

The Vow

A leaf of an eighth-century gospel book housed in Hereford cathedral preserves a summary of a legal dispute dating from a little less than 1,000 years ago. Written in the blank space immediately after the final words of John's Gospel, it relates how six prominent officials, including Hereford's Bishop Athelstan, Thurkil the White, and Cnut's royal representative Tofi the Proud, convened a shire court in the town of Aylestone, which was attended by "all the thanes of Herefordshire" (*Reader* p. 57, lines 7–8). The shire courts were seasonal gatherings that conducted and validated various legal procedures such as the transfer of property, but they were also occasions where one citizen could lodge a formal charge against another. Such an action, if contested, would begin a legal drama in which each party would assemble supporters to take oaths affirming the reputation of the claimant or defendant. On this occasion a man named Edwin came forward and made a claim against his mother for a piece of land. Because the mother was not there to speak for herself and because Thurkil the White, who as her relative might have stepped out of his judicial role to represent her interests, knew nothing of the case, the court dispatched three thanes to Edwin's mother to inquire about her son's claim on the land. The account continues:

And when they came to her, they asked her what was her case concerning the land that her son was claiming. Then she said that she had no land that belonged in any way to him, and she became extremely angry with her son, and called to her kinswoman, Leofflæd, the wife of Thurkil the White, and spoke to her in front of them: "Here sits my

kinswoman Leofflæd, to whom after my death I grant my land and my gold and my clothing and my garments and everything that I possess." And then she said to the thanes: "Act well like thanes and announce my message to the meeting before all the good people, and inform them to whom I have granted my land and all my possessions, and to my own son nothing at all; and ask them to be witness of this." (lines 16–28)

After the thanes returned and repeated her words to the court, Thurkil the White rose up and "asked all the thanes to grant his wife the lands which her kinswoman had granted her clear from any other claim, and they did so" (lines 31–2). Thurkil then rode to Hereford cathedral and had the account recorded in the gospel book. Because it is a relatively rare account of an actual legal proceeding it has attracted a great deal of attention. It gives a glimpse into a woman's legal rights to possess and dispose of property independently of her male relatives, and even to bequeath it to a woman outside the immediate family. It also records a fascinating human vignette, a family drama where even now, almost 1,000 years later, we can imagine the mother's fury over her son's underhanded maneuver to gain control of her property.

It is a stroke of luck that this account survives, because the Anglo-Saxon legal world was primarily an oral one, in which cases were rarely transcribed, and those few that were written down lack what we might consider basic legal conventions. Despite the existence of a fairly large corpus of written law that began to accumulate as early as c.600 CE, no legal decision in all the centuries of Anglo-Saxon England cites or quotes an existing statute.¹ Apparently, the law codes were not applied to specific cases. Instead they had a more symbolic function. Aside from some ecclesiastical centers that preserved charters and other documents out of self-interest, there were no public archives to file away legal documents. It may seem surprising to us today that something as ephemeral as a spoken utterance, even one made with elaborate formalities in front of witnesses, would serve to affirm and publicize a legal transaction. We owe the Herefordshire account's survival to the unusual efforts made by Thurkil to put it in writing and his choice to use a book that stood a good chance of surviving the centuries because of its sacred content. (The gospel book remains in the Hereford cathedral library to this day.) If Thurkil chose to write on almost anything else, it likely would have disappeared in the intervening years. Whether it survived or not, however, his summary

A charter from early eleventh-century Herefordshire copied after the end of the Gospel of John in the Hereford Gospel Book. Note the difference in the writing between the eighth-century Latin (insular majuscule) and below it the eleventh-century Old English (Anglo-Saxon minuscule). Hereford Gospel Book, Cathedral P.i.2, from Hereford Cathedral Library.

itself had no legal status; it could only have functioned as a reminder of the transaction confirmed by the shire court.

Thurkil's account, in fact, refers to not one but three legal transactions. The first is Edwin's original suit against his mother, which the court presumably dismissed in the end. In any case the written record has nothing more to say about it. The second is the woman's declaration in front of the three thanes that after her death her possessions will go to Leofflæd. This private declaration might have been enough for most personal wills, but to secure her decision, she enjoins the men to "act well like thanes" (*Doð þegnlice and wel*) and to petition the shire court to add their collective witness on her behalf. The court then ratifies her will, which becomes the third transaction. The additional steps taken by Thurkil and Leofflæd's kinswoman hint of a lingering worry that her son Edwin might later try more devious means to gain control of the land. Thus she asks the court to ratify her will when "all the thanes of Herefordshire" are there to witness it, and thus Thurkil takes the otherwise superfluous step of writing it down.

The primacy of the oral utterance is reflected even in the very wording of Thurkil's account, which quotes the woman verbatim: "'Here sits my kinswoman Leofflæd, to whom after my death I grant . . .'" (line 21). The use of direct speech emphasizes the crucial importance of her exact words, uttered in front of witnesses. It reminds us today that the oral culture of Anglo-Saxon England valued and depended upon the precise memory of spoken words to a far greater degree than today's more literate culture. Modern Western societies tend to think of literacy as superior and consider its privileged state as a measure of civilization. Especially in legalistic matters written documents have a primacy: "Put it in writing!" is a call for accountability. Literacy does bring many advantages, to be sure, such as my ability to write this book and your ability to read it at some indefinite remove over time and space. Yet just as Anglo-Saxon England, though largely an oral culture, made use of literacy, modern societies still depend to an impressive degree on oral utterances, as will be discussed below. And more to the point, oral societies have their own complexities and subtleties, which can take some effort for us to comprehend.

This chapter explores how formal utterances function as both a theme and at times a condition for the very existence of Old English literature. It will focus on vows such as a hero's boast or a lover's promise as particularly potent instances of what has come to be called

a speech act. There is a danger, however, of overridealizing Anglo-Saxon speech acts as we reconstruct them from oblique historical references and imaginative literature. The account of the family dispute in Herefordshire, for example, seems like a resounding legal victory for the woman in question. But was she or Thurkil manipulating the system? Did she really have a better claim to the land than her son? We cannot know. Even assuming her claim was valid it is curious and a little disquieting that the written account never mentions her name. It may be an oversight, especially if Thurkil had it entered in some haste, but if so the oversight itself reminds us that women, even those with enough status and wealth to dispose of property, were still second-class citizens in Anglo-Saxon England. No women seem to be present at the shire meeting if we take the “thanes of Herefordshire” literally, yet Leofflæd and her kinswoman were apparently nearby, close enough for the three thanes to complete their round trip while the court was still in session. Moreover, within a few years of this date the land in question is listed as belonging to the clergy of Hereford and to Thurkil, not his wife Leofflæd.² Even stripped of any lingering nostalgic idealization, however, the Herefordshire account dramatizes how Anglo-Saxon society depended on the efficacy of the spoken word.

