss of his guard, Bewildered and stunned, staring aghast At the demon's trail, in deep distress.</i></p>
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- *Beowulf* (l. 126–34)

²⁰ As an exception, Aethelred the Unready is never given any warlike pseudonyms in *Maldon*, but he is only mentioned twice in the poem and is never truly present in person. Robinson argues that the poet's mentions about Aethelred smack of ironical criticism towards the absent king (1993, 118–9).

The importance and nature of Anglo-Saxon loyalty has been dealt with in preceding chapters, but the bond shared by *eorls* and their warriors merits some further analysis. It is an important factor in regards to a lord's authority, especially in regards to creating an *eorlish* image.

Warriors were supposed to protect their lord, but the opposite was true as well. A lord was responsible for feeding and lodging his warriors (Mitchell 1995, 200), and with equipping them with suitable war-gear (in form of gifts as well as heriot). In the battlefield, their lives are also dependent on his ability to lead and win wars. As stated before, the lords were part of the *heorthwerod* as much as their leaders; the lord was also a shield in the shield-wall, responsible for warding his comrades from injury or death. Thus, "protector of warriors", "friend of heroes" and other such pseudonyms are often given to various lords in poetry. This is an integral part of being an *eorl*. Ideally, an Anglo-Saxon lord had to always be one of the warriors.

In *Beowulf*, the bond between Hrothgar and his thanes is broken by Grendel. The fiend attacks the Danes when they are sleeping in their lord's hall, defenceless and utterly reliant on Hrothgar's ability to shield them from the threats that stalk in the dark – "*sceadugenga*". It is especially noteworthy that Grendel attacks Hrothgar's warriors, thus challenging the king to show himself an *eorl* worthy of his followers. However, Hrothgar is not up to the test. The king is unable to kill Grendel and thus protect his *heorthwerod*, and the warriors themselves cannot protect their lord's hall against this invader. This is a critical failure, one that upsets the very foundations of Anglo-Saxon society. Hrothgar therefore has to abandon his lordly seat in Heorot, and the whole Danish realm begins to fall apart due to their lord's inability to defend his followers and his home. They have to wait for a true *eorl* to arrive and restore the

status quo, by defeating this threat to a critically important part of King Hrothgar's power – his warriors.

3.2.2 Fame and Glory

*Ure æghwylc sceal ende gebidan
worolde lifes; wyrce se þe mote
domes ær deaþe; þæt bið drihtguman
unlifgendum æfter selest.*

*For every one of us, living in this world
means waiting for our end. Let whoever can
win glory before death. When a warrior is gone,
that will be his best and only bulwark.*

- *Beowulf* (l. 1386–89)

Wealth is important in heroic poetry. From it spring the gifts that are crucial for a working society, since without riches a lord cannot distribute gifts and build the necessary power network with his/her followers. Without wealth, a lord could not truly be a *beahgifa*. This may partly explain the detailed descriptions of jewellery and other treasures, which are the cornerstones of the gift-current, and thus also of a functioning society.

However, fame was more important to an *eorl*. Granted, deeds that won glory often won gifts as well, but fame gained by slaying Grendel and his mother is as precious to Beowulf as the treasures awarded to him afterwards. As mentioned before, the Danes think that no one is more worthy of kingship than Beowulf after he has slain the fiendish mother-and-son pair. Such was the importance of battle prowess and fame won in war in Anglo-Saxon poetry; they were both required of good kings.

Beowulf is called "*lofgeornost*", which is the whole poem's closing word. It is translated in the lines of "keenest to win fame" (Heaney) or "keenest for fame" (Sullivan & Murphy), but can also – according to Robinson (1993, l. 142–143) – mean "boastful" or "vainglorious", which to modern minds are certainly negative words. However, unlike the ambiguous *ofermod*, *lofgeornost* was without a doubt a positive quality in the minds of the poem's Anglo-Saxon audience. *Eorls* were

supposed to boast of their deeds during a *symbel* – which is what Beowulf does before Hrothgar and Hygelac – in order to spread their name and reputation. Gained fame is something that *must* be rewarded by both lords and retainers; a lord is obligated to present gifts to a glorious hero, whereas followers of an *eorl* are bound by honour and fraternal ties to stay loyal, and to follow a leader like Beowulf or Byrhtnoth to the death.

