One. Loot and the Economy of Honor

In the short Latin epic *Waltharius*, written perhaps in the ninth century as an entertainment for clerics,¹ the eponymous hero, having killed eleven men in successive single combats—some while fleeing or begging for mercy—picks the corpses:

Aggreditur iuvenis caesos spoliarier armis
armorumque habitu, tunicas et cetera linquens.
Armillas tantum cum bullis baltea et enses,
loricas quoque cum galeis detraxerat ollis.
Quattuor his oneravit equos sponsamque vocatam
imposuit quinto, sextum condescenderat ipse. (1191–96)

The young man went to strip the slaughtered of their arms
And byrnies, leaving tunics and the rest behind.
He took from them just arm-rings, belts with studs, and swords;
Their corslets also, these together with their helmets.
Four horses he weighed down with these, and his betrothed,
Whom he had called, he placed upon the fifth; he rode
The sixth.²

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¹ The date, authorship and provenance of *Waltharius* are controversial: for a brief summary of the positions, see Millet (1992, 22–26). I find the arguments of Peter Dronke compelling (1991, 66–79); see also the “additions and corrections” to the 1991 reprint); however, I think it probable that the poem was written for clerics. The form of the names leaves no doubt that the poem belongs to an area where High German was spoken. Ziolkowski (2001) addresses doubts that this poem may be discussed with Germanic epics such as *Beowulf*.

² Quotations and translations of *Waltharius* are from Kratz (1984).
These men have lost their ornaments, their horses, their battle-gear and their lives in a dispute over treasure, which unfolded as follows. Waltharius has been a hostage at the court of Attila the Hun since childhood. In a splendid example of the Germanic narrative formula in which hostages fight for their captors, he has long been Attila’s greatest champion and the author of all his victories. Immediately after a great battle, from which Waltharius’s triumphant army of Huns has returned with its loot, he plots to flee Attila’s court along with Hiltgunt, another hostage, whom he wishes to marry. They steal away by night, taking with them Attila’s own helmet and mail-coat and two boxes heavy with golden Hunnish arm-rings. The fugitives’ route takes them to the vicinity of Worms, the seat of Guntharius, king of the Franks, who sees their arrival with so much treasure as an opportunity to recover the tribute that his father long ago was forced to hand over to Attila. Brushing aside the misgivings of his retainer Hagano, himself formerly a hostage at Attila’s court and well acquainted with Waltharius, Guntharius assembles a troop consisting of himself, Hagano, and eleven others and rides forth to seize the treasure. Battles ensue, and now the corpses of the eleven, stripped to their tunics, litter the battlefield as Waltharius, having added their treasure to what he stole from the Huns, rides to his climactic battle with Hagano and Guntharius. The poem will end with the

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3 In medieval literature the Huns are generally treated as a Germanic nation.

4 See especially the entry for 755 in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* A 755 (hereafter abbreviated *ASC* followed by manuscript sigil and year; quoted from Dumville and Keynes (1983)), and *The Battle of Maldon*, ll. 265–72). Citations of words and quotations from *Beowulf* are based on consultation of several editions: Klaeber (1950), Krapp and Dobbie (1931, vol. 4), Mitchell and Robinson (1998) and Fulk, Bjork and Niles (2008). Except where noted otherwise, all quotations of Old English poems other than *Beowulf* are based on the texts in Krapp and Dobbie (1931). Punctuation and word-division in Old English texts have often been adjusted and alternative readings selected. Translations, which are mine except where noted otherwise, are frankly designed to illustrate the point under discussion while remaining true to the text.
three great warriors maimed but reconciled, dividing the treasure among themselves.

The passage quoted above, and indeed the whole of Waltharius, raises a number of questions about the circulation of treasure in heroic narrative. Given the well known horror of theft in Germanic societies (see Andersson 1984), how does the poem justify Waltharius’s stealing away with so much of the Hunnish treasury? Why does he leave the corpses of the men he has killed in their tunics, and why is it worth mentioning that he does so? Finally, and crucially, what, beyond mere possession of wealth, is at stake for Waltharius, Guntharius and Hagano in the competition for treasure that is so central to this poem?

Treasure is hardly less central to Beowulf than to Waltharius, and the issues that Waltharius raises have their Beowulfian analogues. In both poems it is essential to understand how treasure moves from hand to hand—as gift, as has often been observed, but also as loot, the treasure seized from dead enemies, variously called booty, spoils and plunder by modern translators. Looting the slain transforms a violent deed into wealth and feeds the economic system that supports the heroic life as depicted in these and other poems. In this system, which I call the Economy of Honor (borrowing a phrase from William Ian Miller’s classic study of Icelandic saga, also used by John M. Hill), treasure

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5 For a survey of scholarship on gift-exchange in Beowulf, see below, pp. 27–31.
6 In Latin sources it is called spolia, exuviae (also ‘relics’) or praeda (also ‘prey’). Old English sources employ a variety of terms: hlōð (also ‘war-band, criminal gang’), hūð, herehūð (and herchýð), rēaf, hererēaf, wælrēaf; the verb is rēafian.
7 Miller (1990, index, s.v. “Honor, economy of,” p. 400); Hill (1995). Though Miller uses the phrase sparingly, economic terminology is pervasive in his discussions of honor (see especially pp. 29–34). My idea of an “Economy of Honor” differs somewhat from Miller’s: his “economy” is a “zero-sum game” in which honor is traded among the players; I am interested in how treasure and honor circulate together. Hill offers several stimulating readings of passages involving the giving of gifts, and much of the system described here is implicit in these readings; but he does not define in a precise way what he means by an “Economy of Honour.” By “honor” I mean the reputation for
and honor, indissolubly bonded, are traded up and down the social hierarchy in such a way that the participants gain (and occasionally lose) honor with each transaction.

The heroic economy I am describing, if it bears any resemblance at all to the economy of Anglo-Saxon England, is a radically abbreviated version of it. Compare the kinds of wealth that circulated among the Anglo-Saxons with those that appear in Beowulf. At any date when the poem might plausibly have been composed, a moneyless economy would have been a distant memory, but the world of Beowulf gets along entirely without coinage.³ The poem mentions land as a reward for valorous deeds, but land seems to lack all practical value: if noble Danes and Geats collect rents in money, food or service, the poet considers the fact too trivial to notice. Though the warrior elite of these kingdoms consume copious amounts of beer, wine and mead (solid food being fit only for monsters),⁹ the agricultural and commercial sources of these products are of no interest: they seem to be made of nothing, bought from no one. Indeed, the only category of wealth that interests the poet and his characters is treasure—fine weaponry and armor, jewelry, drinking cups and horses with tack. Treasure itself (māđðum, sinc) is a narrower category in the poem than in life. Scholars often note the resemblance between the valuables possessing desirable qualities (especially wisdom and prowess) and performing warlike deeds. Beowulf employs a number of words for this kind of reputation: dōm, mǣrðo, hrēð and various compounds, blǣd, lof, weorðmynd. There are also adjectives: wyrðe, mǣre. These words cover a variety of concepts: fame, favorable judgment, praise, and wealth. Critics have employed a variety of words to represent the concept, none of them completely satisfactory. Here I adopt “honor” for the concept because it emphasizes that the quality in question is conferred by others rather than inborn or inherent.

³ Only one word in Beowulf could be translated ‘coin’. Sceatt, used once by itself (1686) and once as an element of a compound (378), can mean either ‘coin’ or ‘treasure’, and for each occurrence the context suggests ‘treasure’.

⁹ The preference of Germanic poetry for drink and the association of eating with monsters in Beowulf is thoroughly explored in Magennis (1999).

mentioned in *Beowulf* and those from the Sutton Hoo hoard, but the comparison holds only for gold (excluding coinage), gems and steel: the silver items from Sutton Hoo, Trewhiddle and elsewhere have no counterpart in the poem.¹⁰

The ways that treasure circulates within a nation’s economy and the wider world are also radically circumscribed in *Beowulf*. The poet knows enough about commerce to employ it as metaphor—saying, for example, that Hæthcyn bought his revenge against Ongentheow’s sons with his life, *heardan cēape* ‘a cruel price’ (2481)—but his characters neither buy nor sell. Anglo-Saxon kings, of course, acquired wealth by raising revenues of food, service and money,¹¹ by charging tolls and levying fines, but the kings who figure so prominently in *Beowulf* do not appear to tax their subjects. Other modes of exchange are mentioned at least briefly: Hrothgar pays compensation to the Wylfings for the killing of Heatholaf by Beowulf’s father (459–72) and to Beowulf for the killing of Hondscioh by Grendel (1053–55), who declines to pay for his own deeds (156–58); compensation cannot be paid for Hæthcyn’s accidental killing of his brother Heardred (2441).¹² Famously, a slave’s theft of treasure launches the dragon episode (2214–26, 2280–86), but the poem’s noble characters do not steal.¹³ Inheritance is more interesting than compensation or theft: Wealhtheow’s concern that her sons should inherit the kingdom (1177–87) is the most prominent case, and inheritance of kingdoms, land, swords and armor is mentioned throughout the poem.¹⁴ But gift is by far the most interesting mode of exchange in *Beowulf*, and the poet has much to say about the importance of gift-giving: the benefits

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¹⁰ Or, for the most part, elsewhere in Old English poetry. See Tyler (2006).
¹¹ See Stenton (1971, index s.vv. food-rent, taxation).
¹² For a survey of the scholarship concerning this passage and a compelling reading based on Anglo-Saxon law and historical sources, see Jurasiński (2006, 113–148).
¹³ Hama’s carrying away the Brosinga mene (1198–1201) may have been a theft, but the matter is uncertain.
¹⁴ See Klaeber (1950, glossary s.v. láf, 1).
Baker, *Loot and the Economy of Honor*, p. 6

that giving confers and the obligations that receiving imposes.

Treasure could enter the Anglo-Saxon economy in a number of ways: when manufactured, when sent by a neighboring nation as gift, tribute or compensation, when purchased from abroad, when discovered in a grave or unguarded hoard or when seized in battle as loot. These sources of treasure interest the *Beowulf* poet in varying degrees. He does not speak of purchase, and manufacture interests him only when Weland is the manufacturer (455). The dragon’s hoard might be called found treasure, but as we shall see, the poem does not present it that way. Payments and gifts of treasure from one nation to another are mentioned incidentally: tribute to the Danes (11), Hrothgar’s payment of compensation to the Wylfings (459–72, mentioned above), and friendly exchanges of gifts between the Geats and the Danes (378–79, 1859–63). But treasure enters the economy of *Beowulf* most often as loot: not when acquired by exchange, but rather when seized with violence.