Writing a short time before the events in Herefordshire, Archbishop Wulfstan (d. 1023), the leading statesman and legislator of his day, circulated a homily to be read throughout England. Known by its Latin name, *Sermo Lupi ad Anglos*, or “The Sermon of Wolf to the English,” it was composed in the rhythmic cadences that we still associate with oral delivery in English. For most of its length it itemizes the outrages that the Anglo-Saxons have perpetrated at every level of society, which God has punished by allowing the invading Vikings to inflict even worse crimes on them. The crimes include various kinds of violence such as murder, rape, mutilation, the desecration of churches, and enslavement, as will be discussed in a later chapter. But Wulfstan singles out for special execration a specific class of non-violent crimes: failing to keep one’s word. “Also we know well,” he thunders in one passage,

where that wretched deed has happened that a father has sold his son for a price, and a son his mother, and one brother has sold another into the control of foreigners. And all these are great and terrible deeds, let him understand who will. And yet what harms this people is still greater

and even more manifold [*mare and eac mænigfealdre*]: many are forsworn and greatly perjured [*forsworene and swyðe forlogene*], and pledges [*wed*] are broken again and again. (*Reader* p. 89, lines 88–94)

As horrible as it is for one family member to sell another into slavery, what cuts even deeper into the fabric of society is the widespread loss of trust in the spoken word. If forced today to rank the two kinds of crimes, we would be more outraged at the enslavement of family, which strikes us as a betrayal of the most basic values. The breaking of pledges seems distinctly less horrible, even trivial in today's more cynical age where public officials can "retract" promises in response to focus groups and news cycles. What is a broken pledge, we might ask, in comparison with handing mom and dad over to slave traders? Yet to Wulfstan the bond of the spoken word was the *only* glue that held society together. His *Sermo* ends with several exhortations to "keep carefully oath and pledge [*að and wed*], and have some loyalty [*getrywða*] between us without deceit."³

Wulfstan's slightly older contemporary, the abbot and homilist Ælfric of Eynsham (c.945–c.1010), expresses quite similar sentiments in an unfinished letter concerning the responsibilities of King Æthelred's subjects to defend the kingdom. Defending Æthelred (978–1016) from criticism that he did not personally lead the English armies into battle, Ælfric compiles examples from history to show how successful kings have delegated military authority to their generals. But the letter ends in mid-argument at a passage poised to turn in a new direction urging its audience to keep fidelity to the spoken word. Ælfric plays off the closeness in sound and meaning of the noun *behat* ("promise, vow") and the verb *behatan* to make a point about the sacredness of vows: *we sceolon . . . on eornost sprecan, þæt ure behat beon þe we behatað Gode fæste and getreowe, trumran þonne stanweall*. It is worthwhile to translate the larger passage from which this excerpt is taken:

Our guidance and our defense must be from God, and we must seek from God himself our counsel with resolute mind, and speak earnestly so that our vows [*behat*] that we vow [*behatað*] to God will be firm and true [*getreowe*], stronger than a stone wall, because God is truth, and he loves truth, and he completely destroys those who speak lies just as it stands written in these Latin words: "*Thou wilt destroy all that speak a lie.*"⁴

The message seems to be not that God helps those who help themselves, but that God helps those who speak the truth (*soð-fæstnyss*) and keep their word. This sentiment is quite close to Wulfstan's although couched in less alarmist language. The implication, even in the letter's unfinished state, is that while Æthelred may be justified in delegating power to his generals, they need to live up to their pledges to support him.

Beginning with the passages from Wulfstan and Ælfric, we can collect a group of Old English words that become a focal point of anxiety about the efficacy of the spoken word, including *að* "oath," *wedd* "pledge," *wær* "treaty, pledge," *treowe* "truth, promise, fidelity," and the group of related words *hatan*, *behatan*, *behat*, all three of which concern a vow or promise. These last three are in turn related to *beot* (a contraction of an earlier form of *be-hat*), which along with *gielp* assumes a prominence as the "heroic boast" in poems like *Beowulf* and *The Battle of Maldon*. But keeping one's word is not just a job for legendary heroes or Ælfric's generals. In other kinds of literature and in Anglo-Saxon society as a whole it becomes a measure of *treowþ* or "troth, good faith, fidelity." It makes the Herefordshire woman's will, the laws, and every other social transaction feasible, from commercial deals to marriage vows, from pledges of political fealty to the clergy's religious vows, from solemn liturgical ceremonies to magical charms (even if churchmen like Wulfstan and Ælfric would never countenance such superstitions).

Such uses of spoken language have come to be categorized as speech acts, in which the uttering of a sentence changes a social relation (for example, "I promise") or personal state (for example, "I believe"). In other words, the saying of something is doing something. Grammatically, the typical speech act uses first person, present tense forms of a verb, although these features are sometimes disguised by constructions that phrase it indirectly. They cannot be said to convey information, at least the kind of information that is susceptible to truth claims. While the Anglo-Saxons had an extensive working knowledge of speech acts, we have no evidence that they ever theorized about them as a special class of language, but they did consider the complications that can arise. Wulfstan's *Sermo* suggests this question: what happens when people break their promises repeatedly? In other words, what happens when someone loses his or her *treowe*?

Even if the spoken utterance preserves the form of the speech act, it might not be received as one by the audience. To use an obvious

example, there is no doubt that after a couple exchanges their vows in a *wedding*, “pledge, betrothal,” they conduct themselves as if their social relation has changed, and indeed the rest of society treats the newlyweds as a new entity. Most modern Western societies lack a corresponding ceremony to *dissolve* a marriage by means of a speech act; that is, “I hereby declare myself divorced from you.” While an early Anglo-Saxon penitential, for instance, allows a woman to repudiate her husband for impotence, it is not clear if she does so orally in front of witnesses. On the other hand the sagas of medieval Iceland dramatize a number of divorces by speech act. In *Njal’s Saga*, for example, Thrain Sigfusson impulsively names witnesses and declares himself divorced from his sharp-tongued wife Thorhild after she lampoons him with verse. It takes place during the feast celebrating the wedding of Gunnar Hamundarson and Hallgerd Hoskuldsdottir, where Thrain has been eyeing the bride’s beautiful daughter Thorgerd. Thrain’s ogling enrages his wife Thorhild, who improvises a couplet to humiliate him in front of the wedding guests: “This gaping is not good, / Your eyes are all agog.” After his impulsive divorce, Thrain just as impulsively asks for Thorgerd’s hand. “I don’t know about that,” says her grandfather Hoskuld. “It seems to me that you have barely parted from the one you had before.”⁵ Nevertheless Thrain’s proposal is accepted, and the wedding turns into a double ceremony. The story is worth contemplating because it highlights the way that society must sanction each speech act (here a divorce or a wedding). Afterwards individuals have to receive it as valid and conduct themselves accordingly. (In the example from *Njal’s Saga* the divorced Thorhild seems to have no recourse: she is no longer married to Thrain.) Ælfric’s and Wulfstan’s anxiety is not the disappearance of pledges and oaths but their widespread untrustworthiness. The two seem to sense an imminent threat that, once it is compromised too far, the whole network of social bonds will collapse on itself.

