HROÐGAR AND THE *GYLDEN HILT* IN *BEOWULF*

By DENNIS CRONAN

The account of the destruction of the giants in the flood presented in lines 1689b–93 of Beowulf *is probably the commentary of the narrator and not part of the inscription on the hilt. It is addressed to the audience, and it completes our understanding of the significance of Beowulf's victory beneath the mere. Hroðgar's extended gaze at the hilt before he begins his speech is a sign that he is also reaching toward a new understanding of the* eotenas *who have plagued his people. Regardless of whether he is able to read the runic inscription on the hilt, he can read the hilt itself against Beowulf's account of his struggle. The presence of the hilt in his hands implies an extensive social nexus for his apparently solitary enemies, who are now revealed as the enemies of God as well. Hroðgar knows nothing of the biblical stories of Cain and Abel or the flood, but his understanding of the meaning of Grendel's attacks now tracks that of the audience fairly closely. Although his "sermon" is not a direct response to the brief account of the flood, this account provides us with a context for understanding his speech.*

The narrator of *Beowulf* reveals more information to the audience about the background and descent of Grendel than the characters in the poem initially possess. Grendel is not merely a monstrous, cannibalistic *eoten*, "giant" (761), living in the wastes near Heorot (102–5); he and his mother are descendants of Cain who inherit the guilt of Cain's crime (106–14). Because of this guilt they are outcasts and enemies of God. They share this descent and its consequences with other misshapen progeny of Cain, including the *gigantas*, "giants," who contended against God and perished in the Flood.[1] The poem includes two brief references to the destruction of these giants, first when Grendel is introduced (113–14), and then again during the account of the inscription on the hilt (1687–98a). Because we in the audience, unlike the Danes, are aware of this biblical background, we are easily able to correlate the destruction of the giants with Beowulf's defeat of Grendel and his mother and to understand that this defeat is not merely a local victory: it is also an episode in a cosmic struggle, the Great Feud, between God and those elements of his creation that have turned against him.[2]

This distinction between what the audience knows about the background of Grendel and his mother and what the Danes and Beowulf know is commonly

[1] All quotations from *Beowulf* are taken from R. D. Fulk, Robert E. Bjork, and John Niles, eds., *Klaeber's Beowulf and the Fight at Finnsburg*, 4th ed. (Toronto, 2008).

[2] Marijane Osborne, "The Great Feud: Scriptural History and Strife in *Beowulf*," *Publications of the Modern Language Association of America* 93 (1978): 973–81.

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accepted in *Beowulf* criticism.[3] Yet running alongside this stance is the inclination to view Hroðgar's speech after Beowulf's return from the mere as a direct response to the account of the Flood in lines 1689b–93, which has long been accepted as part of the engraving on the hilt on which the king gazes as he begins his speech. So, for example, Andy Orchard states that when Hroðgar delivers his speech, he is "evidently inspired by the hilt, with its depiction of overweening ambition laid low." T. A. Shippey envisions the king speaking from the hilt "as from a text," and Edward Irving sees a parallel between "the theme of a sudden and extreme shift of power" implicit in the story of the giants and the theme of Hroðgar's speech.[4] As is only to be expected, critics who place great emphasis on the distinction between what the audience knows and what the Danes know disagree with this reading: Marijane Osborne stresses that "we are not told that Hroðgar reads what he is looking at," and Fred Robinson asserts that, in the absence of biblical knowledge, "his gaze is a blind gaze."[5]

Even though the king reads nothing of the Flood, his gaze is far from blind. The clear distinction between the audience's knowledge of Grendel's ancestry and the ignorance of the Danes, a distinction that has been valid up until this point in the story, begins to blur and even to dissolve as the king studies the hilt. This artifact presents much more to his gaze than merely the inscription, and, once we pause to consider the possibilities of what Hroðgar could learn from the hilt, it becomes apparent that his understanding of Grendel's background can approach the essentials of what we in the audience know, even if details such as the murder of Abel and the story of the Flood remain hidden from him. His speech to Beowulf, appropriately referred to as his "sermon," is very much a response to the hilt, but not to the inscription alone. It is, rather, a response to the hilt as a whole, a token of Beowulf's victory, and an artifact that implies an unexpected social and historical nexus for that *angenga*, "solitary walker," Grendel (165a, 449a).

The significance of the hilt as a vehicle for Hroðgar's insights into Grendel's background and the context of his attacks extends well beyond this part of the

[3] This distinction has been carried to one possible logical conclusion by Fred C. Robinson, who distinguishes not only between what the audience and the characters know about the descent of Grendel but also between the god(s) that the audience and the characters recognize and worship. See his *Beowulf and the Appositive Style* (Knoxville, 1985), 29–59.

[4] Andy Orchard, *Pride and Prodigies: Studies in the Monsters of the Beowulf-Manuscript* (Cambridge, 1995), 67; T. A. Shippey, *Old English Verse* (London, 1972), 41; Edward Irving, *A Reading of Beowulf* (New Haven, 1968), 147. See also Orchard's remarks in his *A Critical Companion to Beowulf* (Woodbridge, Suffolk, 2003), 158–59. In contrast, Allen J. Frantzen, *Desire for Origins: New Language, Old English, and Teaching the Tradition* (New Brunswick, NJ, 1990), 88, invites us "to suppose that these two texts diverge and that Hrothgar's speech contradicts the text on the hilt."

[5] Osborne, "The Great Feud," 978; Robinson, *Appositive Style*, 33.

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poem. Information that the narrator presents only to us provides us with a perspective that is at times superior to that enjoyed by the characters. But the narrator does not do this in order to create a gap between our awareness and theirs, but to help us understand the story and perceive the development of the characters' own knowledge and understanding. Many modern approaches to the poem take the presence of such a gap for granted, distinguishing between the awareness and knowledge of the audience and the more limited knowledge of the characters in the poem. So, for example, it is common to identify two distinct audiences of the Finnsburg episode: for the Danes and the Geats seated in the hall, it is a tale of delayed Danish triumph over treachery, while for the audience Hildeburh's suffering parallels what is in store for Wealhþeow.[6] Like many other commentators, Robinson sees the juxtaposition of Hildeburh's suffering with Wealhþeow's speech to Hroðgar as a harbinger of the suffering that awaits the Danish queen, a fate "which remains untold in the poem but which was apparently known to the audience."[7] Neither Wealhþeow nor the warriors in the hall know anything of this fate, and the gap between their supposed ignorance and what critics have assumed that we and the original audience know about the future opens a space for ironic readings of the poem. This interpretation depends entirely upon the claim that Hroðgar's nephew will usurp the throne upon the king's death. Despite some strong arguments against this hypothesis in recent decades, the view of Hroþulf as a traitor and Hildeburh and Wealhþeow as comparable tragic figures is still widely accepted.[8]

Interpretations predicated upon a distinction between the knowledge of the audience and the knowledge of the characters have encompassed nearly the entire poem. As R. M. Liuzza has recently observed, the double meaning detected in the Finn story has become a model for reading the story of Beowulf. Indeed he asserts that "dramatic irony must be the inevitable mode of *Beowulf*" if we accept Robinson's view that "it is a Christian poem about pagans."[9]

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[6] Arthur Gilchrist Brodeur, *The Art of Beowulf* (Berkeley, 1959), 119.

[7] Robinson, *Appositive Style*, 26.

[8] The foundation for the reading of Hroþulf as a traitor was laid by Gregor Sarrazin, "Rolf Krake und sein Vetter im Beowulfliede," *Englische Studien* 24 (1898): 144–45, and, at much greater length, by Axel Olrik, *The Heroic Legends of Denmark*, trans. and rev. in collaboration with the author by Lee Hollander (New York, 1919), 49–74. Kenneth Sisam, *The Structure of Beowulf* (Oxford, 1965), 36–37, raised the first skeptical challenge to this reading. He has since been followed by a number of critics, of whom the most recent and thorough is William Cooke, "Hrothulf: A Richard III, or an Alfred the Great?" *Studies in Philology* 104 (2007): 175–98. See *Klaeber's Beowulf*, 177, note to lines 1017–19, for a list of critics who agree with Sisam.

