

UNIT 8

Beowulf: II

For the previous unit I asked you to concentrate on the accounts of the fights between Beowulf and Grendel, and between Beowulf and Grendel's mother, and to ignore the many digressions from the main narrative. This unit is concerned with one of the digressions, what is known as the 'Finn Episode' (*Beowulf* ll. 1068–1159) and another Anglo-Saxon text closely related to the 'Finn Episode', what is known as *The Fight at Finnsburh*, a copy of which is included with the course reader. *The Fight at Finnsburh* survives only as a fragment which was discovered in Lambeth Palace Library in the early 18th century.

I have provided the course text with an introduction which tries to piece together the fragments of the narrative. The *Beowulf*-poet has used an episode from a traditional story and incorporated it as a digression. I think we can assume that the narrative was well known to the contemporary audience. What is not clear is why and to what purpose the *Beowulf*-poet has used the episode from the larger narrative. One clue might be in the prominence given to Hildeburh; as the *Beowulf*-poet relates it, the episode is the tragedy of Hildeburh who in the course of the narrative loses her husband, son, and brother. It would seem that the *Beowulf*-poet is concerned here to highlight the tragedy and futility of the traditional heroic ethics of the feud and vendetta.

Consider the two texts, *The Fight at Finnsburgh* and the 'Finn Episode'. In what ways does *The Fight at Finnsburgh* manifest an heroic ethos? In comparison with *The Fight at Finnsburgh*, do you detect any changes of emphasis in the *Beowulf*-poet's presentation of the episode from what was a larger traditional narrative? There is much debate over this, but, in your view, how does the digression function within the larger narrative of *Beowulf*? In other words, to what extent is it purposeful?

The Fight at Finnsburh

Beowulf, ll. 1068-1159a, is known as the 'Finn Episode' and is an embellishment or digression from the main story-line. It is possible to construct the narrative from the lines in *Beowulf*, but there survives as well a short fragment (known as the 'Finn Fragment') which contains details from earlier in the narrative and this has helped to confirm what is implied in the episode in *Beowulf*. Scholars have speculated that the 'Finn Fragment' may represent the type of heroic narrative out of which *Beowulf* grew. The fragment gives us a glimpse of a less adulterated Anglo-Saxon heroic narrative poem.

The circumstances of the narrative of the 'fragment' and the 'episode' are these: a Danish king Hoc has two children, a son Hnæf and a daughter Hildeburh. Hoc arranged the marriage of his daughter Hildeburh to Finn who is king in Frisia and whose seat is the hall-complex of Finnsburh (in the same way as the hall-complex Heorot is the seat of Hrothgar in *Beowulf*). The implication is that the marriage is part of a peace-treaty between the Danes and the Frisians (and their allies, the Jutes). The beginning of the Finn Fragment suggests that when Hnæf and his troop of Danes came to Finnsburh to visit Hildeburh (married to Finn), violence broke out between the Danes and the Frisians. That this should happen is plausible in the light of *Beowulf*'s account later in the text of how Ingeld's followers will resent the presence of the Danes in their court after Ingeld's marriage to Freawaru (daughter of Hrothgar), and that violence between the Danes and Ingeld's people, the Heathobards, will be rekindled. The 'Finn Fragment' opens with Hnæf and his Danish followers about to defend themselves against an attack by the Frisians and Jutes. The fragment gives an account of part of the battle, with speeches, and then breaks off. The battle went on for five days.

The episode in *Beowulf* picks up the narrative in the aftermath of the battle. We learn that Hnæf (brother of Hildeburh) has been killed and also that Hildeburh has lost her son by her husband Finn during the battle.

[H]næf[ɸ] hleopode ða, hea[ɸ]logeong cyning:

‘Ne ðis ne dagað east[a]n, ne her draca ne fleogeð,

ne her ðisse healle homas ne byrnað,

ac her forþ berað, fugelas singað,

gylleð græghama, guðwudu hlýnnæð,

scyld scefte oncwýð. Nu scyrd þes mona

waðol under wolcnum; nu arisað weaðæda,

ðe ðisne folces nið fremman willað.