**Loot in *Beowulf***

Patricia Silber once observed of *Beowulf* that “all of the gold spoken of in the poem has at some time been booty” (1977, 13)—an overstatement, to be sure, but principally so in the sense that we never learn the history of many of the glittering objects that adorn the poem. The histories we do learn often involve looting, and especially the stripping of jewelry and battle-gear (swords, helmets, mail-coats) from corpses: the magnificent necklace that Wealththeow gives to Beowulf, a sword carried by one of Freawaru’s retinue, the thirty *hildegeatwa* ‘sets of battle gear’ that Beowulf carries from battle in Frisia, the *frætwe* ‘gear’ seized by Dæghrefn in that same battle, the sword that Wiglaf carries into the dragon fight, and the mail-coat, sword and helmet of Ongentheow all are, at one time
or another, loot of this kind. Other kinds of looting are rare. After the slaughter of Finn, his *hām* ‘home’ is comprehensively sacked as Hengest’s men take all of his *ingesteald* (probably ‘treasures from within’), especially *sigla, searogimma* ‘jewels and curious gems’ (1157)—and also, as has often been remarked, his queen, Hildeburh. We hear nothing of the raiding of towns and territories, though such pillage is presumably what Higelac was up to when he was slain in Frisia defending his *wælrēaf* ‘loot’ (1205), and also the sons of Ongentheow when they repeatedly committed *inwitscear* ‘malicious cutting’ on Geatish territory (2478).

Beowulf’s prize from his first monster fight is Grendel’s arm. After his second monster fight he ignores most of the valuables he sees in the underwater battleground, taking only Grendel’s head and the hilt of the giant sword with which he has killed Grendel’s mother, its blade now melted away in Grendel’s hot blood. These objects bear little resemblance to the loot usually taken in *Beowulf*. The arm and head are utterly without intrinsic value, lacking valuable materials, fine workmanship, and utility. Though adorned with gold (1694), the hilt is a ruin that will never again see battle. Yet these things occupy the position of loot in the narrative: seized from dead foes, they are tokens of victory, and they are negotiable in the Economy of Honor. Beowulf explicitly compares Grendel’s arm to loot, joking that he would have preferred to show Hrothgar the whole body *on frætwum* ‘in its gear’ (962), but of course, Grendel carried no sword and

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15 More specifically: Beowulf presents Wealhtheow’s necklace to Hygd; it is taken from Higelac’s corpse in his fatal Frisian expedition (1202–14). The sword carried by Freawaru’s young Danish retainer was taken from a Heaðobard corpse by someone in his father’s generation (2032–69). The battle gear that Beowulf carries away from Frisia presumably belonged to thirty men he has killed (2359–62). Dæghrefn cannot bring to his king the gear he has taken in battle because Beowulf has killed him (2503–08). Wiglaf’s sword was taken by his father Weohstan from the body of Eanmund (2611–19). Ongentheow’s mail-coat, sword and helmet were taken from his corpse by Higelac’s retainer Eofor (2977–98).
presumably also no defensive gear—so we infer, Beowulf having removed his own mail-coat and helmet in preparation for battle with him (671–74). The kinds of loot favored in this poem being unavailable, the arm, a weapon of sorts (971, 984–87), serves the same function, and Hrothgar, seeing it, rewards Beowulf with a standard, helmet, mail-coat, sword, and eight horses, one of them outfitted with his own saddle (1020–45). Better as a token of Beowulf’s first victory than the arm, Grendel’s head is irrefutable proof that the foe is dead.16 The hilt is a token not only of Beowulf’s having killed Grendel’s mother, but also of his destruction of the Grendelkin—God’s enemies and persecutors of the Danes. Presented with these things, Hrothgar rewards Beowulf with yet more treasure (1866–67).

The near worthlessness of the loot that Beowulf takes in his early battles is notable. The reason for his preference for loot of this kind will become apparent in the course of this chapter, but I will mention here that the pleasure Beowulf takes in Hrothgar’s rich gifts and his looting of the slain in Frisia appear to rule out aversion to wealth as a motive. He does, perhaps, make a distinction between objects with and without intrinsic value. Normally a victorious warrior gives the loot he has taken to his lord.17 Beowulf presents the gold-adorned hilt to Hrothgar—we see the king hold it in his hand (1677–78)—but he only displays Grendel’s body parts. A Beowulfian warrior is not indifferent to the intrinsic value of loot, but its greater value lies in its significance.

The dragon’s hoard does not lack intrinsic value, though the swords have rusted and the gems have fallen from their settings (2761–64, 3049).18 Its value is not lost on Beowulf:

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16 On the display of body parts of criminals and defeated enemies, see Bremmer (1996, 124–28).
17 Dæghrefn would have presented his loot to his king, had he lived (2501–08), Weohstan brings Eanmund’s sword to Onela (2611–19), and Eofor brings the loot he has taken from Ongentheow’s body to Higelac (2977–98).
18 For a survey of the treasure mentioned as belonging to the dragon’s hoard, see Owen-Crocker (2000, 64–77). See Chapter Three, below, for further discussion of the dragon fight and the hoard.
though he may well have a number of reasons for fighting the dragon, the only ones the poem mentions explicitly are revenge (2336) and seizure of the dragon’s treasure (2536). After the battle, both Beowulf and his narrator think of the treasure as loot: the dying king describes the dragon as *since berēafod* ‘plundered of his treasure’ (2746), and when Wiglaf carries treasure out of the dragon’s lair, the verb that describes what he is doing is *rēafian* ‘to loot’ (2773).

Silber sees treasure that enters the economy as loot as morally tainted. Most modern readers, indeed, disapprove of looting, and one is tempted to see its prominence in *Beowulf* (like *Waltharius*) as an indictment of the heroic values that inform this poem. But the narrative voice of *Beowulf*, generally so free with opinions about the passing action, has nothing to say about the ethics of looting, which Geats, Danes and their foes all engage in. Further, the poem does not explicitly assign metaphorical or typological

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19 For discussion of the textual evidence, see below, pp. 00–00. Greenfield (1974) argues that the poet’s mentioning Beowulf’s sorrow (2327–32) and his intention to take revenge (2336) before his learning of the origin of the conflict and receiving the cup (2403–05) shows that “Beowulf’s motive in this case . . . is not less noble or ‘pure’ than it was in his earlier ventures” (p. 109). But Greenfield has already argued that “dragons and buried treasure were in a way inseparable to the Anglo-Saxon mind” (p. 108); and of course the poet has given great emphasis to the dragon’s hoard—its origin, the dragon’s acquisition of it, and the theft that launches the poem’s final episode. If Beowulf was unaware of the association of dragons and treasure, or, in defiance of conventional wisdom, expected this dragon to have no treasure, then presumably the poet would have had something to say about such unusual beliefs. I would also point out Greenfield’s assumption—and that of many commentators—that acquisition of treasure is a less “pure” or “noble” motive than revenge. As this chapter will make clear, I do not agree.

20 Silber (1977, 6): “there are two basic uses of gold in the poem: the bad is concerned with plundering, cursing, hoarding or refusal to give, and the good is to adorn people, places and weapons and, above all, to give to deserving warriors.” Later (p. 16): “all of the gold and treasure being dealt out has come as spoils of battle, the hoard exists only because men have died, women have been bereaved, many have suffered.”
meanings to loot. A quick tour of some texts read and written by the Anglo-Saxons that mention loot may help to put the matter in context.

**Loot in literature and history**

_Lętabuntur coram te sicut letantur in messe, sicut exultant victores quando dividunt spolia._ So sang the Anglo-Saxon monks in one of their canticles. A glossator added this translation: _hī blissiað ætforan þē swā swā hī blissiað on gerēpe, swā swā fægniæd sigefæste menn þonne hī dǣlaþ hererēaf_ ‘they will rejoice before you as they rejoice at the harvest, as victorious men rejoice when they divide up the loot’.  

The sentiment is an old one (the canticle’s source is Isaiah 9.3), but no less appropriate for Anglo-Saxon England than for the ancient Near East. The loot collected on the battlefield makes concrete the joy of victory: metaphor being commutative, we can say that the joy of sharing out the loot is like the rejoicing of those to whom God has shown favor. Indeed, inasmuch as the Anglo-Saxons commonly attributed victory to God’s favor, the two might easily be conflated.

Which was it, martial or religious ecstasy, that brought the faithful streaming to Heavenfield, where St. Oswald had set up a cross and prayed before the battle in which he crushed the British king Cædwalla?  

A remarkable passage at the end of the poetic _Exodus_, without biblical source, illustrates well the association of victory, looting, joy and God’s favor. The action takes place on the banks of the Red Sea after the drowning of the Egyptian army:

_Þā wæs ēðfynde Afrisc mēowle_

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21 Korhammer (1976, 279). I quote the revised version in London, British Library, Cotton Vespasian D. xii, with its gloss-like addition of _victores_ (Old English _sigefæste menn_).

22 Except where noted otherwise, both the text and the translation of Bede’s _Ecclesiastical History_ (henceforth cited as _HE_ by book and chapter) are from Colgrave and Mynors (1969). Oswald’s victory is described in _HE_ iii.1–2.
The African woman was easy to find then on the ocean’s shore, adorned with gold. Neck-rings were raised in hands, plunder was seized; the people were happy beholding the prize—their bondage was over. On the shore the sea’s survivors dealt out those ancient treasures by tribal standard, shields and armour; they shared out by right the gold and weaving, the wealth of Joseph, men’s glorious goods. Its guardians lay on the field of death, foremost of nations.23

Though the treasures mentioned here might at a stretch be identified with those taken by the Jews on their way out of Egypt (Ex 12.35–36), the position of the passage after the drowning of Pharaoh’s army, and the poet’s choice of the word hererēaf ‘loot’, signal

23 Translation from Love (2002, 635).
rather that these treasures have been taken from the Egyptian dead. The poet is careful to justify the looting as reclamation of the wealth accumulated by Joseph, but the property seized by the Jews is not less herēaf for that. Blīðe wāeron, bōte gesāwon ‘the people were happy beholding the prize’: bōt is the remedy for their former suffering and compensation for their injuries, both embodied in the loot they are now joyfully gathering. They rejoice before the Lord and divide the loot, both at the same time. This augmentation of their wealth, together with the pleasurable sight of their enemies’ corpses strewn on dēaðstede ‘on the field of death’, is the high point on which the poem ends, a most fitting expression of the form that God’s favor has taken.

In Judith, too, loot expresses the joy of victory as the Bethulians pick the bloody corpses of their hated foes:

Rūm wæs tō nimanne
londbūendum on dām lādēstan,
hyra ealdfēondum unlyfīgendum
heolfrig herēaf, hyrsta scīne,
bord ond brādswyrd, brūne helmas,
dȳre mādmas. (313–18)

There was opportunity for the land’s inhabitants to take from those most hated ones, their ancient foes, now lifeless, bloody loot, bright gear, shields and broad swords, shining helmets, valuable treasures.