[9] R. M. Liuzza, "Iron and Irony in *Beowulf*," in *Beowulf at Kalamazoo: Essays on Translation and Performance*, ed. Jana K. Schulman and Paul E. Szarmach (Kalamazoo, MI, 2012), 50–68, at 60–61.

I focus here on the purpose of what the narrator tells us about Grendel's descent from Cain and the destruction of the giants in the Flood because the difference between what we know and what the characters initially know is expressed directly in the text. It is not the product of a series of interpretive steps. By demonstrating that the information the narrator gives us about the story of Cain and the Flood serves not only to provide a context for Grendel's attacks but also to prepare us for Hroðgar's own discovery of this context, I hope to encourage a more skeptical attitude toward readings that rely upon the assertion of an ironic gap between what the audience knows and what the characters know. In this case a gap is undeniably present at first, yet it is bridged by the revelations Beowulf brings back from the battle beneath the mere. But before we can explore this process, it is necessary to outline my view of the characters' relationship to God and their pre-Christian culture.

To assert that *Beowulf* is a Christian poem about pagans is merely the beginning of the conversation. Too much depends upon how we view this paganism, and Robinson's view is merely one among others. The poem presents a complex perspective on its pagan actors, asserting that some, such as the Danes who offer sacrifices to idols in search of relief from Grendel's attacks, are likely damned for their ignorance (175–88). But the same passage also assures us that those who recognize and praise *drihten God*, "the Lord God," who is *dæda demend*, "the judge of deeds" (181), will seek and find *freoðo*, "protection, peace," in heaven (186b–88). The central characters of the poem, Hroðgar, Beowulf, and others, both recognize and praise God, and they are not so much pagans as pre-Christian monotheists who move and act in a world inhabited primarily by unconverted pagans. In this respect they closely resemble the patriarchs of Genesis.[10]

So, for example, Hroðgar often gives thanks to God (928–29a, 1397–98, 1778b–81), and he praises God after the defeat of Grendel by attributing the victory to *drihtnes miht*, "the power of the lord" (939b–42a). Beowulf attributes his hard-won triumph over Grendel's mother to God's direct intervention (1655–66a) and as he is dying he thanks God for the treasure he has won from the dragon (2794–96). Robinson, however, asserts that words such as *god*, *metod*, *ælmihtig*, *frea*, *drihten*, and so on refer to the Christian God only when they are used by

[10] For a similar approach, see Charles Donahue, "Beowulf, Ireland and the Natural Good," *Traditio* 7 (1949–51): 263–77 and idem, "Beowulf and Christian Tradition: A Reconsideration from a Celtic Stance," *Traditio* 21 (1965): 55–116; Thomas. D. Hill, "The Christian Language and Theme of *Beowulf*," in *Companion to Old English Poetry*, ed. Henk Aertsen and Rolf H. Bremmer (Amsterdam, 1994), 63–77; Christopher Cain, "*Beowulf*, the Old Testament, and the *Regula Fidei*," *Renascence* 49 (1997): 227–40; Dennis Cronan, "'Beowulf,' the Gaels, and the Recovery of the Pre-Conversion Past," *Anglo-Saxon* 1 (2007): 137–80; and Geoffrey Russom, "History and Anachronism in *Beowulf*," in *Epic and History*, ed. David Konstan and Kurt A. Raaflaub (Malden, MA, 2010), 243–61, at 256–57.

the narrator; when they are spoken by the characters, these words refer to some unnamed pagan deity. He argues that these words are ambiguous, holding two apposed meanings in suspension because of "the double perspective which the poet maintains throughout *Beowulf*,"[11] an argument that illustrates just how important the assumption of this double perspective can be to our readings of the poem.

His case in support of this claim is extremely well argued and highly subtle, but I suspect it is too subtle. As Craig Davis has observed, if these apposed meanings actually exist, they are more likely to blur and reduce than emphasize the audience's perception of the differences in belief.[12] Moreover, this approach founders upon a rather simple distinction. Although he detects apposed *meanings* in this vocabulary, the meanings of these words, like those of most words that are not proper names, consist of both sense and reference. The sense of these words never changes: *god* always means "a god," *ælmihtig* always means "almighty," *metod* always means "measurer," *frea* and *drihten* always mean "lord," and so on. Only the reference of these words has the potential to change, not the sense. Whatever their usage may have been before the conversion, these words would all be recognized by the original audience of the poem as part of the Christian vocabulary of words for "God," some of which, such as *metod* and *frea*, are found primarily in poetry. As Robinson acknowledges, both *God* in line 13b and *frean* in 27b are used by the narrator to refer to the biblical God at the beginning of the poem, a usage that establishes him as the referent of these and similar words. In contrast, the poem does not present any referent for what Robinson sees as the pagan meanings. Indeed, even when it criticizes those Danes who offer *wigweorþunga*, "sacrifices to idols" (176a), it refrains from naming any pagan deity but instead refers to the devil, the *gastbona*, "soul-slayer" (177a). Robinson argues that, although the poem minimizes pagan practices, it includes enough to show that the characters are pagan.[13] Yet these infrequent allusions to pagan practices contrast with many more references to a single god on the part of the characters and the narrator. We do not know how much the poem's original audience would have known about the pagan gods, but, if they knew anything at all, they would know that these gods are many, not one, and that the deities have their own personal names or titles. Because characters such as Hroðgar and Beowulf often refer to a single unnamed god using various epithets found

[11] Robinson, *Appositive Style*, 31.

[12] Craig Davis, *Beowulf and the Demise of Germanic Legend in England* (New York, 1996), 180–81.

[13] Robinson, *Appositive Style*, 86, n. 28 suggests that it may have been impious and shocking to name the pagan gods. Even if this observation is true, the absence of a referent for what he sees as a pagan meanings of the words for "god" is an obstacle to his argument for apposed meanings in these words. On 10–11 he points out that the poet has included references to only the least offensive pagan practices.

in Christian poems, their words are much more likely to be references to the biblical God than to an unnamed pagan deity who is not otherwise a presence in the poem.

In the absence of any pagan referent for these words, it is probable that the narrator and his characters are speaking of the same god, the God of the Bible. Yet it is clear that these characters can hardly be Christian: there are no priests in their communities, nor is there even the slightest hint in the poem of the teachings of the New Testament or of Christ the savior. The leading characters are best understood as noble monotheists living, like the patriarchs of Genesis, among pagans who do not know the true God. Like these patriarchs, they also live in a time when God takes a personal interest in their lives and, when he aids Beowulf in the battle beneath the mere, intervenes directly in human affairs. Instead of the sharp division in belief which Robinson perceives, the beliefs of the narrator and his characters are on a continuum. Unlike the figures in the poem, the narrator has had the benefit of the teachings of the Church, but his characters have somehow sensed the presence of an all-powerful creator God. Given the creation song recited in celebration of the newly built Heorot, they may have perceived him through contemplation of the created world, just as Paul, in Romans 1:19–21, argues that pagans ought to perceive him.

As Paul Cavill has argued, "the poet's world view is specifically Christian and conditioned by the whole Bible, not just the Old Testament."[14] This Christian perspective informs the entire poem, but the world-view of the characters is carefully distinguished from that of the poet and his audience. Their monotheistic piety is more biblical than Christian. These continental Germanic aristocrats are presented as worthy predecessors of the Anglo-Saxon Christians, much as the patriarchs of the Old Testament were predecessors of all Christians. This strategy has several advantages. It produces a continuity between the pre-Christian past and the Christian present of the audience, silently erasing much of the cultural rupture produced by the conversion.[15] Through this continuity it recovers the continental past, presenting the values and the deeds of the kings and heroes of the pre-Christian period as worthy of emulation. The identification of Grendel as God's enemy, the frequently voiced monotheism of the characters, and God's response to their plight, especially his response to Beowulf's near encounter with death at the hands of Grendel's mother, all work together to create a

[14] Paul Cavill, "Christianity and Theology in *Beowulf*," in *The Christian Tradition in Anglo-Saxon England: Approaches to Current Scholarship and Teaching* (Cambridge, 2004), 15–39, at 25.

