Sadness in the Heart of the Good One: The Tone of *Beowulf*

Leah Smith
For my mother’s relentless love of learning.
Nu beoð þy hefigran heort.
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Introduction

*Beowulf* is an Anglo-Saxon poem written by an unknown poet between the late six and early eleventh centuries. It is a little over 3,000 lines of poetry in Old English and appears in the manuscript London, British Library, Cotton Vitellius A. xv. There is still much that is unknown about the historical context of the poem and its composition. In fact, the dating of the original composition is one of the most debated topics of *Beowulf* studies.\(^1\) The manuscript is dated c. 1000 AD (Klaeber clxii), providing a clear later boundary, but evidence suggests that the copy in the Vitellius manuscript is at least a copy of a copy, if not even further removed. Scribal errors have been used as evidence that the copiers (two different scribes) were removed enough from the context of the writing of the poem to no longer recognize such proper nouns as *Merovingians*, which appear in the manuscript in garbled form. On the other end of the range, the poem cannot be written any earlier than historical events it references, like the raid that leads to Hygelac’s death in the early sixth century.\(^2\) Not being able to specify the date of the poem creates a wide range of possibilities for the cultural context in which the poet might have been writing.

The composition history and structure of the poem is also an area of *Beowulf* studies where there are many theories but little consensus. There is no known author of the poem, but much speculation about possible source material (analogues, oral tradition, written sources) and iterations of the poem that existed before it arrived at its current state. Critics have made the case, among other things, that *Beowulf* was created from transcribed oral traditional materials stitched together, that it was created from two poems combined (or the second half written to

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\(^1\) For further summary of the dating scholarship see Klaeber (clxii-clxxiv).

\(^2\) The assumption is that the poet expected his audience (the audience at the time of the composition of the poem) to know about the events of the many references to historical or quasi-historical events in the poem.
extend an existing first half), or that the poet inserted monster fights into historical material he had available to him. The composition history of the poem is a branch of scholarship in itself. However, despite the complications of date and authorship, this paper follows in the tradition of Tolkien, Irving, Fry, and other critics in treating Beowulf as a unified whole, regardless of the complexity of the poem’s production. This mode of scholarship assumes that a single poet was responsible for the poem as part of a complete vision that can be analyzed as a single literary work. The thesis will be using the version of Beowulf as it is conservatively reconstructed (the manuscript version has been damaged by age, fire, paper borders added to preserve pages, etc) in Friedrich Klaeber’s fourth edition.

The action of the poem follows the adventures of the character Beowulf, a warrior of the Geatish people, who fights monsters first abroad in Denmark and then at home in Geatland. He fights three monsters: two humanoids, Grendel and his mother, (possibly trolls) in the first half of the poem, and a dragon in the second half of the poem. The monster fights are within a historical framework of feuding tribes (Swedes, Geats, Danes, Heðobards, Frisians, and Franks) and internal succession struggles. Though its macro-structure is a subject of debate among Beowulf scholars, the poem feels like a story in two parts. The first is Beowulf fighting the Grendelkin monsters in Denmark as a þægn [thane] of Hygelac, and the second is Beowulf fighting the dragon in Geatland as king of the Geats.

Beowulf becomes king of the Geats as a result of intertribal warfare that leaves both his uncle king Hygelac and his cousin Heardred dead. The poem begins with a summary of the life, death, and funeral of the Danish king Scyld and ends with the death and funeral of king Beowulf who dies fighting the fifty-foot dragon that attacks his hall. Beowulf kills the dragon before the

3 Thanes were nobles who swore oaths of military service to a lord/king.
dragon’s venom ends his own life. The Geats are left lordless, because the hero dies without a son, or any heir.

Though Beowulf dies as a result of the dragon fight, objectively he ends the poem with a victory. The enemy that has burned down his hall and threatened his people is dead, but the poet does not to reflect this victory in the tone of the ending. Instead, a sense of immense gloom pervades the hero’s last moments and funeral. The messenger sent back by Beowulf’s thane Wiglaf to report on the outcome of the fight not only tells of Beowulf’s death (lines 2905-2910a), but in a sobering speech notes that the Geats can look forward to strife and war with the neighboring peoples once the news of the king’s demise becomes widely known (lines 2910b-2921). The theme of impending doom is taken up again at Beowulf’s funeral, where a lamenting woman predicts war, slaughter and captivity for the Geats (lines 3148-3155a). The future of the people is not just uncertain, as we might expect when a long-reigning king dies without an obvious successor, but bleak. The Geatish kingdom is at the edge of collapse and extinction.

Yet according to the poet, Beowulf has been a wise and just king, protecting the kingdom against all challenges and in the course of his fifty-year rule never swearing false oaths, seeking out unnecessary strife, or murdering kinsmen (lines 2732b-2743a).\(^4\) He also just killed a dragon, which is no small feat.\(^5\) Since the early days of *Beowulf* criticism, scholars have recognized the mismatch between Beowulf’s successful life and the condition of the kingdom after his death, but there is no consensus as to the cause, who is to blame. Most critics who have approached this question argue that the poet is criticizing a personal failure on the part of Beowulf; that he is

\(^4\) This characterization of Beowulf’s reign is his own, not the narrator’s, but it is given on his deathbed and the poet never contradicts this assessment. At least some of the apparent peace and prosperity of Beowulf’s reign must be credited to his wise rule, not merely his own immense personal strength or the strength of his predecessors Heardred or Hygelac. Beowulf was presumably just as strong during their reigns, but his strength was unable to prevent the death of either king.

\(^5\) The famous Norse hero Sigurd also slays a dragon, named Fafnir. Tolkien calls Sigurd “the prince of the heroes of the North” ("Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics" 6).
foolish to fight the dragon, or to fight the dragon alone, that he tries to deny the inevitable weakness of old age, or that he should have left a son to succeed him on the Geatish throne. But to point out a specific failure of the hero is to work from within the Greek literary tradition, in which tragedy is the result of a character flaw in the hero. It is the fall of the great man from greatness that is so tragic, and the fact that he is responsible for his own destruction. But this model does not apply to the tragedy of the Anglo-Saxon Beowulf poet in his representation of the dark and violent world in which his characters live and die. Beowulf is the best of men, and the tragedy is that even the best men die in this world. Everything is temporary.

This thesis considers the criticism leveled against Beowulf’s character and examine the merits of each argument based on a close reading of the text of the poem. The first chapter examines the gloominess of the ending of Beowulf and the desperate situation of the Geats after his death. The next three chapters discuss three different flaws for which, critics have argued, the poet criticizes Beowulf. Chapter two evaluates Beowulf’s decision to fight the dragon alone, both in the practical terms of preparation as well as in the moral terms of motive. Chapter three compares the old kings in the poem as a means of judging whether Beowulf dies because he underestimates the power of old age (even over a hero). Chapter four analyzes the issue of succession at the end of the poem and whether Beowulf neglects his kingly duty to provide the Geats with an heir to the throne. The final chapter looks more closely at how the tone of the poem is achieved and how it informs the lamenting tone of the ending, suggesting that in such a poem the hero need not have a flaw. He can die with his heroism preserved, because the source of tragedy exists not in the cause of the hero’s death but in the fact that he must die. Even a dragon slayer cannot slay death.
Glo[om]

The funeral of the Danish king Scyld at the beginning of *Beowulf* provides a standard by which we can measure the tone of Beowulf’s funeral. The great king Scyld is honored with a ship burial, a pagan ceremony in which the body is sent out to sea (“leton holm beran, geafon on garsecg” (48b-49a) [let the sea bear, gave to the ocean]) in a boat filled with treasures that reflect the greatness of the deceased:

\[
\text{Þær wæa madma fela} \\
\text{Of feorwegum frætwa gelæded.} \\
\text{Ne hyrde ic cymlicor ceol gegyrwan} \\
\text{Hildewæpnum ond headowædum,} \\
\text{Billum ond byrnum; him on bearne læg} \\
\text{Madma mænigo, ța him mid scoldon} \\
\text{On fodes æht feor gewitan.} \\
\text{(36b-42)}\]

[There were many treasures, ornaments brought from distant parts. I have not heard of a more comely ship made ready with war-weapons and war-garments, blades and byrnies; a multitude of precious things lay on his breast, than that which with him should depart far on the power of the water.]

The death of the great lord is sad, but the poet does not dwell on the mourning of the Danes, saying only, “geafon on garsecg; him wæs geomor sefa, / murnende mod” (49-50a) [gave (Scyld) to the ocean; mournful spirit was in them, mourning mind]. Instead, the poem moves quickly on to the successful reign of Scyld’s son Beow, who also rules over he Danes for a long time.

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6 All quotations from *Beowulf* are taken from Klaeber’s *Beowulf and the Fight at Finnsburg: Ed. 4, with Introduction, Commentary, Appendices, Glossary, and Bibliography* Ed. R. D. Fulk, Robert E. Bjork, and John D. Niles. Toronto: Univ. of Toronto, 2008. Translations are my own.

7 In the summer of 1939 an East Anglian king’s ship burial and treasure (dated c. A.D. 670) were excavated at Sutton Hoo almost intact. This find brought into historical context many of the details of the world of *Beowulf* including the swords, armor, harp, and what a ship burial of the type that the Danes perform for Scyld at the opening of the poem might look like. While the Sutton Hoo ship was buried in the ground rather than set adrift on the ocean (presumably to ensure that it did not wash back up on shore to be plundered), it has provided valuable insight into what such a burial would entail. See Chambers’ chapter “Sutton Hoo and Beowulf” for further discussion (*Beowulf: An Introduction to the Study of the Poem*, 508-523).

8 Beow’s name appears as “Beowulf” in the manuscript, but it not the same Beowulf as the hero in the rest of the poem. Klaeber 4 emends to Beow.
There are similarities between the deaths of the two kings that bookend the poem, Scyld’s in the opening lines and Beowulf’s in the closing ones: both kings are heralded by the poet as god cyning [good king], both command their thanes as to the mode of their burials, and both are buried with hoards of treasure. As part of her analysis in *The four funerals in Beowulf*, Gale Owen-Crocker argues that the poet uses the two funerals to create a cyclical effect. If so, then the effect functions more to contrast the two funerals than to set them as parallels. Beowulf’s cremation (also a pagan rite) is far gloomier than the ship burial of Scyld, “brooding” (Lee 172), as Alvin Lee puts it. The sadness of the Geats is the subject of most of the material in the 362 lines after the hero’s death (directly in descriptions of the funeral and indirectly in the predictions of future strife with surrounding people), much more than the two half-lines that summarize the mourning of the Danes. This disproportionate amount of grief suggests that there is something more at play with Beowulf’s death than just the passing of a god cyning.9

The poet places Scyld’s funeral in the context of a continuing line of kings, his son Beowulf and his grandson Halfdane. Scyld lives on, if only in a symbolic sense, through his heirs, so his funeral is characterized by a sense of renewal like the tides of the sea on which his body departs. Beowulf’s cremation, on the other hand, is the ending of an era, consumed in hot flames, overshadowed by the despair of expected defeat, and without an heir to the giftstol [gift-seat, throne]. At the cremation, “Wud(u)rec astah / sweart ofer swioðole, swogende leg / wope bewunden… Heofon rece swealg” (3144b-3146a, and 3155b) [the wood-smoke ascended, black over the flames, the fire roared, wound with weeping… Heaven swallowed the smoke]. Heaven will swallow up the Geats as it does the smoke of the funeral pyre.

The corporeal language of the burning of Beowulf’s body emphasizes the physical nature

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9 Fred C. Robinson describes the effect of the funeral as, “reverberant with dark implications beyond the merely scenic” (“The Tomb of Beowulf” 4).
of death. Owen-Crocker observes that there is a finality in the pagan cremation of Beowulf’s body, arguing that the complete consumption of his *banhus* [bone-house] by the flames is a sign that the hero is truly and inalterably gone. It is not like Scyld’s body drifting out to sea, which, “Men ne cunnon / seccan to soðe,  selerædende, / hæleð under heofenum,  hwa þæm hlæste onfeng” (50b-52) [men, those hall-counselors, did not know, to tell the truth, who received that cargo, that man under heaven]. There is no room for doubt in Beowulf’s case. Beowulf lives on only in memory.

That the Geatish kingdom is coming to a violent end is a recurring theme after Beowulf’s death, which becomes the catalyst for a complete reversal of the situation in the Geatish kingdom. Before his death he ruled peacefully for fifty years, but the moment he is gone, the Geats immediately turn towards a grim and lordless future, which fills almost half, 149 out of the 302, of the lines after Beowulf’s death (2884-2891, 2891-3027, 3076-3078, 3150b-3155). The ceremony before the concluding eulogy, a eulogy that has been interpreted both positively and negatively,¹⁰ is punctuated by repetitions of the Geats’ own predictions of their impending fall and invasion by other tribes. This forecasting starts when Wiglaf concludes his accusatory speech to Beowulf’s retainers by predicting that the troop’s cowardice will lead to the fall of the Geats once enemy tribes learn of their failure:

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Nu sceal sincþego ond swyrdgifu,  
eall ðeðelwyn eowrum cynne,  
lufen alicgean; londrihtes mot  
þære mægburge monna æghwylc  
idel hweorfan, syððan æðelingas  
feorræn gefricgean fleam eowerne,  
domleasan dæd. Deað bið sella  
eorla gehwylcum bonne edwitlif!  
(2884-2891)
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¹⁰ The interpretation of “lofgeornost” as the final word in *Beowulf* is the most debated crux in the poem. It is an important crux upon which turns the question of whether the poet is praising or censoring the hero (which has implications for how we might interpret the entire poem). I will discuss this crux and my interpretation later.
Now shall the receiving of treasure and giving of swords, kin-joy, comfort cease for your kin; each of land-rights of kinsmen of men must become idle, when nobles from afar learn of your flight, inglorious deed. Death will be better for every earl than a life of dishonor!

Wiglaf’s pessimism is repeated almost immediately in the speech of the messenger who is sent to report the result of the dragon fight to the rest of the Geats. His report is a far more detailed repetition of Wiglaf’s warning, including his expectations of future feuds and battle with the Frisians and other enemy peoples:

Nu ys leodu wen orleghwile,
sydðan underne Froncum ond Frysum
yll cyninges wide weordæð.
Wæs siro roht scepen heard
wið Hugas, syððan Higelac cwom
faran flotger on Fresna land
(2910b-2915)

[Now to the people is the expectation of a time of war, when the fall of the king becomes unhiden to the Franks and Frisians widely. This quarrel was shaped hard against/with the Hugas, when Higelac came to go with sea-army onto Frisian land]

Us wæs a syððan
Merewioingas milts ungyfeðe.
Ne ic to Sweodeode sibbe oððe treowe
wiht ne wene, (2920b-2923a)

[For us afterward the kindness of the Merovingian was withheld. I do not at all expect peace or good faith from the Swedes].

He tells of battles like Hrefna wudu (2924b) that have created deep enmity between the Geats and their neighboring tribes:

Wæs siro swatswaðu Sweona ond Geata,
waðrae weora gesyne,
hu ða folc mid him fæhðe towelton.
(2946-8)

[The bloody track of the Swedes and Geats, the slaughter-conflict of men was widely seen; how the people awoke a feud]
wælnið wera, ðæs ðe ic wen hafo,  
þe us seceðo to Sweona leoda,  
syðdæn hie gefricgeað frean userne  
ealdorleasne, þone ðe ær geheold  
wìð hettendum hord ond rice  
after hæleða hryre, hwate Scildingas,  
folcred fremede oððe furður gen  
eorlscipe efnede. (2999-3007a)

[This is the feud and the enmity, the deadly hate of the men, according to which I hold the expectation when the people of the Swedes will seek us after they learn of our lifeless lord, he who before guarded the hoard and the kingdom against enemies after the death of the heroes, valiant Scyldings, performed (for) the people, and further still performed heroic deeds.]

His speech goes on for 135 lines (2892-3027). This section on the desperate future of the Geats is too long to be an afterthought and must be part of the poet’s design. The bleakness of the situation weighs so heavily upon the minds of the Geats that it darkens the mood of the funeral itself:

The messenger’s speech then culminates in the desperate image of war populated by the beasts of battle – the raven, the eagle, and the wolf:

Forðon sceall gar wesan monig,  
Morgenceald, mundum bewunden,  
hæfen on handa, nalles hearpan sweg  
wigend wecccean, ac se wanna hrefn  
fus ofer fægum fela reordian,  
earnæ seçgan hu him æt æte speow,  
þenden he wìð wulf wæl reafode. (3021-3027)

[Therefore, the many morning-cold spears shall be grasped by hands, raised in hands, the warrior not at all shall awake to the sound of the harp, but the dark, eager raven too shall speak over many doomed to die, the eagle shall say how he succeeded in battle, while he plundered those slain in battle with the wolf.]

The Anglo-Saxon beasts of battle motif, as F. P. Magoun puts it, “recurs so often and so conspicuously as to force recognition and to brand itself unequivocally as a theme, namely, the mention of the wolf, eagle, and / or raven as beasts attendant on a scene of carnage” (Magoun
83). Magoun identifies the beasts of battle in nine poems on twelve occasions and describes them as an “ornamental rather than an essential theme” (Magoun 83), used as an embellishment to battle scenes in order to imbue them with a sense of the harsh realities of war. Adrien Bonjour, however, argues that the poet’s use of this theme in Beowulf is not simply a mindless revisiting of this common image. He points out that the poet references the beasts with respect to a predicted carnage, “still hidden in the haze and dream of things to come” (Bonjour 568), as opposed to a battle either imminent or just concluded. Bonjour suggests that the image also includes an undercurrent of doom, “the picture of the congregating beasts, rejoicing in the foreknowledge that men who are yet living will soon cover the ground with their corpses. In a way this image is a visible illustration of the haunting thought that death is foreordained for every man on earth” (Bonjour 566). He also suggests that the use of the sound of the carrion birds as a replacement for the sound of the harp in line 3023 hints at the loss of hall-joys that the Geats will experience as a result of future invasion and the fact that this predicted doom applies not only to warriors in battle but also to the entire population of the Geats.11

The theme of doom is continued in the lamentations of a Geatish woman at the funeral. She predicts invasion and enslavement:

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11 The sound of the harp in Beowulf is connected with good things created by or enjoyed by men (often appearing with variations on the noun “wynn” [joy, pleasure]). It is referenced in: line 89 in connection to the sounds of Heorot that anger Grendel (the singing of the Creation); in line 2107 in which Hroðgar is said to play the harp “wynne” [for pleasure]; in line 2262 as one of the joys (of the hall) no longer available to the last survivor in his lament over the death of his people; in line 2458 as part of the Father’s Lament in relation to the sadness felt by a father who has watched his son hung on the gallows (here it is connected again to halls, following the lines, “winsele westne, windige reste, / reol[ge] berofene” (2456-2457a) [wine-hall wasted, windy restingplace, deprived of joy]) (here the image of the raven also appears again in the line, “þonne his sunu hangað / hrefne to hroðre” (2446-2447a) [when his son hangs as joy to the raven]); and then finally here in line 3023 with the prediction of future strife for the Geats. Bonjour reads this passage as a culmination of hints throughout the second half of Beowulf: “Structurally this climax is at the same time the ultimate link in a whole concatenation of hints and forebodings — the theme of the precarious peace, the elegy of the last survivor, to mention but two of the most obvious ones — all leading to that crowning picture of calamity, which thus has been most carefully prepared” (Bonjour 569).
Wiglaf, the messenger and the Geatish woman predict a bleak outlook for the Geats, which is repeated three times within 295 lines (2860-3155a). The atmosphere that this forecasting creates is not one of reflecting on the triumphant death of a great king who just slew a dragon, nor of a reminiscence of his successful reign for fifty years in peace. Instead a pervasive sense of doom creeps into the poem after Beowulf’s death, a sense of impending and inevitable failure, of extinction.

After all this gloom, the funeral only vaguely celebrates Beowulf’s many past achievements, including the dragon he just killed. It is not until the final lines (3172-3182) that the poet includes any praise for Beowulf, and even then that praise takes the form of generalities such as, “eahtodan eorlscipe ond his ellenweorc / duguðum demdon” (3173b-3174a) [esteemed acts of heroism and his valor-works, praised with glory]. Beowulf was a man whose life was full of exciting and heroic exploits both in the monster fighting and in human warfare, not to mention that he was a king who brought fifty years of peace to his realm and killed a fire-breathing dragon. There should be plenty of adventures for the Geats to recount or at least name. Certainly the poet is not afraid of taking time to reiterate material in light of his three iterations of the Grendel fight (710-836, 957-990, 2069b-2151), and Beowulf is a man that would appear to be worthy of much praise.

What praise there is at the end of the poem is itself subject to critical skepticism. The poet
concludes the poem with a series of epithets that some critics interpret as an expression of Beowulf’s kingly virtues and that others view as evidence of the poet’s criticism of the hero:

“wyruldcynninga / manna mildust  ond mon(ðw)ærust, / leodum liðost” (3180b-3182a) [of world-kings the most generous of men and most gentle, the most mild to the people]. The adjectives do seem somewhat out of place in the context of the descriptions of Beowulf in the rest of the poem as strong, battle-hardened warrior – “niðheard cyning” (2417sb) [battle-hard king], “guðcyning” (2563a) [war-king] – and also as a monster with the same vocabulary used to describe Grendel – “aglæca” (893a), “gúðrinc” (1501a, 1881a) [warrior].

*Mildust* [generous], *mon(ðw)ærust* [kind] and *liðost* [mild] could be examples of the old adage, *De mortibus nil nisi bonum* [of the dead, say nothing except good], and indeed, the text itself recognizes that one should speak well of the dead directly before those epithets:

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swa hit gede(fe) bith
paet mon his winedryhten  wordum herge,
ferhthum freoeg,  ponne he forth scile
of l(l)chaman  (lae)ded weorthan.
Swa begnornodon  Geata leode
hlafordes (hry)re,  heorthgeneatas;
cwaedon paet he waere  wyruldcynning[a]
manna mildust  ond mon(thw)ærust,
leodum lithost  ond lofgeornost.
(3174b-3182)

[so it is fitting that a man praises his lord friend with words, loves with mind, when he shall forth from body come to be led. So grieved the Geatish people, the hearth companions, over the fall of the lord; said that he was of earthly kings the most generous of men and most gracious, the most protective of the people and most eager for fame.]
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The praise of the final lines may just be the language of eulogy.

However, the last praise word, *lofgeornost*, sounds a strangely critical note when read in contrast to the previous adjectives about serving the people. The poet concludes with, “He wære wyruldcynning[a]…lofgeornost” (3180-3182) [he was of earthly-kings, the most eager for
glory/fame], which is a self-concerned quality whether or not there is a value judgment attached to it. This word is the final word of the poem and on Beowulf as a character, not an adjective like strongest [strongest] or even the phrase ðæt wæs god cyning [that was a good king], which the poet uses as a signifier of other good kings elsewhere in the poem (11b of Seyld, 863b of Hroðgar, and 2390b of Beowulf). George Clark reads the final word as a Germanic superlative concluding a list of ideal Christian traits and he argues that thanes would never criticize their lord (Clark 137). Clark does not differentiate between the thanes and the poet, who may be employing irony to criticize the hero, as if to say look what your fame has bought. In a speech after Beowulf’s death Wiglaf suggests, “Oft sceall eorl monig anes willan / wræc adreogan, swa us geworden is” (3077-3078) [Often many a noble shall suffer misery, endure the desires of one (man), as has happened to us]. If the desires Wiglaf speaks about are connected to lofgeornost 104 lines later, and those desires result in the coming doom of the Geats, then it is hard to read the final word as anything but the poet censuring heroic ambition.

Beowulf is not the only subject of Wiglaf’s criticism, and there is a general attitude of blaming and finger pointing after his death. The cowardly warriors who refused to join their lord against the dragon return from the woods “scamiende” (2850a) [ashamed] to find Wiglaf by their fallen lord. Wiglaf addresses them and gives a “grim andswaru” (2860) [grim answer] for their flight from battle, reminding them of Beowulf’s generosity and condemning them for their actions: “Wergendra to lyt / þrong ymbe þeoden, þa hyne sio þrag becwom” (2882b-2883) [Too few defenders thronged around the lord when the hardship happened to him], and, “nealles folcyning þyrdgesteallum / gylpan þorfte” (2873-4a) [The folk-king not at all had reason to boast about (his) war comrades]. Wiglaf’s words reflect the poet’s earlier description of the retainers as men “unleofe” (2863b) [unloved]. It is too simple a solution for the warriors to be
solely responsible for Beowulf’s death and by extention the grim future of the Geats. The same is true in the case of blaming Beowulf, but Wiglaf’s language tempts critics to look for the cause of this reversal of fates rather than to accept the reality of the hero’s death, the *wyrd* [what happens, fate] that the poet so artfully designs. The tendency towards blame in the case of great loss, whether justified or not, is a natural part of the grieving process that the audience, critics included, experiences alongside the Geats after Beowulf’s death. But just because we can blame Beowulf, does not mean that we should.
Beowulf includes three monster fights: two fights against Grendelkin in Denmark when Beowulf is a young warrior and one against a dragon in Geatland when Beowulf is an old king. In between the first two fights and the last one is a span of over fifty years. In that time Beowulf accompanies his uncle Hygelac, lord of the Geats, on a raid to Frisia in which Hygelac is killed. Returning home to Geatland, Beowulf is offered the throne of the Geats by Hygelac’s queen, Hygd, but he turns it down and chooses instead to support his young nephew, Heardred, until he is of age to rule. As a young king Heardred gets entangled in a war with the Swedish king Onela over issues of Swedish succession and is killed. Beowulf then becomes king of the Geats and reigns peacefully for fifty years. The attack of an enraged fifty-foot-long, flying, fire-breathing, venomous dragon cuts short this peace after a thief accidentally awakens the monster by stealing an ornamented cup from its barrow. After the dragon burns down the hall of the Geats, Beowulf rides out to meet it in single combat. He ultimately defeats the beast with the help of a loyal thane, Wiglaf, but dies shortly after as a result of a venomous bite he receives in the battle. The hero dies, but he dies victorious. The separation of the Grendelkin fights in the first half of the

12 Anglo-Saxon society was organized around kings/lords (the term is used interchangeably in Beowulf). The lord was the head of the warband, a group of warrior ædelings (nobles) who pledged military service to their lord. A reciprocal relationship existed between the king/lord and his warriors, also called thanes and retainers, in which the king would reward military service with treasure (usually in the form of precious rings worn visibly around the arm, which is why kings are also referred to as “ring-givers”) presented to the warrior publicly in the hall. The public nature of the exchange was important, because the gift is not only a reward, but also a loan to be paid back with future service.

Leo Carruthers studies the language used of kings in the poem. The term cyning [king] is more literally translated as “from the cyn [kin],” and Carruthers describes the social place of the king as being at the center of circle rather than top of pyramid (Carruthers 19). Carruthers also observes that words associated with kings in Beowulf reflect the connection of the king to the protection of his people: helm [helmet], hleo [defender], hyrde [shepherd], and frea [shepherd, protector].

The kings of Anglo-Saxon England did not rule within the same monarchical structure that later develops in England, with all subjects owing allegiance to the king as his divine right. While they were still chosen from within royal families, they are military leaders. They also do not ascend to the throne through the strict system of primogeniture that characterizes later succession. The oldest son of the ruling king was not guaranteed to follow his father to the throne. Peter Hunter Blair argues that it was more a system of picking the strongest candidate from among the relatives of the ruling family, perhaps one of the nephews of the king (Blair 198).
poem and the dragon fight in the second half creates a structure that Tolkien describes as “two moments in a great life” (“Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics” 29).