As if to justify the looting, the poet states that the Bethulians had dōmlice ‘gloriously’
defeated their enemies, and then returns to the pleasurable subject of the treasure itself, which takes an entire month to carry into the city. Then the people bring a reward to Judith, through whose advice the great victory was won:

\[
\text{Hī tō mēde hyre}
\]
\[
of ðām sīðfate sylfre brōhton,}
\[
eorlas æscrofe, \quad \text{Hōlofernes}
\]
\[
sweord ond swātigne helm, \quad \text{swylce ēac side byrnan}
\]
\[
gerēnode rēadum golde; \quad \text{ond eal ্haust se rinca baldor}
\]
\[
swiðmōd sinces āhte \quad \text{oððe sundoryrfs,}
\]
\[
bēaga ond beorhra māðma, \quad \text{hī ্haust ्ære beorhtan idese}
\]
\[
āgēafon gearoþoncolre. (334–41)
\]

The spear-famed nobles
brought to her very self as a reward
from that expedition Holofernes’s
sword and bloody helmet, likewise his broad mail coat
adorned with red gold; and all that the resolute
leader of men owned of treasure or private inheritance,
of rings and bright treasures, they gave that to
the bright, quick-witted woman.

It is worth comparing the Vulgate source of this passage:

\[
\text{Porro autem universa, quae Holofernis peculiaria fuisse probata sunt, dederunt}
\]
\[
\text{Judith in auro, et argento, et vestibus, et gemmis, et omni supellectili, et tradita}
\]
\[
sunt omnia illi a populo.}
\]

But all those things that were proved to be the peculiar goods of Holofernes, they
gave to Judith in gold, and silver, and garments and precious stones, and all household stuff, and they all were delivered to her by the people. 24

The most obvious difference of the poem from its source is that the wealth of Holofernes has been adjusted to resemble the kinds of goods seized as loot in the passage from Waltharius and most of those from Beowulf cited above: not only treasure, but also, and especially, his sword, his helmet, still bloody from his decapitation, and his mail-coat. Peculiaria ‘peculiar goods’ or ‘private property’, a term that embraces all the things enumerated in the biblical passage, is buried in the Old English list as sundoryrifes ‘of private inheritance’, as if the armaments and much of the treasure, which in Anglo-Saxon England might well be rendered to a deceased man’s lord as heriot rather than passed down to an heir, 25 fall outside this category of heritable property. For the Bethulian looters, any distinction between heritable property and that owed to the Assyrian king is of passing interest only: after a battle, a slain man’s belongings go to the victors, not his heirs.

In both the Book of Judith and the Old English poem, the Bethulians bring Holofernes’s property to Judith. That this wealth is brought to her must have made perfect sense to the Anglo-Saxon audience: like Beowulf returning from the mere, she has brought to the city the head of the hated foe, in its lack of merchantability or any practical use a pure signifier of her great triumph. And as in Beowulf, the signifier is transmuted into wealth—Holofernes’s wealth since the kill was hers—the embodiment of the honor she has won.

In her chaste widowhood, like enough to virginity for Aldhelm to have praised her in

25 See Lapidge (1999, s.v. heriot), and the literature cited there.
his *De virginitate*,\(^{26}\) Judith signifies the Church, as Ælfric says:

> Hēo getācnode untwēolice mid weorcum þā hālgan gelāunge þe gelŷfō nū on God, þæt is Cristes cyrce on eallum Cristenum folce, his ān clǣne brȳd þe mid cēnum gelēafan þām ealdum dēofle of forcearf þæt hēafod, æfre on clǣnnysse Criste þēowigende. (Assmann 1964, 114–15)

In her works she undoubtedly betokened the holy Church which believes now in God, that is Christ’s Church of the entire Christian people, his one pure bride who with brave faith cut off the head of the old devil, ever serving Christ in cleanness.

There is a standard typological interpretation of loot that fits neatly into Ælfric’s schema. It is based on Luke 11:21–22 (evidently an expansion of Mark 3:27):

> Cum fortis armatus custodit atrium suum, in pace sunt ea quae possidet. Si autem fortior illo superveniens vicerit eum, universa arma eius aufert in quibus confidebat, et spolia eius distribuit.

> When a strong man armed keepeth his court, those things are in peace which he possesseth. But if a stronger than he come upon him, and overcome him; he will take away all his armour wherein he trusted, and will distribute his spoils.

*Spolia uero eius*, says Bede commenting on this passage, *ipsi homines sunt ab eo decepti* ‘his [Satan’s] spoils are those men beguiled by him’.\(^{27}\) Bede employs the same figure of the soul as loot in *HE* ii.20, noting that James, the deacon in York, *magnas antiquo hosti praedas docendo et baptizando eripuit* ‘snatched away much loot from the ancient enemy by teaching and baptizing’.\(^{28}\) Ælfric follows Bede’s interpretation of the passage from


\(^{27}\) *In Lucam*, IV.130–31, in Hurst (1960, iii. 234).

\(^{28}\) Most translators render *praedas* as ‘prey’, but the Old English version has *micle hlōpe þurh his lāre*.
Luke, which leads him to think of the harrowing of hell:

Dēofol is se stranga þe ūre Drihten embe spræc, ðe hæfde eall mann cynn on his andwealde þā Ȝurh Adams forgægedynsse, ac Godes Sunu cōm, strengra þonne hē, and hine gewylde, and his wēpna him ætbrǣd and töbræc his searocræftas, and his herereaf töðælde þe hē mid his dēaðe ālȳsde þā Ȝā hē Adam and Efān and heora ofspring genam, swīðe micelne dāl, of þām mānfullum dēofle, and gelǣdde hī of helle ūp tō heofonan rice. 29

The devil is the strong one whom our Lord spoke of, who at that time had all mankind in his power through Adam’s transgression; but God’s Son came, stronger than he, and conquered him, and took his weapons from him and overthrew his wiles, and divided his spoils, which he had redeemed with his death, when he took Adam and Eve and a great part of their progeny from the wicked devil and led them from hell up to the kingdom of heaven.

The interpretation of the harrowing of hell as looting (the word “harrow” is a variant of “harry,” from Old English hergian ‘ravage, plunder’) is older than Ælfric or Bede: we find it, for example, in Arator’s De actibus apostolorum:

Quis datur illi
aetherea de parte fragor quantumque resultant
caelestes in laude chori, cum rector Olympi
euehit excelsis, quicquid suscepit ab imis,
ingrediensque polum carnis comitante tropaeo

*and fullwihte þām ealdan fēonde āfyrde* ‘took much loot from the old foe through his teaching and baptizing’ (Miller 1890, i. 150).

29 *Dominica iii in Quadragesima*, ll. 188–96 (Pope 1967, 00). The reference to the harrowing of hell was added by Ælfric from some other source.
exuuias atri raptas de fauce profundi
lucis in arce locat terrenosque erigit artus! (i.35–41)

What thunder was given for Him from the direction of heaven, and how greatly the celestial choirs resounded in praise when the Ruler of Olympus carried up on high whatever He took upon Himself below, and entering heaven attended by the trophy of His flesh, He placed in the citadel of light the spoils snatched from the jaws of the black abyss and exalted earthly limbs!⁴⁰

The figure of rescued souls as loot (repeated at ii.120) comes as Christ enters heaven like a Roman general returning from conquest. In our passage from Judith, and the one from Exodus as well, the loot seized from the enemies of Israel may be understood typologically as Christian souls “snatched from the jaws of the black abyss.”

One of the most striking and suggestive treatments of loot in a text known to the Anglo-Saxons is in Prudentius’s Psychomachia. Here, after Sobriety has gruesomely slain Luxury, the followers of the fallen Vice flee, scattering behind them robes, garlands, brooches, necklaces, and even such trifles as hairpins and ribbons. The Virtues reject these baubles:

His se Sobrietas et totus Sobrietatis
abstinet exuuiis miles damnatque castis
scandalac proculcat pedibus nec fronte seueros
coniuente oculos praedarum ad gaudia flectit. (450–53)

Sobriety, with her whole army, scorns
These spoils and tramples these cursed stumbling blocks
Beneath her virtuous feet, nor does she gaze

Upon this tempting plunder with delight.\textsuperscript{31}

Avarice and her fellow-Vices, being less fastidious, greedily pick the corpses of their own comrades and kinsmen (see fig. 1):

\begin{quote}
Si fratri galeam fuluis radiare ceraunis

germanus uidit commilito, non timet ensem

exerere atque caput socio mucrone ferire

de consanguineo rapturus uertice gemmas.

Filius extinctum belli sub sorte cadauer

aspexit si forte patris, fulgentia bullis

cingula et exuuias gaudet rapuisses cruendas.

Cognatam ciuilis agit discordia praedam

nec parcit propriis amor insatiatus habendi

pigneribus spoliataque suos famis inpi a natos. (470–79)
\end{quote}

Then if a soldier sees his brother’s helm

Agleam with tawny gems, he does not fear

To draw his sword and to strike off his head

That he may snatch the jewels from the crown.

And if a son sees lying on the field

His father’s body, he strips off as spoils

The bright gold-studded belt and bloody arms:

Thus civil strife deposits its next of kin,

Unsated by greed its dear ones does not spare,

And impious hunger robs its own offspring.

\textsuperscript{31} Quotations of \textit{Psychomachia} are from Cunningham (1966); trans. Eagan (1962).
In this way Avarice preys upon her own followers and makes them weak. So also in Prudentius’s interpretation of his biblical model for the battle for the soul, the battle of the Valley of Siddim (Gen 14), Abram is able to rescue his kinsman Lot and defeat the enemy kings because they are *mole praedarum graues* ‘heavy with the weight of loot’ (*Praefatio* 27; my translation).

In an ironic turn, Avarice is slain by Good Works (*Operatio*), who loots her corpse and distributes the proceeds to the poor (596–603); thus Avarice becomes a victim of the activity that, above all others, symbolized her. Loot has different values for Avarice and Good Works because they desire it for different purposes. For the Vices, wealth is desirable in itself, a greater good even than kinship. For the Virtues, wealth has value only insofar as it enables one to perform charitable works. Looting the slain, as one way in which wealth can be gathered, seems to have no moral valuation attached to it.