[15] Shami Ghosh, *Writing the Barbarian Past: Studies in Early Medieval Historical Narrative* (Leiden, 2016), detects a similar reduction of the differences between the barbarian past and the Christian present in Latin histories such as the *De origine actibusque Getarum* of Jordanes, Paul the Deacon's *Historia Langobardorum*, and Isidore's *Historia Gothorum*. See esp. chapters two and four.

world in which the characters are as close to Christianity as they can be without actually being Christians.

God's direct intervention in the battle beneath the mere is perhaps the most important passage for both our understanding of the characters' relationship to the divine and for my discussion of Hroðgar's contemplation of the hilt of the giant sword. We hear of this event twice, first in the words of the narrator and then in Beowulf's own words. Until God intervenes, Beowulf's encounter with Grendel's mother is one failure after another: as he descends through the mere she grabs him and only his mail coat defends him against her or the attacks by *sædeor manig*, "many sea-beasts" (1510b). Once in her hall he strikes her with Hrunting, but this famous sword merely sings a *grædig guðleoð*, "greedy battle-song" (1522a), without injuring her; after he throws the useless weapon away he attempts to use his strength and grapple with her, but ends up on the floor as she tries to stab him with her *seax*, "short-sword" (1545–49). Only his mail coat and *halig God*, "holy God," stand between him and death. God actively intervenes:

> Geweold wigsigor witig drihten,
> rodera rædend; hit on ryht gesced
> yðelice, syþðan he eft astod (1554–56).[16]

Beowulf's own account of this moment which he gives to Hroðgar is more specific:

> Ic þæt unsofte ealdre gedigde
> wigge under wætere, weorc geneþde
> earfoðlice; ætrihte wæs
> guð getwæfed, nymðe mec God scylde.
> Ne meahte ic æt hilde mid Hruntinge
> wiht gewyrcan, þeah þæt wæpen duge;
> ac me geuðe ylda waldend
> þæt ic on wage geseah wlitig hangian
> ealdsweord eacen; ofost wisode
> winigea leasum, þæt ic ðy wæpne gebræd.
> Ofsloh ða æt þære sæcce, þa me sæl ageald,
> huses hyrdas (1655–66a).[17]

[16] "The wise lord, ruler of the heavens controlled victory in battle; he easily decided it rightly, after he [Beowulf] got up again."

[17] "'I barely survived the combat under water with my life, I engaged in the work with difficulty; the battle would have ended immediately if God had not protected me. I was not able to accomplish anything at battle with Hrunting, although that weapon is good; but the ruler of men granted that I saw a beautiful, immense, ancient sword hanging on the wall; he speedily guided the one deprived of friends, so that I drew the weapon. Then, when I had the

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This passage presents the hero's own experience of God's assistance. During the combat the narrator assures us that God protects Beowulf and decides the victory. Beowulf is fully aware of this divine intervention, and he attributes his survival to God's protection and his victory to God's guidance that enabled him to see and then draw the weapon he uses to slay his foe. Although, as Robinson points out, the narrator knows enough to describe God as *rodera rædend*, "ruler of the heavens," while Beowulf knows of him only as *ylda waldend*, "ruler of men,"[18] they are both speaking of the same divine being. It is difficult to see how anyone would expect a Christian audience to assume that Beowulf is referring to a vague, unspecified pagan deity after he has directly experienced the presence of God. The argument that the characters refer to some unnamed pagan deity when they use the words for "god" runs aground upon the hero's direct experience of the divine presence. Moreover, much of the meaning and significance of the hilt of the giant sword is the product of this moment beneath the mere because Beowulf's report of God's intervention provides the context in which Hroðgar reads the hilt.

The passage describing the hilt (1688b–98a) serves both thematic and structural purposes, recalling and emphasizing what we learned from the earlier passage referring to the story of Cain and the destruction of the giants (106–14). This passage presents the essentials of what the audience of the poem needs to know in order to infer what the king himself learns from this artifact. Because we are familiar with the biblical background, these lines can present this information to us through brief references to the stories of Cain and Abel and the Flood, references that serve as a sort of shorthand, making it unnecessary for the narrative to present at much greater length Hroðgar's own dawning understanding of the significance of the hilt. Thus, even though it includes details that the king will never perceive or understand, this passage completes the context for the king's speech, a speech that arises out of what he is able to deduce from this

opportunity, I slew the guardians of the house in that conflict.'" In this translation I follow the emendation of *oftost* in line 1663b to *ofost* in *Klaeber's Beowulf*; see 211 for the note on this line, and also n. 2 on p. cxc of the introduction, which explains that, while two of the editors had agreed on this emendation, one of the two later had second thoughts. Despite this change of mind, the emendation was made in response to multiple irregularities in the verse, as the note to lines 1663b–64a explains. The unemended text in Klaeber's third edition produces a parenthetical statement, "he has very often guided those deprived of friends." Even though this statement is a general observation about the help that God gives to many who find themselves alone in difficult situations, this observation is presented as a commentary on the guidance that God gives Beowulf beneath the mere, and it is clear from the text that the hero sees the sword and then draws it because of this guidance. Although the emendation produces a more explicit statement, the unemended text likewise attributes both the sight and the use of this sword to God's guidance. So, while the expression of the meaning changes, the meaning itself is essentially unchanged.

[18] Robinson, *Appositive Style* (n. 2 above), 45.

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ealde lafe, "ancient remnant," upon which he gazes (1687–88a). When Beowulf hands over the hilt, he is bestowing upon the king a gift of wisdom, and Hroðgar responds in kind, presenting a return gift of wisdom in his speech.[19]

The account of the inscription on the hilt is framed by verbs introducing the king's speech:

> Hroðgar maðelode; hylt sceawode,
> ealde lafe. On ðæm wæs or writen
> fyrngewinnes; syðþan flod ofsloh,
> gifen geotende giganta cyn,
> frecne geferdon; þæt wæs fremde þeod
> ecean dryhtne; him þæs endelean
> þurh wæteres wylm waldend sealde.
> Swa wæs on ðæm scennum sciran goldes
> þurh runstafas rihte gemearcod,
> geseted ond gesæd, hwam þæt sweord geworht,
> irena cyst ærest wære,
> wreoþenhilt ond wyrmfah. Ða se wisa spræc
> sunu Healfdenes; swigedon ealle (1687–99).[20]

Maðelode, "he spoke formally," is a verb commonly used to introduce direct discourse, and in most occurrences it introduces formal, public speech.[21] Here the verb signals the beginning of Hroðgar's sermon, which is arguably the most formal speech in the poem. However, the king pauses before he speaks in order to examine the hilt. The way the envelope structure of "Maðelode … spræc" embraces this examination implies that his gaze upon the hilt is closely connected to the speech that follows.

[19] For an approach to speech in *Beowulf* as a gift, see Robert E. Bjork, "Speech as Gift in *Beowulf*," *Speculum* 69 (1994): 993–1022.

[20] "Hroðgar spoke, he examined the hilt, the old heirloom. The origin of ancient strife was inscribed upon it; afterwards a Flood, a rushing sea, killed a race of giants — they fared terribly; that was a people estranged from the eternal Lord; the Ruler granted them a final payment through the rushing water. Thus it was marked in the right way on the plates of shining gold by means of runes, set down and told for whom that sword, the best of iron blades [and] the twisted hilt with serpentine decoration was first made. Then the wise one, the son of Healfdene, spoke; all were silent."

[21] For a brief discussion of the meaning and connotation of *maðelian*, see Robinson, *Appositive Style*, 66–67. For more extensive discussions of the use of this verb, see Matti Rissanen, "*Maðelian* in Old English Poetry," in *Words and Works: Studies in Medieval English Language and Literature in Honour of Fred. C. Robinson*, ed. Peter S. Baker and Nicholas Howe (Toronto, 1998), 159–72, and R. W. McConchie, "The Use of the Verb *Maðelian* in *Beowulf*," *Neuphilologische Mitteilungen* 101 (2000): 59–68.