The Herefordshire woman’s orally declared will before three thanes is a clear instance of a speech act, the core of which is “I grant” and which she enjoins the thanes to repeat word for word to the shire court. Her language thus assumes a substantial form, not in any material sense, but as a linguistic formulation retained in memory and reproduced publicly as an utterance. It is possible to see law as well as countless other activities of Anglo-Saxon society conducted through a vast network sustained by individual memory and oral performance. Because

the spoken word is by nature ephemeral, it is impossible to tell with certainty how the Anglo-Saxons used speech acts, but the imaginative literature they left contains a number of instances, which form the focus of the remainder of this chapter.

Wulf and Eadwacer is one of the most enigmatic yet emotionally compelling lyrics in Old English. Its narrow focus on the speaker's affective response allows only a hint of the larger narrative context, which is very likely a legend once widely known but now lost. A prevalent interpretation holds that the speaker's lover is a man named Wulf, from whom she has been separated by her marriage to Eadwacer. The two men are enemies. The speaker's words constitute a fictional speech act against the man who has married her against her will, but the textual ambiguities remain so pervasive that any reading must be tentative. The ambiguity begins with the first three lines. One possible translation is, "It is for my people as if one gives them a gift [*lac*]. They will serve him [food] if he comes into the company. It is different for us" (*Guide* lines 1–3). Who are her "people"? Who are "us"? And in what way is "it" different? The translation offered here adopts the more neutral or optimistic meaning of several crucial words, but the poem's tone grows increasingly dark until the sixth line reveals "there are bloodthirsty men on that island" where her lover Wulf is. Immediately the second line is repeated, *willað hy hine aþecgan gif he on þreat cymed*, but this time the meaning of the key words becomes more threatening: "They will kill [*literally* consume] him if he comes into the armed troop" (line 7). At this point the audience – or more specifically someone imagined encountering the poem for the first time – may circle back and revise the first line's interpretation in a more ominous direction, because *lac* can mean not only "gift" but also "sacrifice": "It is as if one offers them a sacrifice." The initial ambiguity thus adds to a sense of haunting terror.

After recounting how the "battle-bold one," presumably Eadwacer, took physical possession of her, the speaker turns again to her separation from Wulf, which has made her so distraught that she declares: "Do you hear, Eadwacer? Wulf will carry our wretched whelp to the woods" (line 16). This declaration has the force of a menacing prophecy (that is, "I foretell the death of our child"). Or it could be a veiled curse; that is, an imprecation calling upon higher powers to ensure their child's destruction. In either case her words are not merely

wishful thinking, but a speech act of frightening force, all the more startling because the victim will be the speaker's own child, sacrificed to satisfy an overwhelming urge for vengeance. In the final lines the *giedd* which can be "easily severed" is as polysemous as any word in the poem. Its basic meaning is "song, poem," but it can mean "riddle," "story, narrative," or "speech," and in the context of the poem's multiplying enigmas seems expandable to include any tie that binds the speaker to Eadwacer, even the *giedd* that was once their wedding vows.

Wulf and Eadwacer is one of the few poems which by itself constitutes a fictional speech act. In many more cases speech acts form an imaginative core within a larger fiction. A number of these preserve the focus on the lyrical "I," the introspective voice that articulates a subjective response to a narrative hovering just beyond the audience's reach. The first line of *The Wife's Lament* begins with *ic* ("I") and ends with *geomorre* ("sad"), the inflected ending of which alerts the reader that the speaking "I" is a woman, who relates a *giedd* about herself and her miseries (*Guide* line 1). Like the lyric "I" in *Wulf and Eadwacer*, she tells a story of loss and separation from her *hlaford*, "lord," who may be a lover or her husband. (The name commonly given to the poem, *The Wife's Lament*, is a late Victorian invention with no manuscript authority. As with every other poem discussed in this book, the manuscript gives it no name.) Unlike the other poem's "I," however, she is abandoned on an island, where she must endure her exile, *wræc-siþa*, until she can be reunited with her lord (although this part is not explicit). Her sense of loss is twofold: separation from her *hlaford* and from her homeland. While the poem's vocabulary is full of words of loss and desolation, the emotional weight of her anguish becomes focused on the bleak landscape where she must spend her days alone, where she remembers happier times and imagines lovers elsewhere sharing a bed in the early hours of the morning. While the poem nowhere says that they are married, she refers to her man as *hlaford* and *leod-fruma*, "people's leader," which is consistent with how an Anglo-Saxon wife might refer to her husband. Today our ears are also attuned to the power relation that "lord" implies, which makes it difficult to imagine an amorous relation between an inferior and a superior without the real possibility of exploitation and coercion. However, the Anglo-Saxons turned instinctively to the terms of lordship and service because they conceived those relations to be based primarily

on affection. A passage from *The Wanderer* provides the best-known example: “he embraces and kisses his lord and lays hands and head on his knee” (*Guide* lines 41–2). As discordant as it may seem today, gestures of political fealty provided a basic lexicon for sexual and other kinds of friendship. In today’s English-speaking world, by contrast, the language of emotional and sexual attachment has achieved a primacy, which is available for other areas of discourse to draw from. If the lovers in *The Wife’s Lament* are not married, they at least have exchanged pledges in a way that modulates the hierarchy implied in *hlaford* through a kind of reciprocity signaled by the dual pronouns: “Very often we two [*wit*] promised that nothing else but death would separate us [*unc*]” (21–2). The word used for “promise,” *beotedan*, is part of the word family that includes *behatan* and *beot*, which along with the dual pronouns suggests that the vows were exchanged in an equivalent way.

The Wife’s Lament also contains a surprising construction of the feminine subject in a way that is remarkable, yet little remarked. The clearest instance of this begins in line 15, where the narrator starts to speak of her solitary condition and her *geomor* mind. “Then,” it goes on, “I found for me a very suitable person, ill-fated, sad at heart, with a concealing mind, contemplating violence with a cheerful demeanor” (18–21). Every modern interpretation takes *monnan* “person” to refer to her lover, perhaps because the standard editions usually gloss the word as “man,” which may induce readers mistakenly to assume it cannot refer to the feminine “I.” But *monna*, a variant of the more familiar *mann*, primarily means “person, human being,” with no reference to natural gender. The verb *funde* can mean a variety of things besides “find,” including “imagine, devise, contrive,” and even “invent”; and it can be used reflexively. In short the sentence can refer to the construction of her own identity: “I invented for myself a very suitable person, ill-fated, sad at heart, with a concealing mind, contemplating violence with a cheerful demeanor.” As such the lyric is not only a lament but a fictional self-fashioning contrived as a woman’s response to the most trying social forces. There is nothing in the lines immediately surrounding this sentence to suggest that the *monna* must be her lover/husband, and indeed the passage leading up to it concerns the woman’s own condition. To what extent is the usual interpretation that masculinizes the *mod* (“mind”) motivated by an unacknowledged modern reflex, a misplaced gallantry that

steers violence away from the woman and forecloses the possibility of interpreting it any other way? Murderous thoughts, according to this way of thinking, are unladylike – or as monstrous as Lady Macbeth. But it does not take long to think of violent-minded counterexamples from the period, such as the feminine narrator of *Wulf and Eadwacer*. By constructing itself as the subjective experience of a fictional woman, *The Wife's Lament* not surprisingly gives the audience insight into her emotional and mental state. The same cannot be said of the *hlaford*. We learn about him primarily through the narrator's musings on his external actions: he exchanged vows with her; after the feud arose he put her in a place of safekeeping in an oak grove; then he went into exile. Indeed the only lines that refer to his subjective experience come at the end of the poem, when the narrator imagines her *wine werigmod*, "weary-hearted friend," sitting in lonely exile: "My friend suffers great anxiety; too often he remembers a happier dwelling" (50–2). Yet even this insight into his emotional state is mediated by the female subject.

