

## UPDATE PAGE FOR CLASS OF 4/18/19

Richard Sacks – Dusting Off the Classics: *Beowulf*

University of Denver – University College Enrichment Program – Winter/Spring 2019

Course "materials and info" page: <https://sacks-richard.com/beowulf-course-materials>

For our final class (that of 4/18), **we will focus our attention on the end of the poem** as we try to figure out what this remarkable text is ultimately trying to argue. To that end (so to speak), here yet again are some passage-based questions (including a few details in each) you might want to play around with if you're so inclined (note that the first two were passages on last week's update which we never got to in last week's class):

- 1) What do you make of the narrative's decision to interrupt the fight with the dragon with a digression on Wiglaf's history (lines 2602-2630)?** As I very briefly mentioned in the rush at the end of class last week, the passage notes, among other things, that **a**) Wiglaf is a "Shylfing" [=Swede] (2603), that **b**) "he lived among the Waegmundings" (2607 and also mentioned at 2814), and that **c**) he possesses a sword which was given to him by his father Weohstan and which has a complicated and poignant history in the Swedish-Geat wars.
- 2) What do you make of Beowulf's final speeches before he dies: lines 2729-2751, 2794-2808, and 2813-2816?** Note also the introduction to the last of these three speeches (at lines 2809-2812) in which Beowulf gives Wiglaf the "collar of gold from his neck" (2810).
- 3) What do you make of the long speech of the messenger (lines 2900-3027).** We get the speech because Wiglaf "ordered the outcome of the fight [with the dragon] to be reported" (2892) and the narrator rings the speech with the observations that the messenger "told the truth / and did not balk" (just before the speech at 2897-2898), and that "He got little wrong / in what he told and predicted" (just after the speech at 3029-3030). Note that the progression of the speech (each part of which contains various striking details) is as follows: **a**) **lines 2900-2910** in which the messenger reports the fact of Beowulf's death; **b**) **lines 2910-2921** in which the messenger suggests that "war is looming" with the Frisians (in the poem's "reality" Frisians are also Franks/Hetware/Merovingians/etc.); **c**) **lines 2922-3007** (far and away the longest section of the speech) in which the messenger suggests that there will be a renewal of hostilities between Swedes and Geats because "at Ravenswood, Ongentheow / slaughtered Haethcyn, Hrethel's son, / when the Geat people in their arrogance / first attacked the fierce Shylfings" (lines 2924-2927), a passage with many details we didn't get in Beowulf's retelling of these events at 2472-2489; and finally **4**) **lines 3007-3027** in which the messenger concludes his speech with a focus first on the treasure and then on the "path of exile" (3018) which he suggests constitutes the future the Geats are facing.
- 4) What do you make of the notoriously problematic and confusing passage (lines 3058-3075) that comes just before Wiglaf's final speeches?** Some details with which you might want to wrestle: **a**) the passage begins with a focus on "one [=the last survivor or the thief or the dragon or Beowulf or ...?] who had wrongly hidden" (3059) something [=riches or feuding or ...?] under something [= a wall or welling-up or ...?]; **b**) the phrase **his māgum** in line 3065 means "his kinsmen" and not just "his own" (as Heaney translates it); **c**) the phrase **sōhte searo-nīðas** (3067 which Heaney translates "faced the cruelty and cunning") also appears at line 2738 (where Heaney translates it as "fomented quarrels" – my awkwardly literal translation would be "sought out crafty enmity"); and finally **d**) the passage ends with two especially difficult lines (3074-3075) translated as differently as Heaney's "Yet Beowulf's gaze at the gold treasure / when he first saw it had not been selfish" **vs.** Tolkien's "Alas, Beowulf ere he went had not more carefully considered the old possessor's will that cursed the gold" **vs.** Burton Raffel's "if greed / Was what brought him: God alone could break / Their magic, open his Grace to man" –as you might imagine from these radically different translations, there are radically different views on how to make sense of the words in these two lines, most especially because of the difficulties surrounding the second element in the compound **gold-hwæte**; but for what it's worth my hyper-literal translation (leaving out **gold-hwæte**) would be: "he [=Beowulf] had not more certainly [i.e., more clearly] earlier looked upon the gifts of the possessing one," with **gold-hwæte** meaning either "gold-curse" (and syntactically a parallel expression of the direct object "gifts" (=ēst) or "eagerly when it comes to gold" (syntactically an adverbial compound modifying the verb "looked upon"). What a mess.

**5) What do you make of the final speeches of Wiglaf: 3077-3109 and 3114-3119?** Some details you might want to consider: **a)** the opening of the first (and longer) of the two speeches which begins "Often when one man follows his own will / many are hurt. This happened to us. / Nothing we advised could ever convince / the prince we loved, our land's guardian, / not to vex the custodian of the gold..." (3077-3082); **b)** Wiglaf's command, still in that first of the two speeches, to "feast our eyes on that amazing fortune / heaped under the wall" (3102-3103); and **c)** Wiglaf's focus in his final speech on the "arrow-storm[s]" (3117) Beowulf faced in his life.

**6) What do you make of the final passage of the poem which is in the voice of the narrator (3120-3182)?** Some details you might want to consider: **a) lines 3131-3133** in which "They pitched the dragon / over the clifftop, let tide's flow / and backwash take the treasure-minder..."; **b) lines 3143-3146** in which "On a height they kindled the hugest of all / funeral fires; /... / ...the blaze roared / and drowned out their weeping..."; **c) lines 3150-3155** in which "A Geat woman too sang out in grief... / ... / of her worst fears, a wild litany / of nightmare and lament: her nation invaded, / enemies on the rampage, bodies in piles, / slavery and abasement..."; **d) lines 3163-3168** in which we hear the Geat people "let the ground keep that ancestral treasure, / gold under gravel, / gone to earth, / as useless to men now as it ever was"; and finally **e) lines 3173-3182** (the last 10 lines of the poem) in which the Geat people "extolled [Beowulf's] heroic nature and exploits," culminating in the four adjectives used in the superlative in the last two lines (for what it's worth, the first three of these adjectives occur clustered within a single passage earlier in the poem – Wealtheow's final speech – at lines 1229 [**mild-**], 1230 [**þwær-**] and 1220 [**līð-**] respectively).