But Beowulf’s death and the lordlessness of the Geats overshadows this victory. The very fact that he dies makes the audience wonder if things could have been different. A strain of criticism spearheaded by J.R.R. Tolkien’s essay, *The Homecoming of Byrthnoth*, reads Beowulf’s decision to fight the dragon and moreover to fight the dragon alone as a grave mistake and reflection of a flaw in his character. According to Tolkien, Beowulf’s heroic actions are driven by excessive pride, which causes him to fight the dragon on unfavorable terms. If he is indeed arrogant and that arrogance even indirectly leads to his death, then he would be personally responsible for the situation the Geats find themselves in at the end of the poem. Fundamentally this argument suggests that Beowulf does something wrong either by choosing to fight the dragon at all or by instructing his troop not to assist him: “Gebide ge on beorge byrnum werede, / secgas on searwum” (2529-2530a) [Wait you, men in war-gear, protected with byrnies, on the barrow]. What these arguments all overlook is the fact that as a man Beowulf’s death is ultimately inevitable whether or not he dies fighting the dragon.

Still, the critique of Beowulf is actually embedded in the poem itself. Critics have often seized upon Wiglaf’s speech after his lord’s death as evidence that Beowulf should not have fought the dragon:

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'Oft scealleorl monig anes willan
wræc adreogan, swa us geworden is.
Ne meahton er gelæran leofne þeoden,
rices hyrde ræd æigne,
þæt he ne grette goldweard þone,
lete hyne ligean þær he longe wæs,
wicum wunian oð woruldende;
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Tolkien tries to substantiate this reading by equating Beowulf’s oferhogode [despised, scorned] to Byrhtnoth’s ofermod [pride, over-confidence (?)] as it is used in the Old English war poem *The Battle of Maldon*. I will discuss the specifics of Tolkien’s argument later.
If Beowulf’s personal desires were the reason he fights the dragon, then he would indeed have some personal responsibility for the Geats’ future suffering. However, Wiglaf’s harsh words should not be read without context. He is a character and so does not necessarily express the explicit opinion of the poet, which comes through explicitly elsewhere in lines such as, “pæt wæs god cyning” (11b) [that was a good king], and, “swa sceal man dōn” (1172b) [so shall a man do].

The young retainer also analyzes the situation with the dragon from a position of inexperience (“Þa wæs forma sið / geongan cempan  pæt he guðe ræs / mid his freodryhtne fremman sceolde” (2625b-2627) [That was the first time for the young champion that he should perform the battle-rush with his dear lord]). Beowulf, on the other hand, witnesses the consequences of leaving a monster unchecked when he journeys to Hroðgar’s hall as a young warrior.

Beowulf sees how Grendel is allowed to ravage Heorot for twelve years, forcing the Danes to abandon their hall because Hroðgar cannot kill the monster. Hroðgar instead lives in a

14 We can also consider an alternative reading of the line in Wiglaf’s speech, “Ne meahton er gelæran leofne þeoden” (3079). The poet may not be using gelæran (instruct, advise, persuade) to say that Wiglaf and his men could not persuade Beowulf not to fight the dragon (based on Beowulf’s will or stubbornness), but to say that they could not advise Beowulf not to fight the dragon, because as thanes they are supposed to follow their lord wherever he leads. It is not their place to tell their lord to fight the monster or not. Taking this tack, we might also take cues from The Battle of Maldon (though with reservations about reading one text based on the other) in Offa’s offstage warning to Byrhtnoth before the battle. The thane does not warn his lord not to fight the much greater Viking force but instead warns him that some of the men who have sworn oaths to Byrhtnoth may not fulfill them in battle. The poet’s inclusion of this detail may only be as a retrospective commentary on the fleeing of some of the English army, but regardless, there is no evidence of the thanes questioning their lord’s decision to fight or to let the Vikings cross the ford. Furthermore, some of the men only flee the battle because they think that they see their lord retreating when Godric rides off on Byrhtnoth’s horse. Wiglaf may indeed have been cautioning Beowulf not to fight the dragon, but the text also supports less critical possibilities.
state of weakness and suffering, which in the end breeds both internal and external instability.

Hrōðgar’s nephew, Hroðulf, threatens the succession of Hrōðgar’s two young sons by his very presence as an alternative heir in the Danish hall, and later Beowulf predicts that the attempted peace-weaving between Hrōðgar’s daughter Freawaru and the Heaðobeards will end in renewed tribal feuding. Beowulf sees the position that the Danes are in now and will be in the future, and he recognizes that while Hrōðgar manages to continue to survive with a monster in his kingdom, it is a weak survival that only stalls future violence, from monster or man. However, having not been exposed to the lessons that Beowulf learns in Heorot, Wiglaf does not realize that not dealing with the monster leads to a long, slow decline followed by violence from within and without. He criticizes Beowulf for taking action against the dragon without understanding the implications of the alternative.

Furthermore, while Grendel merely raids the Hrōðgar’s hall, the dragon completely destroys Beowulf’s, by which the poet shows that there will be no living with the dragon as there is with Grendel. Wiglaf’s inexperience is evident in his suggestion that Beowulf should have just let the dragon go back to sleep in the barrow where it had been dormant for hundreds of years before a thief steals a piece of its treasure. This reasoning ultimately ignores the reality of a now-awakened, now-enraged dragon. Alvin Lee points out that “The fact that the Beowulf dragon does not attack until the rifling of the hoard is not an adequate reason for deducing that he does

15 Hroðulf is Hrōðgar’s brother’s son and thus has a claim to the Danish throne. He is also a strong warrior, although he does not do any fighting during the live action of the poem. Hrōðgar’s own two sons, Hreðric and Hroðmund, are described as sitting among the youths at the feast, suggesting that they are still too young to take over the throne even though Hrōðgar is an old man. As heirs to the throne standing to inherit political power, the two boys are already in a dangerous position, even without a rival (Hroðulf) living within the hall. There are also other stories in northern literature that tell of Hroðulf murdering Hroðgar’s son to claim the throne. These parallels inform our understanding that Hroðulf being in Heorot represents future violence. I will discuss the situation with Hroðulf and the Danish succession more in the next chapter.

16 Peace-weaving was one way that Anglo-Saxon royal families attempted to settle intertribal feuds. It involved marrying between the offspring of the royal family of one tribe to the offspring of the royal family of another. The peace-weaving between Hrōðgar’s daughter Freawaru and the Heaðobeards is discussed in more detail later.
not represent general hostility to the world of the dryht [troop] in which man lives” (Lee 216).

Scott Gwara also recognizes the serious threat of the dragon to the Geats, calling it a “nation enemy” (Gwara 212). From the moment that the dragon wakes up and realizes the cup is gone, the wheels are set in motion towards extermination either of the dragon or of the Geats.

The dragon is not just going to go back to sleep after one attack. It burns down Beowulf’s hall in the night and, “no þæð aht cwices / lað lyftfloga læfan wolde” (2314b-2315) [not at all did the hateful air-flyer wish to leave behind there anything living]). The dragon is bent on wiping the Geats out entirely, even though it does not achieve this in its first attack. It is not going to return to its barrow to peacefully sleep once more before all its enemies are dead. It only makes sense that the dragon would eliminate all possibility that anything from its hoard could be stolen again by killing all those involved in the theft. Since it does not know who among the Geats is responsible the dragon, even under the most basic premise of revenge, must kill all the Geats to ensure that it has killed its aggressor. It would also want to prevent any retaliatory attack upon itself for the air raid it just launched. The poet does not explixitly address all the nuances of the dragon’s motivations for exterminating the Geats, but logically the fact remains that it continues to represent a grave threat to the existence of the Geatish people. Beowulf had no reason to assume that the dragon was going to return to its barrow for good after burning down the hall.

Niles describes the situation facing the Geats: “After the dragon is aroused, Beowulf inherits a feud that only violence can settle” (Niles 220). The very language of the dragon’s attack is that of feuding: “þa sio faehð gewearth / gewrecen wraðlice” (3061b-3062a) [then the feud became cruelly avenged]. But as with Grendel, who will not receive wergild from the Danes (“sibbe ne wolde / wið manna hwone mægenes Deniga, / feorhbealo feorran, fea þingian”
(154b-156) [he did not want peace with any man of the army of the Danes, to remove the deadly attack, to settle with payment]), the methods available to Beowulf for resolving human feuds are not possible with monsters. He cannot pay the dragon compensation for the theft, and he cannot marry off a daughter to the dragon in peace-weaving. These seem like obvious statements, but critics who argue that Beowulf is a failed king on political grounds because feuds threaten to overpower the Geats after his death, lose sight of the fact that the greatest threats of all, the monsters, cannot be subdued by non-violent methods.

Many critics, including Tolkien, emphasize the line “Oft sceall eorl monig anes willan / wræc adreogan, swa us geworden is” (3077-3078) [Often shall many earls endure distress for the desires of one, as has happened to us], arguing that Beowulf’s personal wishes for fame or treasure are the source of the Geats’ current situation. However, while the observation that they will suffer as a result of the death of the hero is accurate, the perspective needs contextualization. Their actual situation, regardless of their grim predictions, which are, after all, not yet reality within the poem, is that they no longer face death by dragon due to the actions of Beowulf and Wiglaf. They are alive, and they have Beowulf to thank for that. The lines, “ðurh anes cræft ealle ofercomon” (699) [through the strength of one, all overcame] (written in relation to the Grendel fight) remind the audience that the hero is responsible for both victory and defeat, for the lives of the Geats as much as the deaths. Certainly the Geats will suffer as a result of Beowulf’s death, but they have enjoyed many advantages during his lifetime, such as fifty years of peace and a dead dragon.

In context, Wiglaf’s speech serves more as an expression of grief – a grief felt equally by the reader and critic as by the character – than as a logical criticism. Having just fought a dragon, Wiglaf himself must be in a state of mental distress. He is also grieving the loss of a beloved lord
and kinsman as well as looking ahead to a bleak future. His words reflect the sense of injustice commonly felt in grief. The well-known Kübler-Ross model or the five stages of grief outlines grief as a process experienced through a series of emotional stages. This model can provide context for our understanding of how grief functions in *Beowulf*. After Beowulf’s death, Wiglaf exhibits signs of the initial two stages described by Kübler-Ross, denial and anger followed by bargaining, depression, acceptance. The denial stage involves questioning: “You begin to question how and why… You explore the circumstances surrounding the loss. Did it have to happen? Did it have to happen that way? Could anything have prevented it” (Kübler-Ross 10-11)? After Beowulf’s death Wiglaf engages in just this sort of speculation about what could have saved his lord: not fighting the dragon in the first place (“lete hyne licgean” (3082a) [let him (the dragon) lie]) or fighting surrounded by the troop (“Wergendra to lyt / þrong ymbe þeoden þa hyne sio þrag becwom” (2882b-2883) [too few defenders thronged around the lord when that hardship became to him]).

The second stage of grief, anger, “presents itself in many ways: anger at your loved one that he didn’t take better care of himself or anger that you didn’t take better care of him. Anger does not have to be logical or valid” (Kübler-Ross 11). The qualifier that this anger is not always logical or valid is important, because it qualifies Wiglaf’s critique, which is directed at multiple parties, as an expression of grief rather than as authoritative evidence of wrongdoing. Finally, Kübler-Ross says that the anger comes from the fact that “The will to save a life is not the power to stop a death. But most of all, you may be angry at this unexpected, undeserved, and unwanted situation in which you find yourself” (Kübler-Ross 12). In rushing to his lord’s aid on the battlefield, Wiglaf has all the will to save Beowulf, but, as he admits, it is “ofer min gemet maeges helpan” (2879) [beyond my measure to aid my kinsman]. On top of the sudden loss of a
dear lord and kinsman, Wiglaf and the rest of the Geats find themselves also facing a grim future of renewed feuding. In the end, Wiglaf’s grief saturates his words with the sense of injustice, as if Beowulf were struck down too soon in the prime of his youth. But regardless of his continued physical prowess, which I will discuss in detail in chapter three, Beowulf is really an old man who is already coming to the end of a full life.

Because his death is itself inevitable, the way in which Beowulf dies is more important than the fact of his death. Before the dragon fight even begins, the poet eliminates suspense about the outcome in the lines, “no þon lange wæs / feorh æþelinges flæsce bewunden” (2423-2424) [not at all was the life of the prince to be long bound with the flesh] and, “Beowulf maðelode, beotwordum spræc / niehstand siðe” (2510-2511a) [Beowulf said, spoke words of boasting for the last time]. There are no surprises. Beowulf will die, and yet even after telling the audience the result of the fight, the poet still goes through the effort of recounting the battle in detail. By removing any question of the conclusion before the fight, the emphasis of the narrative shifts to the details of the struggle. What happens is that Beowulf’s death itself takes a back seat to the manner in which he dies and the resulting circumstances afterwards. After all, he is human and must die some time. In fact, his age (somewhere around 80 years old based on the events of the poem) suggests that the poet’s statement about his coming separation from his body could be read on two levels, as a reference to his coming death in the dragon fight and as a reflection that, whether or not he fights the dragon, his time is coming. The poet’s foreshadowing emphasizes how Beowulf dies, which in the end is important for his legacy as a hero.

Tolkien offers us, “a man can but die upon his death day” (“Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics” 14). Likewise, R. E. Kaske, in a discussion of sapientia and fortitudo in the kings in Beowulf, argues that “Again, in both Germanic and Christian terms the fact of death, of final
physical defeat, is inevitable and relatively unimportant. What is of desperate importance is having fought the good fight” (Kaske 454). Kaske concludes that

there is about Beowulf’s death an air of inevitability that tends to remove it from the cause-and-effect of even symbolic dragon’s tusks. Potentially it is less accurate to say that the dragon kills Beowulf, than that Beowulf dies fighting the dragon. He dies because he has reached his endedæg [final day]. (Kaske 455)

The poet himself comments on the inevitably of death, which is too strong for even a hero to resist forever. Hrothgar’s farewell speech to Beowulf is an especially important discussion on the transience of life:

“Nu is þines mægnes blæd
anæ hwile; eft sona bīð,
þæt þec adl oððe ecg eafoþes getwæfeð, oððe fyres feng, oððe flodes wylm, oððe gripe meces, oððe gares fliht, oððe atol yldo; oððe eagena bearhtm forsiteð ond forsworceð; semninga bīð, þæt ðec, dryhtguma, deað oferswyðeð.”
(1761b-1768)

[Now the vitality of your might is in this moment; soon afterwards it will be that sickness or the edge of strength hinders you, or the grasp of fire, or the surging of the flood, or the grip of the sword, or the flight of the spear, or terrible old age; or the brightness of the eyes diminishes and becomes dark; soon enough it will be that you, warrior, death will overpower.]

However, despite the seeming comprehensiveness of the list of fates that Hroðgar’s sermon includes, Beowulf does not die as a result of any of the afflictions enumerated. He is killed, not by weather or weapons or old age but by a dragon’s poison. It is not a death that can be foreseen or prepared for.

The concept of lænan lifes (2845a) [loaned life] is another way to approach the inevitability of the hero’s mortality. In Beowulf the fact that life is temporary is a central theme. Tolkien has said that “He (Beowulf) is a man, and that for him and many is sufficient tragedy” (“Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics” 7), pointing out the seriousness of the thematic concept
of loaned life (referencing specifically to læne as used by the poet) in Beowulf.\textsuperscript{17} The word lændagas [loaned days] is used in reference to Beowulf’s imminent death:

\begin{verbatim}
Þæt se mæra maga Ecgðeowes
Grundwong þone ofgyfan wolde;
Sceolde [ofer] willan wic eardian
Ells hwergen, swa sceal æghwylc mon
alæten lændagas (2586-2951a)
\end{verbatim}

[that the glorious son of Ecgðeow would give up the ground-place (earth); he must inhabit a dwelling elsewhere against his desires, as shall each man give up the loaned days.]

The poet portrays life as a gift or loan that must be repaid or alæten [given up] even ofer willan [against desire].

In Beowulf great lords and heroes are themselves loans. The great king Scyld, against whom critics compare all other kings in the poem as a sort of gold standard of kingship, which I will discuss later, comes to the Danes from across the sea and then is returned back over the sea in the form of a ship burial after death. Similarly, Beowulf lives fatherless among the Geats, and after achieving fifty years of peace for his people, as well as other heroic feats, dies without an heir. Loans must be repaid. The poet is dealing less with the sadness of a violent world and more with the uncertainty and inconstancy of this world as manifested through the loss of a strong hero. Ultimately then the poet is not blaming the hero for being unable to counter the chance or fate of the wrath of a dragon, “fiftiges fotgemearces land” (3043) [fifty feet long], raining down (in flame) upon him and his people.

Even great heroes must die. Lee writes that “it is death that defines the shape of heroic

\textsuperscript{17} The Bosworth-Toller Anglo-Saxon Dictionary glosses læne as: granted for a time only, not permanent, transitory, temporary, frail. It is the adjective form of laen: loan, grant, gift. It appears twenty-nine times in the Old English Poetic corpus, twenty-three of those times in relation to dagas [days], tid [time], and lif [life], suggesting that in Anglo-Saxon poetry life, time on the earth, is a loan that can only be held for a short time before it must be repaid (in death).
life” (Lee 212). As a character Beowulf needs his death to be that of a warrior, in battle, and moreover that of a hero, fighting a monster, so that the heroism of his youthful achievements might be preserved forever.\(^{18}\) A poet could not give his hero a greater death than to die defeating a dragon, both claiming glory for himself as well as gaining membership in the canon of dragon fighters alongside Sigmund, one of the greatest heroes of them all?\(^{19}\) Beowulf himself explains:

> “Ure æghwylc sceal ende gebidan worolde lifes; wyrce se þe mote domes ær deaþe, þæt biðdrihtguman unlifgendum æfter selest”  
> (1386-1388)

[Each of us shall experience the end of this world’s life; he who may endeavor to win glory before death, that will be afterwards the best dead warrior]

Likewise, the phrase, “heold on heahgesceap” (3084a) [held/kept high destiny], which the poet uses to describe Beowulf, speaks to the fact that Beowulf is to have no ordinary fate. *Heahgesceap* means that he is destined to do great things and/or end life in a great manner, and the poet makes a point of referring to this worthy death in the lines, “þa wæs endedæg / godum gegongen, þæt se guðcyning, / Wedra þeoden, wundordeæde swealt” (3035b-3037) [then the end-day was reached with good, that the war-king, the lord of the Geats, died with a wondrous death.].

Such a worthy death accentuates rather than tarnishes Beowulf’s heroic strength. While *irenna ecga* [edges of iron] can *fornamon* [carry off] the dragon, it takes a dragon to defeat him. As both a thane and king, Beowulf has faced armies of men with swords before in wars that must have required him to fight multiple opponents at once, even champions like Dæghrefn, and has never met his match. Before the fight Clark argues that the poet creates a certain

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\(^{18}\) I will discuss later how Hroðgar’s heroic youth is overshadowed by his impotence in old age, as a foil to Beowulf’s old age.

\(^{19}\) I will discuss later the nuances of what it might mean to die a king’s death as opposed to a hero’s death, and the responsibilities that being a king entails.
evenhandedness: “In their first sight of each other, both Beowulf and the dragon respond with a chill of fear at the sight of an adversary who means death (mutually assured destruction):

“æghwæðrum wæs / bealohyendra brogafram oðrum” (2564-65; “both of the murderous enemies felt fear from the other”)” (Clark 129). In the end it is not even what might appear to be the most dangerous aspects of a dragon – the size and strength, the teeth and claws, or the fire – that fells the great hero but the venom: “Ða sio wund ongon / ðe him se eorðdraca ær geworhte / swelan ond swellan he þæt sona onfand / þæt him on breostum bealonið weoll / attor on innan” (2711b-2715a) [Then the wound, that which the earth-dragon before worked on him, began to swelter and swell, he soon discovered that in him, in his breast, that deadly evil welled, poison inside]. It is as if the poet taunts us. The hero has survived the fight, but fate is too strong to save him.

The poet keeps Beowulf’s thoughts hidden from the audience, which is one reason his motives have been interpreted on such a wide scale. He appears as the confident warrior, entering an enemy hall unarmed in the foreign land of Denmark, responding to Unferð’s verbal challenge, and even remaining calm when his sword breaks in the heat of battle against Grendel’s mother. The exception to his fearless exterior is before the dragon fight, when he has dark thoughts (or any thoughts explicitly noted by the poet) for the first time in the entire poem: “breost innan weoll / þeostrum geþoncum, swa him gepywe ne wæs” (2331b-2332) [breast welled inward with dark thoughts, as was not customary with him]. These thoughts contrast to his preparations for other fights, like those before the fight with Grendel’s dam when he “nalles forealdre mearm” (1442b) [not at all had anxiety for life]. He knows there is something not right about the battle with the dragon, the cause or the likely outcome or both. It is not simply the fear of death that concerns the hero. He has faced the possibility of death before and does not exhibit
such anxiety. In his speech before the Grendel fight, he lays out in very graphic detail exactly what death against such a horrible monster might be like:

“Wen’ ic þæt he wille,  gif he wealdan mot,
in þæm guðsele  Geatena leode
etan unforhte,  swa he oft dyde
mægenhreð manna.  Na þu mine þearft
hafalan hydan,  ac he me habban wile
d[r]eore fahne,  gif mec deafð nimeð:
byrðæ blodig wæle,  byrgean þenceð,
eteð angenga  unmnullice,
mearcað morhopu –  no þu ymb mines ne þearft
lices feorme  læg sorgian.”
(442-451)

[I know that he (Grendel) will, if he might rule in that battle-hall, eat the man of the Geats without hesitation, as he often did the glorious host of men. Not at all do you need to hide my head, but he will have me, colored with dripping blood, if death carries me off: he will bear (my) bloody corpse, he intends to taste, the solitary one ruthlessly eats, marking the moor-pools (with blood) – nor do you need to sorrow long about the feeding upon my body.]

Beowulf has come to terms with the idea of his own dismemberment, his physical death. There must be something related to the circumstances of his death against the dragon that troubles him. These dark thoughts are connected to his concern that he may have done something wrong in his life to incite the dragon’s attack:

þæt ðam godan wæs
hreow on hreðe,  hygesorga mæst;
wende se wisa  þæt he wealdende
ofeð ealde riht,  ecean dryhtne
bitre gebulge  (2327b-2331a)

[That was a sorrow in heart to the good one, the greatest of heart-sorrows; the wise one thought that he had bitterly provoked the ruler, the eternal lord, over an old law]

Beowulf seems to think himself personally responsible for the destruction that the dragon rains down upon his kingdom, even though the audience knows that the thief in the barrow awakens the dragon. What this sense of responsibility shows, however, is that Beowulf does not believe
himself infallible. In fact, his first thoughts are about the possibility of his own failure (which the audience already knows is not the case) rather than about the glory he can win as a result of defeating the dragon.

Beowulf has to fight the dragon (it is not going away, and it is bent on completely destroying the Geats), he has to die fighting the dragon (he will die eventually and that death needs to reflect the greatness of the hero), and his dark thoughts suggest that he thinks it was his duty to fight the dragon. Yet critics still argue that the poet ends the poem with a gloomy rather than celebratory tone to criticize Beowulf’s choice to fight the monster alone and condemn the egotism of his own hero or heroic culture. Therefore the way in which Beowulf fights the dragon could be the reason for the gloomy ending.

Tolkien ignores Beowulf’s dark thoughts and uses Beowulf’s ensuing preparation for the dragon fight as evidence that the Geatish hero is driven by the same hubris as the heroes of ancient Greece. He frames the hero in terms of excess: “he does not deign to lead a force against the dragon, as wisdom might direct even a hero to do” (“The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth” 14). Tolkien glosses the verb “oferhogode” (2345a) [scorned, despised], which is used in Beowulf’s dismissal of the troop, with the negative connotation of pride (so, Beowulf scorned to fight with the troop out of pride). He bases his glossing of oferhogode on his interpretation of the related word oferhygd [pride] as meaning over-confident, which he comes to by connecting oferhygd to ofermod in the Old English war poem, The Battle of Maldon. But the actual meanings of oferhygd and ofermod, which literally translate to “over-mind” or “over-spirit,” and their variants are very much debated, especially with regard to whether they have

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20 Harry Berger Jr. and H. Marshall Leicester Jr. argue that Beowulf “is not a victim of ego inflation; he simply cannot see other alternatives to his own way. He is a victim of the heroic milieu; he is molded gloriously and inflexibly by his world” (Berger 40). They make the argument that the characters of the poem are not ethically responsible for acting the best they can within a flawed system. The fault lies with the social structures.
positive or negative connotations. Admittedly, Beowulf is later described as “no he him þa sæcce ondred... forðon he ær fela / nearo neðende niða gedigde, / hildehlemma” (2347b-2351a) [nor dreaded he that fight with him (the dragon)... since he formerly dared many narrows, passed through safely the violences of battle-clashes], but this language is reflected in the recurring motif of boasting in the rest of the poem, which I will discuss in detail later.

Dreading the dragon fight will help no one, so Beowulf reminds himself that he has survived many tests and in doing so staves off any sense of despair that might hinder him in the coming battle or cause him to abandon the battle altogether.

For Tolkien the sense that Beowulf is fighting monsters for sport starts in the first half of the poem. Tolkien argues that Beowulf does not take his early encounters with monsters seriously and that this attitude carries over into his final fight against the dragon. Each of his accomplishments leads to success until he does not even fear fire-breathing dragons (“The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth” 21). But had his thane Wiglaf not come to his aid, Beowulf’s decision to fight the dragon alone would have cost him his own life while the dragon remained at large. His actions are “too foolish to be heroic” (“The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth” 15), which

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21 *The Battle of Maldon* describes a battle between an Anglo-Saxon force led by Byrhtnoth and a much greater Viking force. The Vikings, invading from the sea, land on an island that is separated from the mainland by river. The Vikings try to cross the river over a small ford (the width of a few men), but failing to do so, ask Byrhtnoth to allow passage over the ford for a fair fight. Byrhtnoth permits the Vikings to come onto the mainland. The Anglo-Saxon force loses the ensuing battle, and Byrhtnoth is killed. Critics have debated the interpretation of Byrhtnoth’s decision: whether the poet is praising and glorifying the Anglo-Saxon’s fighting in the face of ultimate defeat, or criticizing the heroic myth as foolish and destructive.

22 It is also possible that with regard to fighting the dragon that Beowulf is mindful of a comparison made between himself and the dragon-slayer Sigmund back in Heorot. Returning to the hall after slaying Grendel, one of Hrothgar’s thanes sings the story of Sigmund, the great dragon slayer, as if to make a connection between the hero of legend and Beowulf (867b-897). Perhaps this comparison acts as inspiration to Beowulf, who then get the chance to play out Sigmund’s role as a dragon-slayer when he himself is challenged by a dragon years later. During his speech before the dragon fight in lines 2349b-2354a Beowulf references his deeds in Denmark, including the Grendel fights. He is mindful of his time in Heorot and perhaps also of the comparison to Sigmund made there. Tolkien himself draws the connection between Beowulf and, “the dragon-slaying Wælsing (the prince of the heroes of the North), (who kills) the only other significant dragon in northern literature” (“Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics” 4).
echoes Wiglaf’s description of “dæda dollicra” (2646a) [fool-hardy deeds].

While fighting a monster like Grendel alone might be acceptable for a young warrior in a foreign hall, it is not acceptable for a king who is responsible for the welfare of an entire kingdom that has just been attacked. Still, it is only after Beowulf dies that his tactics are criticized.