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The description of the sword as both a *giganta geweorc*, "handiwork of giants" (1562b), and an *ealdsweord eotenisc*, "old, etenish sword" (1558a), directly connects the weapon to both the *eotenas*, Grendel's species (people?) and the *gigantas*, two of the *untydras*, "evil offspring" (111a), who are descended from Cain. We are not told how the sword passed into the possession of Grendel and his mother, but this detail does not matter. It has belonged only to the descendants of Cain, and its place in Grendel's den *on searwum*, "among arms" (1557a), is strongly suggestive of a display of weapons as heirlooms.[22] Moreover, the presence of the *or … fyrngewines*, "origin of ancient strife" (1688b–89a), in the inscription on the hilt, a phrase that refers to the murder of Abel, implies that the sword itself is, in a sense, also a descendant of Cain. Like the *heoro sliþendne*, "injuring sword," of *Maxims I*, it is a product of Cain's crime:

> Wearð fæhþo fyra cynne, siþþan furþum swealg
> eorðe Abeles blode …
>
> Drugon wæpna gewin wide geond eorþan,
> ahogodan ond ahyrdon heoro sliþendne (192–200).[23]

All swords are products of Cain's crime, but only the *giganta geweorc* is forged and owned by Cain's monstrous descendants. In the context of the poem the most likely referent of the account on the hilt of the *or … fyrngewinnes*, "the beginning of ancient strife" (1688b–89a), is the slaying of Abel. Irving has observed that Cain's fratricide "is consistently represented in *Beowulf* as the true original sin."[24] Given the brief transition in the poem from the story of creation (92–98) to the murder of Abel and the consequences of this crime (106–14), Irving's suggestion is entirely plausible. In the world of the poem there is no *or*, "beginning," of earthly evil prior to Cain's crime, and it is this deed that is presented as the origin of disorder in God's creation. Thus the hilt of this giantish sword, bearing an inscription commemorating the murder of Abel, the source of disorder and evil, is very much an heirloom of the kin of Cain.

When we examine the inscription on the hilt, we need to bear in mind Seth Lerer's observation that instead of a verbatim transcription of whatever text

[22] See *Klaeber's Beowulf*, 208, note to line 1557 for other possible translations of "on searwum."

[23] "Violence arose for the race of men ever since the earth swallowed Abel's blood … They engaged in the strife of weapons far and wide throughout the earth, they devised and hardened the injuring sword." *Maxims I* is cited from George P. Krapp and Elliott V. K. Dobbie, *The Exeter Book*, The Anglo-Saxon Poetic Records 3 (New York, 1936).

[24] Irving, *Rereading Beowulf* (Philadelphia,1989), 138; so also Davis, *Beowulf and the Demise* (n. 12 above), 104.

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the hilt contains we get only an indirect account.[25] We receive a summary of what is on the hilt, not a detailed report. This summary includes at least some narratorial commentary: statements such as *frecne geferdon*, "they fared terribly" (1691a), and *þæt wæs fremde þeod ecean dryhtne*, "that was a people estranged from the eternal lord" (1691b–92a), could not be conveyed in an engraved picture and are highly unlikely to belong to a brief runic inscription carved on a sword hilt, even a hilt such as this, which is larger than usual.[26] Indeed, it is difficult to conceive of the latter of these two statements as the work of a giant carver, who would presumably have been more likely to define his people in terms of their deliberate defiance of God instead of their estrangement from him.[27]

The punctuation of line 1689 in *Klaeber's Beowulf*, with a semicolon after *fyrngewinnes*, reflects the necessity of construing *syðþan* as an adverb meaning "afterwards" instead of a conjunction meaning "after"; the *or … fyrngewinnes*, "origin of ancient strife," in lines 1688b–89a must, as the word *or* implies, precede the Flood that is described in the following lines.[28] The description of the hilt thus falls into three parts: lines 1688b–89a refer to the *or … fyrngewinnes*; lines 1689b–93 present a brief account of the destruction of the giants in the Flood; and lines 1694–98a address the presence on the hilt of the name of the person by whom or for whom the sword was originally made. Despite the emphasis on the correctness (*rihte*, 1695b) of the manner in which this name is inscribed on the hilt, the name itself is not included. Similarly, although it conveys the sense of a great depth of time, the phrase *or … fyrngewinnes* provides no details about the ancient strife to which it refers. Only the middle section furnishes anything specific, a brief narrative of the Flood and the end of the *giganta cyn* that perished in the surging waters. As a consequence it is not surprising that most interpreters of the passage regard this rudimentary narrative as the most significant part of the inscription. However, this is the only portion of the passage whose

[25] Seth Lerer, *Literacy and Power in Anglo-Saxon England* (Lincoln, NE, 1991), 164.

[26] Elliott V. K. Dobbie, ed., *Beowulf and Judith*, The Anglo-Saxon Poetic Records 4 (New York, 1953) sets off line 1690a, *frecne geferdon*, as a parenthesis, a use of punctuation that emphasizes that this verse is narratorial commentary. See also his note to lines 1689–93.

[27] Davis, *Beowulf and the Demise*, 132, takes the opposite approach from mine and assumes the involvement of amphibious giants, like Grendel, who survived the Flood. He suggests that the defeat of the giants could have been depicted in order to serve as a rallying point, a sort of "Remember the Alamo" reminder in the struggle against divine order.

[28] See the note to lines 1688f in *Klaeber's Beowulf*, and Dennis Cronan, "The Origin of Ancient Strife in *Beowulf*," in *Germanic Studies in Honor of Anatoly Liberman*, ed. Kurt Gustav Goblirsch, Martha Berryman Mayou, and Marvin Taylor, North-Western European Language Evolution 31/32 (Odense, 1997), 57–68. Although the conjunction *siðþan* can sometimes be translated as "when," this translation is appropriate only when two events are described as occurring in rapid succession so that they occur at more or less the same time. The second event nonetheless occurs after the first, and "afterwards" is the basic meaning of the conjunction in such contexts.

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presence on the hilt is not confirmed by the text. The connection between the two other sections and the hilt itself is presented explicitly: the *or … fyrngewinnes*, we are told, *wæs … writen*, "was engraved" (1688b), while the first owner's name was *rihte gemearcod, / geseted ond gesæd*, "rightly marked, set down and told" (1695b–96a). As Seth Lerer has argued, these phrases indicate that the name is most likely presented in runes.[29]

It is probable that the lines about the Flood are not actually on the hilt but are included as a commentary on the *or … fyrngewinnes*. However, this issue need not detain us, because even if the lines were included in the inscription, it is unclear whether Hroðgar could even read them, never mind understand them. The lines summarizing the inscription are addressed to us, and the embedding of this account in the king's meditative pause as he begins his speech is a representation of Hroðgar's own growing understanding of the meaning of the hilt. The presence of this passage reflects the importance of the connection between the sword and the Flood to the thematic concerns of the poem and to the king's own understanding. The narrator associates the sword, Beowulf's token of victory, with the destruction of the giants in the Flood in order to emphasize that the hero's defeat of the *eotenas* parallels God's punishment and destruction of the giants, that Grendel's attacks and death are not an isolated episode but part of an ongoing struggle between God and rebellious portions of his creation. As I pointed out above, the most likely referent of the *or … fyrngewinnes* is Cain's slaying of Abel. The poem earlier derived Grendel and his mother from Cain's murder of his brother Abel: the clause *Þanon untydras ealle onwocon*, "thence all kinds of evil offspring arose" (111a), identifies them as both the physical and spiritual descendants of Cain. The explanation of Grendel's descent from Cain ends with a brief reference to the revolt of the giants against God and their death in the Flood:

> swylce gigantas, þa wið Gode wunnon
> lange þrage; he him ðæs lean forgeald (113–14).[30]

Just as this initial reference to Cain concluded with the death of the giants in the Flood, so the narrator returns to the Flood in the passage describing the hilt, creating a vast ring structure or envelope pattern.[31] A chapter of the strife that began with the first kin-slaying has been closed by the deaths of Grendel and his mother.