Throughout early medieval Europe, looting was as pervasive in real as in literary warfare. Though the counterpart for Anglo-Saxon England of Timothy Reuter’s magisterial study of loot and tribute in Carolingian Francia has yet to be written (1985), there can be no doubt that the Anglo-Saxons were as fond of loot as the Carolingians. Indeed, Stephen S. Evans has argued, though more on the basis of poetic records than history and chronicle, that loot and tribute were essential economic supports for the military culture of both Celtic and Germanic Britain (1997, 125–31). In the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicles*, loot (*herehýð, hererēaf*) is associated mostly with vikings, but the English take loot when they can. For example, in 473 Hengest and Æsc fought with the Welsh and took *unārīmedlico hererēaf* ‘untold loot’ (*ASC A*), while in 584 Ceawlin *monige tūnas genom and unārīmedlice hererēaf* ‘took many towns and untold loot’ (*ASC A*). As late as 1054,

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32 Evans (1997, 125–31). The consequences could be dire when new sources of loot and tribute were no longer turning up, as documented by Timothy Reuter for the Carolingians (2006, 266–67).
the Anglo-Saxons evidently had not lost their taste for loot: in that year Earl Siward invaded Scotland, killed much of the land’s nobility, put King Macbeth to flight, and brought back _micele herehūðe swilce nān man ār ne begeat_ ‘much loot, such as no man had acquired before’ (_ASC D_).

An especially notable instance of looting in a historical source comes in Bede’s account of the conquest, in 686, of the Isle of Wight by the West-Saxon king Cædwalla, whom Aldhelm describes admiringly as _bello famosus et armis_ ‘famed for war and arms’. At this time the king, though not yet baptized, was already a promoter of Christianity and a patron of the Church, while Wight was _tota idolatriae dedita_ ‘entirely given up to idolatry’. Whether motivated by piety or the desire to find land for his own people (Bede does not say), Cædwalla decided to _stragica caede . . . exterminare_ ‘drive out with cruel slaughter’ all the natives of the island and replace them with settlers from his own territory. Further, he bound himself by an oath _quia, si cepisset insulam, quartam partem eius simul et praedae Domino daret_ ‘that if he captured the island he would give to the Lord a fourth part of it and of the loot’ (my translation). It is uncertain how much of the island’s population Cædwalla succeeded in driving out or killing. The severity of the campaign, however, is vividly illustrated by Bede’s account of two princes of the royal family of Wight who were captured and sentenced to death. A local abbot persuaded the king to allow him to instruct them in the Christian faith and baptize them; then, their souls having been made secure, their execution was carried out as previously ordered.

33 _HE iv.16; Aldhelm, Carmina ecclesiastica_ III, l. 17 (Ehwald 1919, 15). The date is from _ASC A_. This Cædwalla should not be confused with the British Cædwalla, mentioned above, p. 10, who was slain in battle with Oswald of Northumbria.

34 My translation. _Exterminare_ is often translated ‘exterminate’ (in Colgrave and Mynors (1969), ‘wipe out’), but modern ‘exterminate’ is not a good translation of _exterminare_ ‘place outside the boundaries’. The Old English translator understood _exterminare_ in this sense, then still in use, and translated it _ūt āmǣran_ (Miller 1890, ii. 306).
Bede preserved the story of the princes of Wight as a pious exemplum, not, apparently, because it was so extraordinary to exterminate (in the modern sense) the ruling family in a conquered prouincia. One wonders how often a similar slaughter took place as the small, older kingdoms of the Anglo-Saxons were absorbed into the larger ones.³⁵

Bede reports that Cædwalla gave 300 of Wight’s 1200 hides of land to his spiritual mentor, Bishop Wilfrid. Presumably he also fulfilled his vow to give one quarter of his praeda ‘loot’ (herehýðe in the Old English version) to the Church. If Bede sees an ethical problem in the Church receiving the loot seized in a program of what would now be called ethnic cleansing, he remains silent about it. Indeed, the English Church generally celebrated grants of land from monarchs and others without encouraging too much scrutiny of their origins: Eddius Stephanus’s Life of Wilfrid tells us that Cædwalla gave Wilfrid much land and other gifts, but mentions that king’s conquests only tangentially (Colgrave 1985, 84–85); a wall painting from as late as the early sixteenth century in Chichester Cathedral celebrates Cædwalla’s supposed grant of several estates in Sussex to Wilfrid without alluding in any way to the bloody conquests that enabled such pious munificence (see fig. 2).³⁶ Bede’s story of the conquest of Wight illustrates well the uses of loot and other proceeds of warfare, most of which went to reward Cædwalla’s followers and strengthen their loyalty, guaranteeing future service. But a substantial portion went to the Church in the person of Bishop Wilfrid, who understood these matters since he traveled with a warband himself (Colgrave 1985, 26–29). This gift was no doubt intended to secure God’s support for the king’s further military adventures.

Cædwalla’s reign was brief, though consequential: in 688, he abdicated, journeyed to

³⁵ For the early kingdoms generally, see Yorke (1997). For the role of Cædwalla in the formation of the West Saxon kingdom, see Yorke (1995, 52–93)

³⁶ The charter (S 230) that is the source of the painting by Lambert Barnard is generally thought to be spurious: see Kelly, Fontes Anglo-Saxonici.

Rome, there received baptism, and died a few days later. His epitaph, composed at the pope’s direction, begins by listing the things he had given up for the love of God:

Culmen, opes, subolem, pollentia regna, triumphos,
Exuuias, proceres, moenia, castra, lares,
Quaeque patrum uirtus et quae congesserat ipse
Ceadual armipotens, liquit amore Dei.

High rank and wealth, offspring, and mighty realms,
Triumphs and spoils, great nobles, cities, halls,
Won by his forbears’ prowess and his own—
All these great Cadwal left for love of God.

*Exuviae*, specifically loot stripped from corpses (Isidore accurately says *exuviae ab exuendo dictae, quia exuuntur* ‘*exuviae* are so called from *exuendo* [stripping], because they are stripped off’ (Lindsay 1911, XVIII.i.8), here appears among the perquisites of kingship, no more to be deprecated than power and wealth, fortresses, retainers and heirs. Indeed, neither prelates nor secular rulers of the early Middle Ages seem to have expected victorious warriors to leave loot uncollected on the battlefield. Even the pious British commanded by Bishop Germanus, who routed an army of Saxons and Picts by shouting “Alleluia” three times, rejoiced to gather the loot (*spolia*) scattered by their foes in panic-stricken flight (*HE* i.20).

37 The story is told by Bede, *HE* v.7 (for the date, see v.24) and also by Aldhelm, *Carmina Ecclesiastica* III, ll. 17–32 (Ehwald 1919, 15); trans. Lapidge and Rosier (1985, 14). Cædwalla was among the first of a number of Anglo-Saxon kings who abdicated to join the religious life or go on a pilgrimage (Stancliffe 1983).

Gift theory

For a more thorough understanding of the intense pleasure associated with loot, and answers to the questions I raised at the beginning of this chapter, we must follow the treasure as it leaves the battlefield and enters the Economy of Honor, where it circulates as gift. Fortunately, gift-exchange in Beowulf has been intensively studied by several critics and is now reasonably well understood.

Twentieth-century studies of gift-exchange in Beowulf owe a great debt to modern anthropology. So does the present study. Yet it cannot be stated often enough that anthropological theory must be used with caution when one’s aim is to understand a poem rather than a society inhabited by flesh-and-blood people. An anthropologist who was able to travel in time to conduct a first-hand study of gift-exchange in an Anglo-Saxon village would seek to understand the phenomenon in a number of contexts—for example, kinship structures, systems of land-tenure, commodity exchange, and religious ritual; every aspect of a culture interacts in complex ways with other aspects. But, as I discussed at the beginning of this chapter, the phenomenon I call the Economy of Honor is really a narrow slice of an economic system, presented in Beowulf as if it were the whole. Further, it is an aspect of a society imagined as ancient, distant, and pagan. Beowulf is suffused with awareness of these differences from the poet’s own time and place, so we should not assume that the Economy of Honor as the poet represents it matches precisely a phenomenon in his own culture.

We bring the tools of anthropology to the world of Beowulf much as we might to the Troy of Chaucer’s Troilus and Criseyde. To use such tools to deepen our understanding of either ancient Troy or fourteenth-century London would rather obviously be a serious mistake. But a poet representing an imagined world will, if possible, present it as plausible, possessing an internal coherence comparable to that of our mundane reality—though
inevitably simplified and perhaps idealized. It will be a world where people behave as we expect them to given the circumstances in which the poet places them—one that is meant to be apprehended by applying the same understanding with which we try to make sense of the world we actually live in. Thus I think it is valid and fair to bring anthropological theory (a tool for making sense of our world) to bear on *Beowulf*, as long as our methods do not lead us to confuse the world of the poem with the real one.

One of the foundational texts of modern anthropology is Marcel Mauss’s *Essai sur le don* (1923–24).\(^\text{39}\) Observing that in archaic societies (and modern ones as well), gifts are “obligatorily reciprocated,” Mauss asks, “what power resides in the object” to make that so (3).\(^\text{40}\) His claim, which has held up well over eighty-five years,\(^\text{41}\) is that in a gift economy, as opposed to a mercantile economy, objects are not “alienable”—the giver of a gift is never truly severed from it. “What imposes obligation in the present received and exchanged, is the fact that the thing received is not inactive. Even when it has been abandoned by the giver, it still possesses something of him. Through it the giver has a hold over the beneficiary.”\(^\text{42}\) This “hold” is released only when the beneficiary returns a


\(^{40}\) P. 3. “Quelle est la règle de droit et d’intérêt qui, dans les sociétés de type arriéré ou archaïque, fait que le présent reçu est obligatoirement rendu? Quelle force y a-t-il dans la chose qu’on donne qui fait que le donataire la rend?” (emphasis in Mauss’s text).

\(^{41}\) Subsequent scholarship has more often elaborated than contested his basic findings. I do not intend to survey scholarship on gift theory here, but will simply refer to individual works as necessary. Anglo-Saxonists looking for a survey would do well to read the chapter on “Gift and Exchange” in Surber-Meyer (1994) or, for a more extended treatment, the early chapters in Bazelmans (1999).

\(^{42}\) Pp. 11–12. “Ce qui, dans le cadeau reçu, échangé, oblige, c’est que la chose reçue n’est pas inactive. Même abandonnée par le donateur, elle est encore quelque chose de lui. Par elle, il a prise sur le
gift of equal or greater value. The gift, meanwhile, in being passed from hand to hand, may acquire its own “name, a personality, a history, and even a tale.” Always, the honor (honneur) of both giver and recipient are at stake in an exchange, for one acquires honor by giving, and one loses honor by receiving—at least until the gift is reciprocated.