The narrative transition to her lover's imagined state of mind comes immediately after a second generalization about the interior life of a *geong mon*: "A young person must always be sad-minded, hard-hearted in thought and likewise must have a happy demeanor in addition to anxiety, myriad lasting sorrows" (42–5). Most editions begin a new paragraph with these words (although there is no break in the manuscript), thus marking off the aphorism from the immediately preceding lines, which end with the narrator lamenting "all the longing which seizes me in this life" (41). The deft syntactic transition from the generalized *geong mon* passage to the specific *min freond* ("my friend") makes its application to him beyond doubt, but the aphorism's *exclusive* application to the man may derive (again) from post-medieval assumptions about what emotions are appropriate for a woman. Taken on its own, the sentiment about grief, anxiety, and a dissimulating appearance is not exclusively masculine; its applicability can extend not only to her *freond* (as it clearly does) but also to the lyric "I." Its placement between the passage describing the woman's *mod-cearu* ("heart-grief") and the later lines about her man makes it a middle term that can pivot the imaginative turn from one lover to the other. In light of the equivalence suggested in their exchanged vows, there is something appropriate about the symmetry of the lovers' suffering, even while the narrative springs from the woman's interior life.

The short lyric known as *The Husband's Message* has often been interpreted as a companion piece to *The Wife's Lament*, which precedes it by a few folios in the Exeter Book, a tenth-century manuscript compilation that contains dozens of poems. It is impossible to know whether the two were conceived as a pair or the similarities are fortuitous. However, the correspondences are striking: in both poems the woman is forced into a lonely exile, separated from her beloved because of a feud that has embroiled him. While their situation remains unresolved in *The Wife's Lament*, *The Husband's Message* presents itself as a welcome message carved on a rune stick (see chapter 3 for more on runes), or rather as a double message: on one level the five runic letters in the last lines of the poem convey a cryptic message, but the body of the poem is a more discursive narrative that the stick utters through a rhetorical trope in which an inanimate object is imagined to describe itself in its own voice. (The device is known as prosopopoeia; see the discussion in chapter 3.) It grew up as a species of tree, it begins, but also speaks of itself as an Anglo-Saxon retainer whom its *mon-dryhten* or "lord" has sent as an emissary to the woman: "I dare to promise [*gehatan dear*] that you will find glorious fidelity [*treowe*] there" with her partner (*Introduction* lines 11–12). It conveys the lord's request that she remember the vows (*word-beotunga*, line 15) which they once made and their *freond-scype* (19). The feud is over. He has happily returned to their homeland with treasure, horses, and the pleasures of the mead hall. There is nothing lacking in his good fortune now except her presence, so the messenger stick conveys the lord's request that she sail to him when the song of the cuckoo announces the arrival of spring.

The poem ends with a short passage incorporating the five runic letters ȝ, ƿ, ƿ, ƿ and ƿ (*sigel, rad, ear, wynn and monn*), which seem to be all that the stick has carved on it, but they comprise such an enigmatic combination that their interpretation has inspired a good deal of fruitless scholarly speculation. They cannot be arranged into any pertinent word. The Old English names for the runes can be set in certain configurations as separate words or compounds, but not in a way that makes obvious sense as a message. It is more likely that the runes are the couple's predetermined code with the message "when you see these (arbitrary) runes, you will know it is safe to return home." Even though the speaking "I" identifies itself as the stick, as the poem unfolds the audience realizes that the apparent emotional

depth of the stick's words comes from the woman, who imaginatively displaces her reaction onto it while she reads. Even though the runes signify little more than "come home" on the most literal level, they trigger an elaborate act of reader response in which she projects back onto the stick the painful memory of her exile. Thus the rhetorical device of giving voice to the stick imputes to the runes' opaqueness a fuller story of the couple's past ordeals and their imminent happy resolution. In the fiction imagined through the poem's narrative, the stick and the husband say everything and the woman says nothing. But in effect the entire poem is hers.

When in the poem's final lines the stick announces its five inscribed runes, it does so within the significant context of the couple's earlier speech acts:

Concerning the old vow [*gebeot*] between you two
 I hear 𐌋 together with 𐌒, 𐌖, 𐌗 and 𐌘
 declare an oath [*aðe*]
 that he wished to keep the pledge [*wære*]
 and the vow of friendship [*wine-treowe*] as long as he lived
 which you two often uttered in earlier days.

(49–54)

In a final twist of prosopopoeia, the stick is imagined not only speaking its message, but listening to the runes announce themselves. They orally declare (*benemnan*) themselves as witnesses who confirm by their own oath (*að*) the couple's earlier pledge. The stick expands its role from a simple messenger to a participant in a small legal drama much like that of the Herefordshire woman declaring her will before three thanes, only in this case the stick represents the man's interest and calls on the runes to swear an oath attesting to his *treowe*. While their dramatic speaking and witnessing seem like startling roles for a mute stick etched with five arbitrary letters, the poem can make this move by exploiting a pun on *treow*, a homograph for two Old English words, one of which means "tree" and the other "troth, fidelity." The overlap is not (as with other puns) a mere phonological coincidence because the two senses of *treow* share an Indo-European root meaning "to be firm, solid, steadfast." While the poet could not know of their remote linguistic history, of course, it is faintly possible that the semantic association was perpetuated through the formulaic conservatism of oral poetry. Whatever the level of awareness, however, the

pun linking a tree's physical solidness to the firmness of one's good faith was available because of the identical pronunciation of the two words. The stick announces itself in the first lines as *treo-cyn* who vouches for the *treow* of the man and in the final lines conveys the man's *wine-treow* "vow of friendship." Once the punning associations are clear it is less startling that the carved etchings of a wooden *treow* are given voice as witnesses. Within the fictive world of *The Husband's Message* the stick has traveled a long distance from one lover to the other, and the final lines extend the imagined journey from the physical to the social, from writing in its most palpable form to the shared recollection of their earlier spoken vows.