[29] On the connection between these phrases and the conventions of commemorative rune carvings in Scandinavia, see Lerer, *Literacy and Power*, 167–72.

[30] "Also giants, who contended against God for a long time; he paid them a requital for that."

[31] On ring composition in the poem, see John D. Niles, "Ring Composition and the Structure of *Beowulf*," *Publications of the Modern Language Association* 94 (1979): 924–35. Adeline Bartlett, *The Larger Rhetorical Patterns in Anglo-Saxon Poetry* (New York, 1935), termed such structures "envelope patterns."

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The entire episode is rooted in the murder of Abel, and when it is ended the poem returns to this origin through the inscription on the hilt. The poem opens and closes the period of struggle against Grendel with brief references to the story of Cain and Abel and the destruction of the giants. When these biblical episodes are first mentioned, the Danes have no knowledge at all of these stories. The final reference, however, marks the Danes' growing awareness that Grendel was part of an age-old struggle of rebellious creatures against the order of the world created by God.

The five lines describing the Flood (1689b–93) are thus part of a symmetrical design that marks the opening and closing of this episode. In this respect they are both structural and thematic elements of the poem. The second reference to the giants and the Flood is more developed than the earlier one because in this passage God's destruction of the giants also provides a thematic resonance for Beowulf's defeat of the *eotenas*. Thus the brief account of the Flood is a commentary on the inscription of the *or … fyrngewinnes* — since the Flood is a product of this strife — and on Beowulf's victory, which thus emerges as a parallel to the cleansing action of the Flood. It is also a commentary on the presence of the hilt in Hroðgar's hands, along with all that this presence entails.

For Hroðgar the content of the inscription is probably of only secondary interest — the hilt itself is far more important because it is the token of Beowulf's struggle and a remnant of the weapon he used to slay the Danes' enemies. What we are told while the king gazes at the hilt is not necessarily what he sees, although the account of the inscription serves as a concise representation, as a marker, of his growing awareness that the twelve years of Grendel's attacks were part of a much more ancient and significant struggle. In particular, the themes of divine power and *edwenden*, "a change of fortune, a reversal," inherent in the destruction of the giants reverberate with Beowulf's triumph and indeed with the entire scene. Hroðgar and the Danes themselves are in the process of absorbing a sudden and dramatic change of fortune: not only has Beowulf slain Grendel's mother, ending a twelve-year nightmare, he has returned with a token that through its mere existence can change their understanding of this nightmare. By embedding a brief summary of the Flood, an act of cosmic justice, into the account of the inscription, the narrator concisely prepares us for Hroðgar's speech, with its emphases on the proper respect for the many gifts God has bestowed upon powerful men, on a ruler's responsibilities, on the fleeting nature of human life and vitality, and on the sudden reversals possible in this transitory world.

What can Hroðgar see, and what can he read when he gazes at the hilt? We can only consider the possibilities here since he never speaks about the hilt itself and the narrator does not provide an entry into his thoughts. As we consider this question, we need to keep in mind Tom Shippey's observation that the swords in the poem are more than literary symbols: they are social signs that "function

systematically, in systems which cannot be entirely, or even largely, the creation of the poet."[32] The systems he speaks of here are generated by the symbiosis of the Old English heroic verse tradition with the world-view of the aristocratic martial culture. The reading I present here assumes that many members of the original audience would have been attuned to subtle significances in the use and transmission of swords, significances that we can recover only through sustained attention and thought. Such listeners and readers would have been able to detect and identify the unarticulated implications of the hilt. They would naturally have attributed a similar understanding to Hroðgar, a member of a famous dynasty and a successful king who, as so many passages in the poem demonstrate, is a master of courtly protocol and a keen judge of the value of words, deeds, and gifts. Unlike the king, however, the audience would also have been able to compare and thus confirm these implications against what the poet tells us about Grendel's descent, the inscription, and the destruction of the giants.

It is not merely Hroðgar's gaze upon the hilt as he is about to speak (1687–99) that prompts our exploration of what he can read and understand from this artifact. The preceding passage (1677–86) devotes ten lines to the rather simple process of one man handing an object to another. This extended emphasis on the movement of the hilt from Beowulf to Hroðgar signals how important this transmission is. An affirmation of the deaths of Grendel and his mother is embedded (1680–83) within these lines, much as the summary of the destruction of the giants in the Flood is embedded within the account of the inscription in the following passage. This rough parallel in the structure of the two passages suggests an analogous parallel in purpose. Because Beowulf hands the hilt to Hroðgar, the deaths of the two *eotenas* are now confirmed and known publicly. Because Hroðgar gazes at the hilt as he begins to speak, the destruction of the giants in the Flood serves as a shorthand for the implications of the hilt itself, an artifact that Hroðgar can read and understand.

It is likely that he is looking at an inscription in runes, instead of a combination of runes and carved illustrations. The *swa* in line 1694 is a resumptive *swa*, meaning "thus."[33] The force of this *swa* is not entirely clear. Perhaps it merely marks a return to the inscription after the brief commentary on the Flood. But it could also indicate that the *or* … *fyrngewinnes* is presented in the same manner as the name of the first owner, that is, in runes. Lerer, who has compared aspects of the inscription such as the usage of the verbs *writan*, *mearcian*, and *settan* to the conventions of Scandinavian rune stones, argues that the entire inscription is in runes and that it observes the conventions of Scandinavian

[32] T. A. Shippey, *Beowulf* (London, 1978), 21.

[33] On the meaning of *swa*, see Cronan, "The Origin of Ancient Strife," 64. See *Klaeber's Beowulf*, 212, note to lines 1688f, for a concise summary of arguments for a runic inscription versus a combination of a graphic illustration accompanied by runes.

inscriptions. Lerer concludes that what Hroðgar sees and reads are the conventions of a typical runic inscription.[34] Hroðgar thus reads the inscription as an object, not a text. There are too many unknowns here for us to assume that he can read what he sees. We do not know if he can read runes, and, if he can, we do not know if this ancient inscription is in a language he can read. For that matter, we do not even know if the poet ever gave any thought to the language presented in the runes, since we are kept at a distance from the inscription itself.[35]

What, then, could the sight of the hilt and its inscription convey to Hroðgar? The context of this inscription is not merely the hilt, but also the way this hilt was brought into the hall and placed within his hands — this is why the poem lingers so long over the transfer of the hilt from Beowulf to Hroðgar in lines 1677–86. Beowulf's report when he returns to Heorot, which we have already examined above, is an essential part of this context because he stresses how essential God's protection and guidance was to his success. This passage presents the clearest picture of the crucial role that God's help plays in the hero's survival and victory and conveys Beowulf's own awareness of how much he owes to God's intervention. His victory here is more than simply a matter of divine justice: God has intervened directly in order to protect him (*scylde*, 1658b) and to grant him (*geuðe*, 1661a) the sight of the giant sword. Without this protection and guidance he would not have seen the weapon, he would not have triumphed and survived, and Hroðgar would not be gazing meditatively at the hilt as he holds it in his hands.

When Hroðgar gazes at the hilt he can see, above all, the defeat of his enemies and the end of twelve years of affliction. He sees the power of God. He has trusted that God has the ability to end Grendel's attacks (478b–79), and he earlier proclaimed that Beowulf had defeated Grendel through God's might (939a–40). Now he is a witness to the exercise of God's power as it is manifested in Beowulf's survival and victory, in the hero's declaration that he would have perished without God's guidance, and, most tangibly, in the hilt itself, the extraordinary remnant of a sword that delivered the Danes from their enemies. Beowulf's entry into the hall

[34] Lerer, *Literacy and Power*, 167–72. On 171 he concludes that "Hroðgar may read the hilt; but what he reads are the memorial conventions of the rune master." James I. McNelis III, "The Sword Mightier Than the Pen? Hrothgar's Hilt, Theory, and Philology," in *Studies in English Language and Literature; "Doubt Wisely": Papers in Honour of E. G. Stanley*, ed. M. J. Toswell and E. M. Tyler (London, 1996), 175–85, at 175 questions what he refers to as Lerer's "assumption" that the text on the hilt consists of runes without images. But Lerer does more than simply assume the presence of runes, and to my mind he presents a convincing argument for such an inscription. Although I adopt here Lerer's conclusions about the runes, my own argument would work just as well if the inscription consisted of a mixture of runes and images.