The killing of the Swedish king Ongentheow by Eofor, Higelac’s thegn, illustrates how simply Mauss’s theory of gift-exchange can be applied to Beowulf. After Eofor slays the old king, he loots the body, taking mail-coat, sword and helmet. He presents these tokens of his deed to Higelac (2977–88), who reciprocates with even greater gifts—land, rings and his own daughter as a hāmweordunge ‘honor to the home’ (2993–98). For Higelac to fail to reciprocate with greater gifts would have brought dishonor on him. Because the king’s return gift is greater, Eofor is under an obligation which, as poets are fond of reminding us, must be repaid by continued military service. Such service is variously useful—in national defense, for example—but as regards the Economy of Honor, it must be understood as labor applied to the acquisition, by means of killing and looting, of yet more treasure for presentation to the king.

Heremod, the poem’s model of a bad king (901–15, 1709–22), shows us how failure to

bénéficiaire.”
43 P. 24. “chacun a un nom, une personnalité, une histoire, même un roman.”
44 Gregory (1982, 55) quotes a study of Highland Burma by E. R. Leach: “although an individual of high-class status is defined as one who receives gifts (e.g. ‘thigh-eating chief’) he is all the time under a social compulsion to give away more than he receives. Otherwise he would be reckoned mean and a mean man runs the danger of losing status.” In Old English poetry, of course, a king is defined as one who gives gifts, not one who receives them; yet both giving and receiving are essential to persons of high status in either culture.
45 On the warrior’s obligation to repay gifts with service, see Beowulf 20–25, and also 2864–72; see also The Battle of Finnesburh 39–40 and The Battle of Maldon 194–97.
46 That military force can also directed towards such useful ends as defending the realm is not completely ignored in Beowulf: see ll. 1769–73.
make return gifts can lead to ruin. He resembles Prudentius’s Vices in that he desires wealth for its own sake, and his greed weakens him as it weakens them. In failing to give gifts, he both loses honor and also weakens his warmaking ability (his *hild sweðrode* ‘warfare subsided’ 901), for a warrior to whom no return is made for his gift of loot has little reason to fight again for so miserly a lord. Heremod’s greed must have been comprehensible to royal members of *Beowulf*’s audience, who had to struggle to fund their warlike activities.  

The expenses of a real-world king attempting to engage in Beowulfian gift-giving practices must always have exceeded his income, unless he resorted to such unheroic measures as taxation, but the ring-givers of Old English poetry, where normal accounting practices do not apply, seem able to give more than they receive with little effort.

Heremod’s violence is connected with his lack of generosity in more than a general way. Giving can be aggressive, as everyone knows who has abided more than a few birthdays in the world. The potlatch ceremonies studied by Mauss are extravagant competitions among rival chieftains, who win honor by giving away or destroying property. Andrew Cowell, studying continental historical and literary texts of the central Middle Ages, writes of gift-giving as a kind of violence and makes a good case that, for example, William of Normandy’s extravagant gifts to Harold Godwineson, described in the *Gesta Guillelmi* of William of Poitiers, are intended to force Harold to submit to his will (2007, 19–29). In *Beowulf*, the gift is a means of forcing a man to do what he might not do voluntarily. A thegn’s gift of loot compels the king to part with some of his wealth;

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47 In a passage added to his translation of Boethius, King Alfred reflects on those things that a king has to supply to support the three classes of person necessary for effective rule (it seems he is thinking primarily of the warrior class): *land to būgianne ond gifa ond wǣpnu ond mete ond ealu ond clāþas* ‘land to cultivate, gifts, weapons, food, ale and clothing (excerpted in Baker 2007, 213). An army was clearly expensive to maintain.
Baker, *Loot and the Economy of Honor*, p. 27

the king’s gift compels the thegn to risk his life in battle or lose honor, as Wiglaf claims that Beowulf’s ten chosen warriors do when they run away from the dragon (2864–74, 2884–91). A leader who does not bend men to his will through gifts can do so only through force: that is why Heremod, unwilling to give gifts, *brēt bolgenmōd bēodgenēatas, eaxlgesteallan* ‘angrily slew his table-companions and shoulder-comrades’ (1713–14).

Despite the element of compulsion, the *Beowulf* poet portrays gifts as good and desirable and, quite generally, received with undisguised pleasure.° Somehow, in defiance of the expectations raised by our Maussian analysis, receiving a gift can actually enhance one’s honor, as Beowulf’s gift to the coastguard does:

    Hē þām bātwearde bunden golde
    swurd geserealde þæt hē syððan wæs
    on meodubence māþme þȳ weorþra
    yrfelāfe. (1900–03)

    He gave a sword bound with gold
to the boat-guard so that he afterwards was
worthier on the mead-bench because of that treasure
and heirloom.

In a classic article published above fifty years ago, Ernst Leisi outlined how honor might be conveyed with a gift. According to Leisi, the possession of fine things is an infallible sign of a Beowulfian warrior’s worthiness (*Manneswert*)—so much so that “it is impossible in Old English to say of someone, ‘he is rich, but a bad and unlucky man,’ for virtue or

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48 For example, see Beowulf’s reaction to Hrothgar’s gifts at 1025–26 and 1785 and the Geatish company’s eager survey of them at 1884–85; also the poet’s praise of Beowulf’s gifts to Higelac at 2166–70.
Baker, *Loot and the Economy of Honor*, p. 28

good fortune or both are already included in the concept ‘rich.’” For the Old English poet, the intrinsic value of a sword or fine piece of jewelry is less important than its function as a reward, or advance payment, for the performance of worthy deeds. Such rewards and payments, Leisi insists, are not to be understood in a narrowly economic sense, and the bond they create between lord and retainer is not merely contractual: the bond is moral and emotional, and the rewards and payments confer honor along with wealth. The lord who confers honor by gifts of treasure, and elicits vows of loyalty and bravery, is at the center of the ethical, economic and political system that Leisi calls the *Ehrensold-Ordnung*—an early glimpse of our Economy of Honor.

Among those studies that have taken an anthropological approach to Beowulf, Michael Cherniss’s *Ingeld and Christ* (1972, 79–101) is particularly relevant to our project. Developing Leisi’s argument in several interesting directions, Cherniss argues that the relationship between the individual warrior and his treasure is the same as that between groups and their “collective wealth”: the treasure deposited by the Last Survivor (2233–70) thus represents the “collective honor of the tribe” (1972, 97). Cherniss defines “treasure” broadly, in terms of its function (as I do here): Grendel’s arm counts as “a kind of treasure,” as do Grendel’s head and the hilt that Beowulf brings back from the mere (1972, 84).


50 Fassen wir jetzt die einzelnen Aspekte zusammen, so ergibt sich das folgende ethisch-ökonomisch-politische System, das wir Ehrensold-Ordnung nennen wollen” (1952, 266–67).

51 See especially Berger and Leicester (1974), Surber-Meyer (1994), and Hill (1995). I will discuss the work of Berger and Leicester and Hill as appropriate; Surber-Meyer is a useful guide both to the anthropological scholarship and to the many mentions of wealth and gift-giving in Old English poetry.
Perhaps Cherniss’s most important contribution, for the purposes of the present study, is to connect the honor associated with treasure to the violent act that introduces it into an economy:

In the heroic system of values, the plundering of enemies slain in battle is an integral part of worthy conduct. The treasure which a warrior gains by plundering is the concrete representation of the honor which he has won in battle and is, indeed, the only tangible proof of the honor and esteem to which his deeds entitle him. When a warrior is slain in battle, the honor which he has won by his former deeds passes with his war-implements to his slayer, who holds both the treasure and the veneration until he, in turn, is vanquished (1972, 92–93).

A warrior’s worthy deed—killing an enemy in combat—confers honor upon his weapon as the weapon confers honor on the warrior in a perfectly reciprocal relationship (1972, 94–97). Another way to state the point is that a warrior’s wealth is no more alienable when it is stripped from his corpse than when he gives it away. Whatever part of him would have gone with the gift goes also with the loot. This “something” of the owner adds value beyond what is in an item’s materials, workmanship or usefulness. The ability of treasure to store up some aspects of those who have owned it explains the extraordinary value placed on such objects as the swords of Ongentheow and Eanmund (Beowulf 2611–19, 2985–98) and how these items acquire narratives, as Mauss observed in other cultures: the narratives record the deeds and honor associated with them (Cherniss 1972, 96–97).

I would add to Cherniss’s observations that the loot collected on the battlefield must be valued not as one would a commercial product, by setting a price on it, but rather as a gift. What makes one gift greater or less than another is not its intrinsic value, but rather what C. A. Gregory calls “rank” or “exchange-order”: “Objects as gifts have this exchange-order rather than exchange-value, because the relationship between them is ordinal rather
than cardinal” (Gregory 1982, 48). A major difference between gifts and money (or things that one buys with money) is that one cannot add up a number of low-ranking gifts to equal one high-ranking gift as one can add up pennies to make a dollar: the rank of a multi-part gift is no higher than that of its highest-ranking part. We can perhaps catch a glimpse of Beowulfian ranking in passages that mention the bestowal of multiple gifts: the highest-ranking one seems to be reserved for the rhetorically emphatic position at the end of the list:

- Hrothgar to Beowulf: standard; helmet; mail coat; sword (1020–24)
- Hrothgar to Beowulf: eight horses; Hrothgar’s saddle (1035–42)
- Wealhtheow to Beowulf: rings and garment; fine necklace (1193–1201)
- Higelac to Beowulf: sword; 7,000 in land with hall and lordly throne (2190–2199)
- Higelac to Eofor: 100,000 in land and rings; Higelac’s daughter (2995–98)

Garments, jewelry and battle gear seem to rank below land, but the sword is the greatest of gifts of battle gear. Anthropologists have called a woman the “supreme gift,” and here a king’s daughter—an appropriate return for the gift of a king’s battle-gear—ranks above gifts of land and jewelry. These lists confirm David C. Van Meter’s observation that gifts with a royal connection are ranked above otherwise equivalent objects (1996, 176).

As with gifts, so with the dead and the treasures taken from them: rank matters more than intrinsic value, and one cannot measure a warrior’s accomplishments by simply adding up his kills or the monetary value of the loot he has taken. His honor cannot exceed that of the greatest warrior he has slain.

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52 The high status of the sword is clear from the number of poetic words available and the care that poets take in describing it (Davidson 1962, 121–58). Van Meter (1996, 176) cites the scarcity of swords relative to other weapons in Anglo-Saxon burials as evidence of their status.