Boasts of past and future battle-deeds were an important part of authority in the heroic world. When Unferth doubts Beowulf’s deeds and glory, he is issuing a challenge to the hero’s authority and his worth as an *eorl*. Beowulf must immediately respond, lest his authority be besmirched in the eyes of his followers, on whose opinion his present authority and future power heavily lean.

The pursuit of glory was thus important in regards to gaining and holding power. It created authority, and was also a lord’s “gift” to his people and retainers, according to Mauss’ notion of total prestation. An *eorl*’s garnered reputation kept foes out of their holdings, preventing the “slavery and abasement” of their subjects, which is feared by the mourning Geat woman (*Beowulf*, l. 3155). As a counter-gift for this protection, the people were obligated to stay loyal to the *eorl*.

3.2.3 Upholding Law and Order

...þætte Grendel wan
 hwile wið Hroþgar, heteniðas wæg,
 fyrene ond fæhðefela missera,
 singale sæce; sibbe ne wolde
 wið manna hwone mægenes Deniga,
 feorhbealo feorran, fea þingian,
 ne þær nænig witenan wenan þorfte
 beorhtre bote to banan folmum

*Sad lays were sung about the beset king,
 The vicious raids of Grendel,
 His long and unrelenting feud,
 Nothing but war; how he would never
 Parley or make peace with any Dane
 Nor stop his death-dealing nor pay the death-price
 No counsellor could ever expect
 Fair reparation from those rabid hands.*

- *Beowulf* (l. 151–8)

As described in chapter 2.4, wergild was an important part of Anglo-Saxon legal system for a large part of the period. It was intimately connected to the idea of blood vengeance and feuds, archaic traditions which are very much alive in the world of heroic poetry. The collection of wergild was usually the duty of the slain/injured person's kinfolk, but – especially in the late Anglo-Saxon era – they could also appeal to the king or royal officers for distribution of justice (Mitchell 1995, 110, 203). Thus, lords would have to be powerful enough to collect wergild for both themselves and their subjects. In other words, a lord had to be able to enforce laws through violence if needed.

A lord has to possess this quality. It gives legitimacy to his/her rule and imbues him/her with authority. Therefore, Beowulf has to kill the dragon threatening his people, and Byrhtnoth and Aethelstan must wage war against the invaders that are ravaging their land and threatening their source of wealth and gifts. They must prove themselves worthy of their titles, and prove that they are truly *eorls*.

In heroic poetry, the enemies threatening harmonious societies are often inhuman forces of nature hateful to mankind. This is especially true in *Beowulf*: Grendel, Grendel's mother, and the dragon are all chaotic, primordial beings spawned from mires and long-forgotten earth mounds. Beowulf fights and defeats them all, protecting the people from their rampage, and forcing them to pay for their depredations by taking both their lives and treasures as compensation. It is also notable that Grendel and his mother are descendants of Cain, the biblical brother-slayer, whom the poet's Christian audience might perhaps perceive as the world's first criminal.

In *Maldon*, the Vikings are certainly human enough, but they remain a faceless and nameless swarm. Robinson argues that "...the poet has been careful to portray the

Vikings as anonymous rather than hateful.” (1993, 128), and that the euphemism *waelwulfas* (‘war-wolves’, ‘wolves of slaughter’) is used to make them seem like a destructive, primal force. Even the Viking messenger’s speech is more of a challenge to the Anglo-Saxon army’s courage and unity, and Byrhtnoth’s worth as an *eorl*, than a real dialogue attempt. Thus, Byrhtnoht is fighting against forces of nature and discord that threaten to ravage their society. He is fighting lawlessness itself.

An *eorl* did not bargain when facing the dangers that threatened his/her society and authority. Byrhtnoth adamantly refuses the Viking messenger’s demand for tribute, and Beowulf almost cheerfully announces to Hrothgar that “it is always better to avenge dear ones than to indulge in mourning” (*Beowulf*, l. 1384–5). *Eorls* had to enforce their rule and power upon wrongdoers with the sword’s edge, and in doing so prove their right to rule the people and pass judgement amongst them.