[35] It is for this reason that I regard Schrader's argument that the insciption is in Hebrew as irrelevant to our consideration of this passage. Richard J. Schrader, "The Language of the Giant's Sword Hilt in *Beowulf*," *Neuphilologische Mitteilungen* 94 (1993): 141–47.

dramatically underscores how mistaken the Danish *snottre ceorlas*, "wise men" (1591b), were when they concluded from the blood in the water that the hero must be dead. Taken together, the hilt and Beowulf's account of God's direct guidance demonstrate the limitations of the Danes' understanding even further. For twelve years they have known Grendel only as a monstrous being from the wastelands, a solitary creature whose murderous violence and ravenous appetite violate every norm of civilized behavior. The presence of this horrible affliction in the very center of their kingdom and their own helplessness may have felt at times like an indictment of themselves and perhaps even of Hroðgar's rule. The inexplicable particularity of Grendel's attacks must have added to their burden. What, after all, could Grendel gain by these nightly visitations? He apparently had not eaten Danish flesh for years, and yet he persisted in occupying the hall every night.

But now there is the golden hilt in the king's hands. He can grasp at once that it is an extraordinary token of Beowulf's ordeal, of his victory over the Danes' enemies, of God's direct intervention, and the end of the Danes' twelve-year nightmare. In his speech he addresses the *edwenden*, "reversal" (1775b), he experienced at the height of his reign when Grendel attacked (1769–78a) and also the reversals that all men suffer through fortune, age, or disease (1761b–68). The presence of the hilt in his hands is the result of a dramatic series of reversals, all of them favorable: the unexpected survival and return of Beowulf, who had been on the verge of death before God's intervention; the death of Grendel's mother; the decapitation of Grendel himself; and the melting of the blade of the giant sword. Other implications of the hilt may be apparent to him at this point as well, or they may emerge more gradually. The sword from which it came is unlikely to have been Grendel's personal weapon, given that he never used a sword and had no need for weapons. Yet the size of the hilt demonstrates that it is not the remnant of a human sword. Moreover, whatever the runes might say, their presence implies language. If Grendel was able to speak, he certainly never revealed this ability to the Danes, not even to taunt or insult them. The *gryreleoð*, "song of terror," that he sang (786a) when his hand was clutched by Beowulf was a *wop*, a wordless lamentation which struck fear into all who heard (782b–88a). Without language, he did not have the ability to carve runes or to read them. The artifact itself, the ornamentation that twists about it, and the presence of the runes recall the smiths who forged and decorated the hilt. All of these features imply culture and civilized arts, none of which Grendel seemed to possess.[36] The hilt is an *ealde lafe*, "ancient remnant" (1688a), that speaks of the deep past, of a culture and civilization that no longer exists. It all seems utterly foreign to the Grendel whose presence and crimes the Danes have endured for so many years, and yet the sword and

[36] Although the Christian audience of the poem would presumably be able to associate the hilt with the forging of iron and bronze implements by Tubalcain, Cain's descendant, in Gen. 4:22, Hroðgar would be unable to make this association.

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its hilt are somehow connected to this solitary, monstrous creature. It was found in his den, his *hrofsele*, "roofed hall" (1515a), and was one of his possessions, a part of his treasure. It was able to kill his mother even though, as Beowulf testifies (1659–60), Hrunting, one of the most famous and reliable weapons of the northern world (1455–64), was useless against her. And, as he also reports, the blade melted when it was exposed to Grendel's blood and that of his mother (1666b–68a).[37] The sword will never be used again; it is reduced to an artifact, a token of what it once was, a sign of the defeat of Grendel and his mother, who, it now appears, are somehow descended from a more extensive and culture-bearing kin-group than the Danes could ever have imagined.

The involvement of God in the struggle, the guidance he gives to Beowulf, and his knowledge of the world beneath the mere is of a different order from the earlier help he had provided for the defeat of Grendel. There Beowulf himself and his God-given strength, courage, and resolution provided the victory. God's direct engagement in the fight against Grendel's mother, his very interference, implies a divine stake in this struggle that was not immediately apparent in the defeat of Grendel — which could be taken simply as a result of the workings of divine justice — as the deserved punishment of a twisted and malicious creature of evil. Hrođgar would not be able to articulate a notion such as the idea of a Great Feud between God and elements of his fallen creation; he still knows nothing of Cain and Abel or of the revolt of the giants and their destruction in the Flood. Indeed, it is not even clear from the text whether he is aware that it is God who sent Scyld an heir. But he would not be as successful a king as he has been if he were not able to recognize the hand of the higher power he has already identified as the only God. Even if he does not understand as much of the divine as the Christian audience does, God's intervention beneath the mere confirms his earlier expressions of faith in God's power (381b–84a, 478b–79, 930b–31), and as a result of the destruction of the *eotenas* he is now able to recognize God's goodness as well. Beowulf, of course, would have had the same recognition, but on a more immediate, visceral level.

The ability of the sword to slice through and behead the *eotenas* and its susceptibility in turn to their hot blood implies an intimate connection between the

[37] Beowulf's report gives the impression that the blood that melted the sword, *hatost heaþoswata*, "the hottest of battle-blood" (1668a), belonged to both Grendel and his mother, *huses hyrdas*, "guardians of the house" (1666a). James Paz, "Æschere's Head, Grendel's Mother, and the Sword That Isn't a Sword: Unreadable Things in Beowulf," *Exemplaria: A Journal of Theory in Medieval and Renaissance Studies* 25 (2013): 231–51, at 245 points out that although there is some ambiguity about just whose blood melts the blade, the connection of this melting to the blood of "the one who died therein" (*se þær inne swealt*, 1617b), suggests that it is the blood of Grendel's mother. Yet the sword does not melt until after Beowulf beheads Grendel. Since Grendel managed to drag his wounded body home to his den, he apparently "died therein" as well.

weapon and its owners that surpasses mere physical possession. However strange it may seem, the *eotenas*, the sword. and the smiths who forged this weapon are bound together. Given God's engagement and the way he guided the hero's attention to the sword, the bond between the *eotenas* and those who produced this weapon was most likely one of hostility and opposition toward God. Hroðgar's *ealdgewinna*, "old adversary" (1776a), now appears to have been a participant in a conflict that extends well beyond the twelve years he spent terrorizing the Danes and occupying Heorot.

How many of these realizations would have passed through Hroðgar's mind during the time he spends gazing at the hilt? In light of his speech he gives to Beowulf, which warns against the threats of pride and avarice, disorders that disrupt the established order of the world, it is likely that the king now begins to realize that for the past twelve years the Danes have been unwitting participants in a struggle between God and the forces of disorder in this world. He certainly understands that Beowulf has defeated his enemies and ended twelve years of impotent torment and that the nature of this triumph has changed the world of his people in both obvious and subtle ways. This victory has provided the Danes with a new perspective, a framework through which they can now view and understand those twelve years so they will be able to make at least some sense out of what must have seemed senseless. The gap between what the narrator tells the audience and what the characters in the poem know about Grendel and his descent is fairly wide at the beginning of the poem: we learn about the murder of Abel, the origin of violence and kin-slaying, and about Grendel's descent from Cain and his estrangement from God, while the Danes know nothing of this history. But the presence of the sword hilt in Hroðgar's hands narrows this gap considerably. Although the Danes never share the biblical knowledge that the audience possesses, the implications of the hilt provide them with a much broader and more meaningful context for their understanding of the attacks of Grendel and his mother than they possessed before.

