Treachery and Betrayal in Beowulf

Hugh Magennis

In this excerpt from his book Images of Community in Old English Poetry, Hugh Magennis, professor of English at Queen's University of Belfast, argues that the depiction of Anglo-Saxon society in Beowulf was not intended to be glowing and nostalgic. On the contrary, this is a society riddled with internal treachery, a society in which betrayal is the "rule rather than the exception." From this perspective, the integrity and lack of treachery in Beowulf himself are all the more remarkable.

The nobility of the hero and of other leading figures in Beowulf is glowingly celebrated in the poem, earning the approval both of the narrator and of other choric [commenting] voices. Beowulf's unflinching resoluteness, his wisdom and his loyalty, first to his lord and then to his followers, identify him as a model of heroic conduct. The closing lines of the poem, mentioning his quality of generosity as well as eagerness for praise, testify to the esteem in which this hero is held in his world. Like Bede's Edwin, he shuns all that is mean-minded. A passage in praise of Beowulf after his triumphant return from Denmark to Geatland, emphasizes his lack of savagery—his mind was not savage—and comments especially on his honourable conduct towards his own companions. Never did he slay them when they had been drinking: 'Not at all did he slay his hearth-companions when they were drunk.' A few lines earlier the poet had contrasted Beowulf with those who plot the death of a comrade: 'So must a kinsman act, not at all weave a net of malice for another by secret cunning, prepare the death of a close companion' (2166–80).

Such views of the greatness of Beowulf are amply justified by his actions in the poem. There is, however, a certain disquieting aspect to some of this praise. That Beowulf was not savage-minded and never turned violently on his companions or plotted the death of a kinsman hardly seems much of a point in his favour for the poet to choose to highlight. What sort of warrior would do such things anyway? In a context in which honourable behaviour rather than treachery was expected, these instances of Beowulf's nobility would sound like faint praise, anticlimactic and unremarkable.

A Climate of Treachery

But this suggestion of a climate of treachery is precisely what is borne out by an examination of the world of Beowulf as a whole. The poem presents great acts of virtue, but in a context of predominant weakness and failure, epitomized particularly by failures of loyalty and trust. In Beowulf it may be Grendel who is described as 'encompassed with treachery', but it is the human characters, rather than the monsters, who are shown as acting with deceit and treachery. The pervasive presence of treachery and deceit contributes decisively to the the sense of pessimism which characterizes the poem's presentation of pre-Christian Germanic society. Beowulf centres on noble characters and praiseworthy actions, but throughout the poem these characters and actions are encompassed and constricted by the kinds of *lawinnes* 'nets of malice', alluded to in the above quotation.

Most people in Beowulf are not like Beowulf and the handful of other admirable characters. Treachery between tribes is perhaps implied already in the reference, in the first *fitt* [section], to the eventual destruction of Heorot, the result of the enmity of father-in-law and son-in-law in the suppressed feud between the Danes and Heathobards. Beowulf himself foresees ouths being broken between the two sides and he expresses his doubts about the trustworthiness of the Heathobards. The idea of treachery within tribes is strikingly evident among the Danes and is shown as afflicting them in the past and future, as well as being symbolically tolerated in the poem's present in the person of the brother-killer Unferth. Unferth has been seen by some critics as a figure of disorder at Heorot, but his great crime is that of treachery. Disturbingly, however, Unferth's treachery appears to be accepted by society. This brother-killer has an honoured place in the hall, sitting at the feet of Hrothgar, and his crime, though no secret, is mentioned only by Beowulf, as a
result of taunting provocations from Unferth himself: ‘You became the killer of your brothers, your closest kinsmen; for that you must suffer damnation in hell, though your cleverness avail you’ (587-89).

The enormity of Unferth’s crime is fully acknowledged in the eternal punishment to which Beowulf here appeals, but it is ignored among the Danes. Indeed, Beowulf himself appears disconcertingly well-disposed towards Unferth outside the one scene of their altercation. With regard to Unferth, as to others in the poem, Beowulf accepts the fact of treachery in society with considerable equanimity, as though, despite his own high standards, he does not have high expectations for the conduct of others. Beowulf’s essential concern throughout is with his own conduct rather than with the imperfection of other people. It is because of the faithfulness of his own men that he will face the dragon alone at the end of the poem. Wiglaf rebukes the other warriors, but Beowulf himself does not dwell on their disloyalty, being preoccupied instead by how he himself has acted.

Treachery among the Danes in the past is evident in the reference to the murderous savagery of Heremod, a former king. Heremod, unlike Beowulf, did turn on his close companions—in his anger he destroyed his table-companions. Heremod forfeited the loyalty of his people and was ‘betrayed into the power of his enemies.’

TREACHERY IN THE FUTURE

Treachery among the Danes in the future is also emphasized in the poem, undercutting the scenes of revelry in celebration of the defeats of Grendel and Grendel’s mother. The narrator refers to the facenstafas ‘treacherous arts’, which Hrothulf will practise in future days, and comments that at the time of the foreground events of the poem there is ‘as yet’ trust between Hrothgar and Hrothulf. The sentence immediately following this observation refers pointedly to the presence of Unferth in the company of the Scyldings and to the trust that they have in his spirit. Wealthower perceives only loyalty among the Danes and looks forward in sanguine fashion to Hrothulf’s protection of her own children if he should outlive Hrothgar: ‘I know that my Hrothulf is gracious, that he will treat these youths with honour, if you, lord of the Scyldings, should leave the world before him; I expect that he will repay our sons with generosity, if he remembers all the favours that the two of us have formerly done for him for his pleasure and honour, while he was a child’ (1180-78). The poem makes it clear that such optimism will not be borne out by events.