The Battle of Maldon is one of the few Old English poems that can be assigned even an approximate date, because there is a general consensus it was written within decades after 991, when the battle it commemorates was fought. Although it draws on the specifics of the local geography and personal names, the poem clothes the action with literary conventions that create a general tone of nostalgia for a timeless heroic past – a past that likely never existed in any form quite resembling its conventional expression, much like the mythologized cowboys of the American West. Briefly, it tells the story of Byrhtnoth's heroic defeat in battle against an army of Vikings who had landed at the mouth of the Blackwater River (then called Pante) near the town of Maldon in south-east England. As the "ealdorman" of Essex, Byrhtnoth held one of the most powerful political positions in England after the king, and it would have fallen under his responsibilities to see to the defense of towns like Maldon. The Vikings had set up camp on an island separated by a water channel from the mainland, where Byrhtnoth summoned the local *fyrð* or militia to supplement his own personal retinue that formed the core of the defending force. After an exchange of challenges and a skirmish on the causeway connecting the island to the mainland, Byrhtnoth allowed the Vikings to cross over so that the two armies could begin a pitched battle. During the fighting, as the poem describes it, Byrhtnoth is struck down, some cowards run away, and the Vikings break through the Anglo-Saxons' "shield-wall," which ensures a disastrous defeat. The poem expends most of its rhetorical energy, however, on the heroic conduct of Byrhtnoth and his followers who chose to stay on and fight even after their army's defeat and their own death was assured.

A good deal of perceptive criticism has been written about the Anglo-Saxon heroic ethos as it is exhibited in poems like *The Battle of Maldon*. The *Germania* of the Roman historian Tacitus, completed in 98 CE, provides the starting point and the *locus classicus* for discussions of the *comitatus* (his word, meaning “retinue”) and other aspects of the early Germanic military world. One memorable passage summarizes the dynamic between the chief and his followers:

When battle has been joined, it is shameful for a leader to be surpassed in valour, shameful for his retinue to lag behind. In addition, infamy and lifelong scandal await the man who outlives his leader by retreating from the battle-line: to defend their chief and guard him, to ascribe to his glory their own brave deeds, is their foremost oath. The leaders fight for victory, the retainers for their leaders.⁶

In an obvious, commonsensical way this passage applies to the heroic efforts of Byrhtnoth and his followers in *The Battle of Maldon*, but it helps to give it some perspective by remembering that the late Anglo-Saxon world of Byrhtnoth and King Æthelred, some nine centuries after Tacitus, was far more cosmopolitan than the tribal culture found in the pages of *Germania*.

To be sure Tacitus’ world of honor-bound loyalty finds analogues in earlier centuries of Anglo-Saxon England, most notably the fascinating account recorded in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* for the year 755. It tells the story of a nobleman from a royal family, Cyneheard, whose brother was once the king of Wessex until a rival, Cynewulf, drove him into exile, where he was killed. Cyneheard nursed his urge for vengeance for 30 years until he found the opportunity to ambush King Cynewulf while he was visiting his concubine in the fortified town of Merton. The small raiding party killed Cynewulf after a brave solo fight, and his bodyguard, who were caught shamefully unawares, were also killed one by one as they came rushing out too late to protect their king. Before they were slain, however, Cyneheard offered each of them “treasure and life” if they would switch allegiance and follow him (*Guide* pp. 209–10, lines 19–20). They refused, preferring death with honor. A larger force loyal to the dead Cynewulf soon besieged the usurper Cyneheard within Merton. Cyneheard again offered them money and land if they would accept him as king, and besides, he added, some of your kinsmen are here with me who do not wish to

leave. The besiegers say, in a classic expression, “no kinsman was dearer than [our] lord, and [we] will never follow his killer” (30–2). Nevertheless, they add, any of our kinsmen are free to leave before the fighting begins. The offer is refused. In the ensuing battle Cyneheard and all but one of his force are killed. Even though Cyneheard’s ambush of Cynewulf was politically treacherous, he may have claimed an age-old legal justification to pursue the feud, and the men from both sides behaved honorably according to the ethos described by Tacitus, in which the bonds that tie a warrior to his lord are stronger than kinship and the allure of wealth.

The story of Cynewulf and Cyneheard, with its terse, breathless prose, reads like a tragically honorable exemplum that may or may not reflect the political realities of Wessex in the first half of the eighth century. But the warrior culture in *Germania* is certainly an anachronism by the end of the tenth century, when the population of England was larger, political ties were less personal, and national politics was preoccupied with insurrection from within and military threats from abroad. When King Edward the Martyr was murdered in 978 by Ealdorman Ælfhere of Mercia, the leader of a party supporting Edward’s younger half-brother Æthelred, it was a raw exercise of power politics, a now-familiar *coup d’état* to install a more favorable leader. The new King Æthelred, still a boy of about 10, was a pawn in a powerful struggle between rival political factions. In this world the Germanic chiefs of Tacitus and Cyneheard’s honor-bound personal loyalty were relics of a bygone past. By the late tenth century the dangers to the king were less personal though no less threatening. Something of the change can be sensed in the brief entry for 991 in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, which succinctly puts the battle at Maldon in the context of other events:

In this year Ipswich was ravaged, and very soon afterwards Ealdorman Byrhtnoth was slain at Maldon. In that year the advice was first given that payment should be made to the Danish people because of the great terror they wrought along the coast. It was initially ten thousand pounds. Archbishop Sigeric first gave that advice. (*Guide* p. 213, lines 20–4)

Here the response to the Danes is motivated not by honor but by political expediency, and in fact the policy of paying tribute was no better or worse than others proposed up to that time. Military resistance

had its successes, but it could be ineffective for a number of reasons. The Vikings were formidable fighters and very mobile in their ships. If they found themselves threatened by an English army, they could simply return to their ships and sail to a more advantageous location. Notably absent in the entry for 991 is the name of King Æthelred, who after all was the one who made the decision to give 10,000 pounds of silver (an extraordinarily large sum!) to the Danes. A closer inspection of the precise Old English wording, however, shows that the king's name may not be entirely missing. *Æþel-ræd* was a fairly typical compound that literally means "noble counsel." While the *Chronicle* writer takes care to avoid naming the king, the entry contorts the syntax to use *ræd* in various forms: *And on þam geare man gerædde þæt man geald;* literally, "And in that year one counseled so that one gave." It ends *þæne ræd gerædde Siric arcebiscop*, "That advice advised Archbishop Sigeric." The awkward impersonal constructions using *man* call attention to the absence of the agent responsible for making those decisions, no matter what role Archbishop Sigeric had in the matter. The care that the chronicler takes to use the morpheme *ræd* in three words reminds his audience of the expensive and controversial "counsel" to pay off the Vikings, and the contrived repetition might suggest an ironic twist to the meaning of *Æþel-ræd*. While it might be too dangerous for a chronicler to insult the king directly, we know from later sources that Æthelred was given the nickname *Æthelræd Unræd*, an oxymoron literally meaning "noble counsel, foolish counsel." Why might a chronicler slip in an oblique criticism of the king? As a historical survey of this period summarizes, "Æthelred had one of the longest reigns in English history, 37 years (979–1016), a reign of almost unremitting disaster that has impressed itself on the folk-memory of the English."⁷ These were not happy times.

