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Gold and the heathen polity in *Beowulf*

Abstract: In *Beowulf*, in which there is public gold, personal gold and the hidden gold which can send its owner to hell, King Hrothgar gives Beowulf more of the first kind in order to withhold from him the second, so helping him to the third. Not only the hero of *Beowulf* but virtually everyone else in this poem is heading for damnation, and yet the poet points to King Beowulf's. Because the dead king is his theme, and because ignorance of Christ defines the difference between *Beowulf*'s polity and his own, the poet makes Beowulf the best of his bygone world and then shows how the drive for gold destroys him.

Zusammmenfassung: Im *Beowulf*-Epos gibt es öffentliches Gold, persönliches Gold und das verborgene Gold, das seinen Besitzer zur Hölle schicken kann. König Hrothgar gibt Beowulf mehr von dem Ersten, um ihm das Zweite vorzuenthalten, wodurch er ihm zum Dritten verhilft. Nicht nur der Held des *Beowulf*, sondern jede einzelne auftretende Figur steuert unweigerlich direkt auf ihren Untergang zu; jedoch weist der Dichter besonders in Bezug auf König Beowulf darauf hin. Denn der tote König ist sein Thema, und das Unwissen über Christus prägt die politische Ordnung des *Beowulf*, ganz im Unterschied zur eigenen Lebenswelt des Autors. Deswegen kreiert er Beowulf als die bestmögliche Repräsentation einer längst vergangenen Welt und lässt Gold zu seinem Verhängnis werden.

Beowulf's death

Beowulf's all but abandoned death by the barrow at the end might come as a surprise to us, for until then he has ruled apparently without incident for fifty years. His kingship seems in keeping with the first gnomic saying in *Beowulf*, in which the poet, having introduced Scyld Scefing as the Danes' royal saviour, attributes the success of Scyld's son 'Beowulf' to gifts of money:

> Swā sceal geong guma gōde gewyrcean
> fromum feohgiftum on fæder bearme
> þæt hine on ylde eft gewunigen
> wilgesīþas þonne wīg cume,
> lēode gelæsten: lofdædum sceal
> in mægða gehwære man geþēon. (lines 20–25)[1]

1 Text in Mitchell / Robinson (ed.) 1998.

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So shall a young man ensure by giving good things,
bold gifts of money in a father's bosom,
that in old age he be attended once again
by willing companions whenever war may come,
be obeyed by his people: with deeds of praise
in each and every tribe a man shall thrive.

The happy outcome which is promised by this exordium is subverted in the manner of King Beowulf's death:

Swā begnornodon Gēata lēode
hlāfordes hryre, heorðgenēatas,
cwǣdon þæt hē wǣre wyruldcyninga
manna mildust ond monðwǣrust,
lēodum līðost ond lofgeornost. (lines 3178–3182)

So Geatish tribesmen mourned and keened
for the fall of their lord, companions of his hearth,
said that he was of the kings of this world
the most generous of men and gentlest,
kindest to his people and most eager for praise.

With the superlative *lofgeornost* as his last word the poet looks unnervingly back to *lofdæde* on line 24, to the pursuit of praise which every prince should undertake. *Beowulf* contains no other compound with OE *lof* in the text between, although the simplex *lof* ('praise') appears once half-way through in Beowulf's need to win *longsumne lof* ('long-lasting praise', line 1536) against Grendel's Mother. Through this precise usage it emerges that the poet has a long-term structural aim, despite his lack of directions, and that with *lofgeornost* he asks us to judge King Beowulf against the poem's opening wisdom about giving money freely in the bosom of one's father.

In this case the poem's traumatic ending might be read as ironic, for Beowulf's men fail him despite receiving great gifts. Is Geatish failure the parting theme of this work? Such a notion seems unlikely. *Beowulf* is too complex to end with a failure which depends on the Geats alone, or on judging whether their warriors are weaker than fifty years before. If it is then a flaw in the gold-giving system which leads to Beowulf's death and his people's, we must look for an answer in his fight with the Dragon. Gold is at least part of the reason for Beowulf's attack on the barrow. Not only are the Dragon's fire-raids a threat to the Geatish future, but King Beowulf must slay the reptile because its barrow holds a hoard the like of which no man has seen. Beowulf hears of its gold from the thief who broke in there, from his *melda* ('informer') therefore,[2] whose hand passes the evidence, an extraordinary cup, into his bosom

2 Gwara 2008, p. 279. Read as the thief 'accusing' Beowulf of involvement in the theft, by Biggs 2003, pp. 63–64. Read as 'accuser', a man other than the thief, in Anderson 1977, pp. 154–155; Andersson 1984, p. 494.

(lines 2403–2405). Then he sets out to do battle along with a party of twelve including the thief as guide. Before challenging the Dragon, however, he stands down his warriors, with a claim that this is a fight which only he can manage. This appears to be a mistake. It may be pride that helps him make it, as the poet claims when he informs us that Beowulf *oferhogode* ('was too proud') to attack the Dragon with a host (line 2345). No one has been able to say exactly what that pride consists of, whether it is a refusal to acknowledge his great age, or a fear that others will take the treasure first, or a combination of both.[3] Nonetheless, greed for gold in particular is the spectre which haunts many interpretations of King Beowulf on his last day on earth,[4] as if the young dedicatee of Hrothgar's 'sermon' about gold (lines 1700–1784) in the poem's first half must be tempted by it in the second. Whether or not this is so, it becomes clear that gold destroys Beowulf's body and soul.

Beowulf's damnation

The penultimate fitt (LXII), as if starting after an interval, begins with a brief resumé of what has happened, that the expedition to the barrow did not bring prosperity to the treasure's wrongful concealer, who has now been paid with vengeance for taking Beowulf's exceptional life (lines 3058–3062). God's plan is now made visible. Its mystery was the theme at the close of the previous fitt (LXI), in which the poet noted that *þonne* ('moreover', line 3051) the hoard had a spell denying entry to any but the man whom God in His favour thinks *gemet* ('meet', line 3057) to break in there. Clearly the thief, pathfinder for Beowulf, has been thought suitable. In fitt LXII, with a second such *þonne*, and without a verb in the main clause as if breaking off in exclamation, the poet reflects on the wonder of what is apparently chance. The passage which follows draws together earlier reflections on destiny in lines 697–702, 767–769, 1004–1008 and 1055–1062. No man, despite his courage, may avert an end which only God knows:

> Wundur hwār þonne
> eorl ellenrōf ende gefēre
> līfgesceafta þonne lēng ne mæg
> mon mid his māgum meduseld būan.
> Swā wæs Bīowulfe, þā hē biorges weard
> sōhte, searonīðas (seolfa ne cūðe
> þurh hwæt his worulde gedāl weorðan sceolde),

3 Gwara 2008, pp. 254–258 (heroic confidence); Leyerle 1965, p. 95 (age); Orchard 2003, p. 260 (overconfidence).

4 Bliss 1979, p. 63; Goldsmith 1970, p. 14: "lured as he nears death by the illusory solace of personal glory and great wealth"; Gwara 2008, pp. 278–288 (heroic greed); Stanley 1963, pp. 146–150; Tarzia 1989, p. 110.

swā hit oð dōmes dæg dīope benemdon
þēodnas mære, þā ðæt þær dydon,
þæt se secg wære synnum scildig,
hergum geheaðerod, hellbendum fæst,
wommum gewītnad, se ðone wong strūde;
næs hē goldhwæte gearwor hæfde
āgendes ēst ær gescēawod. (lines 3062–3075)

A wonder, moreover, where
a courageous warrior may reach the end of his life
predestined, when that man may no longer
inhabit the mead-building with his kinsmen.
So it was with Beowulf, when he sought the barrow's
guardian, ingenious enmities (he did not himself know
how his parting from the world should come about),
it was as the emperors of renown who put it there
had stipulated deep until the Day of Judgement,
that guilty of crimes the man would be,
with armies imprisoned, in hell-bonds fastened,
punished with defilements, who plundered this place;
not at all before this time had he more readily
observed an owner's gold-bestowing favour.

Before we go into the meaning of this vexed passage after the beginning of fitt XLII, some note on the syntax is due. The first *swā* ('so') on line 3066 looks both back and forwards, but syntactically forwards to the second *swā* ('as') which begins the subordinate clause on line 3069.[5] There is a parallel to this construction in the last sentence of the poem, on lines 3174–3182, in which the subordinate *swā*-clause comes first (on line 3174), the main *swā*-clause second (on line 3178). In both cases the verb is inverted in the main clause and final in the subordinate clause. The sentence in lines 3066–3075 is longer, in that the parenthesis in lines 3066a–3067 is usually read as the complement to the previous clause, while a new sentence is taken to begin with the second *swā* on line 3069. This reading is less smooth, however, in that it joins two main clauses in one sentence without a conjunction. Thus a parenthesis, with a continuation of the sentence, is preferable; and the sentence becomes even longer in that it leads towards a concluding statement in lines 3074–3075. The overall length of the passage defines it as an intervention.

The meaning of this passage is correspondingly dramatic. In the ten lines of the extended sentence in lines 3066–3075 the poet tells us that Beowulf is the unwitting object of a curse which sends him to hell, either immediately until the Day of Judgement, or from that day to eternity. The alternative syntax splits the *swā*-clauses into separate sentences in order to distinguish Beowulf's case from that of the proscribed

5 Bliss 1979, p. 42.

tomb-raider, but even here the meaning is the same. Since heathens go to hell, and since Beowulf is a heathen, Beowulf will probably go there, whether or not he incurs the curse. Beowulf looks set for hell with either *swā*-construction, unless it can be shown that he is guiltless of plundering the hoard. Most commentators respond by deflecting the anathema from Beowulf in order to save him: either by distinguishing and re-orienting the *swā*-clauses, as above, or by wrestling with the meaning of the concluding statement in lines 3074–3075, or by doing a combination of both. Thus Mitchell and Robinson keep Beowulf safe by keeping the clauses separate, albeit earlier Mitchell privately endorsed the syntax of Bliss, the metrical prosodist who linked them.[6] Myerov, going into this question with a customary rehearsal of all past form, allows for Bliss' syntax but suggests that the first *swā* flexibly looks back as well as forwards; and suggests that the poet speculates about man's ignorance of his otherworldly outcome as well as that of his place and time of death.[7] Nonetheless, the limited punctuation in the manuscript, by which Myerov sets out the larger passage in preference to modern editorial choices, allows him to run its clauses together in such a way that the anathema becomes lost.

Myerov's idea with 'the gold-bestowing favour of God' is that Beowulf only understands the manner of his death clearly when he is about to die. Thus he takes Beowulf's soul as saved, reads *āgend* (like Bliss) as a term for 'God' on the basis of the one attested instance in Ex. 295, and treats the *gold-* in these lines as a figure for heaven, 'the gold of God's grace'.[8] This type of reading, though popular, is weaker for not taking *gold* literally. Although the context invokes God through its reference to damnation, it has already introduced us to the owner in the 'Last Survivor' in lines 2233–2270, whose *hordwyrðne dǣl fǣttan goldes* ('hoard-worthy portion of plated gold', lines 2245–2246) is tangible in the hoard itself, the one which Beowulf tells Wiglaf to rob. That is, we are primed to take 'owner' as the meaning of *āgend* because we have just met the Last Survivor a thousand years earlier. Such is the first of Stanley's two proffered interpretations, although his second allows for 'God' in an *Āgend* as part of a reading of heavenly gold in lines 3074–3075.[9] The gold could be real, however, if 'God' here is seen as its provider in keeping with Beowulf's optimistic heathen view. Fred Biggs follows *āgend*'s primary sense, reading 'not at all had it [i. e. the place] previously granted the gold-incited gift of the possessor more entirely'. Although he finds that Beowulf's actions incur the anathema, he looks for latitude by taking the *hē*-pronoun of line 3074 to refer not to Beowulf, but to *ðone wong* ('this place') in the foregoing line. This spreads the curse more widely to Wiglaf and the Geats.[10] Nonetheless, as Stanley points out, the *secg* ('man') whom the anathema specifies is identifiable only

6 Mitchell 1988, p. 40; Mitchell / Robinson (ed.) 1998, p. 157.
7 Myerov 2001, pp. 541–545.
8 Myerov 2001, pp. 550–552, at 551.
9 Stanley 1963, pp. 144–145.
10 Biggs 2003, p. 68.

with Beowulf. King Beowulf's soul is the focus of lines 3061–3075, and although the poet leaves this in God's hands, his own prediction is hell.

Most readings of these lines, and there have been many, spare Beowulf his damnation, but to do this they have to strain meanings and problematize the syntax of the passage.[11] The most popular emendation is MS *næs he* to *næfne* ('unless'), i.e. unless God spared him, by which the spell is identified with the earlier escape clause with *nefne* on lines 3054–3057.[12] This nefne, however, merely describes God's permission for a man of His choosing to bypass the *galdre* ('spell', line 3052) with which the ancients try to keep their hoard untouched. Their vow of hell for the same robber later in line 3069, as a punishment, is of a different category from God's, although it is part of the same package. In any case we know that hell would have been Beowulf's fate already, from what Alcuin writes to Speratus about King Hinieldus (Ingeld) in a letter of 797:

> Non vult rex celestis cum paganis et perditis nominetenus regibus communionem habere; quia rex ille aeternus regnat in caelis, ille paganus perditus pagit in inferno.[13]
>
> The Heavenly King will have no communion with so-called kings who are heathen and damned; for the One King rules in heaven, while the other, a heathen, is damned and wails in hell.