53 Gregory (1982, 21, 63) ascribes the phrase to both F. E. Williams (writing in 1936) and C. Lévi-Strauss (writing in 1949).
An implication of Cherniss’s valuable study that he touches on but does not explore fully is that a man and his wealth are in some ways equivalent.\textsuperscript{54} In particular, Cherniss’s interpretation of the treasure that accompanies Scyld on his last voyage and that which is burned with Beowulf’s corpse is that, “since the virtues of these warriors have died with them (except, of course, in the minds of the living), the outward symbols of these virtues must also ‘die’ and be buried” (1972, 85). Similarly, the Last Survivor’s treasure “dies” with the death of the last member of the group that owned it, and must be buried (1972, 97).

The idea hinted at by Cherniss is developed more fully by Jos Bazelmans in By Weapons Made Worthy, a study of exchange in Beowulf based on the work of Mauss and later anthropologists. Bazelmans’s concern is to map the relationships among the members, both living and dead, of the Beowulfian community, showing how children are constituted as complete adults through rituals of exchange, and dead kings as ancestors whose qualities are remembered. Though the whole argument of Bazelmans’s book deserves careful study, I am interested primarily in his ideas about the “something” of the giver (to recall Mauss’s formulation) that is conveyed with a gift. This constituent of the self, according to Bazelmans, is what anthropologists call “image”—the external view of the subject in its various aspects. For this concept he uses the Old English word weorð (corresponding to what I have been calling “honor”), which neatly packages ideas of wealth, beauty and perceived virtue. Whenever one who is weorðlic ‘honorable’ gives a gift, weorð is conveyed as well and becomes a constituent of the recipient’s person. An object (a gift) and a subject (a giver or recipient) can both have weorð, and the object’s rank-value, measured as an amount of weorð, is the same as that of the subject; thus Bazelmans says that object and subject are “commensurable.”

\textsuperscript{54} Michael J. Enright has come to a similar conclusion from a historian’s point of view (1998, 316–24).
Loot in the Economy of Honor

Applying the findings of these scholars, we can take an overview of the workings of the Economy of Honor. Because a warrior and his treasure are commensurable, sharing the property of honor, when that warrior meets a violent end, his killer carries off his honor with his belongings. Because giving a gift always increases one’s honor, the killer’s honor is further augmented when he presents the loot to his king. Having received this gift of loot—that is, of wealth and honor—the king “banks” it on behalf of the nation in the hord ‘treasury’, which thus stores up both the wealth and the honor of the nation. To defend this hord is as vital a royal function as to defend territory and people, as the Brunanburh poet says of Æthelstan and his brother Eadmund: land ealgodon, hord and hāmas ‘they defended the land—its treasury and homes’. From the hord the king makes his return gift, and in doing so he transmutes the honor that the warrior has won with his own hand, by killing and taking, into that which is conferred by the good opinion of others. This is dōm or mǣrðo, the fame for having done great deeds in battle, and it is what every warrior values above all else.

We can carry this analysis a step further. It is not only wealth and honor that get transmitted with a gift of loot, but the deed itself—the “credit” for the killing. In receiving Ongentheow’s gear from Eofor, Higelac becomes bonan Ongenþēoes ‘Ongentheow’s killer’ (1968), even though Eofor delivered the killing stroke and continues to be remembered as performer of the deed. As the king embodies the nation, the nation assumes collective responsibility for the deed along with the king. One can say with equal accuracy that Eofor, or Higelac, or the Geats killed Ongentheow, for Eofor’s violent and praiseworthy deed has been traded upwards to the top of the social hierarchy and diffused down again with the king’s gifts, until any of Higelac’s Geatish warriors can say, “we are the killers.”

From the perspective of the bereaved and vengeful enemy, it does not matter much
who wielded the sword, once a killing has been nationalized in this way. A case in point comes in the context of Beowulf’s prediction of the way in which a planned marriage between Hrothgar’s daughter Freawaru and Ingeld of the Heathobards is likely to fail. Beowulf imagines a scene in which an old Heathobard, having spotted a Danish member of Freawaru’s retinue carrying a sword long ago stripped from a comrade’s corpse, incites the comrade’s son to kill the Dane (and, presumably, recover the sword). The old Heathobard contemptuously calls this Dane þāra banena byre nāthwylces ‘the son of one or another of those killers’ (2053): so he is not the killer, and not necessarily the son of the killer, but just someone in the next generation along who happens to possess the sword now. How did he get it? After being seized as loot, the sword would have been given to the Danish king, who might have given it back to the killer as part of his return gift, kept it in the hord for later presentation to someone else, or, as seemingly attested by the recently discovered Staffordshire Hoard, broken it into pieces to be melted down or re-used. The Heathobards do not know how often the sword has changed hands since it entered the Danish economy or whether the present owner received it by gift or inheritance, and they seem not to care much. In their eyes he morðres gylpeð ‘is boasting of that murder’ (2055) in wearing and displaying it, and this “boast” makes him ealdres scyldig ‘answerable with his life’ (2061). Yet revenge, and recovery of the dead man’s honor, could be accomplished by killing any Dane at all. They are all equally answerable.

55 The Staffordshire Hoard may be taken as a reminder that one of the standard epithets for an Anglo-Saxon lord is sinces brytta ‘breaker of treasure’; brytta also comes to mean ‘lord’. In Norse skaldic poetry too, allusions to a king’s breaking of treasure are frequent.

56 The relevant definition in BT, s.v. scyldig, is II. “responsible for, liable for, chargeable with an ill result, (1) with gen.” The first of the quotations illustrates a sense in which the scyldig one is liable to forfeit a thing in the genitive case; and this is a common idiom, e.g. Gif ceorl būton wīfes wīsdōme déoflum gelde, hē sī ealra his āhtan scyldig ‘If a commoner offers to devils without his wife’s knowledge, let him be liable to forfeit all his possessions’ (Laws of Wihtred, 11).
The operation of the Economy of Honor can be observed just as well in *Waltharius* as in *Beowulf*. Indeed, the narrative arc of the Latin poem is much like that of the first two-thirds of the Old English one: a young warrior comes of age, winning honor by killing foes. The treasure he acquires in the course of the action is interesting mainly as the material manifestation of the honor he has won. Waltharius, like some of the heroes of Icelandic saga, is a freelance freebooter: he has declared his independence of Attila, and he has yet to return to his native realm of Aquitaine, where he will presumably have to answer to his father, King Alphere. In the meantime, the honor he wins is entirely his own. Peter Dronke states that Waltharius and Hiltgunt help themselves to some of the Hunnish treasury because “they see [it] as the tribute their own parents had been compelled to pay the conqueror” (1991, 30). This surmise, if true (the poem does not make their motives explicit), would mean that they are commendably aware of the political context of their actions, but there is reason to doubt that they are out to recover the tribute. Payment of tribute is a preemptive offering of loot, a stipulation that, were a battle to be fought, one would lose. Like loot, tribute conveys both value and honor: paying it is much like losing a battle, only without the inconvenience of being killed. Waltharius could recover by stealth the monetary value of the treasure that his father paid to the Huns, but he could recover his father’s lost honor only by public and widely approved acts, and theft is not among these. But stealing wealth that one has already won honorably might be acceptable. This, I suspect, is why the poet emphasizes the magnitude of the victories Waltharius has won on Attila’s behalf and pointedly mentions the loot his army gathers at the last of these. The wealth he makes off with is in a sense his own,

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57 Though Guntharius comes in for a good bit of criticism in the course of the poem (he is proud and stubborn), his determination to recover tribute by fighting for it is far more likely to win him honor than stealing it would have been.

58 The Hunnish army *super occisos ruit et spoliaverat omnes* ‘rushes upon the slain and loots them all’
since by his own prowess he has contributed far more than Attila himself to the size of the Hunnish treasury. While the Attila of this poem is not the monster we meet in, say, the Old Icelandic Atlakviða, he is far from an ideal king: he is slack, and his relationship with Waltharius is exploitative. He deserves the humiliation and dishonor that the narrative inflicts upon him far more than he does the gold in his treasury.

At the beginning of this chapter I asked why Waltharius does not take the tunics of the men he has killed and why the fact is worth mentioning. A modern reader will perhaps assume that he leaves the corpses clothed out of respect for his enemies. Not all medieval victors were so respectful, though. The looted corpses depicted in the margins of the last panels of the Bayeux Tapestry are entirely naked, and that is also the condition of the corpses in the Egil panel of the Franks Casket (see figs. 3, 4, 5). Undergarments seem to have been considered too valuable to leave behind. But the standard battle-kit mentioned as loot in the poems we have looked at includes only swords, helmets, mail-coats, horses and jewelry; presumably nothing else could convey honor to the taker. The Economy of Honor excludes all transfers of wealth in which honor is not transferred as well: this is why, as we saw at the beginning of this chapter, Beowulf shows no interest in commerce and the collection of rents and taxes. Indeed, it is true in heroic poetry, as in Psychomachia and the later texts that Andrew Cowell studies, that to desire wealth for its intrinsic value is deeply dishonorable. By mentioning that Waltharius leaves his foes’

(207, my translation).

59 The modern reader, accustomed to plentiful and inexpensive clothing made of synthetic fabrics and sewn by underpaid laborers in third-world countries, may not suspect how expensive clothing could be in earlier ages. For Anglo-Saxon England, one indication is that persons of rank routinely bequeathed rather ordinary garments in their wills: the will of Wynflæd, for example, mentions two tunecean 'tunics' (Whitelock 1930, 14).

60 See especially his comments on “William the Conqueror’s accusation of greed against Harold” in William of Poitiers’s Gesta Guillelmi (2007, 43–46).
tunics and other items, the poet points out that he is not subject to the vice of greed: he desires only honor.

In *Beowulf* one can easily see how the hero’s acquisition of treasure marks the growth of his honor and fame. After each of his Danish monster fights Beowulf presents his worthless loot to Hrothgar, as we have seen, and receives rich gifts in return. With each round of gift-giving his honor increases. These gifts do not only measure Beowulf’s honor, however; they also help to define his relationship with Hrothgar, which his victory over the Grendelkin has utterly transformed. On Beowulf’s arrival in Denmark, Hrothgar saw him as the son of a man whom he had once helped, the heir to an old obligation (457–72). When Hrothgar planned to offer his young visitor treasure (384–85), he surely had in mind gifts of the sort that a lord typically gives to a thegn. But the service Beowulf actually performs—he restores to the king the chief symbol of his earthly power—cannot be so easily rewarded.

