

UNIT 9

Beowulf: III

The third of Beowulf's battles is the fight with the dragon, or the 'dragon episode' (Swanton, pp. 139–87, beginning with 'In clashes of battle in later days ...'). Whereas in the first part of the narrative Beowulf is a young warrior, in the dragon episode he is an old man who has been king of his people, the Geats, for fifty years. Significantly this has been a time of peace. The narrative itself is highly complex, and to try to unravel some of this complexity I have included in the course reader two charts. The first shows the different phases of the narrative and the different speeches surrounding the key event. The episode is conspicuously organized around the number three: three speeches each describing three episodes, and Beowulf attacks the dragon three times. There may be thematic significance in this use of three to organize the episode, but the technique may equally well be a structural one, simply a way of arranging such a large body of complex material. The second sheet reconstructs the two histories that form the background to Beowulf's fight with the dragon. These concern Hygelac's last raid against the Frisians, which is referred to on four occasions in *Beowulf*, and the ongoing feud between the Swedes and the Geats which covers three generations. In an important way these two ongoing narratives, which are in the past and which at the same time impinge on the narrative in the present, are more than anything typical Germanic heroic narratives; they have all the elements that in their own right would constitute a narrative about warfare and vengeance. The interesting feature of the dragon episode is that these highly conventional pieces of heroic narrative are counterpointed by Beowulf's fight with the dragon; they are all made to focus on this one event, what critics refer to as an 'epic moment'. The dragon is a monster, not a human being, and in this respect the fight with the dragon is similar to the fights with Grendel and Grendel's mother. It is possible to see in Grendel and Grendel's mother demons embodying what was most destructive within Anglo-Saxon heroic culture – feud, vengeance, exile – and at the same time that they represent forces of evil in a religious sense. The dragon similarly represents a destructive force within heroic culture. The *Beowulf*-poet has

constructed the narrative around the dragon fight, and when the dragon is aroused to vengeance, this has the effect of igniting all the destructive forces that have been and will be at work in heroic culture. One of the keys to uncovering the design of the episode, I think, is Beowulf's last speech where he describes how he ruled the kingdom for fifty years; these were fifty years of peace (Swanton, p. 165).

Consider the complexity of the dragon episode in the ways it combines the narrative of Hygelac's last raid and the ongoing feud between the Swedes and Geats with the Beowulf's fight with the dragon and his death. Does the text seem designed to condemn heroic culture? Is there perhaps an implicit admiration and even nostalgia for pre-Christian heroic culture? How does the monster, the dragon, function in this episode and what is the nature of Beowulf's fight with the dragon, that is, what is he fighting against and what is it that ultimately destroys him?

Beowulf: the Dragon episode

- 2210b–2230:
Swanton, p. 141
- the beginning of the crisis of the dragon
- 2231–2277:
Swanton, pp. 141–43
- history of the treasure; lament of the last survivor
- 2278–2349a:
Swanton, pp. 143–47
- the dragon is enraged; Beowulf resolves to fight the dragon
- 2349b–2399a
Swanton, pp. 147–9
- narrator recalls 3 events of Beowulf's history
- fight with Grendel
 - Hygelac's last raid
 - an episode in the Geatish-Swedish wars, that led to Beowulf becoming king of the Geats
- 2397–2416
Swanton, pp. 149–51
- returns to present time; Beowulf seeks the dragon
- 2417–2515
Swanton, pp. 151–5
- Beowulf's speech which recalls 3 episodes in his life
- his youth in the household of king Hrethel; the accidental (kin-)killing of Herebald (Hrethel's eldest son) by Haethcyn (Hrethel's second son), and the analogy of the father who dies of grief; king Hrethel dies of grief.
 - conflict between the Geats and the Swedes, in which Haethcyn, now king of the Geats, was killed. There is a brief reference to the battle of Ravenswood.
 - Beowulf's victory over the Frisian champion Daeghrefn during Hygelac's last raid.
- 2516–2537
Swanton, p. 155
- present time: Beowulf addresses his followers.
- 2539–2891
Swanton, pp. 155–173
- Beowulf's fight with the dragon; the death of Beowulf.
- 2892–3027
Swanton, pp. 173–9
- the speech of the messenger.
- refers to Hygelac's last raid against the Frisians (ll. 2910b–2921).
 - renewed conflict between the Geats and the Swedes (ll. 2922–2998), with an account of the history of the conflict, and a detailed account of the battle of Ravenswood.
 - foretells the end of the Geatish nation and the exile of the warriors (ll. 3007b–3027).