The *Chronicle* entry for 991 also gives a brief mention of Byrhtnoth's death at *Mældun*, which stands in bleak contrast to the new policy of tribute to the Danes (and in contrast to the poem's fuller treatment of his death). There is little point, however, in reading his *obit* as part of the chronicler's criticism of the king, for two reasons: first, there was no choice but to note the death of someone as prominent as Ealdorman Byrhtnoth in 991, and second, his defeat in battle would support an argument in favor of the king's new policy of paying tribute. If the veteran ealdorman of Essex with a sizeable army cannot defend his own territory from the Vikings, then who can?

Such concerns of a national defense policy, however, are largely absent from *The Battle of Maldon*, the style and tone of which indulge in a poetic nostalgia for an imagined heroic world. Its focus is more local. Yet even as it celebrates the conduct of Byrhtnoth and his followers at the moment of battle, one area where the personal expands into the political is the moral imperative to live up to one's pledges. It helps to remember the exhortations of Wulfstan and Ælfric, who as clerics had a primary concern with the spiritual welfare of the people, but each felt motivated enough by events in the secular world to lament and condemn the erosion of *treowþ*. The sequence of speeches in *The Battle of Maldon*, while echoing the older ethos of loyalty to one's leader and a personal code of honor, becomes a means of addressing the same social crisis as Wulfstan's *Sermo Lupi* and Ælfric's unfinished letter addressed. Their dates of composition in the latter decades of Æthelstan's reign (respectively 1014 and after 1005) make them roughly contemporary to the presumed date of composition for *The Battle of Maldon*.

While the poem is full of memorable passages describing heroic behavior, there is an equal and often overlooked emphasis on speech acts. Because the poem survives only in an eighteenth-century copy (made shortly before the manuscript was destroyed by a fire in 1731), and because it is missing an unknown number of lines from the beginning and end, it is difficult to construct any argument about the overall structure. The first lines, abruptly picking up the middle of a scene concerning the response of (the otherwise unknown) Eadric to the summons to war, announce approvingly that "he fulfilled the boast when he was obliged to fight before his lord" (*Guide* lines 15–16). The two key words here are *gelæstan* "to fulfill, perform," and *beot*, which has been defined variously as "vow, promise, boast, vaunt," a semantic range that helps define a basic part of heroic behavior. *The Dictionary of Old English* gives it the simple definition "vow," but notes that it is disproportionately frequent in poetry and concerns especially a "formal vow of a warrior before battle."⁸

The formal challenge given by the *wicinga ar*, "Vikings' messenger," is the first overt speech act of the poem, and it is delivered *on beot*, "threateningly." The Viking's short speech is a masterpiece of cunning and backhanded diplomacy, which begins by addressing the leader Byrhtnoth using the singular pronoun *þu*, *þe*, then switching to the plural *ge*, *eow* as soon as the subject of tribute is raised.⁹ It is as though

the *wicinga ar* suspects that the local men who make up the *fyrð* are unsure about fighting, which he exploits by suggesting that Byrhtnoth has the most to lose by paying tribute and thus the most to gain by jeopardizing the lives of his soldiers. The messenger also switches to the all-encompassing pronoun *we, us* in the “let’s be reasonable” moment of his speech, in which he laments “there is no need for us to kill each other if you succeed in [gathering tribute],” *Ne þurfe we us spillan gif ge spedað to þam* (34). His rhetorical strategy is to speak past the army’s leader to his assembled foot-soldiers in order to break their resolve. Byrhtnoth’s even more defiant reply uses the very terms of the Viking’s challenge and delivers it as the *folc* speaking with a single voice:

Gehyrst þu, sælida, hwæt þis folc segeð?
 Hi willað eow to gafole garas syllan.
 (Guide 45–6)

Do you hear, sailor, what this *folc* says? They wish to give you spears as tribute.

It is a challenge rolled up in vow, a speech act that Byrhtnoth extends to include everyone from himself down to the free peasants in the ranks of the *fyrð*.

After Byrhtnoth falls early in the fighting and the fortunes of war turn against the soldiers from Essex, several prominent men take flight, whom the poet is careful to name so that their disgrace will be commemorated as long as the poem survives (185–201). The point is not simply that Godric, Godwine, and Godwig ran like cowards but that they broke their promise to support their lord, who had sealed the pledge with the gift of horses (185–97). It was an outcome that Offa at a meeting before the battle had predicted: “many spoke bravely there who later had no wish to suffer in a time of need” (200–1).

Then follows a series of short speeches by men of descending rank who continue fighting even though they know that they will not survive. Ælfwine recalls how “we often spoke at mead-drinking, when in the hall we warriors on the bench raised boasts [*beot*] about hard conflict” (213–14). After proclaiming his family ancestry, he declares that he lost more than others with Byrhtnoth’s death, because “he was both my kinsman and my lord” (224). After Ælfwine, Offa speaks

of the need for warriors to embolden one another in battle (231–43). Next Leofsunu says, “I vow [*gehate*] that I will not flee a foot’s pace but will go forward to avenge my lord [*wine-drihten*] in the conflict” (246–8). Finally Dunnere, a free peasant, gives a simple exhortation on the need to avenge one’s lord without concern for life. After each speech the man goes forward to meet certain death at the hands of the Vikings.

As the fighting continues “Long Edward” (*Eadweard se langa*) speaks vaunting words (*gylp-wordum*, line 273) before he and others advance. So does Offa, who fulfilled what he had promised (*gehet*) his lord as he had vowed (*beotode*) (289–90). The most famous lines of the poem are spoken by Byrhtwold, an old retainer (*eald geneat*), who says:

Hige sceal þe heardra, heorte þe cenre
mod sceal þe mare, þe ure mægen lytlað.
Her lið ure ealdor eall forheawen
god on greote. A mæg gnornian
se ðe nu fram þis wigplegan wendan þenceð.
Ic eom frod feores; fram ic ne wille,
ac ic me be healfe minum hlaforde,
be swa leofan men, licgan þence.

(312–19)

Courage must be firmer, the heart keener, spirit must be greater as our strength dwindles. Here lies our good leader entirely cut down on the dirt. He who intends to turn back now from this battle can always lament it. I am wise in years; I have no wish to leave, but I intend to lie by the side of my lord, by such a beloved man.

Byrhtwold does not call his eloquent speech a *beot*, but it does not need that self-reflexive identification to become a vow; *fram ic ne wille* is enough.