3.2.4 The Importance of Being *Eorl*

*Pa wæs Hroðgare heresped gyfen,
wiges weorðmynd, þæt him his winemgas
georne hyrdon, oðð þæt seo geogoð geweox,
magodriht micel. Him on mod bearn,
þæt healreced hatan wolde,
medoærn micel men gewyrcean
þonne yldo bearn æfre gefrunon,
ond þær on innan eall gedæla
geongum ond ealdum...*

*The fortunes of war favoured Hrothgar.
Friends and kinsmen flocked to his ranks,
Young followers, a force that grew
To be a mighty army. So his mind turned
To hall-building: he handed down orders
For men to work on a great mead-hall
Meant to be a wonder of the world forever;
It would be his throne-room and there he would dispense
His God-given goods to young and old.*

- *Beowulf* (l. 64–72)

Defending the people was an *eorl*’s key duty. This could be accomplished by various means: by conquering one’s enemies, by retaining a loyal *heorthwerod* by standing among them in battle, and by building fame that overawed enemies into staying clear of an *eorl*’s kingdom. All these feats were achieved through courage and force of arms. The *Beowulf* poet gives Hrothgar the pseudonym *Helm Scyldinga*, “Helmet of

the Scyldings”, which certainly underlines a lord’s duty to protect his people. A true lord simply could not be only a diplomat and/or an administrator: a *beahgifa*. He was required to fight for his glory, the law and the people, or otherwise the chaotic forces rampant in heroic poetry – the Grendels and Vikings of the world – would tear his realm apart. He had to also be an *eorl*.

In *Beowulf* and *Brunanburh*, warriorhood is an especially kingly quality, which is passed on in royal blood. *Beowulf* begins with a description of Scyld’s deeds, and proceeds to illustrate his lineage, who have kept the Danes safe by being “battle-hardened” and “swift in battle”. The *Brunanburh* poet describes the victorious

Wessex brothers in the following quote (*Battle of Brunanburh*, l. 5–10):

<p><i>...Bordweal clufan, heowan heapolinde hamora lafan, afaran Eadweardes swa him geæpele was from cneomægum þæt hi æt campe oft wiþ lapra gehwæneland ealgodon, hord ond hamas...</i></p>	<p><i>They clove the shieldwall, hammers’ leavings hewed the war-linden – the scions of Edward as it was natural for them from ancestry, that in warfare they often protected the land against every foe, their hoard and homes.</i></p>
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As can be seen in the above lines, Aethelstan and Edmund are also defenders of their *hord* (“hoard”) in addition to their land and people. This is an exceedingly important distinction. Without a well-protected hoard, a lord could not distribute gifts and be a *beahgifa*; without gifts, a lord could never truly possess power or claim the authority to have it. Indeed, the lord’s authority as a ruler has already been besmirched by his/her inability to protect the ring-hoard.

Thus happens to Hrothgar. Like Heremod mentioned in the *beahgifa* section, he is the warning example of a ruler who fails to follow the heroic rules of lordship. Grendel and his mother kill Hrothgar’s retainers, and his authority is not enough to make the monstrous lawgivers yield rightful wergild, nor is Ingeld fearful enough of his power to not pursue the Danes-Heathobard blood feud. In the end, Hrothgar’s descendants practice kinslaughter and drive the Danish realm into intra-tribal warfare.

I argue that in failing to thwart the two monsters Hrothgar has not only betrayed his followers, but also the whole Scylding lineage, whose warlike deeds are recited at the beginning of the poem. His queen Wealththeow is forced to plead Beowulf for help in securing the heritage of Hrothgar's sons against their ambitious enemies, for his line is unable to thrive anymore without the aid of Beowulf, the true *eorl*.