Tolkien sees Beowulf’s journey to Denmark to fight the monster tormenting the Danes as the first exhibit of Beowulf’s foolishness. At the feast after the Geats arrive in Heorot, the Danish warrior Unferð recounts the story of Beowulf’s sea challenge against a man named Breca. The two youths had engaged in a swimming contest that lasted five days before the two were separated, and Beowulf was forced to fight sea monsters to return to shore. Unferð suggests that Beowulf is reckless with his life in performing such a feat of strength, which ultimately resulted in monster-fighting:

‘Eart þu se Beowulf, se þe wið Breccan wunne
on sidne sæ, ymb sund flite,
þær git for wlence wada cunnedon
ond for dolgilpe on deop wæter
aldrum neþdon? Ne ince ænig mon,
ne leof ne lað, belean mihte
sorhfullne siþ, þa git on sund reon.’

(506-512)

[Are you the Beowulf, he who with Breca struggled on the broad sea, about the water competed, there you two for pride made trial of the water and for foolhardy boasting on the deep water ventured lives? Nor could any man dissuade you two, not in terms of life or harm, from this perilous journey, when you rowed on the sea.]

But while this episode certainly displays a certain competitive bravado in Beowulf, it is important to remember that the two men were engaged in a swimming challenge and did not go

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23 The Bosworth-Toller Anglo-Saxon Dictionary glosses dollic as: foolish, rash, stultus. It appears three other times in Old English verse: in Genesis referring to the foolish words spoken by Satan against God; in Precepts when a father warns his son against drunkenness, anger, idleness, and rash words; and in the Paris Psalter in the context of men foolishly forsaking God’s law. In Old English poetry only the Beowulf poet uses dollic in a non-religious context. Generally, it appears in connection to disobedience against God. The dynamic of a lesser force rebelling against a greater one could be reflected in Beowulf’s fight with the much more powerful dragon, but the moral framework of Satan (lesser and evil) versus God (greater and righteous) is not relevant to Beowulf.
specifically in search of sea monsters to fight. The challenge also occurred when Beowulf was younger, a fact that he himself points out:

“We two agreed to that, being boys, and boasted – were both then still in the period of youth – that we two on the sea ventured out our lives, and carried that out].

The hero’s ability to reflect back on his youthful exploits and recognize them as such indicates a more mature character. Beowulf is no longer a boy, and while he continues to risk his life to perform great feats, he does not do so heedlessly or recklessly, as he once did. The exchange with Unferð does more to show that he is wiser than his former self than it does to establish a pattern of life-risking behavior.

Ultimately Beowulf is not an obsessive monster-fighter. He only actively seeks out one monster fight in the entire poem. The sea monsters are met and dispatched during a swimming challenge. Beowulf does go to Heorot to fight Grendel against the urgings of his lord, Hygelac,24 but he does not anticipate the subsequent revenge of Grendel’s mother because the Danish king Hroðgar fails to mention the existence of another monster until after its attack (line 1345).25

24 “Ic ðæs modceare
sorhwyłmum seað, síðe ne truwode
lofeas mannes; ic ðe lange bæd
þæt ðu þone wælgæst wilte ne grette,
leðe Sud-Dene sylfe geweorðan
guðe wið Grendel.” (1992b-1997a)
[I suffered with mind-care about this, surging sorrows, had no faith in the journey of the dear man; I entreated you long that you not in any way attack the murderous spirit; let the South-Danes settle the war with Grendel themselves.]
25 After Grendel’s mother’s attack on the hall, Hroðgar admits:

“Ic þæt londbuend, leode mine,
seleræþende secgan hyrde
þæt hie gesawon swylce twegen

“Wit þæt gecwædon cnihtwesende
on geboeteodon wæron begen þa git
on geogðfeore þæt wit on garsec g ut
aldrum neðdon ond þæt geæfndon swa”
(535-548)
Beowulf does not even sleep in the hall the night she strikes, as he does the night of the Grendel fight. He must be called to the hall the next morning to be told the news of the attack. He also does not request to go after the female monster as he does when he arrives seeking Grendel. In fact Hroðgar verbally challenges him (using the pronoun þu [you] to directly address Beowulf as opposed to his troop) to hunt down and kill the monster as revenge for the murder of his thane Æschere:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Nu is se ræd gelang} & \\
\text{eft æt þe anum.} & \quad \text{Eard git ne const,} \\
\text{frecne stowe, dær þu findan miht} & \\
\text{sinnigne secg; sec gif þu dyrre!} & \\
\text{Ic þe þa fæhðe} & \quad \text{feo leanige,} \\
\text{ealdgestreonum,} & \quad \text{swa ic ær dyde,} \\
\text{wundnan golde,} & \quad \text{gyf þu on weg cymest}
\end{align*}
\]  
(1376b-1382)

[Now is the counsel dependent on you alone. You do not know the region, the terrible place, where you can find the sinful one; seek if you dare! I then will requite the feud with riches, ancient treasures, wound gold, as I did before, if you come away]

Hroðgar not only openly question’s Beowulf’s courage in the phrase, “gif þu dyrre!” (1379b) [if you dare!], but also questions his ability in saying that treasure awaits the hero if he comes back alive. Hrothgar’s challenge verbally backs the hero into a corner where he must accept it, even if that acceptance also aligns with his personal desires. Even then, in his acceptance of the task, Beowulf himself advocates patience in tracking down the hateful enemy rather than hasty pursuit.

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*micle mearcstapan* moras healdan,  
*ellorgæstas. Dæra öðer wæs,*  
*þæs þe hie gewislicost gewitan meahton,*  
*ide onlicnes*”  
(1345-1351a)

[I heard that land-dwellers, my people, the hall-counselors tell that they saw such two great wanderers in the borderland, alien spirits to guard the moors. The other of them was the likeness of woman, as best they might know.]

Why he does not share this information with Beowulf beforehand is not explicit, whether it is a calculated or uncalculated move by Hroðgar or simply an example of a failure of the poet’s artistry.

26 “Hraþe wæs to bure Beowulf fetod, / sigoreadig secg” (1310-1311a) [Quickly Beowulf was fetched to the chamber, the victorious man].
Either way, Grendel is the only monster that Beowulf actively seeks out in the first half of the poem or the second. He refrains from monster fighting for fifty years as ruler of the Geats, and he fights the dragon in response to a specific threat. The dragon attacks first, burning down the hall of the Geats as revenge for a cup that an un-named man steals from its treasure-filled barrow. Beowulf does not wake up one day and decide to go in search of a dragon to fight.

Even if Beowulf is not looking to pick a fight with most of the monsters in the poem, Tolkien argues that the way he fights suggests cockiness. He points specifically to Beowulf’s choice to fight Grendel barehanded without weapon or armor. Yet the relative ease of his overwhelming victory somewhat contradicts any sense that the poet is portraying him as reckless. Recklessness implies unnecessary risk, but Beowulf’s competence in besting Grendel shows that he did not invite any more danger than is inherently involved in any monster fighting. He even explains his decision to fight Grendel without weapons:

No ic me an herewæsmun  hnaгран talige
Guþgeweorca  þonne Grendel hine;
forþan ic hine sweorde  swebban nelle,
aler beneotan,  þeah ic eal mæge.
Nat he þara goda  þæt he me ongean slea,
rand geheawe.  þeah ðe he rof sie
nǐþgeweorca;  ac wit on niht sculon
sece ofersittan  gif he gesecean dear
wig ofer wæpen  (677-685a)

[I consider myself not at all lowly with respect to war-like stature, therefore I do not want to put him to sleep, to deprive him of life, by means of a sword, though I entirely can. He does not know those good things that he might strike against me, hew the boss of the shield, though he is renowned for hostile deeds; but we two in the night shall abstain from the sword if he dares to seek a fight without weapon]

Here Beowulf could just be bragging, as Tolkien might read it, or he could be honestly considering his strength in relation to that of the monster. Beowulf is indeed incredibly strong (“he þritiges / manna mæгencræft  on his mundgripe / heaþorof hæbbe” (379b-381a) [he, brave
in battle, had the strength of thirty men in his handgrip]) and says that it is Grendel who 
dears] to seek a fight without weapons. He considers Grendel an equal if not an underdog, regardless of the monster’s dominance over normal men. His easy victory suggests that his boasting is not empty egotism, which is acknowledged when the poet writes that Beowulf “gilp gelæsted” (829b) [fulfilled boasting].

The fight itself proves Beowulf’s strength relative to the monster, which he immediately catches in his mundgrip [handgrip]. After that, the poet only describes Grendel as trying to escape rather than fight: “on mode wearð / forth on ferhðe; no þy ær fram meahte. / Hyge wæs him hinfus, wolde on heolster fleon” (753b-755) [in mind became afraid, in his spirit; none the sooner might have gone forth. Spirit was eager to get away from him, wished to flee to a hiding place], “eoten wæs utweard” (761a) [the troll was striving to escape], and “Mynte se mæra (hw) ær he meahte swa / widre gewindran ond on weg þanon / fleon on fenhopu” (762-764a) [the greater one thought where he might so wide reach by flight and thence away flee to an enclosure in the fen]. The poet explains that Grendel, “ne mette middangeardes, / eorþan sceata on elran men / mundgripe maran” (751-753a) [had not met in another man of middle-earth, in any corner of the earth, greater handgrip]. Beowulf’s bare hands are sufficient weapons for defeating the monster. The poet also later reveals in something of an afterthought that one of Grendel’s special abilities is that swords cannot harm him. However artistically clumsy the timing of this new information seems, the poet makes the point that Beowulf’s decision to fight without a sword is appropriate.

27 Perhaps it is not entirely a coincidence how precisely matched the strength of the two combatants are. Grendel can grab thirty men with his hand (“genam / þritig þegna” (122b-123a) [seized thirty men]), and conveniently, Beowulf has the strength of thirty men in his handgrip and swims back from Frisia with thirty suits of armor. This detail could be part of the poet’s design, so that Beowulf’s actions are not interpreted as overly reckless.
Furthermore, over the course of the poem it becomes clear that Beowulf is adept at fighting barehanded. Years later during the Geatish war with the Frisians, he crushes to death the Frisian king’s champion Dæghrefn with his bare hands: “Dæghrefne wearð / to handbonan” (2501b-2501a) [became to Dæghrefn slayer by hand], when he, “him hildegrap heortan wylmas, / banhus gebræc” (2507-2508a) [battle gripped him, crushed the bone house, the surging of the heart]. Beowulf’s hands are a weapon in themselves.

Everything about the Grendel fight emphasizes Beowulf’s strength rather than his arrogance. As a monster, Grendel is not of the same caliber as the dragon that eventually kills Beowulf. The troll’s aggression towards Heorot is that of a predator preying on sheep, and not the outright warfare of the dragon’s firestorm, in which “no ðær aht cwices / lað lyftflog læfan wolde” (2314b-2315) [not at all did the hateful air-flyer wish to leave behind there anything living]. Instead, Grendel sneaks into the hall at night and eats sleeping retainers: “He Hroðgares heorðgeneatas / sloh on sweofote, slæpende fræt” (1580-1581) [he slew Hroðgar’s hearth companions in sleep, devoured the sleeping one], and, “wæs þeos medoheal on morgentid, / drihtsele dreorfah þonne dæg lixte, / eal bencþelu blode bestymed / heal heorudreore” (484-487a) [this mead-hall, the splendid hall, was in the morning stained with gore, when day shone, all the bench planks soaked in blood, the hall in battle-blood]. Grendel does not attack during the day, which limits his fearsomeness, if only in regard to time.28 In light of Beowulf’s own strength, Grendel is a monster that does not require the same tactics one might employ against a dragon or even against an army of humans. Beowulf does not need a weapon to

28. He also only attacks the men in the hall, and stays away from the undefended living quarters where the women and children sleep (Hroðgar’s troop is forced to sleep there during the twelve years of Grendel’s raids). This dynamic might suggest something about Grendel’s powers or psychology, in that he only preys upon thanes (weak thanes) in the hall rather than the helpless women and children. If we are to read Grendel as some sort of embodiment of corruption in Heorot, it would make sense that he only attacks those in the hall that might be connected to such corruption.
win, so he does not use one, and considering Grendel’s special resilience to swords, a weapon would have hindered him.

    Beowulf also does not enter into fights weaponless on all occasions, and his varying choice of equipment suggests a considered preparation for each encounter. In the recounting of the Breca sea challenge, he chooses to bring a sword for protection even though he was not looking to fight monsters, but he does not wear armor that would hinder his ability to swim. Later, there is an entire arming scene (twenty-four lines, 1441b-1464) before he fights Grendel’s mother, describing his preparations with helmet, byrnie (which saves his life when he falls during the fight), and famous sword named Hrunting. If anything, all this gear seems overcautious after the barehanded victory over Grendel, especially since the poet describes the female monster as: “Wæs se gryre læssa / efne swa micle swa bið mægða cræft, / wiggryre wifes be wæpnedmen” (1282b-184) [the terror was less just as much as the strength of women, the war-horror of a woman, is with regard to the weaponed man].

    When Beowulf eventually challenges the much more powerful dragon, he takes a famous sword, Naegling, and a specially made iron shield, as opposed to a normal wooden shield, to fend off the dragon’s flames. He explains his choice of weapons:

    ‘Nolde ic sweord beran,
wæpen to wyrme, gif ic wiste hu
wið ðam aglæcean elles meahte
gylpe wiðgripæ, swa ic gio wið Grendle dyde;
ac ic ðær heaðufyres hates wene,
[œ]rædes ond attres; forðon ic me on hafu
bord ond byrnan.’ (2518b-2524a)

    [I would not bear a sword, a weapon to the worm, if I knew in boasting how otherwise I might grapple with that monster, as I formerly did against Grendel; but I expect there hot battle fire, violent deed, and venom; therefore I have with me shield and byrnie.]
Beowulf vocalizes the mental reasoning he engages in before a monster fight, considering the dangers of the enemy and how he might counter them. He admits to not knowing how he might grapple with the dragon successfully, an admittance which in itself suggests a sense of humility rather than overconfidence, but still he prepares as best he can. His willingness to adapt to and prepare for the varying conditions of every battle is not the sign of the sporting mindset that Tolkien attributes to the hero. Instead it is evidence of a warrior who seriously considers the situations before him and does whatever he can, whether it is enough or not, to ensure victory.

The weapons that Beowulf does use fail him at critical moments. Hrunting, the sword that Unferth gives him to use against Grendel’s mother, cannot cut her during the fight, and the failure almost costs Beowulf his life:

\[(D)a \text{ se gist onfand}\]
\[\text{þæt se beadoleoma bitan nolde,} \]
\[\text{aldre sceþan, ac seo ecg geswac} \]
\[\text{ðeodne æt þearfe} \quad (1522b-1524a)\]

[then the guest found that the battle-light (Hrunting) would not bite, harm life, but the edge failed the lord at (his) need]

He instead wields an “ealdsweord eotenise” (1558a) [ancient sword made by giants] that he finds on the wall of her underwater hall. Then later against the dragon, “Nægling forbærst, / geswac æt sæcce sweord Biowulfes” (2680b-2681) [Nægling shattered, the sword of Beowulf failed at battle]. Hrunting and Nægling are not just any swords either. They are named swords with legacies of victory, proven in war many times. After Nægling fails the poet comments,

\[
\text{Him þæt gifeðe ne wæs} \\
\text{þæt him irenna ecge mihton} \\
\text{helpan æt hilde; wæs sia hond to strong,} \\
\text{se ðe meca gehwane mine gefræge} \\
\text{swenges ofersohte bonne he to sæcce bær} \\
\text{wæpen wundum heard; næs him wihtðe ðe sel.} \\
(2682b-2687)\]
[That was not granted to him that edges of iron might help him in battle; his hand was too strong, he who, as I have heard say, overtaxed each sword with blows when he bore to battle the hard-wound weapons; it was not to him in any way better.]

The hero’s strength, that of thirty men, is his true weapon and often causes the failure of more conventional weaponry. Swords and armor are helpful to Beowulf on some occasions but are not a guaranteed advantage, his choice to use a sword or not should not be automatically considered evidence of over-confidence.

The only reason we are even arguing about whether the dragon fight is too risky or not is because Beowulf does not survive it, but his death does not prove that he took unnecessary risks. Separately the two Grendel fights do not appear particularly reckless or any more so than any monster fighting is reckless to begin with, and had Beowulf not died at the dragon fight, his decision would be the subject of praise, not censure. Years before his Byrhtnoth essay condemned Beowulf’s actions, Tolkien recognized the fact that heroism itself is risky: “the wages of heroism is death” (“Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics” 26). In fact, the wages of any life is death. A hero’s death in a monster fight need not be the result of excessive rashness, and the line between bravery and recklessness is mostly a matter of hindsight.

Beowulf has also been accused of fighting the dragon because of greed to gain the treasure hoard. While few critics apart from Gwara seriously support this argument, the gold certainly plays a role. If the hoard were the main focus of Beowulf’s intentions in fighting the dragon, as might be suggested by his desire to see the gold as he lies dying, then this motivation would reflect morally on that decision. After killing the dragon he requests of Wiglaf:

Bio nu on ofoste, þæt ic ærwelæn,  
goldeæht ongite, geæro sceawigæ  
swegæle seærogimmas, þæt ic ðy seæfæt màæge  
aæfter maððumwælan min alætan  
lif ond leodsceæpe, þone ic lonæge heold.  
(2747-2751)
[Be now in haste, that I might perceive the ancient treasure, the gold treasure, might entirely look at the bright, cleverly-cut gems, in order that I might the more gently after (obtaining) the wealth of treasure give up my own life and nation, which I held for a long time.]

The lines, “Sinc eaðe mæg, / gold on grund(e), gumcynnes gehwone / oferhigian, hyde se ðe wylle” (2764b-2766) [Treasure, gold in the ground, can easily overpower each man, he who desires to hide it] do seem to suggest that Beowulf is indeed obsessed with treasure. However, the qualifier that treasure overpowers him who desires to hide it does not match any of the reports of Beowulf as a generous king. He does not desire, as Heremod and the dragon do, to hoard the gold, but instead he gives the gold to the Geats even though they decide to burn it with his body:

‘Ic ðara frætwa frean ealles ðanc, wuldurcyninge wordum sege, ecum dryhtne, þe ic her on starie, þæt ðe ic moste minum leodum ær swyltdæge swylc gestrynan. Nu ic on maðma hord mine bebohte frode feorhlege, fremmað gena leoda þearfe; ne mæg ic her leng wesan.’

(2794-2802)

[I thank the lord of all, the king of glory, for these treasures which I here look upon, those which I must gain such for my people before the deathday. Now I bought the hoard of treasures with my old alloted life, to perform still the need of the people; I may not be here long.]

Beowulf appears to be an example of a good and generous king.

There is just no suggestion of greed in what we know of Beowulf both before and after becoming king. After returning to Geatland from Denmark, he gives the heirlooms of Hrothgar to his lord and uncle, Hygelac:

Hyrde ic þæt þam frætwum feower mearam lungre, gelice last weardode, æppelfealuwe; he him est geteah
meara ond maðma. Swa sceal mæg don, nealles inwitnet oðrum bregdon dyrum cræfte, deað ren(ian) hondgesteallan (2163-2169a)

[I heard that four swift bay horses alike followed the tracks with those ornaments; he conferred the gift of horses and treasures to him (Hygelac). So shall a kinsman do, not at all weave a net of malice around other by means of secret craft, adorn the hand-companions with death.]

Although the poet does not give us much direct insight into Beowulf’s fifty-year reign, Wiglaf’s speeches to the retainers suggest he often distributed treasure to his men. Wiglaf says when reminding the troop of their duties to protect their lord: “ðe us ðas beagas geaf” (2635b) [he who gave to us these rings], “me ðas maðmas geaf” (2640b) [gave this treasure to me], and calls Beowulf, “mine goldgyfan” (2652a) [my gold-giver]. Then later when upbraiding their cowardice: “se mondryhten, se eow ða maðmas geaf” (2865) [the liege-lord, he who gave you those treasures], and “Nu sceal sincþego ond swyrdgifu, eall eðelwyn eowrum cynne / lufen alicgean” (2884-2886a) [now shall the receiving of treasure and the giving of swords, all the enjoyment of hereditary estate, comfort, cease for your kin]. Hiroto Ushigaki studied the epithets used of kings in Beowulf:

In Old English poetry the king’s love for his people is, as discussed above, shown most clearly through generosity. The epithet deserving note in this connection is leof, a term of endearment which, applied almost exclusively to Beowulf (seven instances out of eight are about him, the only other use being applied to Hroðgar), expresses the deep attachment of the people to their still active, therefore intimate, leader. (Ushigaki 65-66)

The sadness that the Geats feel over the loss of their lord and the statements about his generosity show no signs of greed.

Furthermore, Beowulf was warned in Heorot about the pitfalls of greed through the story of the bad king Heremod (898-915 and 1709-1724a), who is described as “nallas beagas geaf” (1719b) [not at all gave rings]. Then later in his sermon Hroðgar again warns Beowulf of the
pitfalls of avarice, telling him to be wary:

“wom wundorbebodum wergan gastes; þinceð him to lytel þæt he lange heold, gytsað gromhydig, nallas on glyþ sele fætte beagas” (1747-1750a)

[against crooked strange command of the evil spirit; too little seems to him that he keep long, covets angry-minded, not at all gives up honorably ornamented rings]

However, as Beowulf does not display any of the behaviors of Heremod, that greedy king acts more as a contrasting figure than a parallel one. If Hroðgar’s speech about Heremod is supposed to be a warning to Beowulf, it seems to be one that the young hero either does not require or one which he takes to heart. The poet ultimately describes him as “manna mildust” (3181a) [most mild/generous of men] and dies killing a dragon that symbolizes the hoarding of a bad king, an anti-king, in his sleeping on the treasure.\textsuperscript{29} Considering the nature of Heremod’s greed, Niles argues that where treasure is concerned, the poem has:

far more to do with the need of rulers to distribute treasure for communal good than with the need of people to renounce it for their salvation. In his “sermon,” Hroðgar could have made much of the vanity of earthly goods. Instead, he stresses the danger of a king’s bottling up wealth. Rather than exhort his audience to forego material goods, time and again the poet dwells lovingly on the beauty or value of precious objects and speaks of the honor they lend their possessors. (Niles 223)

Treasure in the poem is not intrinsically bad; therefore the seeking of treasure is not intrinsically bad either, as long as it is for the purpose of distribution.

John M. Hill refers to Anglo-Saxon gift-giving as a “currency of honor” and explains the importance of treasure to the social and political functioning of the warrior band. By distributing treasure to thanes, especially in the form of worn rings (thus the lord is the \textit{beag-gyfa} [distributor

\textsuperscript{29} Irving offers a symbolic reading of the monsters as inversions of human roles. Grendel’s destructive individualism and refusal to participate in the society of the hall makes him a “mock retainer” and the dragon presiding in the barrow like a king in a hall is a “mock king,” withholding his treasure rather than distributing it (A Reading of \textit{Beowulf} 209).
of rings], a lord ensures that he is constantly present for his retainers. It is a reminder of his needs and the oaths sworn to him to fulfill those needs (“Anglo-Saxon Warrior Ethic” 29). In this way treasure has implications for both the past and future:

it is the central, honorific contract of the *comitatus* — rewards for services rendered or rewards (rings, weapons, mailshirts) for services that might fall due in the future when war comes. Moreover, such rewards are better thought of as ‘gifts’ in one sense and ‘loans’ in another. (“The Cultural World of Beowulf” 86)

Wiglaf acknowledges the reciprocal implications of treasure-giving in his speech to the cowardly retainers:

“Ic ðæt mæl geman, þær we medu þegun, þonne we geheton ussum hlaforde in biorsele, ðe us ðas beagas geaf, þæt we him ða guðgetawa gyldan woldon gif him þyslicu þeard gelumpe”

(2633-2637)

[I remember that time, when we partook of mead then we promised our lord in the beer-hall, he who gave us those rings, so that we wished to repay him for those war-equipments if such need happened to him]

However, sustaining this system requires a constant source of additional treasure.

To this end Niles reads the treasure at the end of Beowulf as a positive sign of his kingship. He argues that if a king dies without having won treasure during his lifetime, usually through raiding other tribes or tribute, an “arms drain” results from the burying of treasure with a lord (Niles 216). Since Beowulf does not engage in raiding as Scyld or Hroðgar does, the dragon’s treasure represents a means for him to rectify a deficit of this sort.

And even though Beowulf does not tell the Geats to bury the treasure with him, instead saying that the hoard is meant to “fremmæð gena / leoda þearfæ”(2801b-2802a) [to perform still the need of the people], such a sacrifice is necessary as a sign of the hero’s greatness. Niles articulates this necessity: “They (the treasures) are Beowulf’s price. In their refulgent splendor,
they are the material equivalent to the life he sacrificed for his people… *lof* made visible” (Niles 222). He also addresses the idea that the treasure might have been bought at too high a price (“ac þær is maðma hord / gold unrime  grimme geceapod” (3011b-3012) [but there is the hoard of treasures, countless gold, hard bought]):

> There is a kind of “rugged economics” here, one might say, but the books balance. The dead king and the dead dragon lie equal in the scales. The Geats will have the troubles they have earned. The hoard lies as useless as always. The difference is that instead of being lost in a nameless hill, it now serves to honor a known man and, by extension, the ideals by which he lived. (Niles 222)

The line, “þær hit nu gen lifað / eldum swa unnyt  swa hyt aerer wæs” (3167b-3168) [there it now yet lies, as useless to men as it was before], is sometimes interpreted as a negative comment on Beowulf’s acquisition or the Geats’ use of it, however, Niles points out that treasure lies useless because they “are now grave goods, and that is what grave-goods are meant to do” (Niles 222). It is not that the treasures do not serve a purpose – they do – but that purpose is no longer one that touches the world of living men.

> With regards to Beowulf fighting the dragon out of greed, I can only agree with Niles, that “After the dragon is aroused, Beowulf inherits a feud that only violence can settle… that his primary purpose is to kill the dragon, not to win the hoard” (Niles 220).

> However, the fact that Beowulf does not fight monsters for sport or for treasure does not prove that he is not egotistically interested in the glory and reputation to be won. Something that Tolkien and other critics have pointed out when analyzing Beowulf’s motivations is the emphasis that the poet puts on Beowulf’s personalization of his fights with the monsters. Before the Grendel fight Beowulf says, “ond nu wið Grendel sceal, / wið þam aglæcan ana gehegan / ðing wið þyrse” (424b-426a) [and now I shall against Grendel alone hold a meeting with the demon, with the monster]. His language before the dragon fight is filled with dual pronouns: unc
[we two], *hwæðer* [which of two], and *uncer twega* [of us two] (“Nelle ic beorges weard / oferfleon fotes trem, ac unc [feohte] sceal / weordan æt wealle, swa une wyrd geteoð, /Metod manna gehwæs” (2524b-2528) [I will not flee from the guardian of the hoard, the step of the foot, and fighting shall come to pass between us two at the wall, as fate, the measurer of all men, allots to us]). In these lines Beowulf expresses the combat in terms of himself versus the monster, not the Danes or Geats versus the monster, man versus beast, or even good versus evil.

However, it is worth clarifying that while Beowulf does explicitly demand to fight the dragon alone, he does not specifically forbid his retainers, or Hroðgar’s, from fighting with him against either of the Grendelkin. In fact his men do eventually join the battle against Grendel. Furthermore, Beowulf is generous with crediting his troop for their role in defeating Grendel, although he is almost solely responsible for the victory. He uses the pronoun “we” (958) when describing the victory to Hroðgar, acknowledging his troop even after Hroðgar thanks Beowulf personally for the deed: “þu þe self hafast / dædum gefremed” (953b-954) [you yourself have performed deeds].

The hero, not the troop, fights the monsters, and Beowulf’s language of solo combat is a reflection of the reality of those fights.