Enigmatic as the poet of *Beowulf* is, any reading which skirts the import of Alcuin's words is weakly grounded.[14] Beowulf has as good a prospect of damnation as other heathens, whether or not this is here reinforced. As soon as Wiglaf brings him some of the gold, Beowulf accepts its dead owner as his gift-giver and looks on his gold-bestowing favour more readily than on any before. The hoard then becomes harmful to his soul. For some readers it will be bad enough that hell is where all heathens are going, worse to treat hell as expedited for Beowulf and worse still to read the poem in this way. The advantage, however, of treating lines 3062–3075 as a statement of Beowulf's entrapment is that he dies without a last-minute reprieve. Beowulf and the others live as heathens from beginning to end, without tuition and through a wild blend of sacred and profane. Their lives are sacred in the intuition of monotheism into which their beliefs are translated, but profane in the destiny they all share. The poet reminds us that heathens languish in hell with the anathema on lines 3069–3073, which makes the tomb-raider *hergum geheaðerod* ('imprisoned with armies', line 3072). The noun in this phrase is usually taken to mean 'with shrines' (OE *hearg*), as if hell were a site of heathen worship rather than the latter's reward; by the same token there would be churches in heaven. It is better, therefore, to read the word *hergum* as the dative of *here* ('war-bands'), and to see hell as filled with them. This position of Beowulf among multitudes is shocking in that it levels his virtue with theirs, but the

11 Tanke 2002, p. 362.
12 Cooke 2007, pp. 217–218; Klaeber (ed.) 1950, p. 115; Orchard 2003, p. 153; Wetzel 1993, pp. 160–164.
13 Dümmler (ed.) 1895, p. 183.
14 Cherniss 1972, p. 80; Goldsmith 1970, pp. 178–181.

poet has prepared us for Beowulf's drive for the Dragon's gold in a way which makes his damnation politically inevitable.

Beowulf's drive for gold

A commentary on the structure of his story will throw more light on Beowulf's interest in gold. At the start of this poem Beowulf cannot get enough of it. Both the given quantity and quality increase for him the further the story unfolds. When we first meet him he is rich enough to fit out a ship, choosing fourteen champions to crew her with *beorhte frætwe, gūðsearo geatolīc* ('bright accoutrements, splendid war-mail', lines 214–215). The poet reveals the gold to us gradually. After speaking with the Danish coastguard, Beowulf marches his men towards Heorot. The poet refers to gold by name for the first time as their boar-crested helmets glint *gehroden golde* ('adorned with gold', line 305). The guard on the door, a *wlonc hæleð* ('adventurous hero') named Wulfgar (line 331), tells the Geats that he thinks it is *for wlenco* ('for adventure') that they are there, not because of exile (line 338); Beowulf is *wlanc* when he answers (line 341). King Hrothgar in private counsel looks forward to offering Beowulf treasures *for his mōdþræce* ('for his daring', line 385). In public, as he makes his offer to Hrothgar, Beowulf draws attention to his mail-shirt, which was made by Weland and formerly belonged to King Hrethel (line 454). Having answered Unferth's challenge, Beowulf completes his request to fight Grendel by making a vow to Wealhtheow, Hrothgar's mead-serving queen, whom the poet describes as *goldhroden* both as she enters and leaves (lines 614, 640). Now the whole scene glitters with gold.

200 lines later Beowulf has carried out his vow and the Danish scene is set for rewards. A Danish noble sings of Beowulf like a new Sigemund, slayer of a dragon that guarded a hoard (line 886–887): these *beorhte frætwa* he loaded on his ship (line 896). Either this poet or ours then contrasts Sigemund and Beowulf with Heremod, whose glamour turned to tyranny. Reasons are not specified, but so far we know that Heremod was a king betrayed into exile by his subjects (lines 902–904). As Beowulf and the Danes ride back from the Mere, King Hrothgar assembles outside the hall with Wealhtheow and a regiment of women. He offers to take Beowulf into his family and to love him as a son. Often, says Hrothgar, he has given more for less. When the moment comes, Hrothgar's gifts are unprecedented: the sword of King Healfdene, Hrothgar's father; his *segen gyldenne* ('golden standard', line 1021); his helmet and coat of mail. To go with these gifts *golde gegyrede* ('girt with gold', line 1028) are eight stallions from the king's herd. The poet ends the fitt (XV) by telling us that no one could find fault with these gifts, so noble they were (lines 1048–1049).

After an interval, when the *Finnsburh lay* is performed and Queen Wealhtheow again comes forward, she is seen walking *under gyldnum bēage* ('wearing a golden necklace', line 1163), which she then presents to Beowulf along with two big bracelets,

raiment and rings, all made of *wunden gold* ('twisted gold', line 1193). Beowulf has now been seated between her sons. The poet says that the queen's necklace is unequalled by any but the one which Hama carried away from King Eormanric, trading it upwards for *ēcne rǣd* ('an everlasting reward', line 1201). Wealhtheow's necklace, he predicts, will one day rest on King Hygelac as he lies under a pile of shields on the coast of Frisia, having lost himself and his people in an expeditionary disaster (lines 1202–1214): *for wlenco wēan āhsode* ('for adventure he asked for woe', line 1206). Back in the present, the poet shows Queen Wealhtheow urging Beowulf to commute this necklace in any way he sees fit.[15] Her speech is shrill with imperatives:

> Brūc þisses bēages, Bēowulf lēofa,
> hyse mid hǣle, ond þisses hrægles nēot,
> þēodgestrēona, ond geþeoh tela,
> cen þec mid cræfte, ond þyssum cnyhtum wes
> lāra līðe! Ic þē þæs lēan geman. (lines 1216–1220)
>
> Make use of this necklace, dear Beowulf,
> young boy, for your fortune, and enjoy these garments,
> imperial treasures, and prosper well,
> put yourself skilfully forward, and to these boys be
> a kind tutor! I will remember you with a reward for this.

So it seems that Wealhtheow will reward Beowulf if he stays on as an instructor to her young sons. No less rhetorically, she follows up with an acknowledgement that Beowulf has raised his renown all over the world. Then, depending on whether we take Beowulf's rank of *æþeling* ('prince') as a vocative or a nominative complement, Wealhtheow tells him to be happy with his lot:

> Wes þenden þū lifige
> æþeling ēadig! Ic þē an tela
> sincgestrēona. (lines 1224–1226)
>
> Be for your lifetime
> a prince blessed! I will well
> grant you rich treasures.

This exhortation is enough to send Beowulf home more than 900 lines later. By then he has slain his second monster, Grendel's mother, who revived King Hrothgar's nightmare by taking vengeance for her son. Hrothgar, after summoning Beowulf from new separate quarters, says that the hand of his generosity lies still (line 1344). Beowulf responds to the incentive and does not disappoint, diving into Grendel's mother's lair with Unferth's sword which he then abandons in favour of a giant-forged blade on the wall of her cave (lines 1492–1565). Against the odds he cuts off her head and brings

15 North 2006, pp. 105–106.

Grendel's unexpectedly back to King Hrothgar, along with the hilt of the new sword, whose blade is now melted. The sword is now a *gylden hilt* ('golden hilt', line 1677), one *wreoþenhilt ond wyrmfāh* ('twisted and with serpentine patterns on the hilt', line 1698).

Hrothgar takes this ominous item as his cue when he gives a long speech or 'sermon' to Beowulf, whose kingship he can foresee, on a good king's detachment from gold. After 85 lines of advice mostly on greed as the root of bad kingship, Hrothgar sends the champion back to his seat with a promise of more gold tomorrow:

> Gā nū tō setle, symbelwynne drēoh
> wīggeweorþad; unc sceal worn fela
> māþma gemǣnra siþðan morgen bið. (lines 1782–1784)
>
> Go now to your seat, live the joy of feasting
> as one honoured for fighting; between us a great number
> of treasures will be shared when morning comes.

In response, Beowulf is given as *glædmōd* ('agreeable'; literally 'minded to be gracious', or more simply 'joyous'). When morning comes, and parting speeches are concluded, Hrothgar gives Beowulf twelve more treasures of a type which the poet does not divulge (line 1867). Perhaps he does not need to, for the language with which he describes Beowulf as he leaves King Hrothgar yields a cinematic image of success, with Beowulf as a gold-seeking hero at the height of his powers:

> him Bēowulf þanan,
> gūðrinc goldwlanc, græsmoldan træd
> since hrēmig. (lines 1880–1882)
>
> Beowulf out of there,
> war-noble gold-adventurous, trod the grassy knoll
> exulting in treasure.

Back home in Geatland, our hero trades this whole expression of his honour further upwards by giving the Scylding panoply and four stallions to his uncle King Hygelac, and Wealhtheow's necklace and three stallions to Hygd, Hygelac's young queen. In return, Beowulf gets the sword of King Hrethel, his mother's father, plus a province of 7,000 hides along with *bold ond bregostōl* ('hall and chieftaincy', line 2196). Thus it is his culmination to emerge *goldwlanc* when his three days in Denmark are over and then to commute some of his new-found status and gold for a role in Hygelac's polity. Most people think that this ceremony marks the end of *Beowulf* 'Part I', for in the so-called 'Part II' Beowulf rises even higher by becoming king of the Geats. In this role he rules for fifty years with the Geatish gold-hoard entirely at his disposal. The question then is why Beowulf shows such an interest in the Dragon's hoard in the climactic narrative of the poem.

Greedy for gold? King Beowulf

Greed is a well-known constituent of King Hrothgar's 'sermon' in the middle of *Beowulf*. Since Hrothgar warned Beowulf about greed in his speech in lines 1700–1784, it may be thought that he sees a common royal risk of succumbing, and that Beowulf later does. In the evening before Beowulf's last night in Heorot, Hrothgar can see that the young man will become a king and in his sermon he warns Beowulf in overtly Christian language not to exceed his future royal power. He instructs Beowulf of what can happen when a king falls in love with his gold and wishes to keep it to himself. He starts off with old King Heremod's example, for which the poet has prepared us once, if not twice. Reference to Heremod first arises probably in the *fyrenðearfe* ('criminal difficulties') which the Lord perceived in the leaderless Danes before sending them Scyld (lines 14–16); and then, with *hine fyren onwōd* ('crime invaded him', line 915), in the veiled tale of King Heremod's tyranny (lines 901–913) by which our or a Danish poet raises Beowulf's promise even higher. Hrothgar's speech makes capital out of the legend in his tradition. Heremod, he says, disregarded good kingship, squandering the gifts by which God advanced him before all. Heremod's transformation began when he abused the royal office:

> Hwæþere him on ferhþe grēow
> brēosthord blōdrēow, nallas bēagas geaf
> Denum æfter dōme. Drēamlēas gebād,
> þæt hē þæs gewinnes weorc þrōwade,
> lēodbealo longsum. Đū þē lær be þon,
> gumcyste ongit. Ic þis gid be þē
> āwræc wintrum frōd. (lines 1718–1724)

> In his mind, however, grew
> breast-hoard blood-cruel, no more did he give rings
> to Danes to match an honour earned. Without joy he lived
> in that he suffered pain for the strife this caused,
> a long-lasting torment. You learn from this,
> take note of manly virtue. It is about you that I,
> made wise by winters, have composed this song.

Hrothgar's last statement here might encourage us to endow him with prophecy, if we believe that Beowulf becomes a second Heremod. Will such paranoia be Beowulf's in later years? Heremod's mind is itself pictured as a hoard in which each thought is set on keeping gold with violence. The conversion value, by which the king has the right to match reward to deed regardless of any fixed price of commerce, is thus scaled continually upwards by Heremod to his profit and the retinue's loss. Greater Danish deeds for Heremod bring ever smaller rewards from Heremod until some of his surviving, because less plaintive, warriors leave him while others betray him.

At this point Hrothgar builds an exemplum out of Heremod in order to analyse the bad king as a type. He holds it a wonder how well God endows some men with wisdom,

territory and lordship, allowing one such man, for example, to run free with thoughts of power until, *for his unsnyttrum* ('for his stupidity', line 1734), he sees no end to it. The man has neither old age nor illness nor dire sorrow nor violence to concern him, and he treats the whole world as his. And that, says Hrothgar (at the start of fitt XXV), is when *oferhygda dǣl* ('a share of prideful thoughts', line 1740) begins to grow within him; when the *sāwele hyrde* ('soul's shepherd', line 1742), probably Conscience, falls asleep, allowing the devil's arrow to pierce his defences from a fiery bow:

> Þinceð him tō lȳtel þæt hē lange hēold,
> gȳtsað gromhȳdig, nalles on gylp seleð
> fǣtte bēagas ond hē þā forðgesceaft
> forgyteð ond forgȳmeð, þæs þe him ǣr God sealde,
> wuldres waldend, weorðmynda dǣl. (lines 1748–1752)

> It seems too little to him, what he long held,
> wild at heart he grows greedy, no more gives vow-makers
> plated rings, and then the world to come
> he forgets and neglects, that share of honours
> which God, the Ruler of Glory, gave him before.