Participating in warfare is manipulation of sorts. By enforcing one's status as an *eorl*, a lord was playing with imagery. He needed victory, and the fame associated with victory. Young Hrothgar attracts followers through his military success, which allows him to build the golden-roofed Heorot. A lord's reputation also had to inspire enough fear and respect in would-be criminals and personal enemies, so that they dared not oppose his rule in any manner whatsoever. Beowulf succeeds in that, since human enemies are only about to descend upon the Geats *after* his death. On the other hand, Hrothgar and his heirs are shown as continuously failing to follow in the footsteps of their warrior-ancestor, and their realm falls prey to monsters, enemy clans and internal intrigue. Though wealthy kings of a mighty tribe, the Scyldings cannot uphold laws through force and intimidation, and thus chaos and strife seems to always be at their doorstep.

While *beahgifa* is a status that is more often praised in heroic poetry, no lord could truly be one without being an *eorl* as well. The ring-hoard and the mead hall had to be protected, so *symbol*s could be held and gifts distributed to deserving retainers. Since gifts and the ritualistic *symbol* as a showcase of a lord's power and authority were of utmost importance in the heroic power structure, their security simply could not be overlooked. Thus, by being an *eorl* a lord both builds and secures the wealth and loyal followers that make being a *beahgifa* possible. That is exactly what Scyld and the young Hrothgar – whose rise to power is described in the quote at

the beginning of this chapter – succeeded in doing. However, Hrothgar fails to live up to his warrior past as Grendel’s assault strips him of both his power and his authority.

3.2.5 Lord as the Bulwark of Society

*Higum unrote
modceare mændon, mondryhtnes cwealm;
æfter Biowulfe bundenheorde
swylce giomorgyd Geatisc meowle
song sorgcearig swiðe geneahhe
þæt hio hyre heofungdagas hearde ondrede,
wælfylla worn, werudes egesan,
hynðo ond hæftnyd. Heofon rece swealg.*

*They were disconsolate
and wailed aloud for their lord’s decease.
A Geat woman too sang out in grief;
with hair bound up, she unburdened herself
of her worst fears, a wild litany
of nightmare and lament; her nation invaded,
enemies on the rampage, bodies in piles,
slavery and abasement. Heaven swallowed the smoke.*

- *Beowulf* (l. 3148–55)

In heroic poetry, a lord who could perform both the roles of a *beahgifa* and an *eorl* was seen as the pillar that held up the whole Anglo-Saxon world. Although the focus of my thesis is on the upper classes and life in the mead hall, both *Beowulf* and *Maldon* picture the value of loyalty and a functioning power structure from the whole society’s viewpoint. This was an important part of the heroic power structure, since the idea of a country’s/tribe’s fate being dependent on the people’s loyalty to their lords certainly reinforced the lords’ hold over their people.

Both texts show how a community begins to fall apart because of disloyalty. Exemplary lords like Beowulf and Byrhtnoth are the glue which holds the society together – they shield their people from violence and anarchy, and it is their demise which unleashes the forces of chaos upon mankind. As stated in the *eorl* section, both the monsters in *Beowulf* and the Viking horde in *Maldon* represent disorder and lawlessness.

Both Beowulf’s and Byrhtnoth’s deaths could be classified as results of overconfidence, which was a typical hamartia in heroic literature. Still, Beowulf’s fate can at least partially be attributed to the cowardice and disloyalty of his *heorthwerod*,

who abandon their lord in his time of need. His only help comes from his kinsman Wiglaf, who severely chastises the routed members of Beowulf's *heothwerod*, and also partially blames them for the Geatish kingdom's grim future (*Beowulf*, l. 2864–72):

<i>þæt, la, mæg secgan se ðe wyle soð specan</i>	<i>Anyone ready to admit the truth</i>
<i>þæt se mondryhten se eow ða maðmas geaf,</i>	<i>will surely realize that the lord of men</i>
<i>eoredgeatwe, þe ge þær on standað,</i>	<i>who showered you with gifts and gave you the armor</i>
<i>þonne he on ealubence oft gesealde</i>	<i>you are standing in –when he would distribute</i>
<i>healsittendum helm ond byrnan,</i>	<i>helmets and mail-shirts to men in the mead-benches,</i>
<i>þeoden his þegnum, swylce he þrydlicost</i>	<i>a prince treating his thanes in the hall</i>
<i>ower feor oððe neah findan meahte,</i>	<i>to the best he could find, far or near-</i>
<i>þæt he genunga guðgewædu</i>	<i>was throwing weapons uselessly away.</i>
<i>wraðe forwurpe, ða hyne wig beget.</i>	<i>It would be a sad waste when the war broke out.</i>