What is being celebrated in the poem? Interestingly, it is not the fighting prowess of the Anglo-Saxons. It is easy to imagine a poem recounting a similar battle where Anglo-Saxons were defeated, but only after slaying large numbers of the Danish force, or one where Byrhtnoth meets his death only after a prolonged fight with a Viking champion (like Hector fighting Achilles). However, *The Battle of Maldon* has a different agenda, in which the manner of the hero’s death is more important than the killing of Vikings. Its account makes the

fighting seem one-sided. Beginning with *Ælfwine* (209), each man's speech is followed by his return to the melee, in which the inevitability of each death seems to go beyond the ambiguous workings of fate; it is almost automatic. *Ælfwine* and some others have modest success in fighting, but for a poem with so many battle scenes the tally of enemy killed is slight (which is to say it may be realistic, but that is not the point). In making its heroes unexceptional fighters, the poem constructs a heroism measured by something other than a body count. It is not that the tenth-century Anglo-Saxons made poor soldiers; the historical record shows they were more than capable on the battlefield. *Byrhtnoth* in particular was a veteran of battles and by some accounts a tall, imposing man, but in the poem even he quickly falls victim. Soon after the fighting begins he receives a spear wound. After he kills the *ceorl* who threw it and a second Viking, he is struck down by another spear, then his arm is injured by a sword, and finally *hæðene scealcas*, "heathen warriors," finish him off (181). It is not even clear who kills him. It does not matter. Even though other sources identify the Viking leader as Olaf Trygvasson, the poem consistently presents the invaders as nameless, faceless killers, especially in the second half of the poem where their brutal efficiency gives them an almost allegorical function as agents of death.

The Battle of Brunanburh is often compared to *Maldon* because both were written shortly after the tenth-century battles they commemorate. But the differences are just as telling, beginning with the length of *Brunanburh*, which is less than one quarter that of *Maldon*, and the happier fortunes of the Anglo-Saxon army. The poem survives in four copies of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* as the entire entry for the year 937, and like a good annals entry it reports the salient facts without digressive embellishment. It announces its business in the first sentence: "In this year King Athelstan, lord of noblemen, ring-giver of warriors, and also his brother prince Edmund, won endless praise with their swords in battle around Brunanburh" (*Eight* lines 58–64). The combined armies from Wessex and Mercia meet an invading force from Dublin led by the Viking King Anlaf (Olaf) and the king of the Scots and Picts, Constantine III. It is an annihilating defeat for the invaders, who (the poem tells us) leave seven earls, five kings, and Constantine's own son among the dead. In describing the carnage, the poem deploys the motif or type-scene that has come to be known as the beasts of battle, the carrion-eaters who will consume the corpses: "the

dark-coated, horned-beak raven [*hræfn*], the dusky-coated white-tailed eagle [*earn*], . . . the greedy war-hawk [*gub-hafoc*], and the gray beast, the wolf [*wulf*] in the forest" (60–5). In *The Battle of Maldon* and most other poems that use the motif, the animals materialize in anticipation of battle either before or while the armies assemble. It is as if the presence of fate (or its personification Fate) is so palpable that even wild beasts can sense it, and it thus becomes a means of testing the heroic resolve of the warriors, who know that many are destined to die. In *Maldon* the relevant lines read: "The time had come that fated persons there had to die. A shout was raised there, ravens circled, the eagle eager for carrion" (104–7).

In *Brunanburh*, however, the beasts of battle become yet another means of reckoning heroism in proportion to the carnage, in contrast to *Maldon*. But the single greatest formal difference from *Maldon* is the absence of direct speech. As with other chronicle entries, the historical distance between the narrative voice and the action it describes discourages certain literary devices such as character development and dialogue, which would be more fitting in an eye-witness account or a fictional re-creation. In any case *The Battle of Brunanburh* has no direct speech and therefore no opportunity for a speech act – that is, none except for a curious passage near the end where "books speak to us," *us secgað bec* (68), as if in a bookish environment like the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* the only witnesses are not humans but other written artifacts. (For a discussion of the complex transmission history of the *Chronicle*, see chapter 5.) Thus, in a personification reminiscent of the talking runes in *The Husband's Message* where a living voice is projected onto mute ciphers, the books ventriloquize a speech act attesting to the truth of the chronicle's claims.

In the large corpus of Old English literature, *Beowulf* is the work most familiar to the general public and the only one likely to be included in college and secondary school survey courses. In the scholarly world it has also been the beneficiary of more books and articles than any other text from the period, for reasons that are partly historical and partly aesthetic. Yet, as well known and studied as it is, there is surprisingly little scholarly consensus about basic matters such as authorship and the date and means of composition. For the purposes of this study I assume it to be the work of a single author who combined a deep familiarity with the Germanic oral poetic tradition with at least

some training in Latin, and who flourished in the eighth century. I also consider it to be a work of breathtaking poetic brilliance, the equal of a “classic” from any period of literature. The discussion that follows examines it from two of many possible perspectives: the vow and (in the next chapter) the hall.

In recent years *Beowulf* has reached an even wider reading public with the commercial success of the poetic translation by Seamus Heaney, who in his Translator’s Introduction characterizes its plot as three *agons* (or struggles) divided between the hero’s youth and old age.¹⁰ Because it is popularly known as a heroic saga or epic (a designation avoided by many Anglo-Saxonists), new readers who expect the main character to combine action-hero exploits with laconic self-expression (think of Clint Eastwood, Vin Diesel, or Arnold Schwarzenegger) may be surprised by all the attention given to ceremonious behavior and speech. The poem’s plot is indeed driven by the hero’s three *agons*, but the actual fighting occupies only a modest fraction of the poem’s 3,182 lines. Far more attention is given to direct speech, which make up on average 40 out of 100 lines. In most cases it is not the quick give and take of conversation, but more formal declamations. Part of the reason for so much talking is that unlike *The Wife’s Lament*, for example, the narrative perspective does not peer inside the characters’ thoughts and emotions.

Famously, the poem begins,

HWÆT!
 WE GAR-DEna in geardagum
 þeodcyniga þrym gefrunon,
 hu ða æþelingas ellen fremedon.
 (*Beowulf* lines 1–3)

We have learned of the glory of the Spear-Danes, people’s kings, in
 days of old, how the princes performed noble deeds.

In the virtuoso complexity of the opening syntax and the speculation of what *hwæt* may mean (it is left untranslated here), it is easy to lose track of *we*, the modest subject of the clause, and its verb *gefrunon*, which means “to learn by asking.” The pronoun unobtrusively draws each reader into an imagined collective audience that has already somehow “learned” the events that are about to unfold. The moment passes quickly as the narrative proceeds, but it conditions the reader

to place the narrative in a larger context of historical lore that (while imagined to be accessible) is distant enough that *we* are not the same as the *they* who populate the world of the poem. At irregular intervals in the poem the first person pronoun reappears in formulaic variants of “I have heard,” subtly reminding the reader of this historical distance. For most of the poem, however, the narrative is told (using the conventional terms) from a third person, limited point of view. We may know that Hrothgar, the king of the Danes, feels a deep emotional bond to Beowulf and is saddened at the prospect of his departure from his royal hall Heorot, but the narrative reveals Hrothgar’s emotion primarily through his words, his embrace, and his tears. Although the narrative tells us that Hrothgar has secret longing, *dyrne langað*, for Beowulf (line 1879), it does not develop it with techniques of psychological realism that one might find in, say, a Jane Austen novel.