Beowulf: the Dragon Episode (ll. 2200-3182)

As the final part of *Beowulf* opens, Beowulf has been king for 50 years. Lines 2200-2210 touch on aspects of the history of the Geats leading up to this point, but the important events are recounted and dramatized (and not in chronological order) as this part of the poem unfolds.

2231-2277: We learn that the Dragon had guarded the hoard of treasure for 300 years before it was disturbed by the thief. This has roused the anger of the Dragon, and has set in train the events leading up to the death of Beowulf and the end of the Geatish nation. The treasure is the treasure-hoard of a vanished race or family, and has been buried in the barrow by the last survivor of that race or family. This part of the poem includes the lament of the last survivor (ll. 2247-2266).

There are several important political events that impinge on the story of Beowulf:

Hygelac's final, disastrous expedition or raid against the Frisians.

This is referred to in a number of places in the poem, and is found in a number of historic texts, most notably in Gregory of Tours, *The History of the Franks*, book 3, chapter 3:

The next thing which happened was that the Danes sent a fleet under their King Chlochilaich [i.e., Hygelac] and invaded Gaul from the sea. They came ashore, laid waste one of the regions ruled by Theuderic and captured some of the inhabitants. They loaded their ships with what they had stolen and the men they had seized, and then they set sail for home. Their King remained on the shore, waiting until the boats should have gained the open sea, when he planned to go on board. When Theuderic heard that his land had been invaded by foreigners, he sent his son Theudebert to those parts with a powerful army and all the necessary equipment. The Danish King was killed, the enemy fleet was beaten in a naval battle and all the booty was brought back on shore once more.

Here Hygelac is referred to as a Danish king (not a Geat), and there is no mention of Beowulf. But the important point is that this account refers to the death of Hygelac. The site of Hygelac's raid is thought to be modern day Utrecht, which was an ancient outpost of the Roman Empire.

Hygelac's disastrous last raid is referred to in four places in *Beowulf*: 1202-1214; 2354-66; 2501-8; 2913-2920. The events of the raid occur after Beowulf has returned home from his exploits in Denmark. The first mention comes during the celebrations in Heorot after Beowulf has slain Grendel; Beowulf is presented with treasure:

...two bracelets, dress and rings, and the greatest necklace of those I have heard spoken of on earth Hygelac of the Geats, grandson of Swerting, had that circlet with him on his last venture when beneath the banner he defended treasure, guarded the spoils of slaughter. Fate carried him off when, out of pride, he went looking for trouble, a feud with the Frisians. The powerful prince wore that ornament, the precious stones, across the bowl of the waves; he fell dead beneath his shield. The body of the king then fell into the hands of the Franks, his breast-armor and the collar together; lesser fighting-men plundered the slain after the battle-shearing; men of the Geats remained on the field of corpses. (ll. 1194-1214; Swanton, pp. 90-93).

The implication is that, on his return from Denmark to his homeland, Beowulf gave the necklace to Hygelac, who was wearing it when he went into battle against the Frisians.

The second allusion to Hygelac's last raid comes at ll.2354-2366 (Swanton, p.147) as Beowulf is preparing to fight the dragon, and the narrative refers to some of his victories:

Not least of hand-to-hand encounters was that where they slew Hygelac, when the king of the Geats, lord and friend of the people, died by blood-drinking blades in the onslaught of war in Frisia, the offspring of Hrethel beaten down by the sword. Beowulf came away from there by his own strength, engaged in a feat of swimming; he held in his arm the battle-gear of thirty warriors when he turned to the water. The Hetware had no cause at all for exultation in the conflict of troops when they carried limewood shields against him; few came back from that battle-fighter to seek out their homes.

Then the son of Ecgtheow [Beowulf], a wretched solitary [*earm anihaga*], swam over the expanse of tides back to his people. There Hygd [Hygelac's queen] offered him hoard and kingdom, rings and a princely throne

But Beowulf refuses the kingdom and supports Hygelac's son Heardrede.