The cowardly *heorthgeneats* have failed their duty to their lord, and thus caused the downfall of order. Wiglaf recalls the various enemies of the Geatish people in his grim soothsaying of the doom that awaits them, in the anarchy and unrest that the multitude of vengeful Franks, Frisians and Swedes embody (*Beowulf*, l. 2911–23). This bleak and hopeless image is intensified by the grieving of the Geats – not only the warriors, but women and *ceorls* as well – before the funeral pyre of Beowulf, which is described in the quote at the beginning of this chapter.

A similar phenomenon is present in *The Battle of Maldon* as well. Byrthnoth's death may be blamed on the Vikings, but the responsibility of the final defeat is heaped on the shoulders of deserters. *Maldon*, according to Robinson, can be seen as representing the fall of the whole society because of the abandonment of the ideal of loyalty. However, the vision of a community's breakdown is achieved through the use of metaphor rather than fatalistic prophecies. This metaphor is the Anglo-Saxon shield-wall, where men protect both themselves and their comrades by linking their shields together, depicting the unity of their community. Robinson argues that "...twice we are told how it was broken by the disloyal retreat of the cowards (l. 193–

195, 241–242). The coward’s disloyalty not only severs the bond of love between men and their leaders; it also disrupts the bonds between men and men and reduces a harmonious community to primitive anarchy.” (1993, 121) These arguments would also support a view that it was actually the deserters’ disrespect of mutual obligations and moral codes rather than Byrhtnoth’s *ofermod* which resulted in the Anglo-Saxon defeat. Byrhtnoth’s and Beowulf’s subjects had an obligation to protect their lord, and thus simultaneously defend themselves and their families, but in failing to do so they have failed the whole realm.

3.2.6 The Case of Hengest

*Swa he ne forwyrnde weorodrædende,
þonne him Hunlafing hildeleoman,
billa selest on bearm dyde;
þæs wæron mid Eotenum ecge cuðe.*

*So he did not balk
Once Hunlafing placed on his lap
Dazzle-the-Duel, the best sword of all,
Whose edge Jutes knew only too well.*

- *Beowulf* (l. 1142–5)

As was mentioned in chapter 2.3, the authority of a true lord lingered on after death, forcing followers to do their utmost to avenge their dead master. In *Maldon* this is done through straightforward deeds in the field of battle, but the case of Hengest the Renegade is more complicated. Tolkien argues in *Finn and Hengest* that Hengest is never exactly depicted as swearing fealty to his lord’s killer, but is more akin to a guest or hostage in Finn’s court. However, the quote “Finn, son of Focwald, should honour the Danes, bestow with an even hand to Hengest and Hengest’s men the wrought gold-rings, bounty to match the measure he gave his own Frisians...” (*Beowulf*, l. 1089–93) and the fact they were promised “honor and status” (*Beowulf*, 1098) hint that Hengest and his companions were formally adopted as parts of Finn’s household.

This would make Hengest doubly a traitor, both for accepting Finn's peace offer and for later betraying him. He does not only violate the code of the *heorthgeneat*, but also breaks the law of hospitality by killing Finn in his own hall while being a guest there. Although the poem does not exactly redeem Hengest in a decidedly apparent way, it should be noted that the tale of this Danish warrior is told in the hall of Hrothgar, the king of the Danes, and certainly the phrase "The hall ran red with blood of enemies. Finn was cut down, the queen brought away... Over sealandes then back to Daneland the warrior-troops bore that lady home" (*Beowulf*, l. 1152–8)) is a fairly clear indication of the poet's favouritism. The inevitable conclusion is that Hengest is actually being applauded for breaking nearly every Anglo-Saxon code of conduct.

The quote at the beginning of this chapter also illustrates that Hengest is actually being driven by honour rather than baser motives to kill Finn. Hunlafing, presumably another "renegade", places a prestigious sword on Hengest's lap to remind him of his duty to avenge Hnaef. This is a similar situation to lines 2030–70, where a young warrior is persuaded by an old spearman to kill his father's murderer with a reference to the youth's father's sword. As mentioned in the *beahgifa* section, inanimate objects carry great weight in heroic poetry, and in these cases they represent the ties that bind warriors to their lords (in case of Hengest) and kin (in case of the Heathobard youth).