Beowulf’s pre-dragon-fight language reveals the hero’s either-or mentality towards monster fighting, which critics might interpret as hubris in the character of the hero. In the speeches he makes before the three monster fights, Beowulf describes only two outcomes: to kill the monster or be killed by the monster. The language of the three speeches creates a strong sense of repetition: before the Grendel fight, “ic anunga eowra leoda / willan geworhte opðe on wæl crunge / feongdrapum fæst. Ic gefremman sceal / eorlic ellen, opðe endedæg / on

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30 Beowulf may also be conscious of the fact that Grendel murders a member of the troop before the fight (Hondscio), who deserves some credit even if the man was gobbled up while sleeping. John Hill argues that this is a reflection of Beowulf’s juristic side and suggests that Hondscio’s death is in keeping with the biting of Tiu’s hand in efforts to bind the Fenris Wolf (echoed in Hondscio’s name, literally “hand-shoe” or glove) of Old Norse mythology (“Anglo-Saxon Warrior Ethic” 81).
þisse meoduhealle mine gebidan” (634b-638) [I (will) carry out the wish of your lord entirely or fall on the slaughter-field, fast in the enemy-grip. I shall perform noble courage, or experience my last day in this mead hall], before the fight with Grendel’s mother, “ic me mid Hruntinge / dom gewyrc, oððe mec deað nimeð” (1490b-1491) [I myself (will) work glory with Hrunting or death (will) carry me off], and finally before the dragon fight, “Ic mid elne sceall / gold gegangan, oððe guð nimeð / feorhbealu frecne frean eowerne” (2535b-2537) [I shall win gold with courage, or war, the terrible life-bale, (will) carry me off, your lord]. Retreat, or the deployment of larger armies, are not even options Beowulf considers. There is no “plan b.” Furthermore, the only two alternatives he describes, victory and death in battle, are the two that generate personal glory and reputation.

In the end, the poet makes it possible for Beowulf to actually achieve both these glorious outcomes at once. He both kills the monster and is killed by the monster. The poet sets up the pattern of the either-or outcome (through verbal boast then subsequent action) in which up until this point Beowulf has always killed the monster but not been killed by the monster. Once Beowulf kills the dragon, the reader assumes that once again the outcome is as it has always been, despite the poet’s assertion before the fight that Beowulf is going to die. It creates a glimmer of hope for the hero, until it becomes clear that the dragon’s poison will keep the poet’s promise. The sense of loss for Beowulf is heightened by the reversal of the audience’s expectations. The audience is initially prepared for the hero’s death before the fight, then thinks that he has managed to escape the very fate the poet foretells, only to finally realize that that fate is too strong. But while the surprise plays with the emotions of the audience, it does not undermine the killing of the dragon or Beowulf’s heroism. He is victorious in his defeat of the dragon and dies in battle, combining two heroic deaths.
Furthermore, the either-or phrasing is part of a larger tradition of boasting in Anglo-Saxon hall culture. Boasting in the hall operates more like a self-initiated social pressure than self-promotion. By standing up in front of his peers (with whom he is competing for the lord’s favor) and declaring that he will perform a certain heroic deed, a warrior creates an added incentive to fulfill that task due to the threat of shame and embarrassment. The warrior will know that failure to fulfill his boast will negatively affect his position and standing in the hall, and, conversely, success in fulfilling his boast will positively affect his reputation there. The use of boasting language as motivation is most obvious in the Anglo-Saxon poem, *The Battle of Maldon*:

> “Hwæt þu, Ælfwine, hafast ealle gemanode þegnas to þærfe. Nu ure þeoden ligeþ, eorl on eorðan, us is eallum þearf þæt ure ægelc ðoderne bieilde wigan to wige, þa hwile þe he wæpen mæge habban and healdan, heardne mece, gar ond god sweord.” (231-237a)

[Listen, Ælfwine, you have reminded all the thanes in need. Now our lord lies dead, the earl on the earth, the need is to us all that each of us encourage the other to fight the battle while he may have and hold a weapon, hard sword, spear and good sword.]

This passage is followed by two boasts in which death is the preferable to fleeing: “Ic þæt gehate, þæt ic heonan nylle / fleon fotes trymm ac wille furðor gan… ac me sceal wæpen niman, / ord and iren” (246-253) [I promise that I henceforth will not flee the space of one foot, but will go further… instead weapons shall carry me off, point and iron], and, “Ne mæg na wandian se-þe wrecan þenceþ / frean on folce, ne for feore murnan” (258-259) [A man cannot weaken, he who intends to avenge the lord on this people, nor care for his life]. Socially, boasts like those in *The Battle of Maldon* or *Beowulf* reflect a need, even for brave warriors, to excite themselves for battle.

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31 Text of *The Battle of Maldon* comes from John Pope’s *Eight Old English Poems*. Translation is my own.
Logically, monster fighting is a win-or-die scenario, and that fact should be reflected in the language.\(^{32}\) The live-to-fight-another-day mentality is just not practical when fighting monsters. If Beowulf decides to retreat mid-fight, his survival does not make the monster any less overpowering than before (not to mention the risks implicit in the exposure of retreat). In the case of the dragon fight, he would also give the dragon more time to cause death and destruction for the Geats. Although an exploitable weakness could conceivably be learned about the monster during the initial encounter, such a weakness may not even exist.\(^{33}\) More importantly, the monster has the same advantage and may become harder to kill at the next meeting rather than easier. In Heorot Beowulf’s strength takes Grendel by surprise, which ultimately is the cause of his dismemberment and death, but surely if he were to face Beowulf again, he would try to prevent him from grabbing hold of him.

In the end, if the hero cannot kill the monster, then no one can, or is even willing to try. When the Danes see the blood in the mere after Beowulf’s fight with Grendel’s mother they assume Beowulf, not the monster, is dead. But instead of advancing to fight the monster themselves they return to the hall, despite the likelihood of another attack. After all, Grendel raided Heorot consistently for twelve years (lines 1595-1605). According to the logic of the poem the hero is the only person who can kill the monster, so if he is unable to do so, then he is not performing his job and might as well be dead.

Beowulf’s order that his troop should not engage in the dragon fight shows that he recognizes the reality that normal retainers are not useful against monsters and will probably just

\(^{32}\) If anything, it is a reflection of the reality that Beowulf could die in any of these encounters despite the fact that he is the best of men. Beowulf’s boasts remind himself and everyone else that the outcome can always be death.

\(^{33}\) The \textit{Beowulf} dragon is not like Smaug from Tolkien’s \textit{The Hobbit} or Fafnir from the Old Norse \textit{Volsunga Saga}, both of which are vulnerable on their underbellies, and both of which are defeated as a result of that vulnerability. There is no indication that the dragon in \textit{Beowulf} has any such weakness. Wiglaf does stab the dragon in the stomach, which stops it from spewing fire, but the poet never mentions that this as a particularly exposed place or the only place Wiglaf could have wounded the dragon. There is no sense that the \textit{Beowulf} dragon is killed by a trick or by the opportune placement of a sing blow capitalizing on a known vulnerability.
add to the body count:

Gebide ge on borge byrnum werede,
seegas on searwum, hwæðer sel mæg
ærfter vælraese wunde gedygan
uncer twega. Nis þæt eower sið,
ne gemet mannes nef(nte) min anes,
þæt he wið aglæcean eofðo dæle,
eorlscype efne. (2529-2535a)

[Await you, men in war-gear, protected by byrnies, on the barrow, to see which of us two might endure wounds better after the bloody conflict. That is not your course of action, nor the ability of man, except of me alone, that he might deal strength against the monster.]

George Clark analyzes the dismissal of the troop pragmatically, arguing that Beowulf goes into battle alone simply as result of circumstance. His strength makes him the only one who can lift the iron shield made to defend against the dragon’s deadly flames, and there is not enough room behind it for an entire troop (Clark 132). It is barely big enough to shield two men, Beowulf and Wiglaf, whose own wooden shield is destroyed as soon as he joins the battle:

Lig yðum for;
born bord wið rond. Byrne ne meahte
geongum garwigan geoce gefremman,
açe se magna geonga under his mæges scyld
ele nee geode, þa his agen (wæs)
gledum forgrunden (2672b-2677a)

[The waves of flame went (out); burnt the shield to the boss. Byrnie cannot perform help to the young spear-warrior, but the young man went quickly under the shield of his kinsman, when his own was destroyed by flames].

However, despite the failure of Wiglaf’s wooden shield against the dragon’s fire, we should not limit our analysis of the retainers’ role in the dragon fight solely to their ability to carry an iron shield. Such a small practical point cannot be the detail on which the entire poem hinges.

In terms of battle logistics, even though Wiglaf blames the troop for the outcome of the

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This gimmick of Beowulf being the only one able to carry the iron shield has a similar feel to Beowulf’s choice to fight Grendel barehanded before it is revealed that the monster cannot be bitten by swords. However, in that instance, the retainers still engage the monster, even though their weapons are useless.
dragon fight ("Wergendra to lyt / þrong ymbe þeoden / þa hyne sio rag becwom" (2882-3) [Too few defenders thronged around the lord when the hardship happened to him]), there is no evidence that a larger force would change the outcome. By engaging in such a battle, Beowulf’s thanes may just have become needless casualties, leaving the Geats in an even more vulnerable position after Beowulf’s death. But Wiglaf only thinks about the death of his lord, and what that death means for the future of the Geats. He does not see the larger picture.

In Heorot, Beowulf witnesses the fatal result of a normal thane against a monster when Grendel devours his retainer, Hondscio:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{ac he gefeng hraðe} & \quad \text{formam siðe} \\
\text{slæpendne rinc,} & \quad \text{slat unwearnum,} \\
\text{bat banlocan,} & \quad \text{blod edrum dranc,} \\
\text{synsnædum swealh;} & \quad \text{sona hæfde} \\
\text{unlyfgendes} & \quad \text{eal gefeormod,} \\
\text{fet ond folma} & \quad (740-745a)
\end{align*}
\]

[he (Grendel) quickly seized a sleeping warrior at the first occasion, tore without hindrance, bit the bone-locker, drank the blood from the veins, swallowed with huge morsels; soon had consumed all of the unliving one, feet and hands]35

Such a scene would not easily be forgotten. According to Niles, “Beowulf takes the measure of his men with a realism unclouded by false hopes” (Niles 241). His speech before the dragon fight suggests that he alone has the physical strength to fight such a monster:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Nis þæt eower sið,} & \\
\text{ne gemet mannes,} & \quad \text{nefne min anes,}
\end{align*}
\]

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35 Some find this scene hard to read in relation to Beowulf’s actions watching Grendel brutally consume one his men (as he was awake in the hall). While John Hill has suggested that this is an expression of Beowulf’s juristic psychology (never attacking without provocation) ("The Cultural World of Beowulf" 63-84), it is more likely that the poet is using this scene to display Grendel’s fearsomeness rather than to comment on Beowulf’s morality, for or against. Grendel’s strike is also quick, and Beowulf might not have time to react before Hondscio is eaten: “Ræpe æfter þon / on fægne flor / feond treddeðe” (724b-725) [after that the fiend tread quickly on the decorated floor], and “Ne þæt se aglæca yldan þohte, / ac he gefeng hraðe / formam siðe / slæpendne rinc” (739-741a) [The monster did not think to delay that, but he quickly seized a sleeping warrior at the first occasion]. Beowulf does engage Grendel immediately after Hondscio’s death, and during the attack Beowulf is not described as sitting idly by watching the scene unfold. It is possible that the poet did not want to interrupt his powerful depiction of the horrors of the monster with an intervention of the hero, or even that the scene is so physically repulsive that Beowulf is momentarily frozen (much like the effect of car crashes, awakening a sense of morbid curiosity in passers by).
[Nor is that your course (of action), nor the measure of man except of me alone, that he against the monster might deal strength, perform heroic deeds.]

His instructions to abstain from fighting the dragon are for the protection of the troop rather than the amplification of his own glory.

Tolkien’s implied argument that since Wiglaf’s intervention helps Beowulf against the dragon, additional retainers would have changed the outcome of the battle, fails to recognize Wiglaf as a hero in his own right. As the poet makes clear, Wiglaf is no ordinary man: “ellen cyðan, / cræft ond cenđu, swa him gecynde wæs” (2695b-2696) [to make known courage, strength and boldness, as was innate in him]. He is himself a hero with heroic qualities that are gecynde [natural, innate, inborn] rather than learned, and he performs like a hero even though it is his first time in battle (although he does admit that he went “ofer min gemet” (2879a) [beyond my normal power]). “Þa wæs forma sið / geongan cempan þæt he guðe ræs / mid his freodryhtne fremman sceolde. / Ne gemealt him se modsefa” (2625b-2628a) [That was the first time for the young champion that he should perform battle-rush with his dear lord. The spirit in him did not melt]. He is “hiora in anum” (2599b) [in one of them], running towards the fight rather than against it. Wiglaf is also the only one named among Beowulf’s retainers. The poet even takes twenty-five lines (2605-2630) in the middle of the dragon fight to define his heroic lineage and war-gear:

Wiglaf wæs haten, Weoxstanes sunu,
Leoflic lindwiga, leod Scylfinga,
Mæg Ælfheres (2602-2604)

[Wiglaf was called, the son of Weoxstan, the precious shield-warrior, the man of the Scylfings, the kinsman of Ælfhere]
Later Beowulf acknowledges kinship with Wiglaf as he presents him his war gear, “Þu eart endelaf usses cynnes, / Wægmundings” (2813-1814a) [You are the last remnant of our kin, of the Wægmundings]. This type of emphasis elevates Wiglaf as a “geongan cempan” (2626a) [young champion] apart from the normal ædeling or þegne. Wiglaf also fights with a hero’s weapon, a sword with its own famous battle history, which is the subject of fifteen lines (2610-2625a) right in the middle of the dragon fight:

\[
gomel swyrd geteah; \\
þæt wæs mid eldum Eannundes laf, \\
suna Ohter[s]; þam æt sæcce wearð, \\
wraecca(n) wineleasum Weohstan bana \\
meces eckum, ond his magum ætbær \\
brunfagne helm, hringde byrnan, \\
ealdsweard etonisc; þæt him Onela forgeaf. \\
his gædelinges guðgewædu, \\
fyrdesto fuscic – no ymbe ða feðe spræc, \\
þeah ðe he his broðor bearn abredwade. \\
He frætwe geheold fela missera, \\
bill ond byrnan, oð ðæt his byre mihte \\
eorlscepe efnan swa his ærfæder; \\
geaf him ða mid Geatum guðgewæda \\
æghwæs unrim þa he of ealdre gewat \\
frod on forðweg. (2610-2625a)
\]

[drew the old sword; that was among men the heirloom of Eannund, the son of Ohtere; with that he became the killer of the friendless warrior of Weohstan at the battle with the edges of swords, and bore to his kinsmen the brown-colored helmet, the ringed byrnie, the old sword made by giants; Onela gave to him that war-dress of his kinsman, the ready armor – not at all spoke concerning that feud, although he killed the son of his brother. He kept the treasures, the sword and byrnie, for many half years, until his son might perform heroic deeds as (did) his forefather; then among the Geats gave to him the war-dresses, an uncounted number of each, when he departed from life, wise on the way forth.]

Furthermore, despite his youth Wiglaf acts with authority both in his upbraiding of the rest of the troop before and after the dragon fight and in his orchestration of the funeral proceedings. This authority is also exhibited in his decision to disobey his lord’s command not to engage in fighting the dragon, a choice that echoes Beowulf’s decision to travel to Heorot to face
Grendel despite Hygelac’s doubts. In the end, the fight against the dragon is not just a lord and his thane but two heroes, both of whom manage to stab the monster.

Tolkien argues that the poet characterizes Beowulf as too proud to fight the dragon with his troop, pointing to the following lines:

Oferhogode ða hringa fægel
þæt he þone widflogan weorode gesohte, sidan herge; no he him þa sæce ondred, ne him þæs wyrmes wig for wiht dyde, eafðo ond ellen, forðan he ær fela
nearo neðende nīða gedigde, hildhelemma, syððan he Hroðgares, sigoreadig secg, sele fælsode, ond æt guðe forgrap Grendelæs mægum laðan cynnes. (2345-2354a)

[Then the king of rings pridefully scorned that he sought the far-flier with a troop, a large army; nor dreaded he the battle for himself, nor did he at all dread the fight of this worm against him, its might and strength, because he formerly dared many narrows, passed through safely violence of battle-crashes, since he, a victorious man, cleansed Hrothgar’s hall and at battle crushed to death the kinsmen of Grendel, of the hateful kin.]\(^36\)

\(^36\) The translation of oferhogode has larger connotations that play into Tolkien’s (and others’) interpretation of Beowulf’s actions as over-proud or over-confidant. Oferhogode echoes the “ofermod” that has been at the center of a spirited scholarly debate over Byrhtnoð’s actions in the Anglo-Saxon war poem The Battle of Maldon. The word appears in line 89: “Pa se eorl ongann for his ofermode / aliefan landes to fela laðre þeode” (89-90) [Then the earl, on account of his ofermod, began to allow too many hostile people on land] (qtd Pope 18, translation my own). Helmut Gneuss considers the philological foundations of the cruc in “The Battle of Maldon 89: Byrhtnoð’s ofermod Once Again”, in which he points out that “pride” (in the negative sense) is the most often suggested glossing. Such an interpretation would mean that the poet is criticising (or even condemning) Byrhtnoð for allowing the viking army to cross the ford before engaging in battle (and indeed, the battle did result in overwhelming defeat). Tolkien argues for such an interpretation based on the fact that the only other use of the noun occurs in reference to Lucifer, as do many of the usages of it in its adjectival form (see Genesis B). Gneuss connects ofermod to the Latin superbia, but also acknowledges that the use of ofermod in Maldon is its only use in a non-religious poem and therefore may not function the same (although part of the ambiguity in defining ofermod is due to its relatively few occurrences). Gneuss also admits that the later praise of Byrhtnoð in the poem complicates our understanding of the poet’s opinion of his leadership. The problem ultimately, is that the debate on the glossing of ofermod in Maldon has influence the translation of oferhogode in Beowulf as a possible criticism of the hero (Gneuss 117-137), but the glossing is by no means agreed upon.

I am sceptical of the fact that Tolkien hangs his entire interpretation of the poem on his translation of a single word. Other critics, like Tom Shippey, argue that Tolkien’s interpretation of ofermod in Maldon ignores what before was an accepted expression of Northern Courage (the Anglo-Saxon praise of continued struggle in the face of inevitable death). Shippey argues that the foundation of Tolkien’s reading is his desire to Christianize the message of the poem (whose spirit of heroism was of a heathen nature). See Shippey’s “Tolkien and ‘The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth’.” Stephen J. Harris in his article, “Ethnogenesis and The Battle of Maldon,” makes the argument that based on battle tactics extrapolated from the information of the poem and the typological possibilities of the tidal water in connection to the story of Moses and the parting of the Red Sea, ofermod should not be read with such a
Hill suggests instead that by releasing his retainers from their required duty in the dragon fight, Beowulf opens the way for freely given repayment (“Anglo-Saxon Warrior Ethic” 40). Either way, in previous monster fights normal retainers have proven little help. Beowulf’s attitude may simply be a reflection of his understanding (and the poet’s) that armies cannot effectively fight monsters.\(^3\)

Both before and during the Grendel fight Beowulf is surrounded by his troop, and yet he still is single-handedly responsible for victory. As the poet describes the retainers, they do not seem at all prepared for monster fighting. For example, despite the fact that they have just travelled far to cleanse a hall of a man-eating monster, they feel comfortable enough to fall asleep without guards in the very hall that the Danes have abandoned for that very reason:

\begin{verbatim}
Nænig heora þohete     þæt he þanon scolde
eft eardlufan     æfre gescecean,
folc opðe freoburh     þær he afeded wæs;
ac hie hæfdon gefrunen     þæt hie ær to fela micles
in ðæm winsele     wældeāð fornām
\end{verbatim}

(691-695)

[None of them thought that he should thence afterwards ever return to dear home, people or city where he was raised; but they had heard that before murderous death carried away far too many in that winehall]

And still they fall asleep peacefully. So peacefully and deeply in fact that they do not even wake up when a huge monster breaks through the door that is made with “fyrbendum fæst” (722a) [fast bands forged with fire]. It is hard to imagine Grendel’s entrance into the hall is particularly quiet, yet somehow he is able to sneak in and consume a man (although to be fair, Grendel is described critical tone and that instead the poem is a warning to the Anglo-Saxons that they will be displaced by the Vikings as they once displaced the Brittons (involving the responsibilities of thanes to stand firm in battle).\(^3\)

In Old Norse mythology, the most powerful giants are fought by gods in single combat, rather than by the army of the einherjar [lone-fighters], human warriors fallen in battle, that fight the host of demons at the final battle of Ragnarök [Twilight of the Gods]. For example, Thor is matched with the Midgard serpent that encircles the world (though he kills many other giants and giantesses). In the version of the story appearing in Snorri Sturlusons’ twelfth century Prose Edda, Thor and the serpent meet at Ragnarök and kill each other, but Thor manages to walk nine steps before succumbing to the serpent’s venom (Lindow 280-88).
as a “sceadugenga” (703a) [shadow walker] and “under sceadu bregdan” (707b) [to move quickly under shadow]). Only Beowulf lies awake in wait for the monster. The troop’s lack of vigilance, which results in the death of one of their number, directly contradicts the description of their preparations for bed before Grendel’s mother attacks:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Wæs ðeaw hyra} & \\
\text{þæt hie oft wær on anwiggearwe,} & \\
\text{ge æt ham ge on herge, ge gehwæþer þara} & \\
\text{efne swylce mæla swylce hira mandryhtne} & \\
\text{þearf gesælde; wæs seo þeod tilu} & \\
(1246b-1250)
\end{align*}
\]

[Their custom was that they often were prepared against attack, both at home or in the troop, and each of them for such opportunities as trouble befell their liege-lord; that was a good troop]

If the troop were so prepared, then they would not have been the victims of two monsters sneaking undetected into the hall.

It is only after almost fifty lines (745-794b) describing the noise and disruption in the hall (“Reced hlynsode. / ða wæs wundor micel þæt se winsele / wiðhæfde heapodeorum, þæt he on hrusan ne feol” (770b-772) [The hall resounded. That was a great wonder that the winehall held out against the battle-brave ones, that it did not fall to the ground]) that the eorls are said to join the fight:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{wolde freadrihtnes feorh ealgian,} & \\
\text{maræs þeodnes, ðær hie meahton swa.} & \\
\text{Hie þæt ne wiston, þa hie gewin drugon,} & \\
\text{heardhicgende hildemecgas,} & \\
\text{ond on healfa gehwone heawan þohton,} & \\
\text{sawle secan} & \\
(796-801a)
\end{align*}
\]

[would defend the life of the lord and master, of the glorious lord, where they might do so. They did not know that, when they engaged in the struggle, the brave-minded warriors, and thought to hew on each side, to try to reach the soul]

In the end, their efforts are useless anyway since Grendel cannot be bitten by swords. Although
we cannot fault the retainers for being ignorant of Grendel’s special power, the entire episode serves to undermine any sense that normal retainers are able to have a serious effect on the outcome of monster fights.

The second failure of the troop occurs with the second attack on Heorot, this time by Grendel’s vengeful mother. Even though the poet describes her as a lesser horror compared to a male creature, Grendel’s mother still manages to enter the hall and carry off Hrothgar’s “rice randwiga” (1298a) [powerful shield-warrior]. She is too much for a normal man to contend with. The poet especially makes a point of the fact that “Næs Beowulf dær” (1299b) [Beowulf was not there] in the hall that night to explain why the monster was able to escape unharmed. Once more the troop of normal, even good, retainers simply cannot do what the hero must do. Later, after being personally challenged by Hrothgar to hunt down and kill this new monster, Beowulf prepares for the fight at the edge of the mere. He does not demand to fight the monster alone, and yet no man stands forward to accompany him. The description of Unferth as, “selfa ne dorste / under yða gewin alder geneban / drihtscype dreogan” (1468b-1470a) [he himself did not dare venture forth life under the waves to perform the valor, the struggle] is an insult to that specific disgraced warrior but is actually applicable to all the retainers present, both Danish and Geatish.

This argument is not meant to find too much fault with normal retainers – indeed it is rather unfair to be using Beowulf as a standard – but instead to reveal the fundamental flaws of the argument that a troop could have aided him against the dragon. In the fight against Grendel’s mother the troop falls short in in two ways. To even get to her lair Beowulf must swim through a mere full of sea monsters (“wyrmas ond wildeor” (1430) [serpents and wild beasts]), something that he has already proven he can do in the exchange about the Breca challenge.38 Then during

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38 There is debate over the meaning of “Da wæs hwil dæges” (1495b), whether it should be interpreted as Beowulf swimming to the underwater hall “for most of the day” or “for a while of the day.” Fred Robinson plays down
the fight itself the poet once more hints at his particular ability to kill the monster in the
description of the giant sword used to kill Grendel’s mother after Hrunting fails. “þæt [wæs]
wæpna cyst, – / buton hit wæs mare ðonne ænig mon oðer / to beadulace ætberan meahte”
(1559b-1561) [That was the best weapon, – but it was more than any other man might carry to
battle-play]. Had other men been willing and able to survive the sea-monster-filled journey to the
underwater hall, they still would have been ineffective in the fight.

The structure of the poem itself produces the exceptionalism of the hero in relation to
normal men. Tolkien recognizes the need for the poem to maintain a certain internal consistency
with how the monster fights operate in both halves:

But for the universal significance which is given to the fortunes of its hero it is an
enhancement and not a detraction, in fact it is necessary, that his final foe should be not
some Swedish prince, or treacherous friend, but a dragon: a thing made by imagination
for just such a purpose… But if the hero falls before a dragon, then certainly he should
achieve his early glory by vanquishing a foe of similar order… It would really have been
preposterous, if the poet had recounted Beowulf’s rise to fame in a ‘typical’ or
‘commonplace’ war in Frisia, and then ended with him with a dragon. Or if he has told of
his cleansing of Heorot, and then brought him to defeat and death in a ‘wild’ or ‘trivial’
Swedish invasion! ("Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics” 33)

However, when he later writes his essay on Byrhtnoth and Beowulf, Tolkien seems to have
forgotten his own argument. Just as Beowulf cannot fight a monster in the first half and an army
in the second or vice versa, he cannot defeat the monster alone in the first half and then march an
army against the one in the second half, no matter how much more powerful the dragon is than
Grendel. The dragon is more dangerous than Grendel in the same way that Beowulf fighting with
Wiglaf (two heroes) is more dangerous than Beowulf fighting alone (one hero). An escalation

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Beowulf’s swimming exploits (including the Breca challenge and Beowulf’s return from Frisia carrying thirty suits of armor) in his "Elements of the Marvelous in the Characterization of Beowulf: A Reconsideration of the Textual Evidence," and translates *hwil dæges* as simply, “during the daytime” ("Elements of the Marvellous" 23). Others, like Stanley Greenfield in his, "A Touch of the Monstrous in the Hero or Beowulf Re-Marvellized," consider swimming a part of Beowulf’s heroic (super)powers. The specific interpretation of this half-line is not essential to my argument here. Regardless of the scope of Beowulf’s swimming abilities, he still must be able to swim (and fight monsters while swimming) to be able to pursue Grendel’s mother into the mere.
has occurred on both sides of the equation without changing the nature of either side, monsters versus heroes. It would be narratively clumsy for Beowulf to deploy an entire troop against the dragon.