In this way the devil instructs the vain king to keep his gold by adjusting its conversion value, until it becomes too valuable to spend at all. The king forgets that it is his duty to circulate gold in line with the court's good opinion of his role in the honour economy (Wealhtheow reminds Hrothgar to do this in lines 1173–1174). He forgets that his gold is lent to him, that his body is also *lǣne* ('on loan', line 1753), and that someone else will spend the gold when he dies. The moral of these lines may be seen flouted in Scyld Scefing's ship-funeral, which features a heap of treasures (lines 43–48), as well as in Beowulf's land-burial in which his new treasure is partly burned and mostly buried with him (lines 3139–3141 and 3163–3168). With the benefit of hindsight here, it may be surprising to see Hrothgar, on the brink of full retirement, at odds with the yellow currency of the empire which he has helped to build (lines 64–67). And yet there is a detachment which goes with the age of this king. For the second time Hrothgar appeals to Beowulf, begging him to take a longer view:

> Bebeorh þē ðone bealonīð, Bēowulf lēofa,
> secg betsta, ond þē þæt sēlra gecēos,
> ēce rǣdas; oferhȳda ne gȳm,
> mǣre cempa! Nū is þīnes mægnes blǣd
> āne hwīle. (lines 1758–1762)

> Save yourself from that evil enmity, dear Beowulf,
> best of men, and choose for yourself what is better,
> everlasting rewards; have no regard for prideful thoughts,
> renowned champion! The glory of your power now is
> only for a while.

The word *bealonīð* occurs six times in the Old English corpus: here and twice more in *Beowulf*, in *Guthlac* (A) and twice in the tenth-century *Kentish Psalm* 50. In *Guthlac* (A) 809, it is used of good Christians, who *beorgað him bealonīþ* ('save themselves from evil enmity') by fasts and prayers.[16] In *Psalm* 50.110, the speaker prays to be mentally freed *fram blōdgēte and bealonīðum* ('from blood-shed and evil enmities'); in *Psalm* 50.151, a man is good who *gebētte balanīða hord mid ēaðmēde ingeþance* ('has mended the hoard of evil enmities with the intention of humility').[17] These instances show a traditional Christian association between hoards and the evil which comes from the devil. This is precisely the meaning of Hrothgar, whose other marked terms are *ēce rædas* ('everlasting rewards') and *oferhȳda* ('prideful thoughts'). Thus Hrothgar appears to give Beowulf a very Christian lesson against greed and pride and other temptations of the fiend.

Looking back from the Dragon's hoard, it is hard to know what young Beowulf makes of Hrothgar's advice. Summing up his stay in Denmark in public before King Hygelac, he says that *gomela Scilding felafricgende feorran rēhte* ('the ancient Scylding told from far back many things he had learned', lines 2105–2106), that he sometimes touched the lyre of mirth and *hwīlum gyd āwræc sōð ond sārlīc* ('other times composed a song true and grievous', lines 2108–2109). Perhaps Beowulf's rhetoric lets an impartial or even loyal picture of Hrothgar emerge, despite Hygelac's apparent contempt for the Scylding monarch (lines 1990–1992). But fifty years on, the message may not have come home. The poet hints that all is not well in the Geatish kingdom. This is not only because of Hygelac's death and the complicated manner of Beowulf's accession to his throne, but also because of the damaged letter-forms for the thief who steals a cup from the Dragon's hoard: *þ... nathwylces* (line 2223). As a man on the run from the lash, this fellow appears to be already either 'someone's slave' (*þēow*) or a 'thief of something' (*þēof*).[18] Biggs suggests that Beowulf is the cruel lord who punished him and that the man placates him with this treasure.[19] The poet seems to leave the question of this role for Beowulf open, as he does initially with the king's fear that he has offended God (lines 2327–2332). But the thief has a story to tell, and some time later, when his party sets out, Beowulf knows enough to link the cup with the Dragon:

> Hæfde þā gefrūnen hwanan sīo fæhð ārās,
> bealonīð beorna; him tō bearme cwōm
> māðþumfæt mære þurh ðæs meldan hond. (lines 2403–2405)
>
> By then he had found out whence the feud arose,
> evil enmity of men; towards his bosom came
> a splendid treasure-vessel by that informer's hand.

16 Roberts (ed.) 1979, p. 107.
17 Dobbie (ed.) 1942, pp. 92–93.
18 'Thief', in Andersson 1984, pp. 494–495.
19 Biggs 2003, p. 62.

The poet's definite article identifies the melda as the thief whom we have met. Despite Kuhn's Law and the caesura on line 2404 we may read the two clauses as one and may identify the cup with *bealonīð beorna* ('evil enmity of men'), which stands in apposition: Hrothgar told him to avoid *bealonīð* and yet here it is moving close to his heart. The poet's final use of this compound reflects the venom with which the Dragon kills the king:

> Đā sīo wund ongon,
> þe him se eorðdraca ǣr geworhte,
> swēlan ond swellan; hē þæt sōna onfand
> þæt him on brēostum bealonīðe wēoll
> āttor on innan. (lines 2711–2715)

> Then began that wound
> which the earth-drake had just made
> to inflame and swell; he soon found
> that in his breast with evil enmity welled up
> a poison from within.

Of themselves, the poet's three uses of *bealonīð* make a pattern by which Beowulf's heart is poisoned by gold even before he ingests the Dragon's venom.

This pattern is reinforced by his related compound *searonīðas* ('ingenious enmities'), which occurs four times and only in *Beowulf*. Neutrally this term is first given in Beowulf's words on line 582, in apposition to *billa brōgan* ('the terror of blades', line 583), as a word for the lithe instincts of *niceras* ('sea-monsters') such as those he fought in the sea in his swimming race against Breca (in lines 549–569).[20] Later, however, with more moral charge, the compound decribes the motive or effect of Hama's arrival in 'the bright city' with a great Gothic necklace:

> Nǣnigne ic under swegle sēlran hȳrde
> hordmāðum hæleþa syþþan Hāma ætwæg
> tō *þǣ*re byrhtan byrig Brēsinga mene, (MS *brosinga*)
> sigle ond sincfæt; searonīðas *flēa*h (MS *fealh*)
> Eormanrīces, gecēas ēcne rǣd. (lines 1197–1201)

> Never under firmament did I hear of a better
> hoard-treasure for heroes since Hama carried off
> the necklace of the Bresings to the bright city,
> jewel and precious setting. He fled ingenious enmities
> of Eormanric, chose an everlasting reward.

Here, as with *bealonīð* on line 2404, little more than a caesura divides a jeweller's intricate work and the *searonīðas* of Eormanric, a king whose cunning is attested in

20 Taylor 1983, p. 112.

Norse and other analogues.[21] The fact that Hama chooses *ēcne rǣd*, more literally 'a policy for eternity', would make Hama an exemplum for Hrothgar, had the king only used him. As Hama lives on the Roman edge of the Scandinavian world, possibly he is the one soul in *Beowulf* to be saved by the doctrine rather than intuition of Christianity. Hama appears to be contrasted with Beowulf's charismatic uncle, whose death in Frisia follows in lines 1202–1214, for Hama's eternal reward is the measure by which Hygelac fails. Hygelac dies not in rejection but in pursuit of tangible gold (not only here but also in lines 2200–2201, 2354–2366 and 2913–2920), and Beowulf may be ready to follow his example. Wealhtheow's necklace, which finds its way from her to Beowulf to Hygd to Hygelac to the Merovingian emperor,[22] is around Hygelac's neck when he dies. So Hygelac dies seeking *searonīðas*.

The compound *searonīðas* arises twice before, and twice after the episode with the Dragon and the poet's three instances of *bealonīð* (on lines 1758, 2404 and 2714). The third instance is when Beowulf is dying. Making his own epitaph, he surveys his achievements. Though without an heir on whom to settle his armour, Beowulf says that he ruled the Geats for many years and kept all foes at bay:

> Ic on earde bād
> mælgesceafta, hēold mīn tela,
> ne sōhte searonīðas, ne mē swōr fela
> āða on unriht. (lines 2736–2739)
>
> I in my country endured
> fated events, held my own well,
> sought no ingenious enmities, nor swore many
> oaths by me invalid.

This third instance of *searonīðas* bespeaks the tangled politics of rule, in which the king claims to have a clean record. However, the word also resembles *bealonīð*, in that the royals who plot against friends and relatives are not so unlike Heremod who did the same for gold. Beowulf goes on to say that he avoided this course (lines 2739–2743), but the poet contradicts him when he employs *searonīðas* for the fourth and last time.

Here Beowulf takes the anathema's full impact *þā hē biorges weard sōhte, searonīðas* ('when he sought the barrow's guardian, ingenious enmities', lines 3066–3067). As we have seen, these words occur in the middle of the passage on *wundur* in lines 3062–3075. The *searonīðas* compound refers to the spell which was cast by the Last Survivor and his forerunners a thousand years earlier. In the poet's view, the Dragon is as ingenious as the magic, for he embodies the greed of the folk

21 Taylor 1983, p. 113.
22 *Pace* Biggs 2005, p. 738.

before him, those kings who cast spells before they all died by the sword.[23] Unwittingly Beowulf seeks the sum of all their enmities when he moves on the gold:

> Ic mid elne sceal
> gold gegangan, oððe gūð nimeð,
> feorhbealu frēcne frēan ēowerne! (lines 2536–2539)
>
> I with courage shall
> get the gold, or battle, evil dangerous
> to the life-blood, will take your lord!

As Beowulf here does not invoke the Dragon's threat to his people, the poet lets us see gold as his motive. No wonder, then, that lines 3074–3075 –

> næs hē **gold**hwæte **gearwor** hæfde
> **āgendes** ēst **ǣr gescēawod**.

– seem better secularly rendered, as above, in 'not at all before this time had he more readily observed an owner's gold-bestowing favour'. If *Āgendes* ('of the Lord') is to be preferred, this must be Beowulf's view of the Dragon's gold as God's gift to him in his need. At any rate, there is little doubt that the words *gold*, *āgend*, *gearwor*, *ær* and *gescēawod* formally replicate Beowulf's command to Wiglaf earlier that he should ease his death by bringing him some of the hoard:[24]

> Bīo nū on ofoste þæt ic **ǣr**welan,
> **goldǣht** ongite, **gearo scēawige**
> swegle **searo**gimmas (lines 2747–2749)
>
> Be now in haste, that I may perceive the wealth
> of times before, the gold it owns, that readily I may observe
> brilliant ingenious jewels

For this is the very moment in which Beowulf incurs the anathema. There is not much doubt that his word *searogimmas* blindly anticipates the term *searonīðas* which, as we have seen, defines both the Dragon (line 3067) and the political enmities which Beowulf says he avoided (line 2738). Unlike the poet and thereby us, Beowulf is without the knowledge to see that the Dragon and the treachery are the same, with the devil their common cause. There is the political ingenuity which schemes for gold and the magical which uses hell to avenge it, and for the poet they count as one. In

23 Taylor 1983, p. 124: "a malice which spoils nature and art alike. It is accomplished magic, achieved sorcery".
24 Stanley 1963, p. 146.

this dismal light, one could be forgiven for thinking that the poet finds Beowulf as guilty of greed as he does Heremod and Hygelac.

King Beowulf's need for gold

But in defence of Beowulf's good kingship, it is worth noting that his interest in gold is not quite as his last actions make it appear. Before dying Beowulf declares a selfless motive for seeking this hoard:

> Nū ic on māðma hord mīne bebōhte
> frōde feorhlege, fremmað gēna
> lēoda þearfe' (lines 2799–2801)
>
> Now I have bought a hoard of treasures with the wise
> deposition of my life, they will henceforth advance
> the people's needs

Perhaps this was his earlier motive too. The wording is potentially ironic, for at first it is in line with OE *þearfe*, which connotes the 'difficulties' of poverty rather than any positive 'needs' a society might have. Hereby it appears that Beowulf expects Wiglaf, his last man standing, to become king and then relieve some poverty by circulating the Dragon's gold just as he would have done. It seems then unlikely that Beowulf means that he would have kept the gold to himself if he had survived. This chain of reasoning clears King Beowulf of greed by showing that he intended to carry out Hrothgar's injunctions to the letter, although politically rather than spiritually, the position is more complex. Beowulf has exchanged his life for the treasure. His word *feorhlege*, sounding rather like **fēohlege* which would mean 'deposition of money', reinforces the use of *bebycgan* as a monetary metaphor for self-sacrifice. What are the financial *þearfe* ('needs') of the Geats which only their king's life can satisfy?