Hengest's deeds are a reminder of the authority of his dead lord, Hnaef, who is briefly encountered in the *Finnesburh* fragment as a vigorous warrior-king who fights side by side with his warriors, and for whose mead his retainers make an unparalleled recompense (*Finnesburh*, l. 37–40). In other words, he is both an *eorl* and a *beahgifa*, a true lord to whom Hengest is bound even beyond death. Hnaef's authority forces

Hengest to avenge him, even though it requires committing extremely serious crimes. Hengest's relations to Finn, on the other hand, is translated by Heaney as "forced allegiance", which is certainly not a true lord-warrior bond. Finn does not deserve Hengest's loyalty the same way as Hnaef does. Hengest is therefore only doing the same thing as Byrhtnoth's warriors: fighting for his lord even after the lord's death.

3.3 Female Power

<p><i>Hygd swiðe geong, wis, welþungen, þeah ðe wintra lyt under burhlocan gebiden hæbbe, Hæreþes dohtor; næs hio hnah swa þeah, ne to gneað gifa Geata leodum, maþmgestreona.</i></p>	<p><i>Although Hygd, his queen, Was young, a few short years at court, Her mind was thoughtful and her manners sure. Haereth's daughter behaved generously And stinted nothing when she distributed Bounty to the Geats.</i></p>
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- *Beowulf* (l. 1926–31)

In heroic poetry, women are often reduced to wives and companions of lords, rather than rulers in their own right. No ruling *cwenes* are recorded in *Beowulf*, *Maldon* or *Brunanburh*, and of these three only *Beowulf* contains female characters at all. In *Beowulf*, the queen's role is supportive rather than dominant, but we do see Wealhtheow wield authority and participate in state matters. Female power did not usually possess the *eorl* aspect of rulership, since women very rarely participated in battles, and thus could not command similar loyalty from their warriors. However, exceptions did exist, both in poetry and history.

Kathleen Herbert, in her book *Peace-Weavers and Shield Maidens: Women in Early English Society*, divides female roles into Peace-Weavers and Shield Maidens (with individual variations). They are somewhat similar to the concepts of *beahgifa* and *eorl* that I have employed in this thesis, though with marked differences. Female power was often restricted by patriarchal laws and traditions, but women nevertheless

played an important part in the heroic power structure, and thus their roles must be scrutinised further.

3.3.1 Women as Peace-Weavers

<i>Ne bið swylc cwenlic þeaw idese to efnanne, þeah ðe hio ænlicu sy, þætte freoðuwebbe feores onsæc æfter ligetorne leofne mannan.</i>	<i>Even a queen outstanding in beauty Must not overstep like that. A queen should weave peace, not punish the innocent With loss of life for imagines insults.</i>
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- *Beowulf* (l. 1940–3)

This is a far more common concept in heroic poetry, especially in *Beowulf*, where it is embodied by every named female character in the poem (Grendel’s mother remains nameless). The peace-weaver concept possesses both active and passive roles, but its importance in regards to power structure is similar to *beahgifa*: the maintenance of an orderly, harmonious mead-hall and society was the main responsibility of a peace-weaver.

In *Beowulf*, Hildeburh and Freawaru are “passive” peace-weavers. They are married off to foreign lords in order to improve relations, and in this regard they can be considered to be “gifts” rather than actual participants in the peace-making process. When peace between Danes and Frisians is broken, Hengest and his warriors carry Hildeburh back to Dane-land, reclaiming the gift to Finn. In this case, women are reduced to tools rather than active participants in the medieval power structure.

Wealhtheow, Hygd and Mordtryth are active peace-weavers. Wealhtheow hands out the mead cup to the gathered warriors in a strict order, making them compete for her favour as well as her husband’s, since a warrior’s place in the serving order defines his place in the mead-hall’s internal pecking order (Pollington 2006, 39–42). In effect, she is handing out gifts. This makes Wealhtheow an active participant

in the power structure, since gifting is so intimately connected to both individual and regional power patterns. As a queen, she possesses higher rank than the gathered warriors, so they have to repay her gifts with loyalty and battle-prowess, which means very real and tangible power.