Yet even with its focus on the spoken words and action, the narrative manages to give insight to the thoughts and feelings of the characters. Thus, for instance, when Beowulf contemplates his final battle against the dragon, his thoughts are conveyed through an extensive speech that, in its complex musings, places his immediate decision in a richly layered context that includes the history of antagonism between his tribe the Geats and their enemies the Swedes, an accidental killing in the Geatish royal family with disastrous consequences, and an extended allegory about a father who loses a son in a way that cannot be compensated for (2426–508). It is as if all these separate narratives bring unbearable pressure to bear on his deliberations, and they in some way stand as analogues to internal psychological forces.¹¹ The technique is so oblique that it resists paraphrase, yet it leads the audience to sense the moral anguish engulfing Beowulf as he weighs the consequences of his decision to fight the dragon.

The poem consistently singles out the ability to wield words as a measure of heroic virtue. When Hrothgar in earlier years has success as a king of the Danes, he decides to build the greatest of halls:

scop him Heort naman
se þe his wordes geweald wide hæfde,
he beot ne aleh, beagas dælde
sinc æt symle.

(78–81)

He who had extensive power of his word shaped for it the name Heorot, he did not belie his vow [*beot*], he distributed rings and treasure at banquet.

Here the *weald* of his word operates on three levels: the command he gives to his followers to build the hall, the naming of Heorot, and the vow to distribute treasure to his followers. It is an altogether exemplary use of language for a king. A hero like Beowulf needs to show a different kind of aptitude with words. When he arrives as a relative stranger to the Danish court he must pass an oral examination. After Unferth publicly challenges Beowulf's credentials as a champion by claiming that Breca defeated him in a test of strength on the high seas, Hrothgar and his court pay attention to the way Beowulf refutes him (499–606). The *how* is at least as important as the *what*. In fact despite Beowulf's rhetorical dismantling of Unferth, which he caps off with a charge of fratricide, neither the modern reader nor the audience in Heorot is in any position to judge the truth claims of one man's account against the other. But Beowulf has the last word, after which the Danes turn with laughter (*hleahfor*) to their feast.

Despite all the talking in *Beowulf*, not many lines in total are given over to vows. Even so, it is clear that everyone, excluding the monsters, holds them solemn. The poet is careful to include a *beot* before each encounter with a monster, but they are given in a variety of formulations. Beowulf's clearest statement of his heroic boast before fighting Grendel comes shortly after his dispute with Unferth, when he tells the Danish queen Wealhtheow of his intention to rid the hall of the monster or die in the effort. "Those words, the *gilpcwide* of the Geat, pleased the woman well" (639–40). His next *gylp-word* (675) comes just as the Geats, now guarding the hall for the Danes, settle down for the night, when he vows not to use weapons because he hears Grendel fights without them. What seems to be a magnanimous gesture turns out to be a stroke of good luck for Beowulf because, unknown to him, a spell has made Grendel impervious to weapons. Hand-to-hand fighting is the only way he can be defeated.

After learning that Grendel's mother has struck in an unanticipated vengeance killing, Beowulf quickly promises Hrothgar (*lc . . . þe gehate*, line 1392) that he will seek out the monster no matter where it goes. His third occasion for a vow, before his fight against the dragon, has the added poignancy that it will be his last:

Beowulf maðelode, beotwordum spræc
 niehstan siðe: “Ic geneoðde fela
 guða on geogoðe; gyt ic wylle
 frod folces weard fæhðe secan,
 mæroðum fremman, gif mec se mansceaða
 of eorðsele ut geseceð.”

(2510–15)

Beowulf made a speech, spoke *beot-word* for the last time: “I survived many battles in my youth; yet will I, the wise guardian of the people, seek out the hostility, perform glorious deeds, if the wicked ravager attacks me outside the earth-cave.”

The placement of *gyt* (“still, yet”) in an alliterating syllable, which is unusual for such a word, makes a pointed but understated contrast between Beowulf’s survival of his earlier battles and his anticipated death from the dragon. At one point his speech asserts that he is so resolute to begin fighting that he will forgo a formal *gylp* (2528), although everything about the 25 lines including this denial (the rhetorical trope of *praeteritio*) constitutes a boast. His final words addressed to his companions before the fight are “Courageously I will obtain the gold or else battle, perilous deadly evil, will take your lord” (2535–7). It turns out he obtains the gold *and* dies.

After receiving the wound from the dragon and with his life ebbing away, Beowulf gives a brief inventory of his virtues: he ruled his people well for 50 years, he protected them from enemies, he never provoked hostilities, and, he concludes, “I did not swear many oaths unjustly” (2738–9). It is a classic example of what has come to be known as Anglo-Saxon understatement, because it must mean that he *never* swore false oaths, that he was meticulously honest. Although Beowulf’s *treowe* is one measure of his exemplary status as a hero, the poem as a whole explores the limits of vows. What happens when they are misdirected? In an early passage the narrative (which is otherwise admiring of the poem’s characters) condemns them for making promises (*geheton*) to false gods at their pagan shrines (175–88). What happens when vows are not kept? *Beowulf* gives two striking examples of broken oaths leading to tragic bloodshed. They both take place within the context of a royal marriage arranged to promote peace between two tribes with longstanding enmity. In the “Finnsburh episode” (1068–159) violence erupts between the Frisians and a party of Danes

who had been welcomed as visitors presumably to see Hildeburh, the daughter of the Danish king who was given as a “peace-pledge” bride to Finn, the Frisian king. It is unclear why the violence breaks out, although the poem says “Hildeburh had no reason to praise the *treowe* of the Jutes,” which implies that they somehow provoked it by violating a pledge. Eventually oaths are sworn between the Danes and the Frisians to conclude the initial outbreak of violence, and the truce survives the long winter when they are obliged to share the Frisians’ hall. For the Danes, however, the promptings for vengeance remain so great that when spring arrives their leader Hengest succumbs to pressure to exact revenge and renew the fighting, despite his earlier oath. The Frisians are defeated, Finn is killed, and his hall is looted. The story is told with repeated reference to Hildeburh, because she lost her son, her husband, and a brother after pledges were not honored. In the end the Danes take her with them back to Denmark.

Later in the poem, when Beowulf returns to the Geats after his exploits at Heorot, his account to his king Hygelac takes a curious detour to describe how Hrothgar’s daughter Freawaru (who was never mentioned earlier) is destined to be given in marriage to the Heathobards. Perhaps the reader is to understand that Beowulf picked up news of this future marriage during his time in Denmark, but even so his words take on the quality of a prophecy or at least a confident prediction by someone who is now wise enough to see future consequences. The pledge of peace between the Danes and Heathobards, Beowulf predicts, will fail because some members of Freawaru’s honor guard will parade around the hall wearing the weapons and armor stripped from Heathobard heroes who were killed in earlier battles against the Danes – the very hostilities that the marriage is designed to end. An old warrior (*eald æsc-wiga*) will goad a youngster to take vengeance, which will doom the chances for peace; “then on both sides the oaths [*að-sweord*] of earls will be broken” (2064). As important as oaths are, especially those designed to curtail violence, Beowulf has learned how precarious they can be, and his assertion that he has always kept his word – his *treowe* – is as much a measure of his heroism as are his physical strength, his courage, and his eagerness for fame.