To answer this question, we must start with the honour economy which is common to all the tribes in *Beowulf*. It is generally accepted that the 'Ehrensold-Ordnung', as Ernst Leisi coined it, is traditional to a warlike society in which trade has not yet replaced aristocratic favours or gift-giving.[25] This 'heroic' type of economy is also about conversion values. The intrinsic value of gold is not fixed in an honour economy, but rises and falls according to fluctuating rates of exchange. In these exchanges the rate is fixed at the moment of giving, not only for the value of the warrior's deed, but also for the value of the king who rewards him. Neither value can be stable, nor is King Hrothgar's, despite the ascendancy of his younger career (lines 64–67). His honour holds up in the twelve years of Grendel, but it is built on a surplus

25 Hill 1995, pp. 85–106; Leisi 1953, p. 267.

which lessens as his humiliation grows. This diminution has already been forecast in the poet's words about Grendel's nightly occupation of Heorot, in which Hrothgar (*hē* on line 168) no longer *þone gifstōl grētan mōste*, *māþðum for Metode ne his myne wisse* ('might approach that gift-seat, that treasure, because of the Measurer, or know His purpose', lines 168–169).[26] Hrothgar's fear of having offended is clear in his later words about his pride in having thought his power limitless, just before the Lord showed him it was not: *edwenden cwōm, gyrn æfter gomene* ('there came a reversal, injury after revelry', lines 1774–1775). There is a similar depth of anguish in Beowulf's fear of having broken God's law in lines 2327–2332. In Hrothgar's case, with greater reserves of honour, the Danish kingdom appears to remain stable, with an efficient coast watch, a well-mannered sentry from another tribe, day-time courtly revels, loyal family (line 1164) and even a planned alliance with the Heathobards through the marriage of Freawaru, Hrothgar's daughter. Above all, King Hrothgar still has plenty of gold. But news of his humiliation has spread. Beowulf's harsh words to the Coastguard (lines 271–285) make it clear that if Grendel stays unbeaten, Heorot will not be *on hēahstede hūsa sēlest* ('noblest of houses in the high place', line 285) for ever. Against this background, Hrothgar finds his guest's destruction of Grendel rather hard to reward. Beowulf's achievement is to restore Hrothgar to the use of Heorot. This is an unparalleled success, going beyond heroic norms. Baker, discussing the exchange-order system in which each gift must be seen to outdo its predecessor, says accordingly of Hrothgar that "Beowulf's gift is symbolically nothing less than the kingdom of Denmark – and what could top that?".[27] But the answer to this question is to recall that Beowulf's gift is Hrothgar's use of his hall or kingdom, not the hall or kingdom itself, in which Hrothgar can now give Beowulf a stake by giving him his daughter Freawaru in marriage.

The poet hints that Hrothgar initially plans to do this. When Beowulf and friends come back from the Mere, Hrothgar steps out *of brȳdbūr* ('from the bridal bower', line 921) with Wealhtheow and her entourage. So Hrothgar has plausibly been talking with the princess whom Beowulf later reveals to be Freawaru, lined up for Ingeld (lines 2020–2029). The king makes an announcement:

> Nū ic Bēowulf þec secg betsta mē for sunu wylle
> frēogan on ferhþe; heald forð tela
> nīwe sibbe. Ne bið þē <n>ænigre gād
> worulde wilna þe ic geweald hæbbe.
> Ful oft ic for læssan lēan teohhode,
> hordweorþunge hnāhran rince,
> sæmran æt sæcce. (lines 946–953)

26 Roberts 2007, pp. 357–361.

27 Baker 2013, pp. 60–70, at 67; Leisi 1953, p. 266.

> Now you, Beowulf, man highest-ranking, will I cherish
> in my heart as a son; keep well from this time forth
> a new kinship. Nor shall you want for anything
> in worldly desires over which I have power.
> Very often I appointed a reward for less,
> honour from the hoard to a lower-ranking nobleman,
> one worse in battle.

The second part of this declaration attempts to explain the first, because Hrothgar's offer, a kin-bond, goes beyond gift-giving norms.[28] So does his open-ended promise to give the hero anything he might desire. Beowulf might want the kingdom itself.[29]

At the very least, Beowulf's achievement asks for more than commutable wealth. The conversion value of gold is fixed at the moment of giving by the king's court-advised *dōm* ('opinion') of the recipient's worth, and this *dōm* (also 'judgement') depends not only on the recipient's worth but also that of the giver. Any reward which fails to match a proffered achievement overvalues the king's gold and moves a step closer to the avarice of Heremod, as Hrothgar knows. As was once observed in an influential essay on competitive gift-exchange, the giver must not allow his honour to fall behind that of the recipient by giving less than the deed is worth. This is because the giver always gives something of himself. As Marcel Mauss says, "La chose ainsi transmise est, en effet, toute chargée de l'individualité du donateur"; that is, 'The thing passed on in this way is indeed very much infused with the individuality of the donor'.[30] Not by chance does the concept of OE *strēon* ('created wealth', 'interest') extend to that of (*ge-*)*strīenan* ('to beget [children]'), as with Methuselah who *worn gestrȳnde ær his swyltdæge suna and dōhtra* ('begat before his dying day a number of sons and daughters') in *Genesis* (A) 1220–1221. Indeed, with no living heir of his own, it seems right that Beowulf uses this verb for the bequeathing of treasure as his heir, thanking the Lord for being able *ær swyltdæge swylc gestrȳnan* ('to accrue such things before my dying day', line 2798). This idiom precedes lines 2799–2801 in which he describes his self-sacrifice financially. Hrothgar's problem is that for Beowulf he must produce a gift of higher than ordinary value. Thus he can give Beowulf Freawaru. Royal women are habitually decked in gold (lines 614, 640, 1948, 2025), and they may be looted or stolen as if they were made of it (Hildeburh, lines 1157–1159). This is why one might call a king's daughter his 'personal gold'.

There are two explicit examples of such marriage offers in *Beowulf*. One is when we learn that King Hygelac once gave *āngan dohtor, hāmweorðunge hyldo tō wedde* ('his only daughter, an honour to his household, as his pledge of loyalty') to his champion Eofor for the slaying of King Ongetheow of the Swedes (line 2997–2998).[31] This,

28 Bazelmans 2000, p. 358.
29 Hill 1995, pp. 95–98.
30 Mauss [1950] 2007, p. 207; Mauss 1990, p. 79.
31 Baker 2013, p. 61. His sole case of overspending, according to Hall 2006, p. 86.

as the Geatish messenger tells us, is the last in his catalogue of the causes of tribal enmity. It may be contrasted with the Danish marriage that Beowulf has missed. Another example is when Hrothgar, speaking to Wulfgar before he welcomes Beowulf to Heorot, tells us that King Hrethel of the Geats gave Ecgtheow his *āngan dohtor* ('his only daughter', line 375), who became Beowulf's mother. So we know that Beowulf and Hrothgar both know that a king may marry his daughter to a warrior of lesser family. In one case, although Ecgtheow has a name like Ongentheow's, one of the Swedish royals, it might be said that his bear-like rampage through northern regions does not of itself make him eligible for Hrethel's daughter. In the other, it appears that the warrior *Eofor* ('boar'), like *Wulf* ('wolf') a son of *Wonrēd* ('dark …' or 'missing counsel', line 2695), is likewise a brute of no dynastic account. Notwithstanding, the Geatish Kings Hrethel and Hygelac feel it right to give their daughters to their foreign champions when honour is due.

In Beowulf's case, nonetheless, King Hrothgar's offer of *nīwe sibbe* ('new kinship') goes unhonoured. Why this is so, can be traced to the gulf between Hrothgar's royal worth and that of the other kings. Wealhtheow makes Hrothgar aware of the drop in level between his and Beowulf's tribes when she shuts down her husband's offer later that day.[32] Her influence on Hrothgar is strong: ever uxorious, he hurries to join her when the sun sets (lines 664–665). Although she and her ladies are present when Hrothgar makes his offer the morning after Beowulf's victory, when the evening of that day comes, the situation has changed. Wealhtheow appears with her great necklace just as the Finnsburh epic has been sung. This is of a Danish triumph against insuperable odds, but also of a queen who loses husband and son to foreign interlopers. The poet adopts the latter view, before moving into six hypermetric lines in which Wealhtheow steps forth and the Scyldings' kindred is both praised as stable and given as lost because of their trust in Unferth. Wealhtheow opens by asking Hrothgar to take the ceremonial cup and to be a *goldwine* ('gold-friend') to the Geats as a king should be. Again she instructs Hrothgar to honour the Geats with those gifts *nēan ond feorran <þe> þū nū hafast* ('from near and far which you hold', line 1174). Beowulf is not in the frame until she cites him with reference to an adoption in which she claims Hrothgar failed to consult her. This claim has been taken at face value, but we know that she heard the offer (line 923), and now she says:[33]

> Me man sægde, þæt þu ðe for sunu wolde
> hereri<n>c habban. Heorot is gefælsod,
> bēahsele beorhta. Brūc þenden þū mōte
> manigra mēdo, ond þīnum māgum læf
> folc ond rīce, þonne ðū forð scyle
> metodsceaft sēon. (lines 1175–1180)

32 North 2006, pp. 103–110.
33 Baker 2013, p. 68.

It has been said to me that you would have
a raiding man as your son. Heorot is cleansed,
the bright ring-hall. Use, while you may,
the rewards of the many, and leave your kinsmen
your people and kingdom when you must go hence
to see fate's decree.

So Wealhtheow reinvents the cleansing of Heorot as a restoration of the old régime. Citing Beowulf not by name, but by the threat of piracy in the word *hereri<n>c* ('raiding man'), she reminds King Hrothgar of the difference between gifts of gold and the polity itself which he holds on behalf of his kindred. She means that a loss of the whole Danish polity will come of adopting Beowulf. Moreover, her reference to Hrothgar's meeting his Maker might be seen as a hint that his passing is near and that his offer to adopt Beowulf has been a senile mistake. It is then that Wealhtheow publicly favours Hrothulf as the ensuing regent of Denmark, reinterpreting the favours which they showed him as a child as an advance payment for those which, so she knows, he will show their children when Hrothgar is gone (lines 1180–1187). This scene has been read as one in which Wealhtheow speaks, as Shippey puts it, with an unmistakable "tone of fear"; or compromises with her husband's adoption by giving Beowulf, in Hollis' words, "an indeterminate stake in the kingdom"; or in Hill's, a "horizontal reciprocity" as an insurance against Hrothulf.[34] But these readings underrate her. There is no doubt that Beowulf has smoked out some views on the royal succession, but it still seems more likely that the promise of his political stake in Denmark is removed by what Wealhtheow says, and that consequently she overrides her husband in public over conversion values in the Danish economy of honour.

Beowulf does not lose hope of his greater prize, for after Grendel's mother's attack, on the point of diving into her Mere towards a duel in far less favourable conditions, he reminds the king of his offer, as if it were something they had discussed:

Geþenc nū, se mǣra maga Healfdenes,
snottra fengel, nū ic eom sīðes fūs,
goldwine gumena, hwæt wit gēo sprǣcon,
gif ic æt þearfe þīnre scolde
aldre linnan, þæt ðū mē ā wǣre
forðgewitenum on fæder stǣle. (lines 1474–1479)

Consider now, renowned son of Healfdene,
wise lord, now I am keen for the mission,
gold-friend of men, what we two earlier spoke of,
if I, in the service of your need, should
give up my life, that you would always act to me
in the role of a father once I was gone forth.

34 Shippey 1978, p. 33; Hollis 1983, p. 44; Hill 1995, p. 103. For the full ceremonial Wealhtheow, see Bazelmans 2000, pp. 360–362.

The participle of the last line is ambiguous enough to mean that Beowulf could expect to be Hrothgar's son either when dead or back in Geatland, but not in Denmark. His statement falls short of alluding to *sibb* ('kinship') and appears to reformulate what Hrothgar has said. At the same time Beowulf balances *gold* with *on fæder stæle* over his main utterance. The pivot is that he is once again risking his life for Hrothgar as if they really were father and son. So Beowulf is still after the higher kind of gold, even if wise enough not to ask for it.

However, Beowulf is also locked into a silent struggle with Wealhtheow for influence over Heorot's main gift-giver. This is not a struggle that he can win. Hrothgar first fails him when he and his men leave the Mere having seen blood on the surface and taking this to be Beowulf's, but without the courtesy which would keep them there until the Geats decide to leave. A little later, when Beowulf returns with Grendel's head and the serpentine hilt, the time comes when Hrothgar can put off his twice-victorious redeemer no longer.

So it is that he starts his 'sermon':

> Þæt lā mæg secgan se ðe sōð ond riht
> fremeð on folce, feor eal gemon,
> eald ēþelweard, þæð ðes eorl wære
> boren betera! (lines 1700–1703)
>
> Lo, he can say, who furthers truth and justice
> in the people, remembering all from long ago,
> old guardian of his homeland, that this gentleman was
> born for higher rank!

