

UPDATE PAGE FOR CLASS OF 3/28/19

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 second class (that of 3/28), we will focus our attention on our first encounter with Beowulf – the Grendel section and its aftermath (lines 86-1231). Here are some passage-based questions (including a few details in each passage) that you might want to play around with if you have the time and inclination:

- 1) **What do you make of Grendel's entry into the poem** at lines 86ff., a passage which first focuses on the song of "man's beginnings" (91) and Grendel's connection to the "ogres and elves and evil phantoms / and the giants too" (112-113) which "out of the curse of [Cain's] exile ... sprang" (111)?
- 2) **What do you make of our introduction to Beowulf** at lines 194ff., which includes the delay in naming him until line 343, and also his first speech to Hrothgar at lines 407ff.? That is the speech in which Beowulf says: "So every elder and experienced councilman / among my people supported my resolve / to come here to you, King Hrothgar" (415-417). But note that the Geat king Hygelac, when he welcomes Beowulf home, says "I dreaded the outcome / of your expedition and pleaded with you / long and hard to leave the killer be, / let the South-Danes settle their own / blood-feud with Grendel" (1992-1996). And note also that in the narrative voice's version of what had happened (lines 202-204), the form **rōfne** "brave" in line 204 is not readable in the manuscript, and it could equally well be **sorhe** "sorrows" in which case lines 202-204 would read: " against his expedition, wise men / argued little, though he was dear to them, / [though] mind-sorrows spurred them, / [though] they saw the signs."
- 3) **What do you make of the connection of Beowulf's father to the Danes**, first mentioned by Hrothgar at 372ff. and more extensively narrated by him at lines 459ff.? Note that he connection involves a tribe called the Wulfings (461) and in the poetic tradition (line 29 of the poem "Widsith") we are told that the Wulfing king was named Helm and thus the Wulfings are evidently also called Helmings (the way the Danes are also called Scyldings after Scyld/Shield), Helming being the tribal designation of Hrothgar's wife Wealhtheow at line 620 of *Beowulf*.
- 4) **What do you make of the passage in which Beowulf is challenged by Hrothgar's councilor Unferth** and in which we get two versions of Beowulf's swimming match with a figure named Breca? Note Beowulf's scathing comment to Unferth at 588ff., a charge the narrative returns to at 1164-1167.
- 5) **What do you make of the central episode of the first third of the poem, the fight with Grendel?** Some details you might want to play around with: **5a)** Beowulf's speech about not using weapons in fighting Grendel (677ff.); **5b)** Grendel being termed a **rinc** "man" at 720 (used of Beowulf and his men at 729) and **mære** "glorious" at 762 (used of Beowulf at 797), while Beowulf is a **heal-begn** "hall-/hell-thane at 719 (used of Grendel at 142); **5c)** the sequence in which Grendel kills one of Beowulf's men and which begins "Mighty and canny, / Hygelac's kinsman was keenly watching" (735ff.); and **5d)** finally the fatal blow Beowulf delivers, the tearing off of Grendel's arm which is then hung from the rafters of Heorot.
- 6) **What do you make of all the story-telling in the scenes following the defeat of Grendel:** namely, **6a)** the sequence beginning in the second half of line 866 and featuring the tale of "Sigemund's exploits" (874), immediately followed at line 900 by the story of the Danish king Heremod (who is mentioned again at 1709ff) **mid eotenum** "among the Jutes/giants" (902); and **6b)** the sequence of 1062ff. featuring "the saga of Finn and his sons, unfolding / the tale of the fierce attack in Friesland [= the land of the **Eotenas**/Jutes] / where Hnaef, king of the Danes, met death" (1067-1069) which ends at 1158 with the "rescue" of Finn's Danish wife, Hildeburh.
- 7) **What do you make of the extended sequence featuring Wealhtheow** at 1161ff., which includes not only her two long speeches (1168-1186 and 1216-1231), but also a digression at 1197ff. about the torque/necklace she gives to Beowulf as a gift, a digression in which we hear that the Geat king Hygelac died wearing that very necklace when he "provoke[d] / a feud with the Frisians [= Jutes]" (1206-1207)?