The poet conserves the heroes-versus-monsters dynamic from the very beginning of the poem. Hrothgar is the lord of a troop that has been so successful in human warfare that the Danes acquire enough treasure to build the great hall Heorot, and yet for years all his men are unable to quell Grendel. They even have abandoned their great hall, the symbol of their power and the social center of their political/family group. More men do not guarantee a dead monster. Maybe that is the difference between a monster and an animal. Even the largest bear could be surrounded and killed by a group of men, but a troop of eleven warriors surrounding Grendel in Heorot are useless without Beowulf. Likewise, a hero cannot guarantee victory in the wars of men. He can help, but even Beowulf cannot save Hygelac in his failed raid on Frisa or Heardred in his attack on Onela. Heroes fight monsters, and armies fight armies, so piling more men into the dragon fight is not the answer.

However, it is necessary to concede that with regard to the dragon fight, Beowulf’s retainers are not simply unable to help. They blatantly choose not to: “Nealles him on heape hændgestallan, / æðelinga bearn ymb gestodon / hildécystum, ac hy on holt bugon, / ealdre burgan” (2596-2599a) [The hand-companions, children of nobles, in the troop not at all stood about him (Beowulf) with valor, but they fled to the woods to preserve life]. The poet calls them hildlatan (2846) [sluggish in battle, coward], tydre treowlogan (2847) [weak false pledgers], and “Nealles folceyning fyrdgesteallum / gyłpan þorfte” (2873-2874a) [not at all did the folk-king have reason to boast of war comrades]. Furthermore, it is not just Wiglaf and the poet who are aware of their gutless behavior, for the warriors themselves, “scamiende scyldas bearan” (2850)
[bore their shields ashamed].

The theme of reciprocal duties that exist between a lord and his thanes appears in other Anglo-Saxon poetry, especially *The Battle of Maldon*. Stephen J. Harris discusses the implications of the poem as one primarily concerned with issues of loyalty. He draws attention to Offa’s kinsman’s freeing of his hawk and horse before battle as a sign that he will not leave the coming battle except in victory or death (Harris 161). This same Offa forewarns Byrhtnoth that certain among the boasters would not suffer (“þolian noldon” (201b)) when it came time for them to fulfill their contract to their lord (payment or keep in return for military service) (Harris 167).39 Indeed, a major turning point in the battle occurs when some of the men retreat, one on the lord’s horse, which causes half the army to turn in confusion and flee. The subsequent urging of the loyal thanes who remain to fight on then becomes the source of praise and glory for the poet. If, like Harris, we do not read the poem with the blinders of the *ofermod* argument, then the poem becomes one that demonstrates the proper action of thanes in repaying their lord even after death.40

John M. Hill argues that the ideal of dying with the lord, however, is one that is only found in the Old English poem, *The Battle of Maldon*, and that in the world of *Beowulf*, there is no such requirement (“Anglo-Saxon Warrior Ethic” 111). Instead of reproducing the customs of the time, the *Maldon*-poet sensationalizes the spectacle of the dead lord surrounded by his thanes:

In Icelandic contexts, according to William I. Miller’s sensitive readings of the sagas (1990), revenge is usually presented as survival oriented and largely up to the individual with his recruited support group of kin and indebted neighbors or other dependents. (“Anglo-Saxon Warrior Ethic” 114)

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39 Although *Beowulf* does not expect his troops to suffer for him, since he dismisses them before the dragon fight. He seems unconcerned about their boasts or loyalty (maybe we should be too).
40 Harris notes that critics like Niles suggest that *Maldon* was written to address major social issues that arose in Anglo-Saxon England as a result of Æþelræd’s disastrous reign (Harris 164).
According to Hill, considering the other methods of resolving feuds—wergild, marriage, and future battle—revenge suicide is extra-social.\footnote{Hill is careful to distinguish that revenge in general is not morally wrong in \textit{Beowulf}. Beowulf foreshadows the Danish failure to settle the Heādōbard feud without value judgment. For Hill the poem says, “Not, isn’t revenge awful, but rather, how does a firm friendship develop between feuding peoples” (“The Cultural World in \textit{Beowulf}” 28)? He argues that even Grendel’s mother, who is sometimes referred to as an \textit{evil avenger} is justified in her desire for revenge for the killing of her son. The problem with her claim is in her desire not to seek a specific settlement (or wergild), but to blindly do as much damage as possible. Revenge when justified is not evil.} This observation works in the context of \textit{Beowulf}, considering sections like the Finnsburg episode, which describes a winter that two feuding factions spend snowed in at the same hall (lines 1063-1159a). The two sides agree to a temporary truce, which is never condemned by the poet. Even in Wiglaf’s criticism, there is no suggestion that the retainers should specifically join the fight in order to die with their lord.

Wiglaf himself outlives his fallen king. The ideal behavior for a thane is instead to serve and protect his lord, which does not always mean die for him.

Niles, on the other hand, sees the grim future of the Geats as just dues for abandoning their lord in his time of need: “By the laws of reciprocity, even a failure to observe reciprocity will invite appropriate retribution. The Geats’ weapons are too good for them and a new balance must be found between outer appearance and inner reality. The men can rest assured that their violation of the ties that bind society together will mean an end to the life of the hall as they had known it” (Niles 221). Wiglaf does single out the cowardice of the retainers, not the death of Beowulf, as the reason for future invasion “syðdan æðelingas / feorran gefricgean fleam eowerne / domleasan dæd” (2888b-2890a) [when the princes from afar might learn of your flight, the honorless deed].\footnote{In \textit{The Battle of Maldon}, while some of Byrhtnoth’s army flees after the death of the lord (and in the face of certain death at the hands of an overwhelming Viking force), the poem celebrates the loyalty and valor of those thanes that remained on the field to fight to the death. However, despite gaining glory in battle-death, the loss of so many men (regardless of their reputations) theoretically will not stop the Vikings from plundering and invading the English countryside that they were protecting. There is a split between the ideal of the thane that never deserts his lord (even in death) and the practical realities of entering into a fight in which you will likely die. The Geatish troop would be just as ineffective at stopping enemy invasion from the grave.} We must once again be conscious that Wiglaf is not speaking with
the authority of the poet, but nevertheless, criticism and outright condemnation of the troop’s actions are explicit in the text.

Let us consider reading the actions of the troop in light of the double-blind motif that appears in other Anglo-Saxon literature. A double bind is the Anglo-Saxon equivalent of a catch-22, a situation in which conflicting duties force someone to prioritize one duty over another. It occurs in *Beowulf* when Beowulf’s command that his troop not engage in the dragon fight opposes the retainers’ primary obligation to protect their lord at all cost. The duty to obey the lord goes directly against the duty to protect and die for him. Another variation of this conflict is found in the Old English poem *The Dream of the Rood*, in which the personified Christian cross is ordered by its lord, Jesus Christ, to take an active role in his death by crucifixion. While the cross does obey Jesus, becoming the tool of his lord’s execution, it expresses an acute sense of betrayal and conflict about its actions: “Sare ic wæs mid sorgum gedrefed, ā hnaġ ic hwǣðre þam secgum to handa / eað-mod, elne micle” (59a-60a) [I was sorely afflicted with sorrows, I nevertheless bow down to the meek one with great zeal].

The *Beowulf* poet does not mention any such struggling thoughts within the minds of the cowardly retainers, a fact that is brought into sharp contrast with the description of Wiglaf in the lines, “hiora in anum weoll / sefa wið sorgum” (2599b-2600a) [in one of them the spirit welled with sorrows]. The poet goes on to describe Wiglaf as “wel þenceð” (2601b) [thinks well], which becomes a negative value judgment on the other retainers when they instead “on holt bugon, / ealdre burgan” (2598b-2599a) [fled to the wood to preserve life]. Their lack of resistance in abandoning their lord may be an indication that there was no conflict in their minds.44 Their

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44 Berger and Leicester argue that one of the problems with the reciprocity system within the context of the warband is that for a great man like Beowulf, his heroism cannot be matched or repaid (Berger 47). The lack of resistance
lord’s orders not to intervene align with their own desires not to fight the dragon. The overall effect is the magnification of Wiglaf’s character as that above and beyond the normal thane, to that of a hero, whose return to help Beowulf exhibits loyalty, bravery and also his fighting ability in wounding the dragon so it could no longer breathe fire.

Ultimately, when considering the many variables of the dragon fight, critics neglect the fact that hindsight is twenty-twenty. The audience, even those at the time of the poem, is analyzing the situation of the fight from a distance of both time and space, space that is as much emotional as it is geographical or cultural. By defeating the dragon, Beowulf dies victorious, a fact that the poet makes clear: “Þæt ðam þeodne wæs / sīðas[þ] sigehwilað sylfes dædum, / worlde geweorces” (2709b-2711a) [That was the last time of victory for that lord, by his own deeds, in the world of works]. Still the ending of the poem is elegaic in imagery and tone, which has led critics to wonder whether the poet is using the gloom of the Geats to reflect upon the circumstances of the hero’s death in the dragon fight, to say that the heroism displayed by Beowulf is somehow problematic. But Beowulf has to face the dragon due to conditions both practical and poetic that the poet creates. If the poet had provided the hero an obvious alternative to fighting the dragon as he did, then Beowulf’s choice would absolutely be a valid focus for criticism. Instead, the monster fighter who has not been challenged since his youthful exploits in Denmark wakes up one day after fifty peaceful years as king to find that an enraged fire-breathing dragon has just burned down his hall and for all he knows will continue to enact murderous vengeance upon his people until their extinction. In the world that the poet creates, there is no choice. The hero can do nothing but kill the dragon, and in that regard he is blameless.

within the troop to leaving their lord could be out of a sense that there is nothing they can do to repay Beowulf adequately.
In the present action of *Beowulf* there are two main kings, Hroðgar and Beowulf. Hroðgar is the king of Denmark during the first half of the poem, and Beowulf becomes king of Geatland in the second. Both have long reigns and are old kings. The structure of the two halls and two kings has naturally led to comparisons of these two men. Through Hroðgar the poet sets the expectation that old kingship is a social position of power rather than a martial one, with the king relying on warriors such as Beowulf to defend his hall from enemies. At least on the surface Hroðgar seems to be portrayed in a positive light, as a teacher figure in a hall still full of loyal men. Nonetheless, he is not equipped to battle a monster, and does not. In his sermon to Beowulf at the end of the first half of the poem, Hroðgar concludes his list of fates with the decline of old age: “atoll yldo; oðde eagena bearhtm / forsiteð ond forsworceð; semninga bið / þæt þec, dryhtguma, deað oferswyðeð” (1766-1768) [terrible old age; or the brightness of eyes diminishes and becomes dim; soon enough it will be that death overcomes you, warrior]. Beowulf is indeed around eighty years old at the time of his death (an *eald epelweard* [old guardian of the country]), and has spent fifty years without fighting a single monster when the dragon arrives. Perhaps Hroðgar’s example is meant to suggest that Beowulf underestimates the effects of age on his ability to fight the dragon. He is no longer the vigorous hero of his youth. In which case the ending of *Beowulf* may by lamenting the fact that all men, even great men must succumb to old age, and that denile of that fact in continued heroic effort leads only to suffering and death, that of the Geats.

However, critics who would interpret Beowulf’s death as evidence of his heroic decline and that decline as the reason for the sadness at the end of the poem ignore the fact that Beowulf’s old age is of a different character from Hroðgar’s and far more like that of another old
king in the poem, the Swedish king Ongenþeow.\textsuperscript{45} By also considering the example of Ongenþeow, the function of the three old kings becomes less to show that old age is a universal condition, and more a means to express both the positive and negative ways in which men deal with such a condition. Clare Lees’ has famously written, “the only good hero, after all, is a dead one” (Lees 146), and although this is something of an absurd assertion, in that heroes cannot actually perform heroic deeds after death, her point that death is the only way to guarantee the preservation of an heroic legacy has implications for understanding the actions of old heroes in Beowulf. If a hero does not die at his peak, his legacy concludes with the anticlimactic regression of old age.\textsuperscript{46} Yet while Hroðgar’s legacy seems to suffer from this waning, the heroic deaths of both Beowulf and Ongenþeow save them from just such a fate. Beowulf’s age adds to the glory of his victory instead of detracting from it.

Hroðgar is the central figure of age in the poem, but whether he is a positive or negative representation of the old king is still debated. The poet himself seems conflicted. He writes of the Danes in line 862, “Ne hie huru winedrihten wiht ne logon, / glædne Hroðgar, ac þæt wæs god cyning” (862-863) [However, they did not find fault with the lord-friend, kind Hroðgar, at all, but that was a good king.], in which he uses the epithet “god cyning,” which puts him in the company of Scyld and (later) Beowulf.\textsuperscript{47} However, later the poet seems to qualify his praise:

“þæt wæs an cyning / æghwæs orleahtre, ọp þæt hine yldo benam / mægenes wynnum,  se þe

\textsuperscript{45} Robert Kaske makes the argument that Beowulf, as king, should be read in comparison to Hroðgar (a wise king no longer strong) and Hygelac (a strong king never wise). According to Kaske, Beowulf is the ideal mix of the two qualities (wisdom and physical strength). However, when considering how the poem deals with aging kings, Ongenþeow presents a more interesting and relevant comparison than Hygelac. Like Hygelac, Ongenþeow is a strong war-king, but unlike Hygelac, he manages to live into old age. See Kaske’s “Sapientia et Fortitudo.”

\textsuperscript{46} Lees actually focuses her argument more narrowly on the gender implications of heroism. She discusses how masculinity, and thus heroism, can only be preserved by death before decline. According to Lees, Hroðgar’s death as a weak old king overshadows his heroic youth.

\textsuperscript{47} In his discussion of epithets applied to the kings in Beowulf, Hiroto Ushigaki describes the poet’s use of god cyning [good king] as “unconditional praise” (Ushigaki 64). I am not convinced that this phrase should be interpreted so rigidly.
oft manegum scod” (1885-1887) [that was a peerless king, blameless in every respect, until old age, which often harms many, deprived him of the joys of strength]. If Hroðgar is blameless until old age, then the implication is that he is not so blameless now. The poet is not explicit about the nature of the blame Hroðgar might deserve, whether it is connected to specific actions performed, a result of his declining strength, or just a general state of decline, but the poet’s praise of Hroðgar as god cyning in line 863 is not so unconditional as it first appears.

Despite the poet’s later hedging of his praise of Hroðgar, some critics still read him as an example of a good old king whose chief virtue is wisdom. This wisdom is expressed most clearly in the passage generally referred to as Hroðgar’s “sermon” (1724b-1784), in which the king warns Beowulf against the sin of pride and reminds him of the mortality of all men. However, for all of Hroðgar’s well-sounding words, the state of his kingdom makes it hard to believe that he is quite so wise as his speeches might suggest. The poet foreshadows the fall of the Danes before he predicts the doom of the Geats, although the doom of the Geats feels more present for the reader, who having become attached to them through connection to their hero and king, witnesses this threat with more empathy.

The first foreshadowing that there are problems to come in Heorot occurs early in the poem in the first descriptions of Hroðgar’s beautiful hall: “Sele hlifade / heah ond horngeap; heaðwylma bad, / laðan lifes – ne wæs hit lenge þa gen / þæt se ecghete ɑþumsweoean /

48 See John Leyerle’s “Beowulf the Hero and the King” for a reading of Hroðgar as the wise, old king. Also, Kaske discusses Hroðgar as a foil for Hygelac, as a king who has lost the strength of youth but gained the wisdom of age: “As the quality of a hero, fortitudo implies physical might and courage consistently enough. With regard to sapientia, we seem to have in Beowulf a general, eclectic concept including such diverse qualities as practical cleverness, skill in words and works, knowledge of the past, ability to predict accurately, prudence, understanding, and the ability to choose and direct one’s conduct rightly” (Kaske 425).

49 Note that Hroðgar does not seem to go against any of his own advice, despite the state of his kingdom. He is generous (not following in the footsteps of Heremod, who hoards rings), “beugas daelde / sinc æt symle” (80b-81a) [he dealt rings, treasure at feast], and is very much aware of his own diminished strength in old age (although it does not help him to deal with his problems, most notably, Grendel). Even if a king or hero (Beowulf) follows Hroðgar’s advice, it does not guarantee a successful reign.
æfter wælniðe wæcnan scolde” (81b-85) [The hall stood high, high and wide-gabled; awaited the hostile flames of hated fire – nor was it long then still that the sword-hate should arise from the oath-sworn ones after the deadly hate]. The dual image of Heorot’s creation and destruction in its initial introduction shrouds it and those who inhabit it in a sense of impending doom even before the monster Grendel appears and forces its abandonment for twelve years. Then during Beowulf’s fight with Grendel, the poet repeats the threat of fire (representing destruction) hanging over the hall. He wonders that the hall manages to remain standing despite Beowulf’s grappling with Grendel, and then says, “Þæs ne wendon ær witan Scyldinga / þæt hit a mid gemete manna ænig / betlic ond banfag tobrecan meahte, / listum tolucan, nymþe liges fæþm / swulge on swaþule” (778-782a) [The wise man of the Scyldings did not expect this previously, that at any time, by ordinary means, any men might break it (Heorot), excellent and adorned with bone, pull it asunder with skill unless the embrace of flame might swallow it in heat]. The ironbound hall is spared during the monster fight but only for a while. The two separate references to Heorot’s burning cannot be accidental. The hall, Hroðgar’s crowning achievement and the symbolic center of heroic society, will burn and be destroyed.

The forebodings do not end there, however. There is another passing hint at future strife for the Danes: “Heorot innan wæs / freondum afylled; nalles facenstafas / Þeod-Scyldingas þenden fremedon” (1017b-1019) [Heorot was filled within with friends; not at all did the Scylding people perform treachery (letters) at that time] (my emphasis). The qualifier þenden [at that time] implies that at some other time treachery does happen in Heorot. Like the dual image of Heorot’s creation and burning, the image of the friends in the hall (freondum afylled) is undermined by the threat that those friends might not be friends after all. This line occurs right after the introduction of Hroðgar’s nephew Hroðulf: “fægere geþægon / medoful manig magas
There is very little in the text about the relationship between the two, and these few lines have been the basis of much speculation. Hroðulf is the son of Hroðgar’s younger brother Halga, but he is older than Hroðgar’s sons, Hreðric and Hroðmund, who sit among the giogod [youths] and do not seem old enough to inherit the throne. Hroðulf is what Anglo-Saxons would refer to as a broðorsunu [brother’s son, nephew]. A broðorsunu such as Hroðulf had a stronger claim to inheritance than a sweostorsunu [sister’s son, nephew], and thus there is more anxiety around broðorsunu with regard to issues of succession. It is unclear why Hroðgar would willingly allow such a threat to his own sons to remain in his hall, and so we assume that he has no choice in the matter.  

Even if Hroðgar does not acknowledge Hroðulf as having a competing claim to the throne by removing him from the hall, Wealhþeow seems to do so. She directly addresses her nephew in front of the men in the hall after Hroðgar’s possible adoption offer to Beowulf:

“Ic mine can

glaedne Hroðulf, þæt he þa geogoðe ðe wile
arum healdan  gyf þu ær þonne he,
wine Scildinga,  worold oflæstest;
wene ic þæt he mid gode  gyldan wille
uncran eaeran  gif he þæt eal gemon,
hwæt wit to willan on to worðmyndum
umborwesendum ær  arna gefremedon.”
(1180b-1187)

[I know my kind Hroðulf, that he wishes to keep those youths with honor if you, friendly lord of the Scyldings, relinquishes the world earlier than he; I expect that he will repay

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50 Sisam warns us not to read too much into an unsubstantiated supposition, arguing that the line could be that ‘the good pair of kinsmen were still together (when Beowulf visited Heorot)’ from the time when they defended Heorot from Ingeld’s attack (Sisam 80-82).

51 For an in-depth discussion of inheritance systems in Beowulf, see Drout.

52 Hroðgar also vaguely makes reference to Beowulf as a son, which could be read as an adoption offer, and which would suggest that the king already assumes that his sons will not be able to inherit his throne (as they will still be too young when he dies). In the scene Beowulf is seated by Hroðgar’s sons among the youths.
the offspring of us two with good if he remembers at all those which we two did for joys and glories before in his childhood for his benefit.]

Weahlþeow’s words may be an attempt to secure her nephew’s support for her sons’ succession, which would be further evidence that his presence is a threat to the current political balance in Heorot. This plea for the protection, if not also the political support, of her sons is the last thing we hear from the queen, and ominously, Hroðulf does not respond. 53

Not only does Hroðulf have the potential to threaten the succession of Hroðgar’s sons, but it also appears that this threat is later realized. R. W. Chambers identifies Hroðulf as Rolf Kraki, 54 a legendary Danish king who appears in both Anglo-Saxon and Scandinavian sources, including The Saga of Hrolf Kraki, the Gesta Danorum, Chronicon Lethrense and Annales Lundense. The suggestion of future treachery in Beowulf is only hinted at in passing, as it is in the poem Widsith, in which the description of Hroðgar and Hroðulf is similar to that in Beowulf: “Hroðwulf ond Hroðgar heoldon lengest / sibbe ætosmne suhtorfædran” (45-46) [Hroðwulf and Hroðgar, uncle and nephew, held peace together the longest]. 55 Chambers suggests that “the mention of Hrothgar and Hrothulf together seems to stir the poet to dark sayings” (Beowulf: An Introduction to the Study of the Poem 25). The Scandinavian tradition includes multiple stories about Hrolf’s (Hroðulf’s) life and kingship. Saxo Grammaticus in the Gesta Danorum mentions Hroðl’s slaying of Rorik, which would have been the Danish version of the name Hreðric. The

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53 Helen Damico argues that Weahlþeow’s speech, “rather than being an appeal . . . is closer to a proclamation of proper action” (Damico 129-131), and suggests other motives for Weahlþeow’s address to her nephew (by marriage), even that she may be defending Hroðulf’s claim to the throne in the face of Hroðgar’s vague adoption offer. As she points out, the queen never mentions that she expects Hroðulf to support her sons’ claim to the throne only that, “he mid gode gyldan wille / uncran eaferan” (1184b-1185a) [he wishes to repay our sons with good] (Damico 126-127).

54 According to Chambers, Scandinavian authorities have Hroðulf slaying his cousin Hrethic. In Saxo Grammaticus, Roluo (Rolf = O.N. Hroðfr, O.E. Hrothulf) slew Roricus (or Hraerek = O.E. Hrethric) who was himself a king of the Danes at the time (Beowulf: An Introduction to the Study of the Poem 26).

Scandinavian material is inconsistent in the details of Hreðric’s character, but despite this inconsistency Chambers claims that Hreðric was “almost certainly an actual historic prince who was thrust from the throne by Hroðulf” (Beowulf: An Introduction to the Study of the Poem 27). While the Beowulf poet only hints at the possibility that Hroðulf causes problems with the succession of Hroðgar’s sons, the Scandinavian Hrolf Kraki fleshes out the dangers that such a man in the hall represents.

The final sword that the poet hangs over the heads of the Danes is the fragile peace-weaving of Freawaru and Ingeld, King of the Heaðobears, which Beowulf predicts will fail. He tells Hygelac about Hroðgar’s attempt to mend a feud sparked by the killing of Froda, Ingeld’s father: “mid ðy wife wælfaehða dæl, / sæcca gesette” (2028-2029a) [with that woman settle a portion of slaughter-feuds, or fighting]. Beowulf predicts that in a “lytle hwile” (2030b) [little while] this peace-weaving arrangement will be violently ended when Freawaru enters the hall followed by Danish attendants carrying the weapons (“gomelra lafe” (2036b) [heirlooms of the old ones]) of the Heaðobard warriors killed in battle. Beowulf predicts that some old spear-warrior will incite the young men saying, “Meaht ðu, min wine, mece gecnawan, / þone þin fæder to gefeohte bær / under heregriman hindeman siðe” (2047-2049) [Might you, my friend, recognize that sword which your father bore to the fight under the war-mask during his last journey]. This reminder of bitter sorrow will lead to “bioð (ab)rocene on ba healfe / aðsweord eorla” (2063-2064a) [on both sides the sworn oath of all will be broken]. Beowulf concludes, “Þy ic Heaðo-Bear[d]na hyldo ne telge, / dryhtsibbe dæl Denum unfæcne, / freonscipe fæstne” (2067-2069a) [For that reason I do not count on the loyalty of the Heaðobeards to keep a portion of sincere peace with the Danes, a fast friendship].56 The entire

56 Saxo Grammaticus records a Scandinavian analogue of the Freawaru peace-weaving story (Saxo 205, 212-213). In book six of the Gesta Danorum, Freawaru, who is a Saxon princess, marries Ingeld, whose father Frotho (Froda)
episode once more undermines the confidence in the security of the Danish future. By hinting at the promise of future strife from a human source, the poet undercuts the joy of the Geats’ departure from Heorot having cleansed it of monsters.57

The foreshadowing of Heorot burning, Hroðulf’s treachery, and the failure of peace-weaving with the Heaðobards does not suggest that Heorot is politically stable. Their future is as uncertain as the Geats’, which makes it hard to see Hroðgar as a wise old king.

Beyond the situation in which the poem leaves Hroðgar, we should also consider the poet’s depiction of Hroðgar’s age and whether his character, if not the state of his kingdom, is worthy of praise. After all, sometimes good men are trapped in bad situations. In his article, “What to do with old Kings,” Edward Irving describes the old king type-character as associated with respect (oldness being an absolute sort of value) but also a sense of contempt. Because elderly warriors are “genuinely handicapped in the heroic world of violent physical action” (“What To Do With Old Kings” 260), Hroðgar represents both dignity and genuine impotence. The dignity that Irving identifies comes partially from the fact that age itself is a sign of power for a king or at least previous power. Only a strong king could manage to survive the many dangers of the heroic world into old age. In reference to Beowulf’s fifty-year reign, Niles offers the observation that historical kings reigned for much shorter periods of time, and although he admits that the fifty is more a product of being a round number rather than a specific span of

was killed by the Saxons. The peace-weaving fails when an old warrior admonishes Ingeld at a banquet for not avenging his father’s murder. These instigative words lead to Ingeld breaking his oath and divorcing Freawaru. This analogue may not be directly related to the story attributed to the Danes in Beowulf, but it adds a context of doom to the peace-weaving of Hroðgar’s daughter (and thus the fate of the Danes).

57 Berger and Leicester comment on Grendel’s universal significance, “as an evil transcending this or any individual monster, sown in the world with the generation of the first human family, and therefore never to be finally purged by the heroic solution of single encounter” (Berger 53). If Grendel is representative of an underlying problem in the hall, then Beowulf’s victory is only over this incarnation. Berger and Leicester read the monsters as distractions from the real issues in heroic society which perpetuates violence by the very structures that the characters take for granted (gift giving, oath taking, succession, etc). While, “the embodiment of evil in monsters diverts the characters from the true intra-psychic and -social sources of more abiding trouble” (Berger 54), the audience and poet see the gap between the “happy ending” of the Grendelkin fights and the reality of continued hall strife.
time, it functions as evidence of Beowulf’s effectiveness as king (Niles 245). So Hroðgar’s age and later Beowulf’s become evidence of both a past physical prowess in his amassing of hall and war band and a present social prowess in his ability to continue ruling that war band when physically no longer the strongest of the group. Many kings even within Beowulf die before ever reaching such a position: Hygelac, Heardred, Finn, and Hrothgar’s brothers, to name a few.

