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English 343

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Unrihte

The second half of *Beowulf* unveils the startling reality of the political tensions that linger in the background of the events that take place in the first. However, the use of the word *unrihte* (Fitt, XLII, 3061) towards the end of the poem raises the puzzling question of whether this section of the poem is inspired by its legal background, or its nascent moral background based on the introduction of Christianity. Fitt XLII almost seems to refer to Beowulf and the dragon interchangeably, so while the word *unrihte* clearly points to the burial of the hoard (presumably the dragon's burial of the hoard), the judgement made by this word extends to cover both characters in this section of the poem. Other occurrences of the word *unrihte* in Old English, suggest that this word is employed in the religious context, which implies that this judgement could be based on Christian beliefs. However, existing legal documentation from the Anglo-Saxon period builds an idea of the laws that might have existed during the time in which *Beowulf* was written and suggests that the poem may indeed be referring to the existing legal frameworks of the time by referring to Beowulf's dismissal of the wergild. In other words—how is the poet measuring 'rightness' in the latter half of *Beowulf*?

Goldsmith argues that that despite the belief that allusions to certain biblical stories throughout the poem are " at the best only half-heartedly Christian" (Goldsmith, 81) and " that the feeling of the poem is essentially pagan" (Goldsmith, 81), readers will find that the poem " gains considerably in coherence and significance if [the reader allows themselves] to be guided by the poet's own emphases in the choice and presentation of the stories and his moral reflections upon them" (

Goldsmith, 81). This, he states, is because the poet was likely heavily influenced by Christian values as he was raised in a setting where " his attitude to the meaning of meaning would be formed by the traditional exegetic methods of the homilists" (Goldsmith, 81), and chooses to interpret the poem as one written by " a skilled Christian poet who [chose] to retell the story of a pre-Christian hero in such a way as to impart certain moral lessons" (Goldsmith, 83).

In reference to the section of the poem that narrates Beowulf's battle against the dragon and subsequent death, Goldsmith argues that the gold is being used to reveal Beowulf's moral degradation. He argues that this section of the poem links back to Hrothgar's warning that "the evil Beowulf must shun is that of lusting after earthly wealth" (Goldsmith, 96). Goldsmith also states that "constantly, from the Scyld prelude to the pyre of Beowulf, the poet uses gold as a setting for death and destruction" (96) and explains that the word *unrihte* is used in reference to the hoard. "To the Christian poet, the burial of gold is not only futile, but also actually *unrihte*, for it goes directly against Christ's command" (Goldsmith, 96).

Thundy, in searching for a more precise time period in which *Beowulf* was written, argues that Beowulf is presented with a unique legal issue—"the Dragon […] not paid [his] wergild or compensation for [his] property [which is] taken by force" (111). In this, Beowulf may be found guilty of a crime, as Athelstan's law states that "if a lord is accessory to a theft by one of his slaves, and it afterwards becomes known, he shall on the first occasion suffer the loss of his slave and forfeit his wergild" (Thundy, 111). Thundy also observes that despite "the fact that Beowulf accepts the stolen cup is keeping with the law" (111), presumably because wergilds are paid to the king, " the legality of the King's behavior does not seem to absolve him of the immorality of the act" (111). This suggests that the use of the word *unrihte* and the subsequent mirroring of Beowulf and the

dragon might be based on the fact that neither the dragon, nor Beowulf are entirely innocent (Beowulf, in having ignored the demands of the law, and the dragon for his violent reaction to the crime). It is noted that Beowulf "accepts personal responsibility" (Klaeber, lxxv) when his people are attacked and that " he is never shown berating the thief" (Klaeber, lxxv), suggesting that he may be aware of this legal infraction.

Additionally, the number of soldiers taken by Beowulf in preparation for his confrontation with the dragon is also interesting, as it remains consistent with several Anglo-Saxon laws. The reference to the "ten weak traitors" (Liuzza, Line 2847) means that 12 men including Beowulf and Wiglaf set out to battle against the dragon. Meanwhile, upon analyzing the translations of Anglo- Saxon laws presented by *The Avalon Project*, it quickly becomes evident that the number 12 frequently occurs in laws that address the process of accusation and defense. For example, Alfred and Guthrum's peace states that "if a king's thegn be accused of man-slaying, if he dare to clear himself, let him do that with xii. king's thegns" (The *Avalon Project)* , while Ethelred's laws state that " the xii. senior thegns go out, and the reeve with them, and swear on the relic that is given them in hand, that they will accuse no innocent man, nor conceal any guilty one...." (The *Avalon Project).* The consistent reoccurrence of the number twelve in relation to accusations made (particularly ones made against thanes), might suggest that Beowulf and his men attempt to absolve themselves of any wrongdoing (that is—sheltering and defending the thief) by battling against the dragon. However, because the thief was evidently protected by them, their actions are considered unrightful in the eyes of both the law and the poet as it is evident that they were guilty of the crime.