For those of us who are readers or listeners of the poem, the brief account of the inscription with the embedded commentary on the Flood seals our understanding of the significance of the hilt. The juxtaposition of this account with Hroðgar's sermon increases the force of the king's words because the framing of his examination of the hilt within the beginning of his speech quite naturally leads us to impute some glimmering of our understanding to him. Michael Near has argued that this increase in force "betrays not so much the power of suggestion borne by Hroðgar's reading as the poet's skill in organizing the narrative."[38] Yet, although the king cannot read the inscription, he is capable of reading the hilt

[38] Michael R. Near, "Anticipating Alienation: Beowulf and the Intrusion of Literacy," *Publications of the Modern Language Association* 108 (1993): 320–32, at 324.

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itself as a significant artifact in the context of Beowulf's account of his struggle against Grendel's mother. Much of what we have learned during the narrative of the hero's struggle is revealed to Hroðgar through Beowulf's report and confirmed through his transfer of the hilt to the king, with the result that Hroðgar's understanding tracks that of the audience fairly closely, but without any knowledge of the biblical context. Instead of presenting a dialogue to convey the king's understanding, the narrator reveals the inscription, complete with commentary, and the embedding of this brief passage in the beginning of Hroðgar's speech implies that he shares our understanding, although he does not share all the information we possess. James Paz has recently observed that Hroðgar's examination of the hilt does not reveal "any extra or hidden knowledge that we do not have access to."[39] Conversely, the king is able to perceive much of what we in the audience know.

Hroðgar contemplates an object that is simultaneously a complex material thing and a sign from God. This sign has been long in the making and is the product of many actors: he is examining a sign that has been shaped as much by God's intervention, the hero's resolute actions, and Grendel's corrosive blood as by the original giant smiths who made the sword and its hilt.

Because the hilt is a material object with a complex history, it remains to some extent enigmatic, yet it is precisely this material complexity that makes it possible for it to serve, like other material signs discussed briefly in chapters one and two of Augustine's *De doctrina christiana*, as a sign leading the king to greater understanding.[40] Although there is still some separation between what we in the audience know and what Hroðgar knows, this separation does not generate dramatic irony because our knowledge has been granted to us, in part, to enable us to perceive the king's new insights. His awareness is now within range of ours because the hilt is a gift of grace from God as well as a gift of wisdom from Beowulf.

The construction of the scene itself, where our understanding and that of the king meet, is the product of a different sort of grace, an artistic grace. There is, first of all, the way in which the poem conveys Hroðgar's realizations by presenting an account of the inscription only to the listeners and readers in the audience and then following this revelation with the king's sermon. Critics such as Irving, Shippey, and Orchard, who attribute a share of our understanding to the king, have intuited this connection, even if they have not paused to examine why it works so effectively.[41] This sequence is remarkable in and of itself, yet the king's gaze upon the hilt provides a further interpretive benefit: although the song of creation at the beginning of the poem (92–98) provides us with a suggestive hint, the origin of the characters' belief in God is not directly revealed to us.

[39] Paz, "Æschere's Head," 247.

[40] Augustine, *De doctrina christiana*, ed. R. P. H. Green (Oxford, 1995), 1.4–5, 2.1–7.

[41] See n. 4 above.

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The presence of the material hilt as an interpretable sign provides us with a model for the way the monotheistic characters could have read the world itself as a sign of its creator, strengthening our intuition that they perceived his presence through his creation in accordance with Paul's words in Romans 1:19–21.

The wisdom Hroðgar presents in his sermon articulates the implications of what Beowulf has just experienced beneath the mere and of what he himself is in the process of realizing. Despite his earlier promise of gifts in reward for Beowulf's pursuit of Grendel's mother (1381–83), remarkably little is made of these gifts when they are granted (1866–69), and they are treated as if they are no more than departure gifts. The actual reward for Beowulf's deeds is the gift of wisdom the king presents in his speech. Yet Beowulf, who has survived and triumphed beneath the mere thanks to God's intervention, now has little need for a warning against pride or a reminder of the transitory and changeable nature of this life: he has just encountered the limitations of his strength, prowess, and life, and he has passed through an extraordinary series of rapid reversals.[42]

Although the king addresses his words to the hero, the rich and powerful men among the listeners and readers of the poem were probably the more important audience. Like the man *mæran cynnes*, "of an illustrious family" (1729a), these men were so fortunate in their station in life that they could easily forget how much of their privileges they owed to God, and thus give way to the temptations of pride and avarice against which the king warns. Yet the king's words are addressed to Beowulf, and we need to understand that they function as both a reward and a warning in the context of the story. The word "sermon" is an

[42] Irving, *Reading* (n. 4 above), 153, observes that "of course Beowulf does not need this sermon, but the poet needs it, one may assume, as an explicit statement of values found implicitly everywhere in the poem." So also Shippey, *Old English Poetry* (n. 4 above), 41, states that "Beowulf needs the old king's speech neither as warning for the future nor reprimand for the past." Other critics, however, partially root their criticisms of the hero's decision to fight the dragon alone in the words of Hroðgar's sermon, arguing that this decision is driven by Beowulf's pride. So, for example, John Leyerle, "Beowulf the Hero and the King," *Medium Ævum* 34 (1965): 89–102, at 98; Margaret E. Goldsmith, *The Mode and Meaning of Beowulf* (London, 1970), 200–201 and 224–44; E. G. Stanley, "Hæthenra Hyht in *Beowulf*," in *Studies in Old English Literature in Honor of Arthur G. Brodeur*, ed. Stanley B. Greenfield (Eugene, OR, 1963), 136–51, at 147–51; Alan Bliss, "*Beowulf* lines 3074–3075," in *J. R. R. Tolkien, Scholar and Storyteller: Essays in Memoriam*, ed. Mary Salu and R. T. Farrell (Ithaca, NY, 1979), 41–63, at 58–63; Andy Orchard, *A Critical Companion to Beowulf* (Cambridge, 2003), 260. Goldsmith, Stanley, and Bliss argue that he is guilty of greed for the dragon's treasure as well. Scott Gwara, *Heroic Identity in the World of Beowulf* (Leiden, 2008), 220–21, argues that Hroðgar must see a potential for destructive *ofer-hygd* in the hero, "otherwise, the entire sermon seems otiose as a 'general' caution against 'pride.'" The sermon, however, is not a general caution against pride; it is instead focuses exclusively upon how pride can grow in a king who ignores his debt to God, leading to avarice and the failure to distribute gifts to his people, thus breaking reciprocity and undermining social bonds.

appropriate name for such an extended (1700–1784) didactic speech. As Elaine Tuttle Hansen has demonstrated, the king's speech is cast in a subgenre of wisdom literature known as "parental instruction."[43] Hroðgar speaks to Beowulf as if he were a wise father addressing his young son.

This speech is presented on the highest, most philosophical level possible, and it is based on two underlying presuppositions, one of which is not expressed at all in the speech: Beowulf will some day be king of the Geats.[44] The second presupposition plays a more direct role, shaping the content of Hroðgar's words: the most perilous threat facing a hero such as Beowulf, who has survived the difficult and nearly mortal encounter beneath the mere and returned in triumph, is his own pride. Kings must establish and maintain order, defending their kingdom against both external and internal threats. Because Beowulf has demonstrated that there is no one alive who is more capable than he at coping with physical attacks, Hroðgar issues warnings against the pride and greed that arise when a man mistakes vitality, prowess, power, and wealth for his own accomplishments instead of recognizing that they are gifts from God. Such pride leads to an utterly self-centered existence that, in Hroðgar's view, results in a king who hoards wealth instead of distributing it to his retainers, completely disrupting the health and balance of the kingdom.