The worthlessness of Beowulf’s loot is like Waltharius’s leaving the tunics in that it tells us he is not greedy. But more than that, its worthlessness signals the impossibility of calculating the magnitude of an appropriate return gift. In representing the service that he has performed, Beowulf’s gift is symbolically nothing less than the kingdom of Denmark—and what return gift could top that? John M. Hill has argued that Hrothgar implicitly offers Beowulf a place in the Danish royal succession: such, he suggests, are the implications of Hrothgar’s “adoption” of Beowulf (946–48), the gifts he gives, and various indicators in the characters’ speeches (1982; 1995, 87–100). Hill’s analysis is perceptive and subtle, but in the end I am left with doubts that Hrothgar’s words and actions add up to an offer of the succession. Hrothgar declares that he will *frēogan* ‘love’ Beowulf as a son

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61 Berger and Leicester (1974, 47–49) track in detail the progress of negotiations between Hrothgar and Beowulf and do a good job of stating what is at stake. My own reading emphasizes Hrothgar’s loss of honor less than Berger and Leicester do: he has much to spare.
(948), and later Beowulf reminds him that he was *on fæder stære* ‘in the place of a father’ (1479). In both places the rhetoric seems to suggest a relationship like that of father and son in its emotional content rather than actual adoption with all its implications for inheritance and succession. Hill has noted the “kingly” quality of some of Hrothgar’s gifts (1995, 98–99): a golden standard such as goes before a king in battle; a mail coat (perhaps other battle gear as well) that, we later learn, belonged to King Heorogar; and Hrothgar’s own saddle (1020–24, 1037–42, 2156–59). These items are consistent with Hrothgar’s view, later expressed, that the Geats would do well to choose Beowulf as their king, should they find themselves in need of one (1845–53). That view arises from the nature and magnitude of Beowulf’s services and gifts. However, one gift that Hrothgar surely would have given had he considered Beowulf a member of the Danish royal house, or even a Danish thegn, is absent here. The king gives him no land, but only portable gifts: things he can carry with him when, as everyone expects, he goes home.

As Beowulf’s gifts to Hrothgar consist merely of a couple of lumps of flesh and a bit of gold, it would be easy for the king, in reciprocating, to match their intrinsic value; but honor resides in the symbolic more than in the intrinsic value of a gift, and the symbolic value of these objects is precisely equal to everything Hrothgar owns. As a king’s return gift, like Higelac’s to Eofor, must be greater than a warrior’s gift of loot, Beowulf’s gifts to Hrothgar *cannot* be reciprocated. If the old king were instantly to abdicate, handing all of Denmark over to Beowulf, even that would be insufficient, merely matching and not exceeding what he has received. For this reason, Hrothgar’s gifts, though no truthful

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62 See also Higelac’s gift to Beowulf (2190–99). We are not told that Onela gave Weohstan more than the gear he had stripped from Eamund’s body (2616–18), but it would be unthinkable to give no more to a warrior who had slain a rival claimant for the Swedish throne.

63 Interestingly, in the film adaptation of Beowulf directed by Robert Zemeckis (2007 screenplay by Neil Gaiman and Robert Avary), Hrothgar does abdicate, handing his kingdom over to Beowulf—
person can find fault with them (1046–49), impose no obligation on Beowulf. I suspect that Hrothgar, who asks nothing of the hero beyond love and alliance, understands this very well.

Wealhtheow is another matter entirely. Someone has told her (mē man sägde 1175) that Hrothgar would habban ‘have’ (1176) Beowulf as a son,\(^6\) a formulation vague enough to embrace both what Hrothgar means—he will love Beowulf as if he were a son—and what she fears—he will adopt Beowulf, introducing a threat to her sons’ inheritance. This dramatic situation has been largely understood for many years.\(^5\) But Wealhtheow’s role in the narrative, I suspect, is a greater one, namely to dramatize the difficulty of defining Beowulf’s new relationship with the Danes. She can read for herself in the fraught language of seating in the hall—Beowulf is positioned next to her own sons (1188–91)—that he has far exceeded the status of a thegn. Yet receiving him as a member of the Danish royal house would risk dangerously destabilizing the delicately balanced politics of the realm. Neither thegn nor prince, Beowulf has escaped all the available categories.

Wealhtheow attempts to bring the unruliness of Beowulf’s status under control by giving him gifts. That she can, at least in principle, do so is unquestionable. In the Economy of Honor, a queen is much like a king. She receives gifts of treasure from warriors, “banks” wealth and honor on the nation’s behalf, and gives gifts from her hord, conferring honor and imposing obligation.\(^6\) Wealhtheow’s gifts include two arm-rings, a

and then commits suicide. What he is passing on is not so much a kingdom as a curse.

\(^6\) Klaeber points out in his note to 1176 that Wealhtheow was present when Hrothgar “adopted” Beowulf, having been depicted entering the hall with him a few lines before (923–24). This narrative detail seems to have been forgotten in the meantime.

\(^5\) See especially Schücking (1933, 40–43), who sees Wealhtheow as reacting (with great queenly and womanly delicacy) to Hrothgar’s “adoption” of Beowulf.

\(^6\) For a quick summary, see Klein (2006, 98).
garment\textsuperscript{67} and a necklace, comparable in its magnificence to the Brōsinga mene ‘necklace of the Brosingas’ (1199), an object famous to the audience of Beowulf, if not to us. These, like Hrothgar’s gifts, are royal, being explicitly identified as þēodgestrēona ‘national treasures’ (1218). The obligation she would like to impose on Beowulf, both with the gifts she gives now and with her promises of future rewards, is to support her sons. She does not ask him to serve them as a thegn: both her gifts and her language reveal her understanding that she cannot hope to fix Beowulf’s status as what Hill calls “a much honoured retainer among retainers” (1995, 103) even if she might like to do so. When she asks him to be lāra līðe ‘kindly in precepts’ and dǣdum gedēfe ‘gentle in deeds’ to her sons (1220, 1227), her words do not evoke kinship (Hill 1995, 102) so much as seniority and rank: she is imagining Beowulf as one who is in a position to advise and instruct her sons if he wishes, and whose choice it is to treat them either gently or harshly.

The status that Wealhtheow assigns to Beowulf is reflected also in his parting words to Hrothgar, a speech largely taken up with magnanimous promises of aid, should Hrothgar find himself oppressed by his neighbors:

\begin{verbatim}
Gif ic þæt gefricge ofer flōda begang
þæt þec ymbstittend egesan þywað
swā þec hetende hwīlum dydon,
ic ðē þusenda þegna bringe
hæleþa tō helpe. Ic on Higelāc wāt,
Gēata dryhten, þēah ðē he geong sȳ
folces hyrde, þæt hē mec fremman wile
\end{verbatim}

\textsuperscript{67} The garment is called simply a \textit{hrægl} in the text (1195, 1217). The word can refer to a mail coat (cf. 454), but only, I surmise from the quotations in BT, when the context is quite explicit, as in compounds like \textit{beadohrægl}. 
If I should hear, over the expanse of the sea,
that neighbors are oppressing you with terror,
as enemies formerly did to you,
I will bring a thousand thegns
and warriors to your aid. I know of Higelac,
even though he is young, that he will support me
with words and deeds, so that I can honor you well
and bring to your aid a forest of spears,
the help of [my] strength, wherever you are in need of men.

Beowulf speaks here for himself. Though confident of Higelac’s support, he does not bind
his king or his nation to any course of action. The thousand thegns he will bring to
Hrothgar’s aid are his own. Here, and in his promise to welcome the Danish prince
Hrethric to the Geatish court—a delayed response to Wealhtheow’s pleas—Beowulf
positions himself as patron and protector of the Danish royal house. With respect to the
Danes, Beowulf has achieved what Andrew Cowell calls “integrity” (2007, 20–25)—he has
no obligations to anyone in Hrothgar’s court, and from now on, whatever he does for
them he will do at his own pleasure. Beowulf’s statement that Hrothgar gave him gifts on
minne sylfe s dōm ‘according to my own judgment’ (2147), whatever its precise meaning in

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68 Orchard (2003, 219–22) argues that Wealhtheow’s speeches to Beowulf go unanswered. However, it
is possible to read 1836–38 as as a promise of help to one of her sons, and metonymically, I suspect,
both of them. I suggest, however, that this offer of support is not compelled by Wealhtheow’s gift.
its context,\textsuperscript{69} surely expresses this independence and integrity.

Beowulf may owe nothing to the Danes, but he is still Higelac’s thegn, and his actions on his return to the Geats are exactly what we would see had he slain a pair of Higelac’s enemies. He presents to his own beloved king much or all of the treasure he has won in Denmark—the return for his gifts to Hrothgar of Grendel’s body parts and the hilt—and in doing so donates both wealth and honor to the Geatish nation. In return Higelac gives him vastly greater wealth: not only Hrethel’s sword, but an extensive realm of his own with \textit{bold ond bregostōl} ‘hall and lordly throne’ (2190–96). Higelac’s status remains higher than that of Beowulf, who continues to repay his king’s gifts with military service (2490–93).\textsuperscript{70}

Beowulf’s gift of Wealhtheow’s necklace to Higelac’s queen Hygd is to be understood in the same way as his gifts of treasure to Higelac. We are not told whether she makes a return gift, but we are surely to assume that she does so. She is a good queen, not \textit{tō gnēað gifa Gēata lēodum} ‘too stingy with gifts to the people of the Geats’ (1930). In her generosity she follows the advice of \textit{Maxims I} 82–87 that a king and queen should both \textit{geofum gōd wesan} ‘be good with gifts’, and the queen in particular should \textit{rūmheort bēon mēarum ond māþmum} ‘be liberal with horses and treasures’.

Exchange and seizure

Although I have approached the subject of loot via theories of exchange, I must emphasize that looting is not a form of exchange, but rather violent seizure. A victor seizes the

\textsuperscript{69} See Biggs (2005, 728–30) for discussion and doubts.

\textsuperscript{70} The reading offered here is not incompatible with the interesting view, offered by Biggs (2005), that Higelac makes Beowulf his co-ruler on his return to the Geats. However, I find it difficult to reconcile lines 2166–71 with the tensions that Biggs finds within the Geatish polity. Indeed, the contrast between the political stability of the Geatish and the instability of the Danish royal house seems likely to be deliberate.
vanquished warrior’s life, fortune and honor all together and gives nothing in return.\textsuperscript{71} In the contest of battle as imagined in \textit{Beowulf}, \textit{Waltharius} and other poems, warriors risk their finest possessions—weapons, armor and jewelry—in a way that seems to the modern reader sheer madness. What present-day soldier would wear his dress uniform, service medals, and great-grandfather’s World War I revolver into combat? But in the context of the Economy of Honor it makes perfect sense. A warrior’s finery announces to friend and foe alike the honor that he has won in battle and that his lord has bestowed upon him by his gifts. Seeing it, friends know how much faith they may place in his prowess; foes know how much to fear him. But further, there seems to be an unspoken agreement among all combatants that they will stake their valuables in the game of skill and chance that is warfare. This is a winner-take-all game: the victor comes away laden with treasure, his honor exalted, while the defeated foe lies dishonored and very likely naked on the battlefield, his corpse picked over by the wolf, the raven and the eagle, whose constant presence warns that even the comfort of the funeral rite may be denied to him (see figs. 6 and 7).\textsuperscript{72}

On the battlefield warriors engage in socially sanctioned violence; elsewhere, the analogues of killing and looting are \textit{mansliht} ‘homicide’ and \textit{rēaflāc} ‘robbery’. Law and custom attempt to mitigate the socially disruptive effects of these crimes by converting them from seizures to exchanges. Famously, a killer in the Germanic world may pay the value of his victim to the family as \textit{wergild}, exchanging money or goods for the life he has

\textsuperscript{71} Miller’s observation about honor in Icelandic saga is relevant here: “The amount of honor in the Icelandic universe was perceived to be constant at best, and over the long run, it seemed to be diminishing. The men of the present generation were never quite the men of their great-grandfather’s time. Honor was thus, as a matter of social mathematics, acquired at someone else’s expense. When yours went up, someone else’s went down” (1990, 30).