The praise is vitiated by an allusion to Beowulf's inferior birth, for Beowulf is no longer *secg betsta* ('man highest-ranking') as he was on line 946. Beowulf is royal only through his mother, as Hrothgar told Wulfgar (lines 373–375). In lines 942–946 he paints a Marian image of this lady directly before his offer of adoption to her son. He does not name or place her, however. To do so would force him to name Beowulf's renegade father, whose early death or absence left the child to the scorn of his mother's relatives (lines 2183–2188). It might be wondered how much of their legend about Beowulf, *þæt hē slēac wære* ('that he was a slouch', line 2187), precedes him to Denmark, but it is certain that Ecgtheow is now back in the frame. Backhandedly, therefore, Hrothgar now implies that the rank to which he promotes Beowulf was higher than he had thought possible.

Without delay Hrothgar passes into a sustained hypermetric passage which is the second of only three in *Beowulf*, and in which family politics are once again the concern:

> Blæd is ārǣred
> geond wīdwegas wine mīn Bēowulf,
> ðīn ofer þēoda gehwylce. Eal þū hit geþyldum healdest,

mægen mid mōdes snyttrum. Ic þē sceal mīne gelǣstan
freoðe swā wit forðum sprǣcon. Đū scealt tō frōfre weorþan
eal langtwīdig lēodum þīnum,
hæleðum tō helpe. Ne wearð Heremōd swā (lines 1703–1709)

Fame is raised up
on roads through distant regions, my friend Beowulf,
yours over each and every nation. All this power you are keeping
with patience, with wisdom of mind. I shall fulfil my
agreement as we both spoke of earlier. You shall become a comfort
all long-lasting to people in your country,
a help to heroes. Not so was Heremod

The manuscript gives *freoðe* on line 1705 with an attempt to erase the tail (to *freode*, which would give 'friendship', with similar meaning), but in any case Hrothgar says that Beowulf will not become king of the Danish people.[35] After an opening in which Beowulf's fame is raised like a monument, the word *þīnum* rather than *mīnum* slaps him down with an anti-climax at the end of line 1708.

In this cruel way Hrothgar's lines are far from being the prelude to such generalized wisdom as a 'sermon' contains. Rather, they come as his solution to a political problem to do with Beowulf, Wealhtheow and Hrothulf. In this speech, in the interests of peace after his death, Hrothgar curtails his offer of adoption. The day before, he promised Beowulf anything from *worulde wilna þe ic geweald hæbbe* ('the worldly desires over which I have power', line 949), but that power has been revised. Hrothgar delivers on his promise like a church father, not a royal one, and Beowulf has been abandoned again.[36] Much then depends on Beowulf's *geþyldum* ('patience'; a word whose meaning shades into 'endurance') if he is to take in what Hrothgar goes on to say about Heremod and the greed for gold.

The next morning there are speeches of farewell before Beowulf leaves, and then twelve more (unspecified) treasures. The guest compliments the host on his stay. Within Beowulf's courtly rhetoric is the offer to Hrothgar that, if there is any more fighting he can do than he has done, *þīnre mōdlufan māran tilian* ('to strive for the greater love of your heart', line 1824), then he is ready at once. To the question of what love Hrothgar has withheld at least in Beowulf's mind, the most likely answer is Freawaru, for on his return, in lines 2020–2069, he takes an otherwise surprising interest in her wedding plans. Before leaving, he offered Hrothgar help with an army if Denmark again lies helpless and to host young Hrethric as well. In the first instance the attack on Heorot which Hrothgar cannot foresee materializes in Ingeld and the Heathobards. This will go as the poet tells us in lines 84–85, and as the raven *blīðheort* ('blithe-hearted') reminds us on the morning of Beowulf's leave-taking in line 1802.

35 Zupitza (ed.) 1959, p. 78, n. 20.
36 Tuttle Hansen 1982, pp. 60–63.

In the second instance, Beowulf's offer to Hrethric has been read as his response to Wealhtheow's concern about the succession in lines 1180–1187.[37] Whether or not charity is his main aim here, there is no doubt that Beowulf knows that the boy's life is hostage to Hrothulf's regency. Hrothgar's reply to these two deft offers, however, is to underrate them as courtesies, and Beowulf's people as pirates, *Sǣ-Gēatas* ('sea-Geats', line 1850). To Beowulf's insinuation of an attack on Denmark Hrothgar replies with one about the hazards of young Hygelac's lifestyle leading to his death by spear, illness or iron (in which case the Sea-Geats will have no better man than Beowulf to choose as their king).

Then, after complimenting Beowulf for establishing a *sib gemǣne* ('kinship in common') between Geats and Danes (line 1857), where trade is the closest kinship which Beowulf may now expect, Hrothgar rewards him with the gifts for killing Grendel's mother. However, the old king's tears make a different subtext of this diplomatic leave-taking plain. The poet attributes Hrothgar's weeping not only to his belief that this meeting is their last, but to a *dȳrne langað* ('hidden longing') which *beorn wið blōde* ('burned against his blood', lines 1879–1880). Beyond lachrymose sentiment, it is hard to see what else this could be but Hrothgar's original offer of *nīwe sibbe* ('new kinship') on which Wealhtheow has made him renege. When Beowulf and friends march back to their ship, at the end of a fitt (XXVI), the poet gives us his last view of Hrothgar through their eyes:

> Þā wæs on gange gifu Hrōðgāres
> oft geæhted; þǣr wæs ān cyning
> ǣghwæs ōrleahtre oþ þæt hine yldo benam
> mægenes wynnum se[38] þe oft manegum gescōd. (lines 1884–1887)
>
> Then on the march was Hrothgar's gift-giving
> often evaluated; there was one king
> blameless in every way, until old age, who has often harmed
> many a man, took from him the joys of his strength.

In their view, Hrothgar's gold even at its highest rate has fallen short of Beowulf's worth. Hrothgar should not have failed to give him the *goldhroden* bride. As Beowulf's birth has been allowed to preclude him from a contest with Hrothulf over the rule of Denmark, so his achievement has been underrated.

Beowulf's path to kingship continues on his own ground when he returns to his uncle Hygelac. After a scene-setting in which Queen Hygd is contrasted with the queen of King Offa of Angeln, the poet puts Beowulf on the beach of Geatland and then shows him to the seaside *worðig* ('fort', line 1972) in which Hygelac holds court. Mead is poured in the same way as in Heorot by Hygd who, however, as the

37 Hollis 1983, p. 43. See also North 2018.
38 Mitchell / Robinson (ed.) 1998, p. 110, n. 1886b–1887.

daughter of Hæreth (line 1981), putatively a king of Hordaland in western Norway, represents an early Viking tendency in line with her husband's. Beowulf's reply to Hygelac's reproachful welcome ironises the Danes once more as *Sige-Scyldingum* ('victory-Scyldings', lines 2004) at the mercy of Grendel against whom only Beowulf could win. Beowulf then trades up his value by saying that Hrothgar seated him next to his sons (line 2013).[39] His 48-line prediction about Freawaru's wedding begins with the implication on line 2022–2023 that Hrothgar did not introduce her to Beowulf or tell him her name. In relating his fights with the Grendels, he alludes to Hrothgar's 'sermon' briskly and before, rather than after, his victory against Grendel's mother.

Then, at the start of a new fitt (XXXI), Beowulf finishes by saying that Hygelac is the one chief kinsman he has. Leading up to this last declaration, Beowulf announces that Hrothgar did things properly because Beowulf lost no honour in the treasures Hrothgar gave him (lines 2144–2146), which were *on mīnne sylfes dōm* ('according to my own judgement', line 2147). Thus he declares his success through the reverse of royal gift-giving norms in which a king decides the value. This detail has been taken as "a piece of new information", but it must reflect Hrothgar's initially boundless offer in lines 948–949.[40] Beowulf upholds his honour with this detail while he increases it by making gifts. Although he keeps back one of the eight stallions and at least twelve of the lesser gifts for himself, he personalizes the Danish royal panoply for his pirate uncle. Namely he says that Hrothgar wanted Hygelac to have the armour which King Heorogar thought too good for his own son (lines 2155–2162). As the poet did not tell us of this earlier, Beowulf's statement seems invented, but it is no less effective, in that his return on this gift is King Hrethel's sword plus a lordship of 7,000 hides. In this qualified way Beowulf moves closer to a kingship of his own.

To understand Beowulf's accession, which is next up in the poem but many years later in the narrative history, we must look in even more detail at the structure of *Beowulf*, which is currently defined as divided into "parts I and II", or three parts or even four.[41] Although the poem is but one, a continuum, it has long been presented as bipartite with such authority that Kiernan has revived the idea that the Geatish end of *Beowulf* is from a poem of separate origin.[42] Whereas Klaeber's edition leaves just one line blank to mark a division, Mitchell and Robinson enhance their mid-fitt temporal break on line 2200 with a new page and as many as four editorial headings.[43] However, any division here breaks an important narrative flow.[44] First, Hygelac's paternally derived place in the Geatish house is given as grounds for his ownership of the kingdom, as opposed to Beowulf's of a province:

39 Biggs 2005, p. 731; Hill 1995, p. 105.
40 Mitchell / Robinson (ed.) 1998, p. 121, n. 2147.
41 Orchard 2003, p. 97.
42 Kiernan 1996, pp. 270–272.
43 Mitchell / Robinson (ed.) 1998, p. 125.
44 Palmer 1976, p. 11.

Him wæs bām samod
on ðām lēodscipe lond gecynde
eard ēðelriht, ōðrum swīðor
sīde rīce þām ðær sēlra wæs. (lines 2196–2199)

To both of them together
in that nation was land a kindred inheritance,
territory of homeland entitlement, the wide kingdom
more especially to the one who was there of higher rank.

Then the following sentence tells us that this power moved to Beowulf. *Eft þæt geīode ufaran dōgrum* ('Later it came about in subsequent days', line 2200), that Hygelac fell and then, with more detail, that his son Heardred also fell:

syððan Bēowulfe brāde rīce
on hand gehwearf; hē gehēold tela
fīftig wintra. (lines 2207–2209)

[that] [45] afterwards the broad kingdom passed
into Beowulf's hand; he held it well
for fifty years.

Fred Biggs, though he deplores any new page for line 2200, reunites the two passages by giving Beowulf not one but two accessions to the throne. Rendering lines 2196–2199: "Together in that country they both possessed the inherited land, the ancestral domain; the wide rule was greater to the one who was there of higher rank", he treats the adverbial *swīðor* as an adjective in order to interpret Beowulf as Hygelac's co-ruler; and *eft* on line 2200 as 'again' rather than 'later'.[46] But a kingship is emphasized as new for Beowulf in the second passage, by the alliteration of his *hand* with the verb *gehēold* on line 2208. Therefore it seems unlikely that Beowulf holds this power jointly with Hygelac the first time around; quite aside from his having to be uncrowned by Heardred before being crowned again. There is much intervening history, but the poet collapses this in order to put Beowulf's chieftaincy and kingship into a graded sequence. The combination *sīde rīce* with *brāde rīce* supports the sequence and breaking this by dividing *Beowulf* at line 2200 has done little but harm. As the fitt-divisions tell us, Beowulf's rule of Geatland is placed just after that of his hidage and is probably meant to make up the substance of Fitt XXXI.

A man's right to rule by having blood through father or brother is attested in early Danish history as well as in *Beowulf*, although blood is missing in most modern discussions of the honour economy.[47] The Geatish house does not show now or at any time

45 Mitchell / Robinson (ed.) 1998, p. 125, n. 2200–2208a.
46 Biggs 2005, pp. 731–732.
47 Maund 1994, p. 41 and n. 63.

that Beowulf is, as Hrothgar puts it, *boren betera* ('born for higher rank', line 1703). After Hygelac's death in Frisia, Hygd offers Beowulf the vacant throne only because she considers her son Heardred not up to it (lines 2369–2372). Here it is obvious that she and her court first consider Heardred because his blood is royal on the father's side, as Hygelac's was. In this light, Hrothgar's words about the Geats not having any man *sēlran* ('higher in rank') than Beowulf to choose after Hygelac's death (line 1850) have no bearing on the Geats themselves. Hygd does not abide by a system of primogeniture, nor does the poet of *Beowulf* espouse or even understand one, but Hygd does honour kingship by election in which full *cyn*-membership is defined by a vertical or horizontal link through the existing king. Only an emergency seems to override this ideology where Beowulf is concerned, and his refusal is as interesting as Hygd's offer. Beowulf holds back from the crown not through passivity or lack of ambition, or because he believes in primogeniture,[48] but because he is loyal to the family on his mother's side. Being lord to Heardred, as the poet puts it in line 2375, stores up trouble even if it solves the immediate problem of succession. One day, Beowulf's cousin may make a bid for his father's throne, just as Heoroweard for his father's in Denmark (lines 2161 and 2167–2169). In this way, Beowulf's political awareness shows that he does not see kingship as an opportunity for gold, and so there is less cause to accuse him of greed.

