

UPDATE PAGE FOR CLASS OF 4/4/19

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 third class (that of 4/4), **we will focus our attention on lines 1232-2199**: Beowulf's encounter with Grendel's mother, his ensuing farewell scene with Hrothgar, and finally his welcome home at Hygelac's court. But we'll start with a brief look at a passage we didn't get to near the end of last week's reading: lines 1191-1214 in which Wealtheow gives Beowulf a necklace as a reward for killing Grendel. Here again are some passage-based questions (including a few details in each) you might want to play around with if you're so inclined:

- 1) What do you make of the way the narrative presents the necklace which Wealtheow gives to Beowulf (1191-1214)?** Note that the necklace is first referred to as "The most resplendent / torque of gold I ever heard tell of / anywhere on earth or under heaven" (1194ff.). That superlative is then immediately qualified by a comparison to the mythological necklace of the Brosings (1198), a necklace stolen from Freyr's sister Freyja and which Odin agrees to give back to her only if she engenders a feud between two kings that will last forever, and also a necklace fought over by Loki and Heimdall, two gods who also fight each other at Ragnarök. And then that reference to the necklace of the Brosings is in turn followed by the story (1202ff.) of how Hygelac died wearing the necklace which Wealtheow is in the process of giving to Beowulf.
- 2) What do you make of the Grendel's mother sequence (1232ff.)?** There are many provocative details in the passage so you should absolutely feel free to focus on whichever ones capture your imagination, but here are a few you might want to consider: **2a)** the narrative's comparison of her "onslaught" to that of Grendel (1282-1287); **2b)** the description of her as "... driven to avenge her kinsman's death. / Or so it seems to thanes in their grief..." (lines 1340-1341); **2c)** Beowulf's speech at 1384ff. which begins "Wise sir, do not grieve. It is always better / to avenge dear ones than to indulge in mourning. /For every one of us, living in this world / means waiting for our end. Let whoever can / win glory before death..."; **2d)** the time the narrative spends (1455-1464) on the sword Beowulf takes with him, a sword lent to him by Unferth; and finally **2e)** the fight itself, from the moment she grabs him at line 1501 to her death at 1569.
- 3) What do you make of the extended farewell scene (1644-1887) between Beowulf and Hrothgar?** Some details to consider (though again feel free to pursue anything that captures your imagination): **3a)** the description (1688ff.) of the hilt of the sword which Beowulf finds and then uses to kill Grendel's mother, a hilt which he carries back to Hrothgar from the bottom of the mere (note, for what it's worth, that a more literal translation of what Heaney renders in the second half of 1688 through all of 1689 would be "On it was written the origin / of ancient strife"); **3b)** the beginning of Hygelac's long moralizing speech (1700ff.) in which he contrasts Beowulf with Heremod (we first heard of Heremod back at 900ff.); **3c)** the second part (1728-1768) of that long moralizing speech (1700ff.) in which Hrothgar focuses on the danger of **ofer-hygd** (in lines 1740 and 1760 and translated by Heaney as "overweening" in 1740 and "pride" at 1760; its verbal form is also used once at 2345); **3d)** the raven announcing dawn at 1801 – the word **hrefn** "raven" also is used at 2448 and 3024, as well as in the name of a Frisian/Frank victim of Beowulf (at 2501ff.) and twice (2924 and 2935) in the place-name in Sweden of a battle between the Swedes and Geats (note also Odin has two ravens named Huginn "thought, understanding" and Muninn "memory" on which see page 51 in [the Gylfaginning section of Brodeur's translation of the Prose Edda](#); and finally **3e)** Hrothgar's last speech to Beowulf (1841-1865), which are also the last words we witness Hrothgar deliver in the poem.
- 4) What do you make of the extended scene (1925-2199) in which Beowulf is welcomed home at Hygelac's court?** Note that the scene includes several digressions including: **4a)** the story at 1931-1962 of Queen Modthryth who becomes the wife of a king named Offa (her story evidently serves as a contrast to Hygelac's wife Hygd); and **4b)** Beowulf's narration at 2020-2069 of what he imagines will happen at the marriage of Hrothgar's daughter Freawaru to the Heathobard king Ingeld. The scene also includes: **4c)** Beowulf's narration at 2070-2100 (as his long speech continues) of his fight with Grendel which features some details we hadn't heard about before; and **4d)** the final 27 lines (2163-2199) before the 50-year break in the poem, including Beowulf giving Hygd the necklace he received from Wealtheow (2172ff.), the narration's claim that Beowulf had been "poorly regarded" in his youth (2183ff.), and the "heirloom [sword] of Hrethel" which Hygelac gives to Beowulf (2190ff.).