\textsuperscript{72} For a discussion of unburied corpses and their meanings in \textit{Beowulf} and other Anglo-Saxon texts, see Owen-Crocker (2002).
taken. Failing that, the victim’s survivors may take revenge, forcing the exchange of one life for another.\textsuperscript{73} In the Laws of Ine, the logic of compensation for \textit{rēaflāc} is similar: the criminal must restore (\textit{āgife}) what he has taken (or presumably, in appropriate cases, an equivalent) and pay a penalty of sixty shillings. In either case, the ledger must be balanced at the end of the transaction, which involves not only life and wealth, but also honor: a dead man’s honor is restored by payment of \textit{wergild}, and the robbery victim’s honor is restored along with his goods.

But the warrior on the battlefield has no interest in exchange or balanced ledgers: His aim is to be one of the winners in the Economy of Honor. In the Icelandic saga, the type of character that best illustrates the disruptive effect of this warrior ethic away from the battlefield, on the farm, is the \textit{ǒjafnaðarmaðr}, the man who refuses either to pay compensation for his own acts or to accept compensation from others, who insists on taking more than his due, and who bristles with hostility, signaling to all that he is not to be trifled with (Miller 1990, 67). He may be a seriously dangerous man like Skammkel in \textit{Njál’s Saga}, whose devious manipulation of his weak-minded friend Otkel draws the hero Gunnar, up to that point notable for his restraint, into the first conflict that he is unable to resolve peacefully.\textsuperscript{74} Or he may be a violent yet clownish character like Víga-Hrapp ‘Killer-Hrapp’ in \textit{Laxdœla Saga}, whose orneriness persists even beyond his death, until Óláf Pái has his body burnt and so ends his hauntings.\textsuperscript{75} Glám of \textit{Grettis Saga} has several

\textsuperscript{73} Stefan Jurasinski has argued persuasively that revenge is not glorified in Old English law and literature to nearly the extent that critics have often imagined (2006, 90–110).

\textsuperscript{74} Sveinsson (1954, 120–46) trans. Cook (2001, 79–97). Skammkel is described as \textit{illgiarn ok lyginn, ðodæll ok illr viðreignar} “illnated and dishonest, difficult to deal with and hard to manage” (Sveinsson 1954, 120).

\textsuperscript{75} Sveinsson (1934, 19–20, 39–40, 66–6); trans. Magnusson and Pálsson (1969, 61–62, 77–81, 102–03). The saga writer says of Hrapp that \textit{fyrir þat er hann var ðodæll . . . en vildi ekki bœta þat er hann misgerði, þa flyði hann vestan} ‘because he was difficult to deal with . . . and would not pay
characteristics of the type: disliked by everyone, he describes himself as *skapstyggr* ‘irritable’ when he does not get his way; his selfish and impious insistence on satisfying his appetite when others are fasting brings about his death. Like Hrapp he becomes a *draugr*, a corporeal ghost capable of killing as well as terrorizing (Johnston and Faulkes 2001, 142–54). Glám is of course one of the closest analogues of Grendel, and this *ellorgæst* ‘alien spirit’, who kills without paying compensation, is the most prominent *ójafnaðarmaðr* in *Beowulf*:

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sibbe ne wolde
wið manna hwone mægenes Deniga,
feorhbealo feorran, fēa þingian;
ne þær nærig witenā wēnan þorfte
beorhtre bōte tō banan folmum. (154–58)
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he did not desire friendship

with any man of the Danish host,

compensation for crimes he had committed, he had fled from the west (*i.e.* from the Hebrides)’ (Sveinsson 1934, 19). Another Víga-Hrapp in the same saga is even more clownish: a braggart and obvious coward, he appears near the end of Ch. 63 and is killed near the beginning of Ch. 64 (Sveinsson 1934, 190–91; Magnusson and Pálsson 1969, 206–07). Yet a third Víga-Hrapp, in *Njal’s Saga*, is also pseudo-comic: he helps himself to others’ food, dallies with a benefactor’s daughter, robs and burns a temple, and is finally killed by Grim and Helgi Njálsson (Sveinsson 1954, 209–20, 225–29, 234; Cook 2001, 140–49, 153–57, 160).

76 The resemblance of the Glám episode of *Grettis Saga* and *Beowulf* was first noted by Guðbrandur Vigfússon (1878, xlix), who described it as “a late version of the famous Beowulf Legend.” He continues, “Gretti’s fight with Glam, and afterwards with the troll-wife and the monster below the water-fall, is thus the Icelandic version of the Gothic hero’s struggle with Grendel and his witchmother.” Fjalldal (1998) denies any connection between *Beowulf* and *Grettir’s Saga*, but of course there are many possible positions between Guðbrandur Vigfússon’s and that of Fjalldal, e.g. the nuanced reading of Orchard (1995, 140–68).
to cease the life-taking, settle with wealth;
nor had any of the counsellors reason to expect
bright compensation from the killer’s hands.

As the violence of the őjafnaðarmaðr is inappropriate in the Icelandic countryside, so Grendel’s attacks are inappropriate in the royal hall. It is shocking enough that he kills so outrageously and eats his prey (metaphorically hūðe ‘loot’, 124); the setting in which he does so makes his deeds even worse, for they violate the peace and amity of the hall—a serious offense under the laws of Æthelberht, and sometimes capital under Ine and Alfred.77

The good warrior of Beowulf does not fight in the king’s hall or attack his fellow countrymen, but when confronting foes on the battlefield the attitudes of the őjafnaðarmaðr are appropriate and praiseworthy. Further, custom does not demand that the warrior who has won treasure and honor by killing foes “settle with wealth,” surrendering what he has won. In the view of the victorious warrior, his possession of treasure and the honor that goes with it is fully justified: he has proved the superiority of his claim to these things by killing the man who possessed them before. After Higelac’s death in Frisia, we are told, Beowulf carries thirty sets of battle-gear down to the sea (2361). It is a great feat of strength, to be sure, as is swimming home over the North Sea with so much weight, if that is what the text describes.78 But in marveling at such feats we should not lose sight of the more significant point that in the battle that claimed the life of his king, Beowulf has killed thirty men, carrying off their honor with their gear. In the

77 Laws of Æthelberht 2, 3, 5; Laws of Ine 6; Laws of Alfred 7 (Liebermann 1898, 3, 52–55, 90–91).
78 For an overview of the controversy concerning this passage, see Fulk, Bjork and Niles (2008), notes to ll. 2361 and 2367. Briefly, most critics believe that Beowulf swam from Frisia to Geatland with thirty sets of battle gear on his arm, but some maintain that he went home by boat. I take no position on this controversy here.
world of this poem, a warrior wins honor by killing foes, not by lifting weights. And like the Danes humiliated by Grendel’s numerically similar depredations, the Franks and Frisians have no reason to expect compensation from Beowulf’s hand. Nor have they any reasonable prospect of exacting revenge, since he is protected by his own formidable power, by the great distance between Frisia and Geatland, and by the collective responsibility of the Geats for the killing that they have done in battle.

My concern in this chapter has been to show how violence and the looting of the slain are essential to the system of exchange as observed by Beowulf critics. The killing of a foe introduces both wealth and honor into the heroic economy, and as these goods circulate, the violent act circulates with them. Wealth, honor and violence are fungibles in the Economy of Honor. To illustrate this idea, I have chosen straightforward examples from Beowulf and Waltharius—tales of victory in which a hero’s acquisition of wealth and honor is easy to understand. Not all the heroic tales of Beowulf are straightforward, though, and not all are of victory.

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79 The Grendeline aspects of Beowulf’s performance in this battle have been noted: thirty is the number of men killed by Grendel in his first visit to Heorot, and Beowulf kills at least one of his foes with his bare hands (2506–08). Refs.

Fig. 1. *Prudentius.jpg* Avarice with loot abandoned by the fleeing Vices. London, British Library, MS Cotton Cleopatra C. viii, fol. 23v.

Fig. 2. *caedwalla.jpg* Cædwalla’s supposed donation of Sussex land to Bishop Wilfrid in 686 is idealized in an early sixteenth-century wall painting in Chichester Cathedral. Cædwalla had conquered Sussex and killed its king not long before. (HE iv.15).

Fig. 3. *franks_egil.jpg* The prone figures in the Egil panel of the Franks Casket appear to have been stripped of their gear (except, curiously, their shields). The figure bending over this naked corpse seems to be in mourning.
Baker, *Loot and the Economy of Honor*, p. 48

Fig. 4. <bayeux1.jpg> In the Bayeux Tapestry, corpses are stripped to the skin: this man’s penis is partly visible.

Fig. 5. <bayeux2.jpg> More naked corpses are left on the battlefield at Hastings.

Fig. 6. <Stuttgart_74r.jpg> The ninth-century Stuttgart Psalter depicts beasts of battle devouring corpses. The image illustrates Psalm 64:11, tradentur in manus gladii; partes uulpium erunt ‘They shall be delivered into the hands of the sword, they shall be the portions of foxes’. The artist has added a raven for good measure. (Württembergische Landesbibliothek Stuttgart, Cod. bibl. fol. 23, fol. 74r).

Fig. 7. <Vatican_Beasts.jpg> A treatment of the beasts of battle from the Bury Psalter (Vatican, Biblioteca
Baker, *Loot and the Economy of Honor*, p. 49

*Apostolica, Reg. lat. 12, fol. 87v*, illustrating Psalm 78:2, Posuerunt morticina servorum tuorum escas uolatilibus caeli, carnes sancorum tuorum bestiis terrae ‘They have given the dead bodies of thy servants to be meat for the fowls of the air: the flesh of thy saints for the beasts of the earth’. The verse is interpreted as prefiguring the slaughter of the innocents (Matthew 2:13–18).