That sin is all Hygelac's, or at least appears to be, because King Hygelac dies in pursuit of gold on a far-flung foreign shore. The poet's first reference to this disaster tells us that Hygelac *sinc ealgode, wælrēaf werede* ('guarded treasure, defended spoil of the slain') on the beach in Frisia, besides asking for this woe on account of *wlenco* 'adventure', lines 1204–1206). Thus Hygelac's case makes it clear that a king puts his own kingdom in danger by going on pirate raids. The trigger for this leap into the future, moreover, the necklace with which Wealhtheow commutes her daughter to Beowulf, asks another question. Hygelac will be wearing this around his neck before the Merovingians strip it off him along with his other armour, all of which they (and not Dæghrefn) send to their king (lines 1210–1211). Since we know that Beowulf gives the necklace to Hygd on his return home (line 2172), it is worth asking how it moves to Hygelac. The answer is that the quiet domestic transfer of this big golden item indicates a fluid economy among the Geats. Whether or not Hygelac's piracy extends to the bedroom, the Geatish cash flows faster than the Danish. Whereas Hrothgar's kingdom is a stable polity, with a surplus of gold and honour even after twelve years of Grendel's attacks, Hygelac's is flashy and insubstantial.[49]

If we look at Beowulf's mother's tribe in *Beowulf*, we do see that the Geats are politically less stable than the Danes. There is first the name by which the Geats are known. OE *weder* ('weather' or 'storm') describes them as a simplex (line 461) and as the prefix to their name (lines 1492, 1612, 2379, 2551), while the Geatish territory is

48 Hollis 1983, p. 48.

49 The reverse is assumed in Baker 2013, p. 71, n. 83.

called *Wedermearc* ('weather-march', literally 'turbulent border-country', line 298). There is also the lack of unity in Hrethel's family which decrees that the Geats would not keep Ecgtheow, their son-in-law of five or six years, *for herebrōgan* ('for fear of raiding', line 462) by the Wylfings, who are kin to Heatholaf whom Ecgtheow killed (and also to Wealhtheow). This disunity extends to Hrethel's sons' relationship, as Beowulf tells his retinue. Before taking on the Dragon, he cheers them with proof of his long experience in warfare. Along the way it emerges that, as a child, he saw Hrethel's eldest son Herebeald mistakenly shot by his brother Hæthcyn, and how their father died of grief for being unable to show hatred to Hæthcyn, *þēah him lēof ne wæs* ('though he was not dear to him', line 2467). Beowulf goes on to say that Hrethel's death ushered in Swedish attacks, which Hæthcyn and Hygelac avenged although Hæthcyn paid for this with his life. Beowulf's partiality becomes clear when we learn the exact opposite about Hæthcyn from the Geatish Messenger, that *for onmēdlan* ('for lack of moderation', line 2926), he had first attacked the Swedes, kidnapping and stripping King Ongentheow's *gomela iōmēowlan golde berofene* ('ancient gold-robbed girl of former times', line 2931). In this light, neither the Geats' instability nor their strong acquisitive streak seems unnatural to Beowulf, the outlier in their house. Piracy will not have seemed strange either to young Hrothgar before he amassed his treasure, great retinue and kingdom (lines 64–67), but the difference lies in the stability of his kindred as against that of Hygelac's. King Healfdene, Hrothgar's father, expands his and his sons' power, building an alliance with the Swedes by marrying his daughter to <On>ela (line 62). Hygelac's polity, on the other hand, is destabilized by the suspicious death of the first brother, collapse of the father and destruction of the second brother with most of his army.[50]

A weak Geatish polity is further revealed by Beowulf when he says that he served in Hygelac's army, repaying the king with his light sword for the treasures he gave. Hygelac gave him land and inheritance; and thanks to Beowulf's invincible record:

> Næs him ænig þearf
> þæt hē tō Gifðum oððe tō Gār-Denum
> oððe in Swīorīce sēcan þurfe
> wyrsan wīgfrecan, weorðe gecȳpan. (lines 2493–2496)
>
> For him was there no need
> that from Gifthas or from Spear-Danes
> or in the Swedish kingdom he had to seek out
> lower-ranking war-braves, buy them for a price.

All this at first seems similar to the freebooting glory of young Hrothgar's court, but there is a difference. Hrothgar and his family attract men from abroad who serve them for mutual honour, doing deeds for gifts which express the king's opinion and reflect

50 Hollis 1983, p. 48.

his court's opinion (*dōm*) of their worth.[51] Hygelac, on the other hand and at least until Beowulf comes of age, must go beyond his borders for hirelings who can set their own price. His style of kingship has more in common with King Finn's payments to Hengest and other 'Half-Dane' mercenaries who stay on in his court even after he has killed his brother-in-law Hnæf ('fist'), who is their captain. Mercenaries are at the low end of honour's sliding scale. Finn's payments have been read as his 'tribute' to the Half-Danes, but the fact that the Half-Danes continue to live with him defines Finn as their employer.[52] It is also worth noting that the poet first uses *wyrsan wīgfrecan* to describe the poorer, probably paid, troops in the Frankish coalition which destroys Hygelac (line 1212).[53] Perhaps there is poetic justice here. Having to hire such soldiers, Hygelac has no guarantee that their quality matches the money they ask for. His is the low end of the royal honour economy, overspending to keep power.

The origin of this Geatish weakness is also clear in what the Messenger says about Hygelac's entry into history. King Ongentheow, having settled accounts with Hæthcyn, promises all night to the latter's surviving Geats that he will execute them all in the morning. Early next day, however, when the Geats hear the trumpets and drums of Hygelac, the Swedes withdraw to their holy ground (in Uppsala) for fear of his generalship. Ongentheow is slain there in a duel with Eofor and Wulf. The bestial names of these champions of the young Hygelac give them out to be men of no background, and then Hygelac takes the credit (line 1968). He takes the dead king's panoply; to his foreign champions *him fægre gehēt lēana mid lēodum* ('with fair language he promised rewards for them with their people', lines 2989–2990). He carries this out:

> geald þone gūðrǣs Gēata dryhten,
> Hrēðles eafora, þā hē tō hām becōm,
> Iofore ond Wulfe mid ofermāðmum,
> sealde hiora gehwæðrum hund þūsenda
> landes ond locenra bēaga (ne ðorfte him ðā lēan oðwītan
> mon on middangearde syððan hīe ðā mærða geslōgon),
> ond ðā Iofore forgeaf āngan dohtor,
> hāmweorðunge, hyldo tō wedde. (lines 2991–2998)
>
> The lord of Geats, Hrethel's offspring, when he came
> to his home-seat, paid Eofor and Wulf
> for that war-charge with an excess of treasure,
> gave each of them one hundred and twenty thousand
> of land and linked rings (nor need any man in the middle world begrudge
> them that reward, since they had won those glories by fighting for them)
> and then he gave Eofor his only daughter
> as ennobler of his estate, the pledge of his loyalty.

51 Bazelmans 2000; Hill 1995, p. 93.
52 Baker 2013, p. 192; North 1990, pp. 24–28.
53 On Carolingian *pauperiores*, see North 2006, pp. 166–167.

This is the third and last hypermetric sequence in *Beowulf*. Once again, the purpose of the longer lines appears to be to shed light on a king's polity, here with Hygelac's courtiers who have something of their own to say. The word OE *ofermāðmas*, which occurs only here and refers to 'excess', does not denote a king's gift within the honour economy, or even one within the exchange-order system in which each gift asks for a bigger return.[54] Added to the excess of this giving is the poet's hypermetric hint that his landed men hold a grudge against Hygelac for what he has done. In combination with the story of Weohstan, Wiglaf's father, who serves Onela despite having lived in Geatland (lines 2606–2625), it appears that Hygelac funds his payments by dispossessing them of land and treasure. This reckless type of spending, augmented by the inflation which necessarily follows imports of foreign (here Swedish) gold, resembles Heremod's greed in one respect, that a king needing gold will either withhold or take this from his subjects: *brēat bolgenmōd bēodgenēatas* ('wrath-swollen he struck down table-comrades', line 1713).[55] Yet Hygelac's case is different in being grounded on need. We have his end in Frisia to show that not only meanness but also overspending endangers a king's health. Thus, although the Geats have an 'economy of honour' like the Danes, theirs is better regarded as one of inflationary expenditure.

After the death of Hygelac, there is no clear succession. Beowulf's refusal to rule the Geats beyond Heardred's majority, his disappearance from view and the perhaps consequent death of Heardred on his helping Onela's nephews are things which may weaken Beowulf's status in the eyes of the Geats; as do the facts that Beowulf's father is a foreigner and that Onela either lets or makes Beowulf rule their country as a vassal. Behind this unravelling polity in Geatland is the unchanging inferiority of Beowulf in his link to the royal house through his mother. If Beowulf, with little right to rule, becomes a king *primus inter pares*, what is there to raise him above other Geats with the same ambition? So Beowulf, with little ideology of kingship to keep him in power, must keep the gold flowing.

In this way, the *lēoda þearfe* ('people's needs', line 2801) to which Beowulf refers on dying are likely to be the demands of warriors who want ever more gold to stay in his service. Although these are Geats, not mercenaries, their loyalty has become suspect. Witness Wiglaf's words to the cowards on Beowulf's gifts of expensive armour and weapons:

> Þæt lā mæg secgan se ðe wylle sōð specan,
> þæt se mondryhten se ēow ðā māðmas geaf
> eoredgeatwe þe gē þǣr on standað
> (þonne hē on ealubence oft gesealde
> bencsittendum helm ond byrnan,
> þēoden his þegnum swylce hē þrȳðlīcost
> ōwēr feor oððe nēah findan meahte)

54 *Pace* Baker 2013, p. 56.

55 On value in relation to the availability of gold, see Creed 1989.

þæt hē gēnunga gūðgewǣdu
wrāðe forwurpe ðā hyne wīg beget.
Nealles folccyning fyrdgesteallum
gylpan þorfte. (lines 2864–2874)

Lo, he may say this, who will speak truth,
that the loving lord who gave you those treasures,
the trappings in which you there stand
(when at the ale-bench he often gave out
helmet and mail-shirt to bench-sitting men,
a chief to his thanes, such very splendid things
as he anywhere far and wide might find)
that those war-garments he simply and utterly
threw away, when battle found him.
No need at all had the king of his tribe to boast
of comrades on campaign.

It is hard to see why these Geats have to be cowards, when those of the Danish adventure were not, unless King Beowulf has paid them over their merits. The higher he overrates the recipients of his gifts, the lower Beowulf's stock falls with these men and the less loyalty he may expect from them.

With these Geats by the barrow we are thus a long way from the stability of Hrothgar's power. Beowulf is generous, as the poet tells us by calling him *goldgyfa* ('gold-giver', line 2652), *goldwine* ('gold-friend', lines 2419 and 2584), *wilgeofa* ('willing giver', line 2900) and *sincgyfa* (line 2311).[56] King Beowulf the big spender is indeed so generous that his gold is running out, and not because he has lost it in the Dragon's raids.[57] The same drain of treasure which drives Hygelac to die *for wlenco*, although he is king, becomes a concern for his sister's son, making him never readier to see what the Dragon's hoard contains (lines 3174–3175). It seems that this is why Beowulf ignores Wiglaf's advice about letting others attack the Dragon (lines 3079–3083).[58]

Related to this problem is Beowulf's decision to fight alone. Even after fifty years, the same (notional) length of rule as Hrothgar's, the king must campaign in person. Yet although his ongoing physical presence on the battlefield is spiritually prideful, politically it is the only way in which he may keep power. King Beowulf's power rests on the gold, which rests on his ability to take it, which rests on his taking it alone. We see that his kingship was always so, if we follow the implication of Beowulf's *bēotwordum* ('making a vow', line 2510) habitually, that he has led by heroic example for all of his reign. His men call him *lofgeornost* ('most eager for praise') in their public epitaph (line 3182), but the superlative in this last word, as we have seen, reveals a weaker version of *lofdǣdum geþēon* ('to thrive by doing deeds of praise', lines 24–25).

56 Marshall 2010, pp. 3–6.
57 Marshall 2010, p. 5.
58 Noted in Baker 2013, p. 213. With stress on *hē* ('he', line 3081).

The superlative compensates for Beowulf's lack of legitimacy. His words before dying reveal that there has been nothing but war; only by force of arms has he held his kingdom together. No other king, he says to Wiglaf, *mec guðwinum grētan dorste* ('dared approach me with war-associates', line 2735) and *hēold mīn tela* ('I held my own well', line 2737). His decision on this occasion to reserve his army, and then to stand down his smaller troop, has nothing to do with the battle, and everything with the prize which he must secure alone. Beowulf is guilty of *oferhygd* where the poet says that he *oferhogode* ('was too proud') to attack the Dragon in numbers (line 2345), but 'pride' is a name for the spiritual manifestation, not the political cause, of his mistake. The economics dictate that Beowulf the *wilgeofa* ('willing giver', line 2900) has no choice but to alienate his bodyguard. Unless he wins the new hoard alone, still proving that his strength surpasses theirs, his men will treat him as an equal and share out the gold accordingly, not at his valuation but at theirs. Then Beowulf's power will go, and the Geatish kingdom with it.