Ac onwacnigeað nu, wigend mine,

habbað cower [i]nda, hi[c]geap on ellen,

win[n]að on orde, wesað on mode!’

Ða aras mænig goldhladen ðegn, gyrde hine his swurde;

ða to dura eodon drihtlice ceman,

Sigeferð and Eaha, hyra sword getugon,

and æt oþrum durum Ordlaaf and Guplaaf,

and Hengest sylf hwearf him on laste.

Ða gyt Garulf Guðere styrde,

ðæt he swa freolic feorh forman siðe

to ðære healle durum hyrsta ne bærf[e],

nu hyt mīpa heard anyman wolde;

ac he frægn ofer eal undearninga,

deorndod hælep, hwa ða duru heolde.

‘Sigeferþ is min nama,’ cwep he, ‘ic eom Seegen a leod,

wrec[c]e[a] wide cuð; fæla ic we[a]na gebad,

hefa[ɸ]dra hilda; ðe is gyt her witod

swæpær ðu sylf to me secean wylle.’

Ða wæs on healle wælslihta gehlyn,

sceolde cel[lod] bor[d] [c]jenum on handa,

banhelm berstan, buruhðelu dynede,

oð æt ðære guðe Garulf georang

ealra ærest eorðbuendra,

Guðlafes sunu, ymbe hýne godra fæla,

hwearf[i]lra hræ[w]. Hræfen wandrode

sweart and sealobrun. Swurdeleoma stod,

swylce eal Finnsburh fyrenu wære.

Ne gefrægn ic næfre wurplicor æt wera hilde

sixtig sigebeorna sel gebæra[n],

ne nefre swan[as] hwitne medo sel forgyldan

ðonne Hnæfe guldan his hægstealdas.

Hig fution fif dagas, swa hyra nan ne feol,

drihtgesiða, ac hig ða duru heoldon.

Ða gewat him wund hæleð on wæg gangan,

sæde þæt his byrne abrocen wære,

heresceorp u[n]hror, and eac wæs his helm ðyrel.

Ða hine sona frægn folces hyrde

hu ða wigend hyra wunda genæson,

oððe hwæpær ðæra hyssa

‘..... are the gables burning?’

Then Hnæf, a king young in the experience of warfare, spoke out: ‘This is not the dawn breaking from the east, nor does a dragon fly there, nor are the gables of this hall burning, but (warriors) are bearing their arms towards us; the birds are singing, and the grey-coated wolf howls, the spear resounds, the shield answers the shaft. Now the moon is shining, wandering under the clouds. Now will arise such deeds of war which will arouse this anger of the people. But awake now, my warriors; take up your shields and take thought to valour, and fight in the front-line; keep up your courage!’

Many athane with weapons adorned with gold girded himself with his sword; then the noble warriors, Sigeferð and Eaha, went to the doorway and drew their swords, and at the other doors were Ordlaaf and Guplaaf, while Hengest himself followed close behind. Still Garulf restrained Guðhere, urging that he should not bear his so noble life and armour to the doors of the hall at the onset of the attack now that a warrior fierce in battle wanted to deprive him of it (i.e., his life), but he asked openly above all the clamour who guarded that door. He said, ‘Sigeferþ is my name; I am a follower of Seegen, an exile known far and wide. I have experienced many woe, many hard battles; whichever (swæpær) (outcome) you yourself wish to seek from me, that is decreed here.’

Then was there the noise of slaughter in the hall. The embossed (celled ?) shield, the protector of the bones of the hands for the brave ones, had to shatter; the floor of the stronghold resounded until at the battle Garulf, son of Guðlaaf, fell at the battle, the first of all the dwellers on the earth, and around him were the bodies of many a good and active man. The raven circled, black and dusky (sealobrun). The brightness of the swords shone out, as if all of Finnsburg were ablaze. I have never heard in human warfare of sixty warriors bearing themselves better or more nobly, nor ever did young men better repay their gleaming mead than his young men repaid Hnæf. They fought for five days such that none of their retainers fell, but they held the doors. Then a warrior turned away wounded; he said that his coat of mail was broken and his armour had broken into pieces, and also his helmet was pierced through. Then immediately the leader of the people [Finn ?] asked him how the warriors endured their wounds and whether the young men