The third reference to Hygelac's raid comes at ll.2501-8 (Swanton p.153) in the context of Beowulf's speech to his followers before he fights the dragon (ll.2426-2509). This includes references to his youth and the war with the Swedes. There is an allusion to Hygelac's last raid as well. Hæthcyn (then king of the Geats) is killed in battle with the Swedes, and Hygelac becomes king and rewards Beowulf as a chief warrior:

As it was granted me, I [Beowulf] repaid with my bright sword in the battle [against the Swedes] the treasures he [Hygelac] bestowed on me; he gave me estate, dwelling, delight in homeland. There was no need, not any cause, for him to seek out to hire for a price a worse fighting-man among the Gifthas or among the Spear-Danes or in the Swedish kingdom. I would always go before him in the troop, alone in the vanguard; and while life lasts I shall do battle for as long as this sword endures that has stood by me early and late, ever since I slew the Franks' champion Dæghrefn with my hand in the presence of tried warriors. In no way could he bring to the Frisian king the ornament adorning the breast, but the standard-bearer fell in the contest, a prince with courage; nor was a sword-edge his slayer, but a warlike grip broke his heart's surge, his bone frame. Now the edge of the blade, hand and hard sword, must fight for the hoard.

The final mention of the raid comes at ll.2913-2920 (pp.173-5), as part of the speech of the messenger, after the death of Beowulf, when we are given a picture of how the old feuds will be renewed:

Now the people can expect a period of conflict, once the fall of the king [Beowulf] becomes openly known abroad among Franks and Frisians. The bitter grievance against the Hugas was brought about when Hygelac came journeying with a sea-borne army into the land of the Frisians, where the Hetware subdued him in battle, with greater forces brought it about that the mailed fighter had to howl in death; the chieftain [Hygelac] fell in the troop, in no way gave adornments to tried warriors. The favour of the Merovingian

[i.e., king of the Franks] has been denied us ever since.

Another important thread in the narrative is the war or feud between the Geats and the Swedes; for this see the genealogy of the Swedish royal house. The history of the feud is not given in chronological order in *Beowulf*, but I will try to reconstruct it. The first episode is told twice, the first time in an abbreviated form:

(i) 2472b-2489a: The sons of Ongenþeow (i.e., Ohthere and Onela) attack the Geats, and there is a battle at Mares' Hill. In the battle to seek vengeance, Hæthcyn (king of the Geats) is killed. Ongenþeow sought out Eofor (a warrior of the Geats), and Eofor killed Ongenþeow as revenge for the killing of the Geatish king Hæðcyn. 2490-2500: Beowulf was rewarded with a sword for his part in the conflict and served Hygelac who became king because of the death of Hæðcyn.

(ii) 2922-2998: These lines are part of the speech of the messenger after the death of Beowulf, and refer to the future hostility of the Swedish nation against the Geats. The messenger gives an account of the battle of Ravenswood (a forest in Sweden). We learn that (as vengeance for the battle of Mares' Hill) the Geats had attacked the Swedes (Guð-scilfings) and captured the Swedish queen, wife of Ongenþeow and mother of Onela and Ohthere. Ongenþeow attacked the Geatish force in order to rescue his wife/queen, and in so doing killed Hæðcyn (king of the Geats). Ongenþeow pursued the Geats until they escaped into Ravenswood; because of the death of Hæðcyn, they are now lordless. Ongenþeow besieged the Geats. In the morning Hygelac attacked the troop of the Swedes, and Ongenþeow was forced to retreat to higher ground. Hygelac pursued Ongenþeow who had to submit to the Geatish warrior Eofor. The Swedish king Ongenþeow was attacked by the two Geatish warriors, the brothers Eofor and Wulf. Eofor slew Ongenþeow, and was rewarded by Hygelac and married his daughter.

After the death of Ongenþeow, Ohthere became king of the Swedes.

2379b-2399a: After the death of Ohthere, his sons (Eanmund and Eadgils) are exiled and seek refuge among the Geats. They had rebelled against the new ruler of the Swedes, namely their uncle Onela, who had become king after the death of Ohthere (father of Eanmund and Eadgils). Onela attacks Heardred (king of the Geats and son of Hygelac) for protecting the exiled and rebellious sons of his dead brother, and the result is that Heardred is killed and Beowulf becomes king of the Geats. Beowulf is obliged to seek vengeance on Onela for killing Heardred, and so supports the cause of Eadgils, who slays Onela.

2602-2625a: We learn that Wiglaf, the young warrior who supports Beowulf in the fight against the dragon, is the son of Weohstan. During the conflict of Onela's attack on Heardred, Weohstan had slain Eanmund the son of Ohthere and brother of Eadgils, and had been rewarded by Onela with a sword. Weohstan is described as a prince of the Scylfings (i.e., Swedes), and of the family of the Wægmundings. Wiglaf and Beowulf are of the family of the Wægmundings, and after the death of Beowulf, Wiglaf is the last survivor of the tribe of the Wægmundings.