So King Beowulf's interest in the Dragon's gold is quite different from Heremod's greed or from the mortal pride about which Hrothgar warned him. Beowulf has no choice but to fight for this hoard. Hrothgar's speech is good at warning about *bealonīð* in general, but it offers no guidance to Beowulf's polity in his day. At the same time Hrothgar's political decision to underrate Beowulf's achievements, by withholding his personal gold, the family bond which he promised, becomes a cause of Beowulf's destruction. Marriage into Hrothgar's line is the only gold which matches what Beowulf has achieved. To give generously in the bosom of one's father, as the poem's opening injunction puts it (lines 20–25), works as an ideology for princes who have the father. But the disloyalty of Beowulf's men shows that he has no father, not where they are concerned. Hrothgar's offer to become Beowulf's would have fulfilled the conditions, but Hrothgar, by going back on his offer, removes Beowulf from that hope of legitimacy. Without a royal bride, and without her sanction or her father's, Beowulf may expect to have a busy time of it being king.

King Beowulf's lack of heir

When Hygelac dies, it seems that Hygd offers herself to Beowulf along with her dead husband's *hord ond rīce, bēagas ond bregostōl* ('hoard and kingdom, rings and royal seat', lines 2369–2370). At least, with Heardred still at court, it is hard to see where else she would go. There is supporting evidence from St Augustine's *quaestiones* (no. 5) to Pope Gregory, in *c*. 600, that Anglo-Saxon sons expected to be able to marry stepmothers, or brothers their sisters-in-law, in order to maintain a line.[59] Bishop Paulinus of York, before Easter in 627, appears to have lectured against this custom

59 Colgrave / Mynors (ed./trans.) 1991, pp. 84–85 (I.27).

to Deiran Angles in York who were *non licitis stricti coniugiis* ('bound to unlawful wives').[60] So it is probably meant to be to Beowulf's credit that he steps back in order to keep Hygelac's family together. Beyond Hygd's implicit offer, however, it is clear that Beowulf never takes a queen even when he becomes king. When he is about to die, he hands his necklace, armour and presumably authority on to Wiglaf with the words that he would give these to a son, had fate granted him *ænig yrfeweard æfter* ('any inheritor after me') who was *līce gelenge* ('of my body', lines 2731–2732).[61] It has been hinted that Beowulf has no heir because he is gay,[62] but the most plausible reason is that he rules without the power to make a proper match.

Politically, Beowulf is too weak to set one kindred against another over marriage rivalry. This may be why King Æthelbald of Mercia (716–757) avoided marriage, preferring instead to visit women in convents around his wide domain.[63] Æthelbald's women were doubtless highborn inmates, but nuns cannot produce royal heirs. Bishop Boniface draws attention to the nuns in a letter to Æthelbald in *c*. 746 in which he also blames the king for robbing Mercian minsters. It has been postulated that Æthelbald was militarily as well as politically aggressive because his kingdom faced a depletion of silver.[64] In the world of *Beowulf* it seems likewise that King Beowulf has many Geatish kindreds to consider. The poet shows twelve of these with enough power for their sons, described as *æþelinga bearn* ('sons of princes'), to ride in public around the barrow at his funeral (lines 3169–3174, at 3170). And as with Æthelbald, the lack of an heir does not mean that King Beowulf holds back from women. Although sexually the poet of *Beowulf* is conservative, to judge by his restriction of women to decorative, elegiac or political roles, in King Beowulf's case he leaves the trace of a different story. There is the woman at his funeral:

> Swylce gīomorgyd <G>ēat<isc> mēowle
> <æfter Bēowulf b>undenhēord<e>
> <so>ng sorgcearig sæ<d>e geneahhe
> þæt hīo hyre <here>g<a>ngas hearde ond<r>ēde,
> wælfylla worn, werudes egesan,
> hȳ<n>ðo ond hæftnȳd. Heofon rēce swealg. (lines 3150–3155)
>
> Likewise a mournful dirge <in Beowulf's memory>
> a <G>eat<ish> girl with her hair <b>ound up
> sorrowing sang, said constantly again and again,
> that she dreaded for herself cruel days of pillage,
> mass killings in number, the terror of battalions,
> humiliation and captivity. Heaven swallowed the smoke.

60 Vita Sancti Gregorii Magni (Colgrave (ed.) 1968), p. 97 (ch. 15).
61 Hill 1982; Hill 1995, p. 88. Disputed in Biggs 2003, pp. 72–73.
62 Biggs 2003, pp. 64–65.
63 Stafford 2001, p. 37.
64 Dümmler (ed.) 1892, pp. 339–345 (no. 73); Emerton (trans.) 2000, pp. 106–108; Kirby 1991, p. 136.

The above unnamed woman may stand for the Geatish future, but in person she is seen standing before Beowulf as his mortal essence mimics the journey to heaven. As *mēowle* ('a girl'), she is young, and yet the bound or (if <*w*>*unden*-) 'wound' state of her hair hints also that she is not free to marry, even while her fear of personal enslavement shows that she has no male kindred to protect her. This woman was once thought to be Beowulf's queen, but with no gold about her, she cannot be royal like Wealhtheow (lines 614, 640), Hygd (lines 1929–1931), Offa's queen (line 1948), Freawaru (line 2025) or Ongentheow's queen (line 2931).[65] She mourns like Hildeburh (lines 1117–1118), but unless she is a professional mourner or long-lost sister, neither of which is paralleled, the poet has placed her as Beowulf's concubine.

The poet may allude to Beowulf's living with his future mourner, or with other women like her, when the king's hall is razed and he fears that he *ofer ealde riht ēcean dryhtne bitre gebulge* ('against the old law had bitterly enraged the everlasting Lord', lines 2330–2331). The wording of this unusual glimpse into a person's feelings accords with the text of the same letter in which Boniface warns Æthelbald to take a lawful wife. Boniface adds that Kings Ceolred of Mercia and Osred of Northumbria each lost life and soul through adultery and the violation of nuns. He tells the king that even heathens in northern Germany *qui Deum nesciunt et legem non habent* ('who know not God or the law') are more moral than he is, because the nations, according to St Paul, *naturaliter ea, quae legis sunt faciunt et ostendunt opus legis scriptum in cordibus suis* ('know by nature the things of the law and have the works of the law written upon their hearts').[66] As for Kings Ceolred and Osred who persisted in these sins:

> id est in stupratione et adulterio nonnarum et fractura monasteriorum, iusto iudicio Dei damnati, de culmine regali huius vitae abiecti et inmatura et terrabili morte praeventi, a luce perpetua extranei, in profundum inferni et tartarum abyssi demersi sunt.[67]
>
> that is, in the adulterous violation of nuns and the destruction of monasteries, they were condemned by the righteous justice of God and cast down from their royal state, overtaken by an early and terrible death, shut out from the light eternal, and plunged into the depths of hell.[68]

It seems plausible therefore that a concubine appears at King Beowulf's funeral as the poet's answer to his riddle earlier, Beowulf's fear that he has offended God. The poet's late discovery of this girl is an echo of Hrothgar's failure, fifty years before, to give Beowulf his daughter Freawaru. It is to Hrothgar that Beowulf owes his poor legitimacy, overspending, and expedited prospect of hell.

65 Müllenhoff 1869, p. 242.
66 Dümmler (ed.) 1892, p. 342; Kirby 1991, p. 135.
67 Dümmler (ed.) 1892, p. 344.
68 Emerton (trans.) 2000, p. 107.

King Hrothgar's 'sermon'

This outcome is a lot to load on Hrothgar, whom the poet appears to represent as a wise king. Hrothgar's role as gold-giver in word and deed has been read as typical of a heathen war-lord, but the language and phrasing of his 'sermon' in the middle of the poem are entirely Christian.[69] This speech fills 85 improving lines (lines 1700–1784) and although it opens politically, as we have seen, it offers much of value about a tyrant's greed and a good king's need to avoid his example, the Lord's bounty in bestowing virtues and how one man thus gifted may forget himself, how the devil tempts him to avarice while the gold passes down unhindered, and how the highly gifted Beowulf should likewise remember that his time has a limit. That the lesson is drawn from a homiliary is clear enough if we set it alongside part of *Blickling homily* IV, from the mid tenth century:

> þonne þæs monnes sāul ūt of his līchoman gangeþ, þe him wǣron ǣr his ǣhta lēofra tō hæbbenne þonne Godes lufu, þonne ne gefultmiaþ þǣre sāule þāra gimma frætwednes, ne þāra goldwlenca nān þe his līchoma ǣr mid oforflōwnessum gefrætwod wæs, ond þā eorþlīcan gestrēon swīþor lufode þonne hē his gāst dyde.[70]
>
> When the soul leaves the body of a man who preferred to keep his possessions rather than the love of God, then that soul is helped neither by those jewels' adornment, nor by any glamour of gold with which his body was once superfluously adorned, if he loved those earthly riches more than he did his spirit.

These traditional ecclesiastical words could be used to judge Beowulf as a sinner. They remind us that in Denmark he is a *goldwlanc* ('gold-adventurous') man at the height of his power (line 1881), and that fifty years later, before dying, he is even readier to behold *goldhwæte* [...] *āgendes ēst* ('an owner's gold-bestowing favour', lines 3174–3175).

In his 'sermon' Hrothgar appears to see these temptations coming. Speaking like a bishop, in words which might draw attention to his lack of one, he tries to teach Beowulf to avoid *bealonīð* and *oferhygd* while choosing *þæt sēlra* ('what is better'), which he defines as *ēce rædas* ('everlasting rewards', lines 1758–1760). The last words, perhaps meaning 'policies for eternity', are of Christian formulation in that they may be compared with Ex. 516–530, in which Moses, on the Red Sea's eastern shore, lectures the lucky Israelites on *ēce rædas* (Ex. 516); or with *Daniel*, in which the Jews, having fallen into Babylonian captivity through *wlenco* ('pride'), have let a longing for earthly pleasures trick them out of *ēces rædes* ('everlasting reward', Dan. 17 and 30).[71] The poet of *Exodus* tells his reader that if the mind unlocks the riches of Holy Writ,

69 Cherniss 1972, p. 149; Leisi 1953, p. 263; Orchard 2003, p. 161.
70 Homily for 3rd Sunday in Lent (Kelly (ed.) 2003), p. 34.
71 Goldsmith 1970, pp. 204–205.

rūn bið gerecenod, rǽd forð gǽð ('the mystery will be told, reward will come forth', Ex. 526). In conjunction with this line, we might think of the *rūnstafas* ('runic staves', Beowulf, line 1695) engraved on the golden hilt of Grendel's mother's sword, from which Hrothgar takes the cue for his speech. There is no given reason to believe that Hrothgar cannot read these runes.[72] His given wisdom shows us that the poet treats all Scandinavians as heathen, but lends the best of them a spiritual intuition whereby even a king of idolaters may speak like Moses or read divine history from signs in the most awful place.

Intuition is just as well, for like Moses, neither Hrothgar nor the other heathens can base what they say on any tuition, whether formal or informal. From what Hrothgar says about humility in the closing lines of his speech (1769–1778), his one tutor has been the twelve-year humiliation which Grendel inflicts. Both Hrothgar (line 169) and the poet (line 711) impute Grendel's attacks to God's wrath, as Beowulf does the Dragon's (lines 2329–2331), but God has taught him his wisdom through suffering.[73] God's power in their world is given as *sōð* ('manifest', line 1611), but Hrothgar must see this power by himself. There is no bishop in Heorot nor any church to point it out to him by teaching God's word in *Beowulf*.

In fact, Hrothgar is so far from being Christian that he lingers near a scene in which his subjects ask the devil for help against Grendel (lines 175–183). It has been argued that these Danish counsellors take up idols in these lines without their king's consent.[74] Yet while Hrothgar is unnamed in these rites, he is related to them, in that one description of his pain falls before (line 170–172), and one after (lines 189–190), the Danish offerings to their *gāstbona* ('soul-slayer', line 176). Later the poet gives Hrothgar in an unambiguous heathen style. Hrothgar has already named his hall *heorot* ('hart') after the beast which elsewhere provides Freyr with his weapon, a *hjartar horn* ('stag's horn'), in the last battle of the Norse gods.[75] Moreover, when Hrothgar gives Beowulf *bēga gehwæþres* [...] *onweald* [...] *wicga ond wǽpna* ('possession over each kind, both steeds and weapons', lines 1043–1045), the poet calls him *eodor Ingwina* ('protector of the Ingwine'). This ancient epithet is first used as if the horses come with it, for we know that Freyr, otherwise known as *Ingunar-* or *Ingvi*-Freyr, leading god of the Norse *Vanir*, is said to have been worshipped by kings or chieftains keeping stallions with herds of mares.[76] There is also a strange moment after Grendel's mother's attack, later still in *Beowulf*, when Beowulf walks down the hall with his men:

72 Gwara 2008, pp. 184–187.
73 Gwara 2008, p. 200.
74 Irving 1989, p. 53.
75 Snorra Edda (Faulkes (ed.) 1982), p. 31 (ch. 37).
76 North 1997, pp. 26–31, 77, 331–332.

þæt hē þone wīsan wordum sægde
frēa Ingwina, frægn gif him wære
æfter nēodlaðu niht getæse. (lines 1318–1320)

so that he spoke words to the Ingwine's
wise lord, asked him after the urgent
summons if the night had been obliging.