Wealhtheow also possesses the authority to issue requests and demands on important guests such as Beowulf. It is she who asks Beowulf to remain an ally to her and Hrothgar's son instead of the king himself, which certainly implies that she possesses considerable authority in external as well as internal political affairs.

Hygd and Mordtryth are used to express the virtues and vices of queens. Hygd, on one hand, is described as an ideal queen, with thoughtful manners and a sure mind. More importantly, she is also depicted as having the right to give gifts to the Geats, which – as stated before – is a sign of power. Mordtryth, on the other hand, is the warning example of a poor peace-weaver. Mordtryth terrorises her realm until she is married off and becomes a passive extension of her new husband, Offa. She does have the authority to torture and execute disfavoured retainers, which shows that Anglo-Saxon noblewomen could possess considerable power over their subjects, even sworn warriors. However, the married Mordtryth's "high devotion to the hero-king" is a clear example of a queen's traditionally subservient role in regards to her husband.

Peace-weaver is a concept steeped in medieval sexism. Enright (1996, 89–90) argues that the queen is a "mother" in the "family" that forms the mead-hall (the king being the "father" and the warriors their "sons"), and in a patriarchal society that inevitably meant a secondary role. Though queens such as Wealhtheow, Hygd and Mordtryth could certainly possess power, they were ultimately regarded their husbands' servants. Much like the warriors that served the lords, peace-weavers were both active participants and passive tools in the power game.

3.3.2 Shield Maidens

*Com þa to Heorote, ðær Hring-Dene
geond þæt sæld swæfun. Þa ðær sona wearð
edhwyrft eorlum, siþðan inne fealh
Grendles modor. Wæs se gryre læssa
efne swa micle, swa bið mægþa cræft,
wiggryre wifes be wæpnedmen*

*She came to Heorot. There, inside the hall,
Danes lay asleep, earls who would soon endure
A great reversal once Grendel's mother
Attacked and entered. Her onslaught was less
Only by as much as an Amazon warrior's
Is less than an armoured man's.*

- *Beowulf* (l. 1279–84)

As is evident in the above quote, the role of the warrior-woman was not utterly alien to Anglo-Saxons. Female warriors known as shield maidens were far more prevalent in Old Norse than Old English poetry, and the word ‘shield maiden’ or ‘shieldmaiden’ does not appear in any Anglo-Saxon heroic poem, but – following Herbert’s distinction – I will employ it in my analysis of Anglo-Saxon warrior women.

Perhaps the best example of an Anglo-Saxon shield maiden comes from fact rather than fiction. Aethelflaed, the daughter of Alfred the Great, was known as *Myrcna hlæfdige* (“Lady of the Mercians”), and she both ruled her realm and defended it from Viking incursions after her husband’s death (Mitchell 1995, 211–212). It is thus evident that Anglo-Saxon females could exercise power in the same way as men did, although that was rarely the case in heroic poetry.

Fairly few women actually participate in outright violence in heroic poetry, especially if we do not take Mordtryth into consideration, who orders violence to be done in her name rather than actually carrying out the deeds herself. Grendel’s mother and Judith are the only female characters who wield weapons of war and actually engage in violence. Both, however, have an active part in the Anglo-Saxon power structure. Grendel’s mother is carrying out the family obligation to collect wergild for her slain son – a duty which usually fell to dominant male family members. She is thus protecting her family’s power and prestige, and acting as the family chieftain.

Judith does even more than that. She not only kills a mortal enemy, but is actually depicted as leading the Israelites to battle, and the victorious warriors afterwards bring the gained battle-booty to her. This is an important distinction, since she is thus acknowledged as the leader of the war-band, and the warriors are effectively treating her as their lord. She is acting both as an *eorl* and a *beahgifa*, which is the foundation of power.