The faithlessness of Beowulf’s own warriors in the closing part of the poem is not dwelt on by the hero himself, but the seriousness of their transgression of the code of loyalty is fully apparent, and is particularly outrageous to Wiglaf, the faithful follower. At the end of the poem a bleak time to come is forecast for the Geats, who have failed their lord in his fight—on their behalf—against the dragon. For the Geats to have deserted Beowulf at his time of need may be regarded as the equivalent to their having fled from an army led by the king, which we have seen to be a grave crime in late Anglo-Saxon law. There is no need, however, to appeal to particular laws to appreciate the fault of the Geats, since the Germanic revulsion against disloyalty to a lord, recorded as early as Tacitus, is keenly felt by the warriors themselves. They themselves are scamtiende, ‘ashamed’, as they endure the rebuke of Wiglaf, who reminds them that ‘for any warrior death is better than a life of disgrace.’ The poet refers to the faint-hearted Geatish warriors explicitly as trewlo-gan, ‘troth-breakers’.

OUTCAST LIKE CAIN

The future that Wiglaf predicts for the Geats is one of alienation and desolation, in which they will wander about without right to land: ‘Each man of the tribe must wander, destitute of his land-right.’

The image has overtones of the punishment of the betrayer Cain, who is directly referred to several times in the poem: Grendel is associated with the dwelling-places of the kindred of Cain; Cain had been banished by the Lord far from humankind after his crime of brother-killing; as a result of his crime, he was outlawed, marked with murder and had to settle in the wilderness; the race of giants descended from him had been destroyed in the Flood; the poem also says that Grendel was descended from Cain. The legend of Cain is thus familiarly alluded to in Beowulf, but the idea of the Cain figure is also insistently drawn upon outside such references, in the poem’s treatment of acts of treachery and betrayal. It is there in the words of Wiglaf just quoted, and in the account of Heremod, who after he
destroyed his table-companions turned away alone from the joys of men: 'until he turned away alone, the famous chieftain, from the joys of men.'

Hæthcyn's tragic killing of his brother Hereald, though apparently an accident, bears a Cain-like weight of unatoneable guilt. It is described as a crime, 'sinfully committed, wearying to the heart.'

Unferth, the poem's other brother-killer, may have escaped the fate of Cain in the present life, but Beowulf is confident that this Cain figure will receive his punishment in the next. For other betrayers, as Wiglaf perceives with regard to the disgraced Geats, their sin brings its own punishment in this world, a punishment whose physical hardship may be seen as, like that of Cain, reflecting a spiritual alienation and annihilation.

The message of Beowulf concerning treachery and betrayal is that they are evils destructive to society and to self. And yet the reality of the poem's world is that treachery and betrayal are the rule rather than the exception. In Bede's Historia Ecclesiastica treachery is associated with external enemies; in Beowulf it is within. Unferth retains his place at the heart of society. The frequency of acts of deceit and betrayal in Beowulf militates against the view of the poem as a nostalgic evocation of a glamorous Germanic past. The poem shows admiration for the noble aspirations of the pre-Christian Germanic world, but sets these aspirations beside a perceived reality of predominant weakness and failure. Beowulf shows acute awareness of the discrepancy between ideal and reality in an imperfect world, and it encourages its audience to consider the significance of this discrepancy. At the end of the poem the audience is led to identify not with the superhuman Beowulf but with the mourning Geats who honour him and contemplate a future without him.

The Digressions in Beowulf

David Wright

The digressions in Beowulf are especially puzzling to first-time readers trying to follow the main plot and themes. British scholar David Wright points out in the following essay that the many digressions and episodes are not accidental, but rather serve as indirect commentary and context for the main plot. The distressing and violent feuds described in the digressions serve, in Wright's view, to cast a pall over Beowulf's achievements.

[Turning] to the structure of Beowulf: one of its characteristics is the extraordinary number of episodes and digressions that are contained in it. Many of these considerably puzzled the early students of the poem, who invented a number of ingenious but unsatisfactory theories to account for them, theories which usually postulated either a composite authorship for the work or the existence of one or more interpolators. It is now generally agreed—and indeed obvious—that Beowulf is the work of a single poet, and that this poet was a Christian. In a brilliant essay, The Digressions in Beowulf, M. Adrien Bonjour has discussed the artistic relevance of these episodes and asides. He concluded that the poet of Beowulf knew what he was about: everything that he put into his poem is there to add something to the effect of the whole. Far from being a rambling, incoherent affair, the poem is built up of themes, motifs, contrasts, and parallels, and is in fact as sophisticated in its construction and use of allusion as The Waste Land of T.S. Eliot. One example is the funeral of Scyld Sceafing, with which the poem opens, foreshadowing Beowulf's obsequies [funeral rites] at the end. Another may be found when Beowulf's defeat of Grendel is celebrated by one of Hrothgar's men in a song of praise, and the singer compares the hero with the mythical