The somber, admonitory quality of this speech may seem out of place in this moment of victory: where are the joyous celebrations, the feasting, and the much-deserved praise of the hero's accomplishment? Nonetheless, this speech and the gift of wisdom it presents are actually the most appropriate measures of what Beowulf has achieved. His victory has demonstrated that he is a hero without equal, a warrior whose accomplishments have passed beyond the usual forms of celebration, beyond feasting and acclamation, beyond ordinary praise, and beyond even the richest and most significant rewards of treasure. His victory has surpassed all other heroic deeds, and he, who has brought back gifts of knowledge and wisdom for the king, is himself beyond ordinary recompense.

As we have seen, the hilt demonstrates that Grendel belonged to a much more complex past and kin-group than the Danes could ever have imagined. Indeed, it

[43] Elaine Tuttle Hansen, *The Solomon Complex: Reading Wisdom in Old English Poetry* (Toronto, 1988), chap. 2. Hansen explicitly links the maxims elsewhere in the poem to Hroðgar's sermon. Other discussions of maxims include Robert B. Burlin, "Gnomic Indirection in *Beowulf*," in *Anglo-Saxon Poetry: Essays in Appreciations for John C. McGalliard*, ed. Lewis E. Nicholson and Dolores Warwick Frese (Notre Dame, 1975), 41–49, and T. A. Shippey, "Maxims in Old English Narrative: Literary Art or Traditional Wisdom?" in *Oral Tradition, Literary Tradition: A Symposium*, ed. Hans Bekker-Nielsen et al. (Odense, 1977), 28–46.

[44] Although Hroðgar does not explictly predict in his sermon that Beowulf will become king of the Geats, in his last speech the king does declare that if Hygelac were to die the Geats would have no better choice for king than the hero (1845b–53a).

would not be going too far to say that Beowulf's return and the gift of the hilt have altered Hroðgar's world. The Danes left the mere because they concluded that the hero was dead (1591–1602a). His victorious return bearing Grendel's head is a shock — a welcome shock, but a shock all the same. The sword hilt is also a shock — not a sudden one like the hero's return, but one whose implications are already revising the Danes' understanding of the past twelve years. Although the sword blade has melted, this remnant of the weapon still has the ability to cut, and as Hroðgar stares at the hilt its implications slice through his preconceptions, opening him up to new knowledge, understanding, and wisdom. When he speaks of *edwenden*, his subject is the reversal he encountered under Grendel's attacks, but his words arise out of the *edwenden* he is experiencing as he speaks now in the hall, a reversal that is driven by the hilt in his hands: not only have Grendel and his mother been defeated for good, but his understanding of them and their attacks is changing. Although he cannot reach the full knowledge of Grendel's ancestry that the poet has revealed to us, he can come close, and he can apply this understanding to his own experience of Grendel's terror and work through to new insights. By handing him the hilt, Beowulf has bestowed upon him a gift of wisdom. Hroðgar grants him a gift of wisdom in return. Despite the admonitions and warnings in his speech, his words are actually a sign of the highest respect and, in their own understated way, a *gied* of praise.

Hroðgar's dawning but unarticulated understanding is signaled by his pause at the beginning of his speech. This pause assures us that the king does indeed respond to the hilt, and the framing of this pause with the verbs of speaking — *Hroðgar maðelode* (1687a) and *Ða se wisa spræc* (1698b) — connects the hilt to his speech. The narrator's reference to Cain's crime and the destruction of the giants represent the king's emerging comprehension of the significance of the hilt. If we subtract the biblical details from our own understanding, we have a rough approximation of what Hroðgar can also perceive. Even though the king can gain no knowledge of the biblical stories, he can perceive God's extraordinary assistance to the hero and the depths of time, culture, and feud that lie behind what had previously appeared to be the inexplicable and senseless attacks of a twisted, solitary creature.

I have focused primarily on Hroðgar because the poem invites us to ponder his response to the hilt and what it represents. Beowulf's own response to his experience beneath the mere would of course have been more visceral and immediate than the king's meditative absorption at the beginning of his speech. Yet his understanding of the implications of his experience and of the hilt would be at least as extensive and probably more profound than Hroðgar's. In the second half of the poem there are some surprising statements that can be understood only as a consequence of his experience beneath the mere. His direct encounter with God's presence has opened up in him, and apparently in anyone closely

connected to him, an awareness of the possibility of salvation after death, an awareness that provides indirect confirmation of Hroðgar's growing understanding of Grendel and his background outlined above.

At the moment of Beowulf's death, the narrator tells us that *him of hrœðre gewat / sawol secean soðfœstra dom*, "his soul departed from his breast to seek the judgment (glory?) of the righteous" (2819b–20). Although many commentators have argued against the obvious implications of the phrase *soðfœstra dom*, if this passage does not mean Beowulf is saved then it says nothing at all. As the note in *Klaeber's Beowulf* observes, this phrase refers either to God's judgment of the righteous or to eternal heavenly glory.[45] Despite the discomfort this statement has given some critics, these words are at least spoken by the narrator, who knows the Christian teaching of salvation.

The awareness of the possibility of salvation apparently shared by Beowulf and Wiglaf is more difficult to explain. When Beowulf speaks of Hreðel's death, he states that his grandfather *Godes leoht geceas*, "chose God's light" (2469b). Some commentators have attempted to dismiss this statement as no more than an euphemism for "he died." Yet it is difficult to contest T. D. Hill's observation that the phrase is "unequivocally Christian in its ideological implications."[46] Similarly, when Wiglaf commands the Geats to prepare Beowulf's funeral pyre, he tells them they need to carry their beloved king *þær he longe sceal / on ðæs waldendes wære geþolian*, "where he must long remain in the ruler's keeping" (3107b–8). Wiglaf's words echo what the narrator tells us when Scyld dies, that he departs *on frean wære*, "into the keeping of the lord" (27b). Unlike the narrator, the Danes have no knowledge of the destination of Scyld's soul, just as they do not know who receives his funeral ship after they launch it into the sea (50b–52).

Wiglaf assumes his king attains salvation, but the knowledge that he and Beowulf possess about the destination of their kinsmen's souls after death is not shared by the Danes who mourn Scyld at the beginning of the poem. The only possible source of this knowledge in the events of the poem is Beowulf's experience beneath the mere. As he is helped and guided by God, this encounter provides him with a direct experience of the divine that confirms his belief in the God who saves his life. Although the struggle between God's enemies and their creator is no longer a central theme in part II, both Beowulf and Wiglaf reveal their understanding of the possibility of salvation, an understanding that can have come only from Beowulf's experience of the divine presence, in which he apparently intuited God's saving power in all its dimensions. Just as he has

[45] *Klaeber's Beowulf* (n. 1 above), 257, note to line 2820b, which includes a review of the scholarship.

[46] T. D. Hill, "The 'Variegated Obit' as an Historiographic Motif in Old English Poetry and Anglo-Latin Historical Literature," *Traditio* 44 (1988): 101–24, at 120. See also *Klaeber's Beowulf*, 247, note to line 2469b.

recognized the possibility of salvation, so Hroðgar has recognized the wider context and significance of Grendel's attacks against Heorot.

When the narrator tells the audience about Cain's crime, his proscribed descendants, and the destruction of the giants in the Flood, he is overtly connecting Grendel to well-known biblical stories in order to provide a context for the *eotonas* and the events of part I. In contrast, critics who perceive tragic irony in the juxtaposition of Hildeburh's grief and suffering with Wealhþeow's speech about the succession are unable to base their arguments on a passage that is anywhere near as explicit. At most, there are some possible but subtle hints in the text. The most important reason, however, for us to be skeptical of the supposition of ironic gaps between what the audience knows and what the characters know is that the one gap in knowledge that the narrator explicitly presents is not there to give us a superior, ironic perspective but to provide us with the biblical context of Grendel's attacks and then to guide our recognition of the way Beowulf's experience beneath the mere rapidly expands both his and Hroðgar's own understanding of this context. Beowulf passes his new understanding on to the king by giving him the sword hilt. As many commentators have argued, Hroðgar's contemplation of the hilt as he begins to speak connects the hilt with the speech he delivers. This contemplation also invites us to pause with the king, to ponder what the hilt tells him, and to recognize the new knowledge and understanding of Grendel's attacks that it brings to him and to his people.

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