And yet despite the power that might be implied by the elderly Hroðgar’s continuing rule over a great hall at his age, his character is still dominated by a sense of weakness. There is nothing but a residual sense (a shadow)\textsuperscript{58} of the glory of Hroðgar’s past: “Þa wæs Hroðgare heresped gyfen, / wiges weorðmynd, þæt him his winemagas / georne hyrdon, oð þæt seo geogoð geweox, / magodriht micel” (64-67a) [Then success in war, glory of war, was given to Hroðgar, that his kinsmen eagerly obeyed him, or that his youth increased the great band of retainers.], “þæt hit wearð eal gearo, / healærna maest” (77b-78a) [that it all entirely happened, the greatest of hall-buildings], and “He beot ne aleh: beagas dælde, / since æt symble” (80-81a) [He did not fail to fulfill the promise: distributed rings, treasure at the feast]. In the present there are only faint memories, the grandeur of Heorot, and his generous gifts as proof of a heroic past, because his youthful exploits never fully take shape in the poem, especially when compared to the vivid descriptions of Beowulf’s past, which manifests itself in the detailed recounting of the Breca challenge and through the audience having “witnessed” (twice, thanks to the retelling) the Grendelkin fights.\textsuperscript{59} The difference in the representation of Hroðgar’s past versus Beowulf’s has serious implications in heroic society, in which men are defined by accumulated exploits.

\textsuperscript{58} Edward Peters explores the medieval character of what he calls “The Shadow King” or Rex Inutilis. For his discussion of Hroðgar specifically, see Peters (95-100).
\textsuperscript{59} And these examples of the clarity of Beowulf’s past heroic action are only those that occur before he is king. After the fifty-year jump, as an old king, Beowulf’s past is still continually present in: the recounting of Hygelac’s failed raid on Frisia and Heardred’s death at the hands of Onela (2354b-2396), the explication of the Geatish succession (of which Beowulf is obviously a part)(2425-2443), the telling of Beowulf’s revenge on the Swedes for Hygleac’s death (including Beowulf’s crushing of Dæghrefn)(2462b-2509), and in both the last words of Beowulf himself, and the eulogy of the Geats (2792b-2859, 3110-3182).
Irving even admits that Hroðgar essentially lacks a third dimension in time. To the audience he is an old king without the young counterpart, as if he were always old and thus always weak (“What To Do With Old Kings” 266). On the other hand, the audience not only hears about but also experiences Beowulf’s youth, so that the memory has a greater impact on the perception of him in old age.

Whatever the audience’s sense of Hroðgar’s past, he himself is often mindful of his former exploits, as he is when Beowulf leaves Heorot on his return to Geatland:

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hwilum eft ongan     eldo gebunden
gomel guðwiga     gioguðe cwīðan,
hildestrengo;     hreðer (in)ne weoll
þonne he wintrum frod     worn gemunde.
(2111-2114)
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[sometime after, the old warrior, bound with age, began to speak about youth, battle strength; welled within the breast when he, wise with winters, remembered much]

This reminiscence suggests that Beowulf reminds the old king of himself in his days of glory as a young warrior. Later when Beowulf is about to face the dragon, he too is mindful of his youth:

“Ic geneðde fela / guða on geogoðe” (2511b-2512a) [I engaged in many battles in youth], and remembering his grapples with Grendel in Heorot (2519b-2521). However, although both kings look fondly upon the past, Hroðgar’s reminiscence is characterized by a sense of loss with respect to his current situation of impotence while Beowulf’s is woven into boasting that becomes the impetus of the action that he intends to take in fighting the dragon. Hroðgar looks upon his youthful strength as something lost forever, emphasizing his current state of weakness. Beowulf looks upon his past as an inspiration for strength and courage in current exploits, emphasizing his continued state of heroic prowess.

Hroðgar’s current weakness is also emphasized in his relation to Beowulf. Hroðgar strangely exhibits excessive sadness at Beowulf’s departure:
Considering the fact that the warrior could not have been in Heorot for much more than four days, Hrōðgar seems disproportionately sad. Mary Dockray-Miller sees a homoeroticism in this leave-taking, arguing that the combination of the kiss and the embrace (be healse genam) suggests that the scene is more emotionally charged than the usual goodbye, especially when Hrōðgar starts to cry (hruron him tearas) (Dockray-Miller 19). Dockray-Miller goes farther than I would in ascribing a particularly homoerotic nature to Hrōðgar’s sadness. If the sadness is personally related to Beowulf, it is tied more to the loss of the youth and strength that he embodies, rather than the man himself, which the king mourns.

However, Dockray-Miller’s observation that the tears at the leave taking “indicate desperation rather than resolution” (Dockray-Miller 19) is more in line with the scene in Heorot. There are many threats that still trouble the Danes. Beowulf then would represent relief from at least some of them. Hill frames the adoption as a more pragmatic affair, an attempted recruitment of a warrior from one band to another (“Anglo-Saxon Warrior Ethic” 113). Beowulf

60 Dockray-Miller’s analysis of Hrōðgar is part of a larger reading of the poem with emphasis on gender and masculinity. I do not find it necessary to frame Hrōðgar’s weakness only as a result of his declining masculinity, as Dockray-Miller does, but her observations concerning how that weakness is expressed are useful.

61 Dockray-Miller also sees the leave-taking as an expression of Beowulf’s power, which she again equates with masculinity. “His response to Hrōðgar’s outburst of emotion is the same as his response to the offer of adoption: he ignores it… In a striking change of tone after the poet tells us that Hrōðgar is longing for Beowulf in his blood, Beowulf simply walks away” (Dockray-Miller 24). Again, her analysis of the power structure is accurate here, but her framework of reading power and masculinity as synonymous is overly simplified. Masculinity is certainly a part of attaining and expressing power, especially in heroic society, but it is not the only part.
has within a few days proven a valuable retainer. He fulfills every oath he makes to Hroðgar. Losing the stability that Beowulf might have provided, mixed with the inherent reminder that Hroðgar himself can no longer provide that stability, could be enough to cause such an emotional response from the old king. The departure scene is over-determined, but whatever the reason for Hroðgar’s tears, they are not a sign of strength.

Hroðgar’s loss of strength in old age is compounded by his passivity, something that has not gone unnoticed by critics and readers. When dealing with the Grendel situation, he not only cannot fight Grendel, but he will not even try (instead he, “unbliðe sæt” (130b) [sat sorrowfully]). When his retainers fail to defeat Grendel, he gives up Heorot completely to the monster, “oð þæt idel stod / husa selest was seo hwil micel, / twelf wintra tid” (145b-147a) [until that greatest of houses stood empty, the while was long, the time of twelve winters]. Irving frames this passivity in terms of Hroðgar’s religion as that of “one who depends on God to rescue him and who even grumbles at one point that God could easily have done so earlier if he had a mind to” (“The Nature of Christianity” 14). Whether or not we read the poem with an emphasis on Christianity, Irving’s observation that Hroðgar awaits deliverance, which eventually comes in the form of Beowulf rather than self-enacting it, is accurate. In the context of his discussion of old kings Irving also points out that Hroðgar is notably absent in all active scenes: he is not sleeping with the men in the hall during either the Grendel fight (710-836) or Grendel’s Mother’s attack (1251-1306a); he does not accompany the men who follow Grendel’s blood trail to the mere (837-874b); even though he leads the troop to the mere (1399-1472), he does not accompany Beowulf to fight against the female monster (1492-1622) (“What to do with Old Kings” 64-65). Hroðgar might as well not exist in the context of the warrior band, because his hall and troop are essentially functioning without him, a dynamic that never comes to pass in
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Beowulf’s hall.

Hroðgar’s passivity and outright absence during the heroic action in Denmark are symptoms of his age, but it is ambiguous whether the poet is critical of him personally for this and how far such criticism might extend. When responding to Unferð’s verbal assault at the first banquet in Heorot, Beowulf responds by pointing out the Danes’ incompetence in battling Grendel:

Secge ic þe to soðe, sunu Ecgłafes, þæt næfre Gre[n]del swa fella gryra gefremede, atoll ægłąca, ealdre þinum, hynðo on Heorote, gif þin hige ware, sefa swa searogrim swa þu self talast; ac he hafað onfunden þæt he þa fæhðe ne þearf, atole ecgræce eower leode swiðe onsittan

[I, son of Ecgłaf, tell you in truth that Grendel, the horrible monster, never would have performed so many terrors against your lord, humiliation in Heorot, if your spirit were as fierce in battle as you yourself suppose; but he has found that he need not dread very much that hostility, terrible sword-storm of your people]

While the comment is leveled at Unferð, it actually implicates the entire Danish troop in this *hynðo* [humiliation]. However, Hroðgar does not seem to take the comment as a personal insult, which suggests that as an aged king, it is socially acceptable for him to rely on retainers to engage in the physical defense of the realm. As Irving notes, “old men who fight with all the recklessness and skill of the young are rare” (“What To Do With Old Kings” 260). The insult would then fall upon the Danish warriors for failing to defend Heorot against Grendel.

Irving, who skirts the issue of Hroðgar and the Danes not facing the monster themselves, argues that Hroðgar is a good leader in his decision to accept the aid of a foreign warrior: “For the good of his people, he carries out the almost sacrificial act of deeding his hall over to a stranger to defend” (“What To Do With Old Kings” 262). Irving thinks Hroðgar is wise to put
aside his pride and accept Beowulf’s help, but his analysis does not consider the possibility that more manipulative motives are in play. Hroðgar advantageously shifts the situations in the hall to save his reputation as much as possible. Irving does not offer an explanation as to why the Danes do not have any allies willing to help in the twelve years Grendel attacks them, despite the fact that their suffering is widely known. Their weakness is “undyrne” (150b) [not hidden], and yet based on Hroðgar’s interactions with Beowulf, although Hroðgar will accept help, he will not ask for it. He also accepts the hero’s request to fight Grendel only after reframing it as the repaying of a debt already incurred by Beowulf’s father, spending sixteen lines describing the feud he helped Ecgeow settle:

‘Fore fyhtum þu,   wine min Beowulf,
ond for arstafum    usic sohtest
...
Siððan þa fæhðe   feo þingode:
sende ic Wylfingum    ofer wæteres hrycg
ealde madmas;    he me aþas swor’
(457-458, 470-472)

[You, my friend Beowulf, sought us on account of fights and for a favor … Afterwards I settled that feud with property, sent old treasures to Wylfing over the ridge of the waters; he swore oaths to me.]

Hroðgar thus stages his acceptance of Beowulf’s aid as a fulfillment of past debt rather than as Beowulf doing him a favor, but his reaction to Beowulf’s vow to kill Grendel belies just how much the Danes need someone to kill their monster:

Þa wæs on salum    sinces brytta
gamolfeax ond guðrof;    geoce gelyfde
brego Beorht-Dena;    gehyrde on Beowulfæ
folces hyrde    fastræde gepoht
(607-609)

[Then the distributer of treasure, grey-haired and brave in battle, was in happiness; the lord of the Bright-Danes counted on help; heard firmly resolved thought in Beowulf,

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62 Beowulf’s father is only referenced in the poem and never appears as a character. In his youth, Beowulf is raised by his grandfather, Hreðel, who is his mother’s father and king of the Geats before Beowulf’s uncle, Hygelac.
shepherd of the people]

Even before Hroðgar brings up Beowulf’s father, he says, “Ic hine cuðe cnihtwesende” (372) [I knew him when he was young]. His first comments contextualize the hero as a child, constructing a relationship between him and Beowulf with himself in the position of dominance. Of course this construction does not last long. When the hero comes into the hall, it becomes clear that he is no longer a child, and the power dynamic falls overwhelmingly in his favor.

After agreeing to let Beowulf fight Grendel, Hroðgar does not risk questioning Beowulf’s legitimacy himself. Instead the king hides behind his retainers Unferð, who in the ensuing verbal exchange is charged by the foreign warrior both with failing to stop Grendel himself (“ac he hafað onfundende þæt he þa fæhðe ne þearf; atole ecgþraece eower leode / swiðe onsittan” (595-597a) [but he (Grendel) has found that he need not dread very much that hostility, terrible sword-storm of your people]) and with kin-killing (“ðu þinum broðrum to banan wurde, / heafodmægum; þæs þu in helle scealt / werhðo dreogan” (587-589a) [you became slayer of your brothers, near relatives; for this you shall in the hall suffer humiliation]). In this way Hroðgar is able to contest Beowulf’s reputation without having his own called into question. He does not get his hands dirty.

Hroðgar may also be attempting to manipulate his social and political position in the hall in taking the “frolic wif” (615a) [noble woman] Wealhþeow to bed in front of Beowulf and his troop: “Þa him Hroðgar gewat mid his hæleþa gedryht, / eodur Scyldinga ut of healle; / wolde wigfruma Wealhþeo secan, / cwen to gebeddan” (662-665a) [Then Hrothgar, the protector of the Scyldings, departed from him with his troop of warriors, out of the hall; the war-

63 An example of Anglo-Saxon flyting, in which warriors engage in a contest of words rather than swords. Robinson and Orchard argue that helle [Hell] is an error for healle [hall] considering that the seriousness of mentioning “hell” seems out of proportion with Beowulf’s character. Beowulf’s interactions in the hall are very diplomatic. Irving believes helle is correct and refers to kin-killing in Unferð’s past (Klaeber 154).
chief wished to visit Wealhþeow, the queen to bed. He leaves the hall with Wealhþeow after she presents the mead cup to Beowulf’s men who have just completed a long and womanless journey across the sea. They have gotten a chance to admire her beauty up close. Later “eode goldhroden / freolicu folccwen to hire frean sittan” (640b-641) [the gold-adorned noble folk-queen went to sit by her lord], and Hroðgar makes a visible show of his sexual conquests. Then after the fight with Grendel, Hroðgar’s return to the hall with Wealhþeow dispels any doubt as to the king’s nighttime activities:

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swylce self cyning
  of brydbure, beahhorda weard,
tryddode tīrfaest getrume micle,
cystum gecþed, ond his cwen mid him
medostigge mæt mæþþ hose.
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(920b-924)

[likewise, the king himself, the guardian of the ring-hoard, stepped glorious from the bridal chamber, made known with excellence the great troop, and his queen with him traversed the path to the mead-hall with a troop of maiden attendants.]

In this return to the hall it seems as if Hroðgar’s show of sexual prowess the night before has backfired. Raymond Tripp suggests that this passage implies that “Hroðgar returns like a cock with his flock of hens” (Tripp 61), in the context of other bird humor like that in Chaucer’s *Nun’s Priest’s Tale*. It is not an altogether flattering connection. Tripp’s interpretation of the humor in this scene is very problematic, but it is not hard to read Hroðgar’s return with the women to the hall after the battle as having undercurrents of mockery. It is a strange image and

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64 Wealhþeow’s names does mean something like “foreign servant” or “foreign captive”, which could be a reference to how she came to be in Heorot (thus as a constant reminder of Hroðgar’s past victories). Whatever the specific meaning of the name, it highlights the fact that she is a sexual conquest of Hroðgar.

65 Chanticleer the rooster is the central character in the Nun’s Priest Tale (a fable) from Chaucer’s *The Canterbury Tales*. He has a flock of seven wives, one of whom persuades him to neglect a dream that a fox will soon eat him (calling him a coward and almost seducing him with thought of sleeping next to her). This proves to be bad advice, as the fox does later appear and almost eat Chanticleer, but through a series of events Chanticleer escapes into a tree. In the tale Canticlear is depicted strutting about the yard with his wives. I do not see any real connection between Hroðgar and Chanticleer (both in terms of literary traditions and the time separating the two stories). It is a forced argument.
not particularly masculine, in the way that the initial scene of him going to Wealhþeow’s bed chamber might be, or heroic.

To be fair, Hroðgar has been sleeping outside the hall for twelve years at this point, so his sleeping in the brydbure [bridal bower] may be a continuation of what has become customary to the Danes as opposed to the men sleeping together in the hall and visiting the women only to engage in sex. On the other hand, it is noteworthy that Hroðgar does not choose to reclaim Heorot the night of the impending battle between Beowulf and Grendel, instead giving up his hall to Beowulf: “Næfre ic ænegum men ær alyfde, / siþæn ic hond ond rond hebban mihte, / ðryþærn Dena buton þe nuða. / Hafa nu ond geheald husa selest” (655-658) [Never before have I, since I might raise hand and shield, entrusted the mighty house of the Danes to any men except for now. Have and hold the best house]. Hroðgar entrusting his hall to Beowulf could be a foreshadowing of Beowulf’s future kingship, but even if it does not intimate Beowulf’s kingship, it does signify Hroðgar ceding his place in the war band and in heroic society.

Dockray-Miller argues that sleeping in the hall dressed for battle is a masculine, collective activity: “Rather than assert the bond between lord and warrior by sleeping in camaraderie with his men, Hroðgar chooses to sleep with the queen” (Dockray-Miller 11). She connects Hroðgar’s sleeping with Wealhþeow with the Danes having had to abandon the hall and sleep with women “æfter burum” (140a) [among the burghs] during Grendel’s twelve years of raiding (Dockray-Miller 12). Instead of an affirmation of masculinity, Dockray-Miller interprets Hroðgar’s heterosexual relations with Wealhþeow as an emphasis on his lack of masculinity, so far as it draws attention to the fact that he cannot make the ultimate masculine statement of fighting the monster (Dockray-Miller 14). Here I agree with her analysis and would emphasize the relationship between masculinity and power. Hroðgar’s show of taking the queen to bed is a
scheme to show power through implied sexual conquest, and it works when he departs with Wealhþeow at night before Beowulf defeats Grendel. But its effect is reversed when Beowulf performs the true act of dominance in defeating the monster. In the light of the morning, when Hroðgar returns to Heorot, Wealhþeow and her attendants do not appear like such a prize compared to Grendel.

Finding himself in a relatively weak position following the Grendel fight after the hero in one night dispatches a monster that has been tormenting the Danes for twelve years, Hroðgar tries to affect the balance of power through ceremonial gift-giving:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{brand Healfdenes} \\
\text{segen gyldenne} & \quad \text{sigores to leane,} \\
\text{hroden hildécumbor,} & \quad \text{helm ond byran.} \\
\text{Mære maðbümoweord} & \quad \text{manige gesawon} \\
\text{beforan beorn beran.} & \quad (1020b-1024b)
\end{align*}
\]

[the sword of Healfdane, a golden banner, a decorated battle-banner, as reward for victory, helmet and byrnie. Many saw him carry the famous precious sword before the warrior]

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Ymb þæs helmes hrof} & \quad \text{heafodbeorge} \\
\text{wirum bewunden} & \quad \text{walu utan heold} \\
(1030-1031)
\end{align*}
\]

[The crest of the helmet held from without, around that helmet’s roof, that head-protection, wound about with wire]

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Heht þa eorla hleo} & \quad \text{eahta mearas} \\
\text{fætedhleo} & \quad \text{on flet teon,} \\
\text{(in) under eoderas;} & \quad \text{þara anum stod} \\
\text{sadol searwum fah} & \quad \text{since gewurþad;} \\
\text{þæt wæs hildesetl} & \quad \text{heahcyninges} \\
\text{þonne sweordæ gelac} & \quad \text{sunu Healfdanes} \\
\text{efnan wolde} & \quad (1035-1041a)
\end{align*}
\]

[Then the protector commanded to draw into the hall eight horses with ornamented headgear, in under the enclosure; on one of those a saddle shining with skill (of craftsman), adorned with treasure; that was the war-seat of the great king when the son of Healfdane wanted to perform the play of swords.]

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66 See Hill’s *The Cultural World of Beowulf* (63-84) for greater discussion of gift giving and reciprocity dynamics.
Before the departure to Geatland:

\[ \text{Da git him eorla hleo inne gesealde,} \\
\text{mago Healfdenes, maþmas twelfe} \\
(1866-1867) \]

[Then the protector of nobles, the son of Healfdane, made a present of twelve treasures within]

And then a third time during Beowulf’s presentation of the gifts to Hygelac:

\[ \text{Het ða in beran eaforheafodsegn,} \\
\text{heãð osteapne helm, hare byrnan,} \\
\text{guðsweord geatolic (2152-2154a)} \]

[Then (Beowulf) commanded to bear the boar-head-sign, the battle-steep helmet, the gray byrnie, the adorned war-sword]

\[ \text{Hyrde ic þæt þam fætwum feower mearas} \\
\text{lunghre, gelice last weardode,} \\
\text{æppelfæaluwe (2163-2165a)} \]

[I heard that after those treasures four swift bay horses alike followed the tracks]

\[ \text{Hyede ic þæt he þone healsbeah Hygde gesealde,} \\
\text{wrætliche wundurmaððum, ðone þe him Wealhðeo geaf,} \\
\text{ðeod(nes) dohtor, þrio wicg somod} \\
\text{swancor ond sadolbeorht (2172-2175a)} \]

[I heard that he gave that neck-ring to Hygd, the daughter of the lord, three horses together supple and saddle-bright]

The grandeur of these gifts and the extensiveness of the description is a visual expression of the great service that Beowulf has rendered the Danes, adding to his glory by putting a material value to his accomplishments. As Niles has noted, “Arms, precious ornaments, human lives, and human services can be equated in this society, pragmatically speaking. They are functionally equivalent, for they can be exchanged in a variety of ways spelled out by law and custom. The poet’s praise of material things should not be taken as mere ornamentation” (Niles 219).\footnote{Niles argues that the Anglo-Saxon wergild (the system of settling feuds for the killing of a human by paying their...}
case the kingly gifts are a reflection of the hero’s worth. The poet could also be foreshadowing Beowulf’s own future kingship, especially in the context of Hroðgar’s comment that “þe Sæ-Geatas selran næbben / to geceosenne cyning ænigne, / hordweard hæleþa, gyro þu healdan wylt / maga rice” (1850-1853a) [the Sea-Geats will not have to choose any better king, treasure-guardian of warriors, if you wish to hold the kingdom of kinsmen].

Berger and Leicester observe an “uneasiness that lurks beneath the joyful surface of the ceremony (1020-62)” (Berger 48). They point to the poet’s approval or defense of the gifts (lines 1048-9) and suggest that “This (approval) conspicuously suppresses the opposing thought: that someone might find fault” (Berger 49). Their argument is focused on the problems that they see with gift-giving within a system of reciprocity that breeds its own violence and doom. The problem for Berger and Leicester lies in the fact that Beowulf provides a service that cannot be reciprocated as opposed to Hroðgar not being generous enough.68

Instead of seeing the gifts as a sign of Beowulf or Hroðgar’s power or glory, Mary Dockray-Miller sees these gift-giving scenes (991-1062 and 1866-1887) as yet another expression of Hroðgar’s martial impotence. He can only assert his authority and status through gift-giving, which is a real expression of power in the Anglo-Saxon hall. As Niles explains, “Precious gifts clearly reflect the glory of the givers, for only people of worth could afford to present them” (Niles 214). Dockray-Miller argues that even then the excessive grandeur of those gifts (as “yrfelafe” (1053a) [heirlooms]) is evidence of insecurity, as if Hroðgar feels the need to distribute such gifts as a show of power insomuch as they represent past conquest and military

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68 Berger and Leicester see the inability to create a functional reciprocal relationship with an extraordinary hero like Beowulf as leading to the problems with the Geatish warband at the end of the poem (Berger 47)
might: “perhaps the greatness of those gifts is an attempt, on some level, to make up for his
inability to kill the monster himself” (Dockray-Miller 10). She sees Beowulf’s lack of explicit
acknowledgement of the gifts or the adoption as a sign that the hero, not the king, is the center of
power (Dockray-Miller 16). However, while Beowulf responds to the adoption offer by talking
about the Grendel fight in terms of a collective “we” of the troop, which could be a conscious
deflection, it seems more likely that in the case of the gift-giving scene the poet just did not
record Beowulf’s response. After the description of gifts the poet describes the “sang ond sweg”
(1063a) [song and sound] in the hall. I am hesitant to go as far with my interpretation of
Hroðgar’s weakness as Dockray-Miller. There are more social and political factors to consider
with respect to gift-giving than just its reflection of Hroðgar’s inadequacy.

Chambers’ discussion of gift-giving in *Widsith* offers another possibility for reading
Hroðgar’s generosity. He frames the giving of lavish gifts to foreign warriors as an indirect way
for kings to give gifts to other kings:

> When trade, or fortune in the gift hall or on the battlefield had put into the hands of a
> “thegn” treasures too great for a private gentleman to possess — an armlet or necklace of
> surpassing value, a king’s panoply, a tame bear — custom approved of his presenting it
to a great chief: if he had one, to his own chief. (Widsith 24)

However, it seems strange that Hroðgar would choose to present Beowulf with Danish heirlooms
intending for them to inevitably pass Hygelac. Surely there must be other worthy treasures he
could give that have less dynastic implications, unless years of Grendel’s raiding have
diminished the Danish reserves so much that these are the last treasures left that are appropriate
for a king such as Hygelac. Chambers also comments on the expectation that in return for
passing the gift on to their lords, thanes would expect a social reward rather than lesser treasure
in kind:

> The prince makes the donor his personal servant, or gives him a landed estate, or weds
him to his daughter. It is not so much an exchange as a recognition of mutual
dependence. The winnings of the retainer fall to the chief: the chief values the wealth
only as he may share it with his retainers. (Widsith 25)

Hygelac’s repayment of Beowulf’s gifts is reflective of Chambers’ observations:

\[
\text{Het ða eorla hleo in gefetian,} \\
\text{heaðorof cyning Hreðles lafe} \\
\text{golde gegyrede; næs mid Geatum ða} \\
\text{sinumaðum selra on sweordes had;} \\
\text{þæt he on Biowulfes bearm alegde,} \\
\text{ond him gesealde seofan þusendo,} \\
\text{bold ond bregostol. Him wæs (b)am samod} \\
\text{on ðam leodscipe lond gecynde,} \\
\text{eard edelriht, oðrum swiðor} \\
\text{side rice ðam ðær selra wæs.} \\
\text{(2190-2199)}
\]

[Then the protector of earls, king brave in battles, commanded to be brought the heirloom of Hreþel, prepared with gold; there was not then among the Geats a better treasure in the form of a sword; he lay that in Beowulf’s lap, and made him a present of seven thousand hides (of land), a hall and throne. The inherited land in that country, the land of ancestral right, was to them both together, to the other the more broad kingdom, to him who was higher there.]

Even if this system does not explain the dynastic heirlooms that Hroðgar presents to Beowulf, it does contextualize Beowulf’s presentation of the gifts to his own lord not as an act meant to highlight his loyalty, but in keeping with the normal and expected behavior of any thane.\(^69\)

The giving of dynastic heirlooms could instead be a reassertion of Hroðgar’s earlier offer of adoption to Beowulf, which occurs about 100 lines before the gift-giving. Hill argues in favor of interpreting Hroðgar’s gesture as one of offering the right of succession as well as kinship:

At the least Hrothgar gives items from his personal treasure chest, signifying both his warrior heritage and his past role as kingly war-band leader. By passing on those tokens to Beowulf, Hrothgar invites Beowulf to those roles for the Danes. But because he is a king and the last of a line in his own generation, he implicates the dynastic succession when he gives dynastic gifts. (“The Cultural World in Beowulf” 99)

\(^69\) Hill argues that Beowulf giving gifts to Hygelac is an assertion of his loyalties to Hygelac after he has provided another king with “continuing” service in killing both Grendel and Grendel’s mother (“The Cultural World of Beowulf” 88).
If this is the case, then the gifts could be a gesture meant to emphasize the seriousness of Hroðgar’s adoption offer, especially in his command to “het hine wel brucan” (1045b) [commanded him to make use of well] (echoed by Beowulf when giving up his war-garments to Wiglaf, “het hyne brucan well” (2812b) [commanded him to use well]), which could be the expectation that Beowulf will personally use the weapons rather than pass them on to Hygelac. Furthermore, if Hroðgar expects Beowulf to accept his offer of kinship and stay in Heorot, then he would not be distributing those heirlooms with the expectation that they will end up with the Geats. If Beowulf were to become part of the Danish kinship, it would be appropriate for him to have Danish heirlooms.