This would not be the first time the concept of 'wergild' (which was "a money payment made to a family group if a member of that family were killed or in some other way injured" [Jeffery, 655]) is mentioned in *Beowulf* as it repeatedly occurs throughout the poem. Most notably, Hrothgar "redeemed [Beowulf's father] with wergild" (Weil, 101) which sets in motion the main events that introduce the titular character, as it instils a sense of gratitude in Beowulf that urges him to fight Grendel on Hrothgar's behalf. In fact, this concept appears to play a role in almost every major conflict in the poem—as Grendel "rejects the obligation to pay *wergild*" (Kahrl, 191). Interestingly, the introduction of Christianity into the preexisting Anglo-Saxon society is what prompted the development of the wergild in an attempt to replace blood feuds (Jeffery, 655), therefore even if 'rightness' were no directly measured according to Christian beliefs, the implicit connection between the law and Christian morality would still be present.

Textual evidence seems to provide greater support for the religious interpretation of the foundations upon which these moral judgements are built in Fitt XLII. The poet's references to the "doomsday mighty princes" (Liuzza, p. 141, Line 3069) and hell reveal the underlying Christian beliefs in the poem. It is said that "the man who plundered that place would be / harried by hostile demons, fast in hellish bonds, / grievously tortured guilty of sins, / unless the Owner's grace had earlier / more readily favored the one eager for gold" (Liuzza, p. 141 Lines 3071-3075).m This section of Fitt XLII strongly implies that both the dragon and Beowulf have committed wrongful deeds and will both meet the same fate as they both " plundered that place." The capitalization of the first letter of the word "Owner" (or "Agendes" in the *Electronic Beowulf*), suggests that the poet is not speaking of the original tribe to whom the hoard belonged, rather they are referring to God and stating that only those who owned the treasure with God's approval would remain protected from its curse.

Moreover, Goldsmith's argument about the use of the word unrihte in relation to the burial remains consistent with the language used in the poem. This is because the poet appears to approach the hoard with a sense of wariness. The hoard is proclaimed to have been "grimly gotten" (Liuzza, Page 141 Line 3085) as Wiglaf seems to criticize Beowulf's actions when he says that "often many earls must suffer misery/ through the will of one man" (Liuzza, Page 141, Lines 3077-3078). This implies that Beowulf's decisions (and the fact that they led to the opening of the hoard) will bring about "misery." The hoard is further referred to as "a great mighty burden" (Liuzza, Page 142, Line 3091)and as "wundengold" (*The Electronic Beowulf*, Line 3136) which Liuzza translates to "twisted gold" (Page 143, Line 3134), which emphasizes on the hoard's capacity to harm those who try to keep it (as it is a " burden" on those who try to carry it).

Finally, Beowulf's burial emphasizes that the use of the word *unrihte* refers to the act of burying gold in an attempt to *possess* it and profit from it, rather than the simple act of burial. In some ways, it can be said that Beowulf takes the place of the dragon as he is buried with the treasure so that it may cause no more harm, meaning that he becomes the treasure's "guardian," which was a term that was previously used to refer to the Dragon. However, since Beowulf is dead, he is no longer capable of 'possessing' the hoard and is restricted to the role of the protector. While Wiglaf criticizes Beowulf—his criticisms are based on his decision to approach the Dragon to rather than his dismissal of the wergild.

In conclusion, upon analyzing the legal documentation from the time period in which *Beowulf* was written it becomes evident that, while some parts of the text may favor the idea of Beowulf's deeds being legally "unrightful," the language used suggests that the act of hoarding gold is unrightful because Beowulf and the Dragon are both led by their greed to take that which has not been granted

to them by God. In this case, we see the beginnings of religious morality creep into the poem and extend past the reach of laws. Since Beowulf is King, he is able to overturn laws (which allows the majority of the narration to remain in his favor), however once the poet presents their own judgement of the events that have taken place in the poem, it quickly becomes evident that the lens used by the poet views Beowulf's actions as those that are inescapable from divine justice through their use of the word *unrihte*, their description of the hoard, and the mirroring of Beowulf and the Dragon.

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