So soon after the attack and at the end of a fitt (XIX), it is odd that Beowulf's courtesy reflects on Hrothgar's night-time convenience. But the poet has already shown us Hrothgar's eagerness to see his wife Wealhtheow with him in bed before sunset (lines 664–665); and the *Ingwine*-epithet may go with this, for Freyr is known as the priapic Norse god of fertility.[77] Hrothgar's title in any case lets us suppose that 'Ing' or 'Ingui', identifiable with the Danish devil, is the god of his family.[78] In all these ways, the Christian value of Hrothgar's 'sermon' is circumscribed long before its delivery, especially when the poet indicates that all the Danes, king as well as people, *helle gemundon in mōdsefan* ('thought towards hell in their hearts', lines 179–180).

So in the light of Hrothgar's named association with the devil, it is worth recalling what makes him seem Christian. In *Beowulf*, OE *hæðen* ('heathen') covers not only Grendel (lines 852, 986) and the Dragon's hoard (lines 2216, 2276) in the poem, but by implication all Scandinavians both ancient and modern and the humanoid descendants of Cain, Hama initially, Hrethel and of course Hrothgar. Yet for all his tragicomic hints that Hrothgar really leads a heathen life, the poet fills the rest of *Beowulf* with the illusion that this king and his people have morals. Hrothgar and other heathens live like God's chosen people. Without knowing the creed or rites which would make them Christian, the Danes fulfil many of the conditions. Beowulf, too, a half-Geat, seems to know where not to go in the hereafter when he tells Unferth that *þū in helle scealt werhðo drēogan* ('you shall endure damnation in hell', lines 588–589) for his well-known fratricide. If this MS *helle* is not for *healle* ('hall'), by a scribal Christianization, Beowulf shows that heathens know of a place called hell. Conversely, we have seen that Hama *gecēas ēcne rǣd* ('chose an everlasting reward', line 1201) in exchange for *searonīðas*: perhaps he gets the chance to convert. King Hrethel's case, too, looks promising in that he is shown by Beowulf to suffer a calvary of grief, having refrained from the (Odinic) catharsis of killing Hæthcyn: Hrethel thus *gumdrēam ofgeaf, Godes lēoht gecēas* ('gave up men's joy, chose God's light', line 2469).[79] The phrase *Godes lēoht*, as we have seen in the above letter, is rather like Boniface's *lux perpetua* ('light eternal'); and it is also found for a vision of heaven in a homily by Ælfric, of the late tenth century.[80] With Beowulf describing Hrethel's death in his own words, the

77 North 1997, pp. 30, 195–196.
78 North 1997, pp. 176–181.
79 North 2006, pp. 199–202.
80 Godden (ed.) 1979, p. 107, line 537 (no. 11).

poet shows that any heathen can be hopeful about his afterlife; perhaps, also, that Beowulf has entertained hopes for his. Beowulf thanks God for the Dragon's hoard (lines 2794–2796) and he and other heathens, including Hrothgar, praise Him all the time.

For his early explanation, the poet's note after the Danish rituals that these heathens know not how to praise God (lines 180–183) is tantamount to saying that in their own way they do praise Him. It is clear from other evidence that the poet translates their erroneous ways into an acceptable belief system, an ancient form of Judaism. By tracing the Danes from Abel (lines 106–108) probably through Japheth, the poet gives Hrothgar and the others a northern inheritance of pre-Mosaic law.[81] In this context, the Danes' devil-worship aligns them with fallen Israelites below Mt Sinai in a characterization which explains how King Hrothgar can give Christian advice while sanctioning satanic rites. Hrothgar's advanced age is the likeliest cause of his semi-retired lack of presence when the devil worship takes place. It is also productive in that he is cunning enough to reinterpret Beowulf's *wlenco* as a debt-repayment, by revealing that he saved Ecgtheow, Beowulf's father, with wergild to the family of a man whom Ecgtheow killed with his bare hands (lines 459–472). On the other hand, we have seen that Hrothgar's age passes for senility where Wealhtheow and the Geats are concerned. The advanced age which makes Hrothgar Beowulf's spiritual adviser in his 'sermon' also lacks the force that goes with effective kingship.[82] This is why Hrothgar yields to his wife on the matter of Freawaru, restoring her to Ingeld and keeping her from Beowulf; so dooming Beowulf to a kingship without foundation in ideology, without the loyalty of his men, and without an heir.

Wiglaf and the need for a church

A Christian king would fall back on his bishop for ideological authority or spiritual guidance, and as King Beowulf's story unfolds, the need for a church in both Danish and Geatish polities becomes very clear. No force or agency exists in the heathens' world to stabilize their royalty except the wisdom of the kings themselves, and Beowulf's lack of an heir will bring disorder. It is not surprising, therefore, that Wiglaf seems not to take up Beowulf's authority to rule the Geats after him, despite organizing Beowulf's funeral (lines 2892, 3101–3103, 3105–3109, 3110–3114, 3120–3124). Although Wiglaf's power there is so obvious that he even delegates a command through the Messenger (lines 3007–3010), there is no evidence that he becomes king. His freedom to leave is proof of a detachment similar to King Hrothgar's. It allows an advanced moral insight of a kind which King Beowulf is not free to use.

81 Anlezark 2002.
82 Irving 1989, p. 61.

First there is Wiglaf's comment to the Geatish army, following the Messenger's speech and their arrival at the scene of Beowulf's death, that he and others could not give the king any plan he would accept, whereby he would let others approach *goldweard þone* ('that gold-keeper', line 3081), or let it lie there until the world's end. By pronouncing the hoard *gescēawod* ('observed' or 'seen') three lines later, Wiglaf recalls what Beowulf said when he told him to plunder it, *þæt ic* [...] *gearo scēawige swegle searogimmas* ('that readily I may observe brilliant ingenious jewels', lines 2477–2479). As we have seen, he echoes the poet ten lines earlier to do with the curse on this gold: *næs* [...] *gearwor hæfde* [...] *gescēawod* ('not once had he more readily observed [the gold]', lines 3074–3075). Wiglaf further refers to Beowulf's soul in a place *þǽr hē longe sceal on ðæs Wealdendes wære geþolian* ('where he shall long endure in that Commander's covenant', lines 3108–3109), as if he intuits Adam and hell's other noble damned who *bryne þolodan* ('endured the burning') before Christ descends to release them (*The Dream of the Rood* 149).[83] Most theological of all is Wiglaf's closing epitaph, in which flame engulfs the king who had experienced storms of arrows, where the *sceft* ('shaft'), aided by the bow-string, *nytte hēold fęšergearwum fūs, flāne fullēode* ('made itself useful, hastening with its feather-gear, assisted the arrow-head', lines 3118–3119). This extended image, without clear relevance to context, harks back to what King Hrothgar said about *bona swīðe nēah, se þe of flānbogan fyrenum sceōteð* ('the slayer very close, who wickedly shoots from a fiery bow', lines 1743–1744). St Paul provides the image for this last temptation of Beowulf in Eph. 6:15–16. The poet's re-use of the Apostle gives Wiglaf the untaught moral power of Hrothgar.

But Wiglaf moves out; in the last fitt the poet does not make it clear that he stays on for King Beowulf's funeral. Any notion that Wiglaf stays makes light of Geatish politics at the end of the poem.[84] Even if the *wræc* which Wiglaf proclaims as inevitable, at the beginning of his speech to their army, is rendered 'misery' rather than 'exile' in line 3078, it seems that he leaves Geatland for another country. Wiglaf's rebuke to the bodyguard earlier draws a line between him and the Geats when he tells the cowards that all the good things of life, such as inheritance and gifts of gold and swords, will come to an end *ēowrum cynne* ('for your kin', line 2885) as soon as foreigners hear of *flēam ēowerne, dōmlēasan dǽd* ('your flight, [your] deed bereft of honour', lines 2880–2890). Wiglaf's words about the end of public gold are by definition extended to the hidden gold which Beowulf has won. Not only does the Messenger, obeying Wiglaf (line 2892), decree that more than one part of the Dragon's hoard must burn with the king (lines 3010–3011), but Wiglaf presides over the funeral wagon which is loaded with *wunden gold* ('twisted gold'), *ǽghwæs unrīm* ('a countless quantity of everything', lines 3154–3155), as well as with Beowulf himself. That this gold goes into a mound with its new owner is evidence that Wiglaf has no wish to spend it as the

83 North 2006, p. 311.

84 Most recently in Baker 2013, p. 221.

next king of Geatland.[85] He wants to avoid this burden. When he leads the Geatish party inside to get the hoard (the message of line 3126 is that they loot it without restraint), Wiglaf tells them nothing of Beowulf's hope that the treasure would be spent on his *lēoda þearfe* ('people's needs', line 2801). Instead, it appears that he tells them the opposite. The last fitt (XLIII) begins in denial of Beowulf's last wishes, with his pyre hung about with weapons, shields and bright mail-shirts, *swā hē bēna wæs* ('as he had requested', line 3140). Scyld is meant to express the same wish in the half-line *swā hē selfa bæd* ('as he himself had asked') at the beginning of *Beowulf* (line 29). Although the later *hē*-pronoun makes the source of the request ambiguous on line 3140, it seems that Wiglaf pretends to relay this as a last request from Beowulf as if this dead king were Scyld.

And so the poem goes full circle. Although the poet does not state that Beowulf asks for treasure to be laid with his monument or mortal remains (lines 2799–2808), the closing effect is the same. If it is Wiglaf who thus tells the Geats to bury the treasure, it follows that he does so in order to delay a war between Geatish kindreds. King Beowulf owns the hoard, having won it. Since the Geats have no king with which to replace him, the gold (and its anathema) must go with the king. Out of common interest, the Geats carry out Wiglaf's instructions:

> Hī on beorg dydon bēg ond siglu,
> eall swylce hyrsta swylce on horde ǣr
> nīðhēdige men genumen hæfdon,
> forlēton eorla gestrēon eorðan healdan
> gold on grēote þǣr hit nū gēn lifað
> eldum swā unnyt swā hyt ǣror wæs. (lines 3163–3168)

> They put into the mound necklaces and jewels,
> all such trappings as in the hoard earlier
> men with their minds on hostility had taken,
> let earth keep the gentlemen's treasure,
> gold in the rock, where it lives to this day
> as useless to men as it was before in ancient times.

With the word *nīðhēdige*, the poet appears to point to civil war ahead. The dative ending of *hord* on line 3164 does not give the verb *genumen hæfdon* the same general meaning as *dydon* two lines above it, whose complement *on beorg* is an accusative phrase. That is to say, the men plotting violence are not the warring ancients who laid their gold in their mound, but their Geatish heirs who have brought it out of there and into Beowulf's. In a pattern which the poet makes cyclical, it seems that the Geats will soon see some *fyrenðearfe* (line 14) of their own to add to the feared invasions. With everything for show and with their boys in procession, the twelve Geatish kindreds

85 Condren 1973, p. 298.

collude peacefully in what is *gedēfe* ('fitting', lines 3175–3176), while they know that their polity is on the brink of collapse.

Conclusion

Beowulf vindicates a dead king by revealing and deploring the influence of gold on his failure in the role. *King Beowulf* would be a better title for this poem. And that the relation of Beowulf's kingship to his tragedy of gold and damnation has long gone unnoticed, is probably because of Hrothgar. Over time the balancing of *Beowulf* between this old king and the younger hero, with the theme known accordingly as 'youth and age', has become axiomatic, just as the division of *Beowulf* into 'parts I and II' over the grand temporal jump of line 2200. However, both this theme and its apparent structural confirmation hide the fact that King Hrothgar's two thirds act only as a prelude. The poet's true theme is Beowulf's rise to kingship. His work advances to this end right from the beginning in a continuum in which the only interruptions are breaks for the (44) fitts, while it emerges in the long Danish preamble that King Hrothgar's role is effectively to hinder, not to help, Beowulf's prospects of becoming king. In Beowulf the poet highlights the potential of a man of inferior birth, but he hobbles this with Hrothgar, whose Christian-seeming precepts are qualified by heathen epithets, founded on the detachment of old age and crowned with the disaster of Ingeld's raid. Indeed the poem's central 'sermon' draws attention less to King Hrothgar's wisdom than to the absence of a bishop in his court. Working without any institution but his queen, Hrothgar holds back on their daughter, the right gift for his guest, compensating by giving Beowulf ever more gold. But gold is no substitute for the ideology of royal blood. When Beowulf becomes king of Geatland without this, he cannot marry and must give ever more gold for less honour until both run out in his fight for the hoard.[86] Thereafter the fate of his soul becomes an emblem for everyone in the poem, while the Geats' loss of Wiglaf reveals a stasis consistent with the lack of a church, that institutional complement which saves kings in this world as well as in the next. The death of King Beowulf defines this poem as his requiem, but the king and his people are flawed. It is his polity's drive for gold which kills Beowulf's body and soul, and in this light, *Beowulf* may be read as a requiem for all heathen kings and for their kingdoms as well.

86 King Beornwulf of Mercia, a big spender, fell in search of more money in East Anglia in 826. For a case that he was the living model of Beowulf, see North 2006, pp. 254–296.

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