The adoption itself, if that is what Hroðgar offers Beowulf, is a bold move. Hroðgar addresses the hero during the feast after the Grendel fight: “Nu ic, Beowulf, þec, / secg bet[e]sta, me for sunu wylle / freogan on ferhþe; heald forð tela / niwe sibbe” (946b-949a) [Now I wish to have you, Beowulf, best of men, as a son to me; hold forth well this new kinship]. It is unclear whether such a remark actually constitutes a real offer of adoption into the house of the Scyldings or if it is purely a social gesture. If Hroðgar is making a serious proposal here, it would make Beowulf a powerful ally, especially against the shadowy figure of Hroþulf. As discussed earlier, Hroðgar has known Beowulf only a few days when he offers adoption, which is far too soon to initiate a bond as serious as adoption on emotional grounds if not also on political ones.

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70 Mary Dockray-Miller also reads the adoption offer as Hroðgar trying to rebalance the power of the hero in his hall, but interprets this desire through the lens of Lacanian ideas of the phallic power of the father over the child (with the father as the possessor of the Law) (Dockray-Miller 25-26). This interpretation overly complicates Hroðgar’s motives and assumes too much in reference to the underpinnings of Hroðgar’s psychology relating to his offer of adoption to Beowulf. The influence that such a position (adopted father) would afford the old king over the strong hero is motive enough.

71 Although Beowulf would be a powerful ally against Hroþulf or other enemies, his presence adopted into the Danish hall could also lead to further complications of the succession of Hroðgar’s two young sons. If Wealthþeow recognizes the implications of Beowulf’s adoption with regards to her sons, her application to Hroþulf to protect them (as discussed earlier) may be an expression of her disapproval of Hroðgar’s offer.
Drout notes the inappropriate nature of the offer in his analysis of Wealhþeow’s negative reaction to it (Drout 201-202). The offer is a purely political move that unfortunately fails for Hroðgar. Beowulf does not engage this adoption and does not even acknowledge it verbally or physically, returning to Heorot expressing constant support for his lord and uncle Hygelac. The loss of the potential stability that Beowulf represents for Hroðgar could be the reason that the king is so sad to see the hero leave Heorot as opposed to any subconscious homoeroticism.

The ultimate failure of the adoption is solidified in Beowulf’s departure for Geatland, when the poet reveals, “Him wæs bega wen / ealdum infrodum, ọfres swiðor, / Ọt h[i]e seodda(n no) ọgeon moston, / modige on męble” (1873b-1876a) [the expectation of both was to them, the old wise ones, especially the other, that they not at all might see afterwards, the mighty ones in meeting]. Not only does Beowulf not accept the offer to stay in Heorot, but it seems as if his offer of continued assistance to Hroðgar and the Danes will not come to pass either. He promises Hroðgar:

“Ic on Hygelac wat,  
Geata dryhten, ṛeah ḏe he geong sy,  
folces hyrde, Ọt he mec fremman wile  
wordum ond worcum, ṛe ot ic ḏe wel herige  
ond ḏe to geoce ọr holt bere,  
maegens fultum, ṛe ḏe bid manna ṛearf”
(1830b-1835)

[I know in Higelac, lord of the Geats, guardian of the people, though he is young, that he further wants me with words and words, that I praise you well and help you, bear the spear-shaft with the support of strength, where there is need of men]

After Beowulf reports to Hygelac, there is no reference to the Danes until the brief mention of the victory against Grendel before the dragon fight. When Beowulf leaves Denmark, he never returns.72

72 Berger and Leicester point out the possibility that this is actually what Hroðgar desires. If he cannot keep Beowulf as an ally in Heorot, then he must attempt to ensure that the Geats will not later return to invade Heorot themselves.
Despite the lack of response to his offer of adoption, Hroðgar continues to use the hall as a place to exert what little control he has left over the younger warriors, specifically Beowulf. After Grendel’s mother carries off and subsequently murders Æschere, Hroðgar manipulates Beowulf into avenging the attack for him. He does not ask or beg him for his help in avenging his hearth companion, instead he dares the hero:

‘Nu is se ræd gelang
eft æt þe anum. Eard git ne const,
frecne stowe, δær þu findan miht
sinnigne secg; sec gif þu dyrrre!
lc þe þa fæhðe feo leanige,
Ealdgestreounum, swa ic ær dyde,
Wundhan golde, gyf þu on weg cymest.’
(1376b-1382)

[Now help is again dependent on you alone. You do not know the region, the terrible place, where you might find the sinful one; seek if you dare! I recompense the feud with property, ancient treasures, as I did before, with wound gold, if you come away.]

Beowulf can do nothing but accept the challenge as Hroðgar has sets it forth, both a challenge to his courage (“sec gif þu dyrrre!”) and his strength (“gyf þu on weg cymest”). In that way Hroðgar has removed himself from the position of weakness and restored himself to the position of power, in which great warriors are pledging to perform courageous acts for him. Hroðgar even leads the troop that accompanies Beowulf to the mere, as if to show that he is somehow a part of Beowulf’s victory despite having no hand in the actual fighting. Had the Danes waited for Beowulf to return from the underwater hall, the two would have returned to Heorot victorious together, with Hroðgar sharing in a triumph he did nothing to achieve. Instead the poet emphasizes that Beowulf’s victory in as an individual by giving Hroðgar no part in it.

Hroðgar also manipulates his position in the hall by continually warning the young hero...
about the ways of life and kingship, thus playing the role of the wiser teacher. Interpretation of this aspect of Hroðgar’s character is ambiguous as to whether it is an expression of Hroðgar’s wisdom and care for Beowulf or a conscious social positioning. The king cautions the young hero about the pitfalls of pride through the exemplum of the bad king Heremod, which he repeats twice. In giving such advice he himself assumes the position of a good king.\footnote{Hroðgar does admit that he is not a perfect king (even admitting of his dead brother Heregar that, “se wæs betera ðonne ic” (467b) [he was better than I]) but he never acknowledges any responsibility for Grendel’s raids on Heorot. He seems more interested in excusing his current state on the universal blight of old age, which is something that all men must suffer (which in itself sidesteps direct responsibility for his circumstances and the state of the Danish kingdom).}

Finally, Hroðgar hides his own inaction in rhetoric. In his farewell speech to Beowulf he outlines the various fates of men as a sort of warning to the young warrior (lines 1761b-1768, quoted on page 26). Initially these lines seem like well-meant insight, but Hroðgar essentially removes himself from any agency in his own death or his own situation by saying that if one danger does not kill a man, then another will. If a man, good or bad, can as easily succumb to sickness and old age as death in battle, then there is little motivation to choose the more violent course and little cause to judge the course he chooses. As Hroðgar’s list would suggest, the outcome is the same. In the end, however, the fates that Hroðgar describes do not trap \textit{all} men. Beowulf does not suffer from flood, spear, or old age; he dies slaying a dragon. Not only does Hroðgar claim the role of the victim for himself,\footnote{Irving describes Hroðgar’s language as that of elegy and the passive victim. He connects Hroðgar’s eloquent language in articulating his feelings, like the use of \textit{torn} (147), to poems like \textit{The Wanderer}, an elegiac poem about a retainer who has been exiled from his lord’s hall (Irving attributes to the word a sense of “impotent rage”). The wanderer can do nothing to remedy his situation and is left despondent. Irving points that Hroðgar’s language is also lyrical rather than the narrative language of an active man (“What to do with Old Kings” 263-264).} but he also projects that role onto Beowulf, asserting that if he does not die in battle, one day he too will be as impotent as Hroðgar himself. Not only does this demean the hero, but it also does not come to pass. Hroðgar seems to suggest that had he been his younger self, he would have been able to deal with the Grendel problem, essentially setting himself up as Beowulf’s equal, which is also not true, considering that
Hroðgar had younger thanes among the Danes that could do neither.

Hroðgar’s religious sentimentality adds to his positioning of himself as the victim of circumstance. By attributing all significant power to God and not humans, he essentially denies the power of the heroic. He says in his sermon, “Wundor is to seccanne / hu mihtig God manna cynne / þurh sidne sefan snyttru bryttað, / eard ond eorlscipe; he ah ealra geweald” (1724b-1727) [Wonder is it to say how mighty God dispenses through great spirit to mankind wisdom, estate, and rank; he has all power]. Not only does he downplay Beowulf’s victories, but also his own responsibilities with regard to quelling the monster, saying that God could have stopped the torment of the Danes at any time: “God eaþe mæg / þone dolscaðan dæda getwæfan!” (478b-479) [God easily may put an end to the deeds of the mad ravager!]. Hroðgar implies that he himself could not have. In effect, by invoking the existence of an all-powerful God, Hroðgar rejects the very heroic world of which he is a part, creating a double standard considering his fond reminiscence of his personal power in youth. Irving observes that the number of Christian references in Beowulf falls sharply in the second half of the poem when Beowulf is king. However, Beowulf does acknowledge god (though not a specifically Christian one) on multiple occasions throughout the poem.

Irving separates these references into two categories: (1) modesty in attributing protection and victory to god after fights, and (2) awareness of god as the judge of man (587-9, 972b-9, 2741-3a, 2820b) (“The Nature of Christianity” 15). While Beowulf like Hroðgar uses god to moderate the perception of his own human achievement, unlike Hroðgar he does not use god as an excuse for the status quo. Instead god as judge places even greater responsibility on the actions of men.

This sense of victimization at the hands of god and/or fate surrounds Hroðgar with a
constant aura of regret that is only fleetingly acknowledged by the king himself. Dockray-Miller observes that “Hroðgar does not speak his own grief, except at line 473, when he tells Beowulf, “Sorh is me to secganne on sefan minum / gumena ængum” (“It is a sorrow to me to tell [what is] in my heart to any man,” 473-74). More usually the narrator speaks Hroðgar’s emotions for him” (Dockray-Miller 4). Hroðgar is implicitly characterized by all the tragedy of the fallen king.

The poet knows it and tells the audience, and the people in the poem know it:

Forðam [gesyne] wearð
ylda bearmum, undyrme cuð
gyddum geomore ṭætte Grendel wan
hwile wið Hroðgar, heteniðas wæg,
fyrene ond fæhðe fela missera,
singale sæce (149b-154a)

[Therefore it became evident to the children of men, clearly well-known in sad songs, that Grendel fought a (long) while against Hroðgar, carried enmity, violence and feud, continual fighting, for many seasons]

By not discussing it at length, Hroðgar avoids openly addressing his own weakness.

As an older king himself, Beowulf is not even implicitly diminished or sorrowfully nostalgic. His language in old age is still that of the boasting youth, as are his actions. Even at death’s doorstep, his regret is not that he was unable to live longer because he chose to fight the dragon alone or was too old to defeat it. He is only rueful that he does not have a son to whom he can pass his war-gear, a situation only partially remedied by Wiglaf, who accepts the heirlooms as the last of the Wægmunding line (“Þu eart endelaf ðusses cynnes / Wægmundinga” (2813-2814a) [You are the last remnant of our kin, of the Wægmundings]).

Hroðgar the good old king does not seem so good, or so bad for that matter. His passing of “wisdom” to Beowulf seems driven as much by a need to preserve his own reputation as it is by a love or concern for the hero himself, and he uses the hall dynamic and the people around

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75 The poem does not end with Wiglaf becoming king later. I will discuss the implications of Beowulf’s lack of heir and his passing of his wargear to Wiglaf.
him to manipulate younger, more powerful warriors into doing as he desires. Almost all of the action of the first half of the poem in Denmark occurs within halls in the space where the politics of an old king are still relevant as opposed to on the battlefield. Early in the second half of the poem the dragon burns down Beowulf’s hall. The poet never shows Beowulf as a king in the hall, and so we never see him using the tactics Hroðgar does to manipulate his men. He is still a king of the battlefield, a king of physical power that does not have to employ social or political maneuvers like Hroðgar.

Still, although Hroðgar is a weak king, he is still a king, and he was a good one until old age deprived him of strength. He does after all still have the loyalty of his retainers, which is real evidence of his effective leadership. Irving points out that the poet does defend Hroðgar’s reputation, albeit nervously (“What To Do With Old Kings” 261), which means that outright condemnation of him is as misguided as unconditional praise. Ultimately the sense of ambiguity in how to read almost every aspect of Hroðgar’s character suggests that while essentially good, he has serious flaws. The poet provides examples of kings like Scyld to whom no such doubt of character or action is attached. Like the poet, I might also feel nervous trying to defend Hroðgar’s record, and for that reason we cannot unconditionally praise his kingship.

The second specifically old king in Beowulf is Ongentheow. While compared to Hroðgar and Beowulf he occupies a relatively small portion of the poem (about 102 lines: 2472-2489, 2922-3007a), the poet includes him as an example of what strength in age looks like. Although the poet acknowledges that aging is something all men suffer, through Ongetheow he shows that some deal with it better than others.76

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76 Dockray-Miller, in her article on Hroðgar’s waning masculinity, also argues that Ongetheow is an example of an old king who properly dies in battle. She reads Hroðgar’s character as a failure in relation to the old Swedish guðcyning [battle-king] (Dockray-Miller 20).
In *Beowulf*, Ongenþeow is an old Swedish king who engages in a feud against the Geats. The first reference to him is *Beowulf*’s telling of Ongenþeow’s death at the hands of Eofor:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Þa ic on morgne gefrægn mæg oðerne} \\
billes ecgum on bonan stælan, \\
þær Ongenþeow Eofores niosað; \\
guðhelm toglad, gomela Scyrfing \\
hreas [hilde]blæc; hond gumende \\
fæhðo genoge, feorhsweng ne ofteah. \\
(2484-2489)
\end{align*}
\]

[Then, in the morning, as I have heard tell, the other kinsman avenged the killer with the edges of swords, where Ongenþeow attacked Eofor; the war-helmet split asunder, the old Scyrfing fell, battle-bleak; the hand remembered many feuds, did not hold back the life-blow.]

Later the messenger goes into more detail about the feud between the Swedes and the Geats (2922-3007a). Ongenþeow kills the Geatish king Hæþcyn at the battle of *Hræfnesholt* [Raven’s Wood], while rescuing the Swedish queen, Onela’s mother, whom Hæþcyn has captured. Then he besieges the Geats in the woods for a night until Hygelac arrives with Geatish reinforcements. Ongenþeow retreats and is eventually killed, but only under the onslaught of two men, Wulf and Eofor:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Þær weard Ongenðio ecgum sweorda,} \\
\text{blondenfæxa on bid wrecen,} \\
\text{þætt se þeadcyning ðafian sceolde} \\
\text{Eafores anne dom. Þyne yrringa} \\
\text{Wulf Woneding wæpne geraðhte,} \\
\text{þætt him for swenge swat ædrum sprong} \\
\text{forð under fæxe. Ñæs he forht swa þeh,} \\
\text{gomela Scyrfing, ac forgeald hræðe} \\
\text{wyrsan wrixle wælhelm pone,} \\
\text{syðdan ðeodcyning þyder oncirde.} \\
\text{Ne meahte se snella sunu Wonedes} \\
\text{ealdum ceorle ondslaþt giofan,}
\end{align*}
\]

77 Ongenþeow could be the same as the Swedish king Egil from Old Norse sagas. The evidence for this connection is based on his identification as the father of Ohtere and grandfather of Eadgils, rather than an etymological similarity. For discussion of the link between Ongenþeow and Egil, see Gad Raising.
Ongenþeow like Beowulf continues to fight even after being grievously injured and manages to wound Wulf before Eofor finally hews him down. Unlike Hroðgar, Ongenþeow is a king of action. Although this battle is not part of the present action of the poem, it is still a vivid and exciting scene. The messenger’s account is detailed and long in a way that the vague memories of Hroðgar’s war exploits are not, and Ongenþeow feels like a present character even though he is not actually introduced within the action of the poem.

At the time of his death, like Hroðgar (in 1791a and 1873a) Ongenþeow is *blondenfexa* [grey-haired, old] (in 2962a) as well as *gomeľ* [old] (in 2487b and 2968a) and *har* [hoary, old] (in 2988a). However, Ongenþeow’s age does not diminish his martial prowess as it does Hroðgar’s. He is one of the *Guð-Scyldingas* (2927b) [war-Scylfings], an epithet that echoes the *guðcyning* [war-king] used to describe both Beowulf and Hygelac. The poet also describes other good kings in the poem as active until death. King Scyld at the beginning of the poem: “Him da Scyld gewat
to gescæphwile / felahror feran on frean wære” (26-27) [Then Scyld departed to the dying-time, was to go to the lord very vigorous]. Likewise, his grandson Halfdane, “heold þenden lifde / gamol ond guðreouw glæde Scyldingas” (57b-58) [(Halfdane) ruled the glad Scyldings as long as he lived, old and battle-fierce]. These examples suggest that in the world if Beowulf, the old must remain battle-hard like Ongenþeow: “Sona him se froda / fæder Ohteres, eald ond egesfull / ondslyht” (2928-2929a) [At once the wise father of Ohtere, old and terrible, gave him onslaught].

The poet does not directly comment on Ongenþeow’s actions at the battle of Hrefnesholt (there is no pa was god cyning), so any evidence by which to judge his kingship is indirect. But consider his characterization. He is an enemy of the Geats, a Swede who is part of a deadly feud with the people of the poem’s hero. At the end of the poem this feud is predicted to play a part in the Geats’ extermination, which is imminent at the time of the messenger’s account of it, and yet the old king is not villainized. He is not represented as evil or immoral like Heremod. He is described as terrifying, but that registers as a term of respect for his war prowess rather than as an incrimination of his character, especially in a world of constant tribal warring. War is not ethically wrong in the world of Beowulf. The reader almost comes to root for the old king in his final moments as he fights heroically to the bitter end against two men. The image of Ongenþeow with his bloody hair is expressive of Northern Courage and yet it is evoked by a Geatish messenger who moments later predicts that these feuds will be the end of all joy for the Geats. Ongenþeow’s actions are not explicitly praised, but their depiction, even by his enemies, suggests that they are properly heroic.

The connection between the heroism of Ongenþeow and Beowulf is explicit in the narrative proximity of the deaths of both great men. The Ongenþeow episode is part of a speech

78 Ongenþeow is the father of Othhere.
given by the messenger sent by Wiglaf to announce the news of Beowulf’s death to the Geats. It is directly before Beowulf’s funeral. The poet glorifies his battle against the much stronger dragon by comparing it to the famous death of Ongenþeow’s brace fighting against two great warriors Wulf and Eofor. Both kings strive against unfavorable odds. The poet does not choose to reference Hroðgar or his advice on ruling either before or after Beowulf’s death, instead providing the example of a strong old king against which Beowulf’s own actions in the preceding fight measure up.

The similarity between Beowulf and Ongenþeow at the conclusion of the poem reframes the relationship between Beowulf and Hroðgar as one of contrast rather than comparison. That being said, using the situation of the Danes as evidence of Hroðgar’s failure as a king may seem hypocritical if we do not do the same for Beowulf and the foreshadowed doom of the Geats. It is true that the Geats end the poem with the threat of extinction, however, there are some significant differences between the Danish and Geatish situations. The threats to the Danes, those that still exist after cleansing Heorot of Grendel, are from very human sources, some of which are within Heorot itself. The burning of Heorot would theoretically occur within the context of invasion, perhaps by the Heaðobards after the failed peace-weaving, but the stability of the Danish succession is constantly under threat from Hroðulf. On the other hand, while the predicted end of the Geats deals with human feuding as well, that feuding is caused solely by external hostility. Furthermore, while Beowulf’s kingdom is unstable after his death, the Danish hall is unstable while Hroðgar is still alive. It is therefore not from the loss of a good king that the Danes suffer but from a king who while still living cannot protect his people. In contrast, all the Geats’ foreseen disaster is directly sparked by the dying of their lord in combat with a dragon awakened seemingly by the chance theft of the cup.
Beowulf is described in similar terms as Hroðgar. The Danish king is “wintrum frod” (2114a) [wise with winters], and Beowulf is king of the Geats for fifty winters (“he geheold tela / fiftig wintr(a) – wæs ða frod cyning, / eald eþel(w)eard” (2208b-2210a) [he kept well fifty winters – was then a wise king, old guardian of the land]). However, this type of description reads more as a formulaic way of describing old age than as a conscious connection between these two old kings. In fact the audience is hardly ever reminded that Beowulf is an old man until he dies. The poet never indicates that his strength is diminished by age as he explicitly does with Hroðgar (in lines 1886b-1887, quoted on page 66). Instead, before the fight Beowulf shows all the signs of youthful vigor: he “strengo getruwode / anes mannes” (2540b-2541a) [trusted in the strength of one man]; challenged the dragon, “Let ḷa of breostum, ða he gebolgen wæs, / Weder-Geata leod word ut faran, / stearчеort styrmde” (2550-2557a) [Then when he was angry, the man of the Weder-Geats let a word burst from his breast]; and faced his enemy without fear, “Stiðmod gestod wi(ð) steapne rond / winia bealdor, ða þe wyrm gebeah / snude tosomne” (2566-2568a) [the stout-hearted one, the lord of friends, stood with the towering shield when the worm coiled itself together swiftly]. These actions, inconceivable for old king Hroðgar, seem totally natural to Beowulf. Even after the dragon bites his neck when “He gebłodegod wearð / sawuldriore; swat yðum weoll” (2692b-2693) [he became bloodied with life-blood; blood welled in waves], he continues to fight, eventually slaying the dragon (“forwrat Wedra helm wyrm on middan” (2705) [the lord of the Weders completely cut through the wyrm in the middle]). There is no want of strength in Beowulf.

The poet highlights the hero’s continued power when his sword breaks in the heat of battle, which he restates three times: “þæt sio ecg gewac / brun on bane, bat unswíðor / þonne his ðiocyning þearfe hæfde / bysigum gebæded” (2577b-2580a) [that the edge failed, bright on
bone, bit less strongly when his people-king had need, pressed hard by distress], and “guðbill geswac / nacod æt niðe, swa hyt no sceolde, / iren ærgod” (2584b-2586a) [the war-sword failed, naked at the battle, as it should not have, the formerly good iron], and then finally, “Nægling forbærst, / geswac æt sæce sceord Biowulfes” (2680b-2681) [Nægling completely shattered, the sword of Beowulf failed at the fight]. This sword-breaking is a continuation of the strength that causes Beowulf to break swords in his youth, as he did to the sword he used against Grendel’s mother, which almost costs him his life. “wæs sio hond to strong” (2684b) [his hand was too strong]. Beowulf, “mægenstrengo sloh / hildebille” (2678b-2679a) [struck with the battle-sword with great strength], and it is the sword that geswac [failed] (a word repeated three times), not Beowulf.

The quantity of age-related adjectives that the poet applies to Beowulf in relation to Hroðgar is part of what puts an emphasis on Hroðgar’s age but not on Beowulf’s. Of the twelve times that a variation of the word gamol [old, aged] is used to describe either of the two kings, it is applied seven times to Hroðgar (608, 1397, 1595, 1677, 1792, 2105, 2112) and five times to Beowulf (2421, 2817, 2851, 2793, 3095).79 Of the five times that Beowulf is referred to as gamol, all but one in line 2421, occur after he has been mortally wounded by the dragon. The exception occurs in the lines 2419b-2424:

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Him wæs geomor sefa,
waefre ond wælfus, wyrd ungemete neah,
se ðone gomelan gretan sceolde,
secean sawle hord, sunder gedælan
life wið lice; no þon lange wæs
feorh æþelinges flæsce bewunden.
(2419b-2424)
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[A mournful mind was to him restless and ready for death, fate was exceedingly near, he who should attack the old one, seek the hoard of the soul, sever asunder life from limb; it

79 Gamol is also applied twice to king Ongenþeow (2487, 2968). Ongenþeow is also referred to as: hares hyrste (2988) [armor of the grey one],
was not long that the spirit of the noble one would be wound by flesh."

Even here however, the poet only references the hero’s age in direct connection to his imminent death. While Hroðgar is described as old throughout the first half of the poem, Beowulf only “becomes” old once his death is determined by wyrd [what happens, fate], and is never referred to as gamol before or during the dragon fight.

Other words synonymous with gamol also follow this pattern. Beowulf is only described once as har hilderinc (3136) [gray battle-warrior] as he is being carried to the barrow dead upon his shield, while Hroðgar is described using har [hoary, gray, old] on three separate occasions (357, 1307, 1678). Hroðgar is also described three times using variants of eald [old] (357, 1702, 1874). Beowulf is described once as “eald eðelweard” (2210a) [old guardian of the nation], right after the fifty-year jump between his ascent to the throne and the live action of the dragon fight. While this eald is used before the mention of his coming death, it is paired between dashes with “frod cyning” (2209b) [wise king] that separate the passing of fifty years and the arrival of the dragon.\(^8^0\) So once again Beowulf’s age is directly linked only to the means of his death. In the second half of the poem the poet does not emphasize his age the way he does Hroðgar’s in the first half, suggesting that the poet was not overly concerned with Beowulf’s age as a theme or a cause of failure.

The old-age argument ultimately goes back to Beowulf’s fight with the dragon, because it is against the dragon that his strength alone is not enough. Seeing that now he needs help fighting the monster and even then only kills it at the cost of his own life, critics jump to the easy

\(^8^0\) The full line is: “he geheold tela / fiftig wintr(a) – wæs ða frod cyning / eald eðelw(e)ard – oð ðæt (a)n ongan / deorcum nihtum draca rics[i]an” (2208b-2211) [he held properly fifty winters – was then a wise king, an old guardian of the native land – until a certain dragon began to rule the dark nights] (dashes editorial, not in manuscript). Here the fact that the descriptions of age occur broken between half lines and set apart by dashes suggests that these descriptions may have been inserted for the purpose of maintaining alliteration as opposed to as a calculated emphasis on his age. They are place holders (which make sense after the mention of time passing).
conclusion that the difference between Grendel-fighting Beowulf and dragon-fighting Beowulf is age. This conclusion does not take into account the fact that the dragon itself is a far more dangerous monster than any Beowulf has previously faced, having the advantage of teeth, fire, and venom, “ic ðær heaðufyres hates wene, / [o]reðes ond attres” (2522-2523a) [I expect there hot battle-fire, violent deeds and venom]. Beowulf has just finally met his match.

And despite the terrible power of the dragon, it only manages to kill Beowulf through the poison from a bite on his neck, theoretically not even a terribly large bite, since Beowulf continues to fight afterwards, as opposed to totally overpowering the hero with its strength or teeth, or fire. In some ways Beowulf technically survives the dragon fight but is then overcome by the secondary cause of the poison, or by the poet’s realization that the hero must die somehow. He is almost cheated out of his life. Irving’s idea that “Beowulf’s death undermines the killing of the dragon” (“What to do with Old Kings” 285) just does not feel true. His victory also seems more complete than the dragon’s. He physically lives longer, but more importantly his victory, and thus his death, has meaning. He has eliminated the threat to his people and gained glory, which is the only thing that extends after death for humans in a pagan world. Since the eternal life of Christian salvation is not yet in reach, the only “life” after death is achieved in the memories of men still living. So while Beowulf’s heroism in the fight is celebrated long after his death in the form of the barrow and ultimately the poem, whatever revenge the dragon is able to enact upon the Geats by burning their hall is short-lived.

The appearance of Wiglaf during the dragon fight initially seems to echo Beowulf’s journey to Denmark, the strong young warrior coming to the aid of the old warrior. However, his relationship to Beowulf is not really a recycling of Beowulf’s relationship to Hroðgar as much as it is a reinvention of it. Hroðgar is impotent against Grendel and is forced to abandon his hall:
“Swa rixode ond wið rihte wan, / ana wið eallum, oð þæt idel stod / husa selest” (144-146a) [So one held sway and fought with all against right, until the good house stood idle]. He does not dare face the monster that terrorizes his people for “twelf wintra tid” (147a) [time of twelve winters], or even stay in the hall when Beowulf fights Grendel. In the twelve years of raiding, the impotence of Hroðgar and the Danes becomes a source of humiliation, “Forðam [gesyne] wearð / ylda bearnum, undyrne cuð / gyddum geomore þætte Grendel was / hwile wið Hroðgar” (149b-152a) [therefore it became visible to the children of men, apparent, well-known with sad songs that Grendel fought a time against Hroðgar].