Violent way to power was thus in theory open for women, but it was very rarely taken. Anglo-Saxon society was a warlike one, and power had to be protected by strength of arms, and thus warrior women like Judith and Aethelflaed could actually achieve real power instead of being extensions of their husbands' authority. Nevertheless, peace-weavers by far outnumber shield maidens in heroic poetry, and the virtues of humble servitude and wise counsel are praised in women instead of courage or strength. However, fighting women are never stigmatised as especially unnatural or unwomanly in heroic poetry. The role of the shield maiden was assumed rarely, but it was certainly possible for those who dared to challenge the norms – both in poetry and in reality.

4. Conclusion

*þone ðe ær geheold
wið hettendum hord ond rice
æfter hæleða hryre, hwate Scildingas,
folcred fremede oððe furður gen
eorlscipe efnde.*

*In days gone by when our warriors fell
and we were undefended he kept our coffers
and our kingdom safe. He worked for the
people, but as well as that he behaved like
a hero.*

- *Beowulf* (l. 3003–7)

God cyning. These words are used twice in *Beowulf*, and being praised thus was the ultimate goal of an Anglo-Saxon lord. Assuming suitable imagery was an integral part of lordship in heroic poetry, and being given honorifics such as *beahgifa*, *eorl* and *god cyning* were important parts of retaining and using power. A lord had to be able to present himself as a semi-divine figure, who embodied both sides of lordship, for he could never hold on to his throne (or “gift-seat”, as it was sometimes called) if he lacked in either aspect. More importantly, law and order could not be upheld unless a true lord was in power. A harmonious society needed one, and the people had to stay loyal to their ideal ruler, or everything would succumb to the chaos that was often rampant in the turbulent Early Middle Ages.

Wealth was – as it often still is – the cornerstone of power. The distribution of material riches to the right people was an essential part of power, since it both reinforced the lord’s image as a rightful ruler and retained the ever-important gift current, upon which the ties of obedience and authority were based. This was done in a ritualistic fashion in the mead-hall, in a grand ceremony in which everyone played their part. These showcases of power and authority, as well as the gifts being distributed there, gave both the material and illusionary means for wielding power over warriors and other nobles. Generosity was equated with wisdom in heroic poetry, and thus open-handedness gave authority, by signifying that the lord in question could rule fairly and competently over the people.

Medieval reality, however, rarely accommodated lords who tried to retain power through purely administrative means. The Early Middle Ages could be very violent and unpredictable. The role of royalty and nobility reflected that atmosphere, and Anglo-Saxon aristocrats had to be leaders in war as well as peace; moreover, they were expected to be actually present in the fighting rather than leading from the rear echelon. They had to defend their people and earn fame as a warlord in doing so. By protecting the land a lord earned the right (and authority) to rule it, and could present himself as a true leader of his people. With a safe realm, the feasts and gift-distributions that cemented a lord's power could go on undisturbed, and disorder would be held at bay.

It cannot be stressed enough that power relied on image-crafting. A lord had to earn fame as both a gift-giver and a warlord, and could never be successful if lacking in either one. If the lord possessed both qualities, he/she was regarded as the centre of society on which *everything* relied. If subjects failed in their duties to the exemplary lord, the lord fell. If the lord fell, so did the realm and its people. Thus subjects were beholden to their leader's ideal qualities rather than to the lordly rank itself, and could expect only death and doom if they refused to obey a ruler who had proven his/her worth. A society simply could not exist without its lord.

Beowulf ends in a praise of the eponymous character's kingly virtues, which include both ideal lordly qualities (*Beowulf*, l. 3178–82):

*Swa begnornodon Geata leode
hlafordes hryre, heorðgeneatas,
cwædon þæt he wære wyruldcyniga
manna mildust ond monðwærust,
leodum liðost ond lofgeornost.*

*So the Geat people, his hearth companions,
Sorrowed for the lord who had been laid low.
They said that of all the kings upon the earth
He was the man most gracious and fair-minded,
Kindest to his people and keenest to win fame.*

Most importantly, Beowulf desired fame, for the construction of the required imagery needed fame as both *eorl* and *beahgifa*. Anglo-Saxon poetry is full of euphemisms used to praise successful lords, but they should never be perceived as simple poetical flourishes. Those words have a very tangible meaning, for they are signifiers of power, both in life and death.

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