Beowulf, on the other hand, rides out to hunt the monster soon after the dragon attack, engaging the enemy face-to-face (“Nelle ic borges weard / oferfleon fotes trem, ac unc [feohete] sceal / weordan æt wealle” (2524b-2526a) [I will not flee from the keeper of the barrow, the step of a foot, but a fight shall happen, we two at the wall]). Since the dragon has burned down the Geatish hall, Beowulf does not even have the space in which to engage in the performance of the reciprocal lord-thane relationship, the space in which to ask other men to fight the monster for him. The monster eliminates any possibility that Beowulf can hide like Hroðgar, half in and half out of the hall, until a hero comes to save him. So Beowulf fights the dragon himself, and although Wiglaf predicts that the troop’s cowardice will be a source of humiliation for the Geats, Beowulf’s reputation remains intact. There is an agency in him that does not exist in Hroðgar, and even fighting alongside the youthful Wiglaf, his bravery still outshines that of a normal retainer. The normal retainers retreat to the woods.

Another difference between Hroðgar and Beowulf is Beowulf’s sense of responsibility with regard to his own actions. He never sends other men to fight for him. The “þeostrum

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81 Irving argues that Beowulf is “aware of ethical accountability” (“The Nature of Christianity” 15). This awareness, as Irving sees it, is expressed in Beowulf’s references to God as a judge of men (as discussed above), and the
geþoncum” (2332a) [dark thoughts] he has before the dragon fight show that he even thinks that he might be somehow morally responsible for such an attack:

\[
\text{æt þam godan wæs} \\
hreow on hreœ, hygesorga mæst; \\
wende se wisa þæt he wealdende \\
ofer ealde riht, ecean dryhtne \\
bitre gebulge (2327b-2331a)
\]

[That was a sorrow in the breast of that good one (Beowulf), the greatest of heart-sorrows; the wise one thought that he has bitterly enraged the ruler, the eternal lord, over old right]

By first revealing the true source of the dragon’s wrath, the thief stealing the cup from the barrow, the poet creates situational irony. The audience knows that Beowulf is not responsible for the dragon’s feud and the burning of the Geatish hall even before the hero himself does. So when Beowulf has dark thoughts about the possibility that he has had a hand in arousing the attack, thoughts that the audience knows are unjustified, both his innocence in that regard and his humility are emphasized. The poet also calls Beowulf “þam godan” [that good one] again to stress that Beowulf is mistaken (and the audience would be too) to consider himself the cause of the dragon attack.

The opposite effect is set up in Heorot, in which the source of Grendel’s raids on the hall is uncertain and kin-killing is hinted at, and yet Hroðgar never entertains the thought that he

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acknowledgement that men will be held answerable for their actions.

82 There is a similar effect that I have observed already in the poet revealing the ending of the dragon fight before the fight even begins (making the decision to fight and the manner of the fight the focus, as opposed to the outcome). The poet is playing with the emphasis of the action and chronology of the second half of the poem to shape the characters’ motivations.

83 Moorman argues that Beowulf’s dark thoughts concerning a crime against eald riht [old right] have a specific source: “We should have expected Beowulf to have died at Hygelac’s side, and it may well be that his flight is the violation of and ealde riht of the comites which he recalls and laments at the end of his life” (Moorman 15). As discussed above, however, there does not appear to be value placed on suicidal revenge, and later Beowulf does enact revenge upon the Swedes for Hygelac’s death. Moorman also suggests that Beowulf is concerned about his inability to save Heardred or that he attacked Onela for revenge even though he was a benefactor (who might have let him rule, lines 2387-2390a). This argument seems strained. There need not be a specific action that Beowulf is concerned about. In fact, the vagueness of the dark thoughts works to gloss over any possible past sins Beowulf might have had. The poet would not put in such a cryptic line, referring either backwards or forwards hundreds of lines, on accident.
might be accountable. Irving observes that instead the blame for bad things in Heorot, like the
offering of human sacrifice, is placed on the shadowy figures of the Danish elders (“What To Do
With Old Kings” 263):

Hwilum hie geheton æt hærgrafum
wigweorðunga, wordum bædon
þæt him gastbona geoce gefremede
wið þeodþreaum. Swylc wæs þeaw hyra,
hæþenra hyht; helle gemundon
in modsefàn, metod hie ne cuþon…
(175-180, on to 188)

[At times they performed sacrifice at the heathen temple, asked with words that the soul-
slayer do help for them against the great calamity. Such was their custom, the hope of the
heathens; they remembered hell in their hearts; they did not know the Creator]

They are also guilty of the decision to leave Beowulf behind in the mere after blood appears in
the welling waters. They determine that it is likely that he has died at the hands of Grendel’s
mother and advise the Danes to return to Heorot while the Geats remain on the shore:

Sona þæt gesawon snottre ceorlas,
þa ðe mid Hroðgar on holm wilton,
þæt wæs yðgeblond eal gemenged,
brim blode fah. Blondenfeaxe,
gomele ymb godne ongeador spræcon
þæt hig ðæs ædelinges eft ne wendon,
þæt he sigehreðig secean come
mærne þeoden; þa ðæs monige gewearð
þæt hine seo brimwyrf abroten hæfde
(1591-1599)

[Soon the wise men saw those who with Hroðgar gazed upon the water, that was blended
water all mixed, water decorated with blood. The grey-haired, old ones spoke together
about the good one that they of that noble afterwards did not expect that he would come
to go victorious, the famous lord; then it suited many of these that the she-wolf of the
lake had cut him down.]

In claiming no participation in these bad decisions, despite being the king, Hroðgar is not held
responsible for any of them or anything else with regard to the state of his kingdom. Beowulf, on
the other hand, is attacked by a monster one time during his fifty-year reign over Geatland,
immediately thinks (wrongly) that he might be the reason for the misery of his people and then rides out alone to deal with the problem.

The poet hints at another level of accountability in Heorot. Though he does not explicitly address Hroðgar’s acquisition of the Danish throne, critics such as Alvin A. Lee argue that there is reason to believe that Grendel is possibly a manifestation or result of fratricidal sin within Heorot. Hroðgar’s succession to kingship is somewhat unclear. His older brother Heregar (whom Hroðgar describes as “betera ðonne ic” (469b) [better than I]) is dead, although there is no explanation as to how this came about. There is also the insinuation of brother killing when Grendel is described as “Caines cynne – þone cwealm gewræc / ece drihten, þæs þe he Abel slog” (107-108) [kin of Cain – the lord punished that killing, in which he slew Abel]. His evil is characterized by human sin. He is, “Godes andsaca” (1682b) [God’s enemy], and “laðgeteona synnum beswenced”(974b-975a) [malicious enemy afflicted with sins]. There is also reference to kin-killing in Beowulf’s accusation of Unferþ: “þeah ðu ðinum broðrum / heafodmægum” (587-588a) [though you became slayer to your brothers, near relatives]), and to the foreshadowed slaying of Hroðgar’s children by their cousin Hroþulf. The poet never connects these hints as part of a specific accusation against Hroðgar, but taken together they feel damning. As Berger and Leicester offer, “The spirit of Cain is never too far away” (Berger 45).

In Anglo-Saxon England the sin of kin-killing was particularly problematic, because it fell outside the wergild system of compensation. In this system every man’s life had a certain monetary value, so that when murder was committed, the murderer paid the family of the slain a wergild [man price] to settle the feud. Killing within one’s own family, however, leaves no means for this type of compensation, because the family cannot pay itself for the loss of one of its own. The poet addresses this issue directly in relation to Hreþel’s sadness over the death of

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84 See Alvin A. Lee for more discussion of the symbolism of Cain in *Beowulf*. 
one of his sons at the hands of another:

Swa Wedra helm  
æfter Herebealde heortan sorge  
weallinde wæg; wihte ne meahte  
on ðam feorhbonan fæghðe gebetan;  
no ðy ær he þone heaðorinc hatian ne meahte  
làðum dædum, þeah him leof ne wæs.  
(2463b-2467)

[Thus on account of Herebald the protector of the Weders endured the sorrow of the heart, welling; might not in any way settle the feud on that life-slayer (his son Haþcyn); yet he might not persecute that warrior with hostile deeds, though he was not beloved to him.]

Kin-killing is an unsolvable problem, which could be part of Grendel’s association with it. As in cases of kin-killing, Hroðgar is unable to settle the feud with the monster, who will not deign to receive compensation or reciprocate it and “No he þone gifstol gretan moste / maþðum for metode” (168-169a) [not at all could he (Grendel) approach that gift-seat for treasures, because of the Maker]. Hill refers to Grendel as a “fratricidal ghoul” (“The Cultural World in Beowulf” 38). Whether or not there is a direct causal link between Grendel and possible kin-killing in Hroðgar’s past, the monster is described as a moral wrong. His control over the hall thus negatively reflects upon the state of Hroðgar’s stewardship, and the fact that Hroðgar never takes responsibility for anything bad in Heorot is another shortcoming.

However, Beowulf’s constant sense of accountability coupled with his continued strength in age, which allows him to act upon that sense of accountability, could result in the stunted development of his troop. By being his own champion, he eliminates the need for a retainer to step forward and take his place, or as Berger and Leicester put it, “his unique and charismatic being made reciprocity impossible – worse, it made reciprocity unnecessary” (Berger 64). With the normal aging of a king, the shift in power would theoretically be more gradual. As the power of the king fades, the power of his son or champion develops. Instead,
He (Beowulf) created something like a power or energy vacuum, de-tensing his warband in a world where tension, alertness, and uneasiness are basic to survival… his success turned warriors into sleepers. Hence the behavior of his retainers and the choric sense of helplessness expressed by the messenger and the figure of the wailing woman. (Berger 65).

Hiding in the woods does make the Geats seem like untested warriors, although it also seems like just the natural reaction to a fifty-foot-long dragon, much more so than Beowulf’s challenging war cry.

Despite the state of the Geatish war band, the other examples of kingship in the poem do not seem to be governed by this dynamic. The Danish warriors fail to fend off and eventually even to engage Grendel despite Hroðgar’s normal decline in strength. Unferð does not even offer to join Beowulf fighting Grendel’s mother. Hygelac, on the other hand, dies relatively young, and yet Beowulf has already become a proven retainer fighting both monsters and human armies. Furthermore, his development as a warrior is not directly linked to his relationship with Hygelac. The challenges that he faces in the beginning of the poem – the swimming contest with Breca and the two Grendelkin fights – are outside the space of Hygelac’s hall and even Geatland itself and are achieved as an individual. Berger and Leicester see the poet creating another iteration of the Anglo-Saxon double bind, which here

confronts the great hero as ruler: if by his excellence he holds fearful aggressors in abeyance, keeps raid and feud to a minimum, he erodes the Geat warrior ethos; if, on the other hand, he wages continual warfare every trophy he wins creates new enemies and lust for vengeance; in both cases the others, the ‘ymbsittend,’ ‘painfully endure hardship for a time’ (86-7), and when he dies his people become losers. (Berger 65)

According to Berger and Leicester the system is rigged. But even if the Beowulf’s unique strength in age does somehow dilute the heroic ethos of his warriors, the alternative would be for the hero to deny his own abilities, which would lead to the same effect in its own way. Warriors cannot be expected to follow and aspire to a hero who refuses to be a hero.
Ultimately the poet acknowledges that Beowulf lives in a world of action: “Þæt ðam þeodne wæs / siðas[t] sigehwila sylfes dædum, / worlde geweorces” (2709b-2711a) [That was the last time of victory for that lord, by his own deeds, in the world of works] – and makes it clear that in this heroic world fighting the good or bad fight is the preferable course of action. However, in the live action of the poem, relatively few thanes act thus. The poet describes wars in retrospect and only Beowulf’s troop against Grendel and Wiglaf against the Dragon are examples of thanes fighting. Wiglaf says that death will be better than a life of dishonor in his speech to the retainers after Beowulf’s death. Beowulf chooses not to live with the dishonor of watching a monster torment his hall, as Hroðgar does with Grendel. Hroðgar accepts submission to the monster. Beowulf refuses.

Edward Peters argues that “The aesthetic hero, one whose superiority to others lies in physical strength and courage, is destroyed, as Auden once pointed out, not so much by death as by the passage of time” (Peters 99). As a pagan hero’s legacy is arguably the only means for him to live on after death, the fading of such a legacy is a real threat. This dynamic is also true though on a lesser scale with respect to all men whose ability fades over time. Hroðgar’s reputation, though perhaps not that of a “hero” in his youth, certainly suffers from the passage of time. However, in his description of Hroðgar’s age as “se þe oft manegum scod” (1887b) [that which often harms many], the poet says, “which often harm many” not “which always harms all.” The reversal of the expectation for old kings occurs first in Beowulf’s slaying of the dragon and is then reaffirmed in the Ongentheow’s heroic fight against Wulf and Eofor. The poet includes the Ongeþeow material right after Beowulf’s death to reassure the audience that despite the coming suffering of the Geats, Beowulf’s actions are deserving of praise. Beowulf starts the poem as a young hero and dies as an old hero, even greater on account of his age.

85 Originally from, Wystan Hugh Auden.
Success[ion]

Beowulf *should* not be criticized for fighting the dragon and *cannot* be criticized for growing old, but there is a real question about his legacy as a king with no heir. The final gift that a king leaves to his people lives among them in the form of a new leader in the hall, but Beowulf dies childless, so the Geats become lordless. Old English elegies like *The Wanderer*, which is the tale of a dreary exile on the sea, express the sadness Anglo-Saxons associated with being lordless:

> Wat se þe cunnað,  
> hu sliðen biþ sorg to geferan,  
> þam-þe him lyt hafaþ leofra geholena.  
> Warþ hine wræclast, nales wunden gold,  
> ferþ-loca freorig, nealles foldan blæd.  
> Geman he sele-seegas and sinc-þege,  
> hu hine on geoguþ his gold-wine  
> wenede to wiste. Wyn eal gedreas!  
> Forþon wat se þe-seal his winedryhtnes  
> leofes lar-cwidum longe forþolian.  
> Þonne sorg and sleþ somod ætgædere  
> earmne an-hagan oft gebindþ,  
> þinceþ him on mode þæt he his mann-dryhten  
> clyppe and cyssþ and on cneo lece  
> handa and heafod, swa he hwilum ær  
> in gear-dagum gief-stolas breac.  
> Þonne onwæcneþ eft wineleas guma,  
> gesihþ him beforan fealwe wægas,  
> baðian brim-fugas, brædan feðra,  
> hreosan hrim and snaw, hægle gemenged.  
> Þonne beþ þy heðigran heorton benna,  
> sare æfter swæsne. (29b-50a)\(^86\)

[He knows, he who experiences it, how cruel is sorrow as a companion, he who has few friends dear to him. The exile-track awaits him, not wound gold (rings), the frozen spirit-locker, not the joy of the earth. He remembers the hall-warriors and the receiving of treasure, how in youth his gold-friend accustomed him to the feast. All pleasure has failed. Indeed, he knows, who must endure the absence of the counsel of his dear lord-friend for a long time. Afterwards sorrow and sleep together often bind the wretched

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\(^{86}\) Text of *The Wanderer* is an excerpt from Pope’s *Eight Old English Poems*. Translations my own.
solitary man, it seems to him in his mind that he might lay head and hand on the knee of his lord, might kiss and embrace, as he enjoyed the gift-seat at times before in former days. Then, after the friendless man wakes, sees before him the yellow waves, the bathing sea-birds, spreading their feathers, the fall of the frost and snow mingled with hail. Then the wounds of the heart are heavier because of that, sore (longing) after a dear one.]

The lordless and hallless man is a sad man, and if Beowulf were responsible for leaving his kingdom both lordless (without a successor) and hallless (after the dragon burns his down), then he would be responsible for creating a kingdom of exiles.

The hero himself acknowledges the sadness, if not the political implications, of his heirless state at the end of the poem. As he lies wounded after the dragon fight, he expresses only one regret with regards to his long life, lamenting not having a son to whom he can bequeath his war-gear: “Nu ic suna minum syllan wolde / guthfæwaedu, þæer me gifeðe swa / ænig yrfeweard aefter wuðe / lice gelenge” (2729-2732a) [Now I would wish to give war gear to my son, there any heir, belonging to body, became thus granted to me (by fate)]. His final words tell of the end of the Wægmunding line:

Þu eart endelaf usses cynnes,
Wægmundinga. Ealle wyrd forsweop
mine magas to metodsceafte,
eorlas on elne; ic him æfter sceal.
(2813-2816)

[You (Wiglaf) are the last remnant of our kin, of the Wægmundings. Fate swept off all my kinsmen, earls in courage, by the decree of fate; I shall (go) after them.]

By focusing Beowulf’s final speech on the ending of his bloodline, the poet places a huge emphasis on that regret and the issue of Beowulf’s sonlessness. Furthermore, Beowulf prefaces his regret with a retelling of the accidental killing of Hreðel’s son Herebeald by his other son Hæðcyn (2435-2443) followed by the “Father’s Lament” (2444-2462), a passage in which Beowulf describes Hreðel’s sadness over the death of Hæðcyn in terms of a father watching his son hanging on a gallows. Hreðel even dies as a result of this sadness: “He ða mid þære sorhge,
The intended function of the moving image of the mournful father is not explicit. It could be the poet’s nod to Beowulf’s dying words, or it could suggest that while Beowulf regrets not having a son, those that do have sons are also vulnerable to their own sorrows and regrets.

These passages suggest that the passing of inheritance from father to son, and thus having a son to whom to pass that inheritance, has a moral or ethical value. The poet concludes the father’s lament:

\[
\text{gumdream ofgeaf, Godes leohht geceas; eafem laefde, swa deð eadig mon lond and leodbyrig, þa he of life gewat.} \\
\text{(2469-2471)}
\]

[(Hreþel) gave up the joys of men, chose God’s light; left land and fortress to his children when he departed from life, as does the blessed/prosperous man]

A good man leaves his wealth to his children, and as king, Beowulf has the largest possible inheritance to give, not only treasure and land but also the rule of the kingdom. If he were to be blamed for having no heir, then it would be a greater failure than it might be for a normal man.

In *Medieval Masculinities* Clara Lees proposes that “The actions of dead kings and dead heroes . . . provide the only guides for interpreting action in *Beowulf*” (Lees 144) and for determining how “goodness” is defined throughout the poem. The poem opens with three
examples of what the poet describes as good kings: Scyld, Beo, and Healfdane. These examples suggest that a god cyning is one who increases the power or wealth of the kingdom and then passes the kingdom on to his only male child. He leaves his kingdom in a more powerful position, which is stable through a smooth and uncontested succession.

The opening passages of the poem describe the great kings of the Scylding lineage and their victorious conquering exploits and generous giving of rings:

Oft Scyld Scefing sceapena þreatum, 
monegum mæþgum meodosetla ofteah, 
egsode eorl[as], syððan ærest wearð  
feastscæft funden. He þæs frofre gebad;  
weox under wolcnum, weorðmyndum þah,  
oð þæt him æghwylc þara ymbsattendra  
ofe hronrade hyran scolde, 
gomban gyldan. (4-11a)

[Often Scyld Scefing seized the mead-benches from troops of enemies, from many nations, terrified earls, after he first was found wretched. He experienced consolation for this: grew under the clouds, prospered with glory, until to him each of those neighboring peoples over the whale-road had to submit, to pay tribute.]

Scyld grows the wealth of his kingdom so much through tribute that he is afforded an elaborate ship burial, piled with treasures denoting his high rank and prestige:

þær æt hyðe stod, hringedstefna  
isig ond utfus -- æþelinges fær;  
aledon þa leoðne þeoden,  
beaga bryttan on bearm scipes,  
mærne be mæste. þær wæs madma fela  
of feorwegum frætwa gelæded.  
Ne hyrde ic cymlicor ceol gegyrwan  
hildewæpnum ond heaðowædum,  
billum on byrnum; him on bearme læg  
madma mænigo, þa him mid scoldon

88 The poet says of Scyld, “þæt wæs god cyning” (11b) [that was a good king]. God cyning is repeated three times in the poem (11, 862, and 2391): of Scyld, Hroðgar, and Beowulf (although Moorman argues that the god cyning of line 2391 might refer to Onela rather than Beowulf (Moorman 15)).
89 In the original manuscript Scyld’s son is called Beowulf as well. It is unclear whether this is a mistake by the scribe (in confusion about the name of the hero of the poem) or simply a second character with the same name (intentionally or unintentionally) as the hero. Often the name of Scyld’s son is emended to Beow for clarification.
on flodes æht feor gewitan.
(32-42)

[there stood at the harbor a ring-prowed ship, icy and eager – the vessel of the noble one; then they laid the dear lord, the distributor of rings in the bosom of the ship, the famous one by the mast. There was many treasures, ornaments, brought from distant parts. I have not heard of a more comely ship, readied with war-weapons and war-garments, blades and byrnies; they lay on his bosom a multitude of precious things that should with him depart far on the power of the water.]

The treasure and power that Scyld gains as king is first handed down to and then augmented by his heir Beow, who is also in turn a successful king: “Beow wæs breme – blæd wide sprang – / Scyldes eafera Scedelandum in” (18-19) [Beow was famous – glory spread wide – the son of Scyld in Scandinavia], and “Da wæs on burgum Beow Scyldinga, / leof leodcyning longe þrage / folcum gefræge” (53-55a) [Then Beow of the Scyldings, dear people-king, was a long time on the throne, well-known to the people]. With Healfdane’s ascension to the throne after Beow, the pattern of a successful line of kings is established. Leo Carruthers points out that Scyld, the head of this lineage, is such a good king that his very name becomes a sort of legacy in the Danes being referred to as “Scyldings” throughout the poem (Carruthers 20), arguably making all the Danes the heirs to the kingdom he builds (though not to his throne).

Unlike the kings of the poem’s introduction, Beowulf leaves behind no son, no heir to claim the Geatish throne. Lees points out that “The poem opens with a fatherless father whose past is unknown, Scyld, and closes with the death of a childless son, Beowulf” (Lees 141). The dichotomy of the opening and closing elements, of the smooth progression of the Scyldings and the lordless decline of the Geats, emphasizes the importance of succession in Beowulf as the means for successful survival. The foreboding prediction of invasion and death at Beowulf’s funeral is absent in the description of Scyld’s funeral despite the fact that Scyld’s conquests

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90 Alvin Lee writes a similar line, “Beowulf begins with a lordless people and ends with another lordless people…” (Lee 177).
would have made the Danes many enemies during his reign.

Michael Drout argues that within the poem there are two systems of inheritance, one of blood and one of deeds. An heir can be worthy of either or both in varying degrees, and his suitability in both affects the probability of a smooth succession: “In ideal situations, the two systems are complementary and isomorphic, so the two separate processes appear to be one. Beowulf Scylding is not only his father’s son but also a worthy warrior and king” (Drout 202). Drout sees the Scylding dynasty at the beginning of the poem as setting the example for ideal succession in the poem from father to son.

However, while Drout emphasizes the single-child heirs of the Scylding succession, the beginning of the poem could be an abbreviated genealogy. The poet may construct the narrative of the single male son as successor for the purpose of literature rather than an imitation of reality. If Beow and Halfdane had siblings who did not play a role in the succession, the poet may not have considered it necessary to mention their existence, pruning the family trees for literary reasons. The poet does mention other heirs when it comes to Halfdane’s four children: “Ðæm feower bearn forðgerimed / in worold wocun, weoroda ræswa[n], / Heorogar ond Hroðgar ond Halga til” (59a) [To them four children counted up awoke in the world, to that company of troops, Heregar and Hroðgar and good Halga]. There is a reason for naming these other heirs, because Hroðgar’s ascension to the throne over his older brother Heregar is a break from the normal pattern of succession and could imply kin-killing.91 While this distinction does not necessarily affect the interpretation of the Scylding genealogy significantly, we should not automatically assume that Beow and Halfdane are only children or consequently that having only one heir is the ideal system of succession.

91 As discussed in detail in chapter two, the possibility of kin-killing is suggested by the absence without explanation of Hroðgar’s older brother, who theoretically should have inherited the throne before him.
Peter Hunter Blair, in *An Introduction to Anglo-Saxon England*, points out that although it is proper to emphasize the hereditary aspect of the rule of kings in Anglo-Saxon England, it should be stated with equal emphasis that the principle of primogeniture played no part in the succession. At no time within the period did it become the practice for the dead king’s eldest son to succeed automatically to his father’s position, nor was it necessary even that a son should succeed his father. (Blair 198)

But father-to-son succession is the dominant pattern in the poem regardless of whether it was strictly the practice. Both Wealhþeow attempting to protect her sons’ inheritance, and Beowulf both ignoring Hroðgar’s offered kinship and refusing Hygd’s offer of Hygelac’s throne, suggest that this is the preferred method for exchanging power.

Deviation from this pattern does occur in the poem, however, with Beowulf assuming the Geatish throne after his cousin dies heirless. When he returns to Geatland after killing Grendel, his uncle Hygelac is still king of the Geats. Hygelac dies in a raid against the Frisians (2914b-2920a), and his queen Hygd offers Beowulf the throne in place of her son Heardred:

> þær him Hygd gebead hord ond rice,  
> beagas ond bregostol; bearne ne truwode,  
> þæt he wið ælfylcum eþelstolas  
> healdan cuþe, ða wæs Hygelac dead.  
> No ðy ær fæascafe þefan mealton  
> æt ðam æþelinge ænige ðinga  
> þæt he Heardrede hlaforð wære,  
> oððe þone cynedom ciosan wolde;  
> hwæðre he him on folce freondlarum heold,  
> estum mid are, ðð ðæt he yldra wearð,  
> Weder-Geatum weold. (2369-2379a)

[there Hygd offered to him (Beowulf) the hoard and kingdom, the rings and throne; did not have faith in her son, that he knew how to hold the native seat against foreign people, when Hygelac was dead. Not at all that wretched one (Hygd) might prevail upon that noble prince by any means, that he would be lord of Heardred or taste that royal power; however he kept himself among the folk with friendly counsel, with favors with honor, until he became older, controlled the Weder-Geats.]

Beowulf chooses to uphold the normal path of succession by supporting his cousin even though Heordred is still young. Only when the young king dies in a conflict with Onela and the Swedes
does he himself take the throne. He is still within the ruling family of the Geats, but he is removed from the direct line of inheritance, which makes his ascension to the throne different from the examples in the Scylding dynasty at the beginning of the poem.

Beowulf’s death without an heir, direct or indirect, creates a situation that requires what would be an even more uncommon succession (as opposed to usurpation). The ruling dynasty of the Geats is basically extinct. After the dragon fight Beowulf does give his war-gear to Wiglaf, a young retainer and distant relative, which is a sign of some sort of inheritance:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Dyde him of healse} & \quad \text{hring gyldenne} \\
\text{þioden þristhydig,} & \quad \text{þegne gesalde,} \\
\text{geongum garwigan,} & \quad \text{goldfahne helm,} \\
\text{beah ond byrnan,} & \quad \text{het hyne brucan well} \\
\end{align*}
\]

(2809-2812)

[The brave lord did give the golden ring from him off his neck to the thane, the young spear-warrior, the ornamented helm, ring and byrnie, commanded him to make use of it well]

Critics such as Norman E. Elaison have argued in favor of interpreting this inheritance as Beowulf handing over the Geatish throne along with his sword and mail coat. Compared to other examples of potential heirs in the poem, Wiglaf seems to be the most heroic. He displays loyalty and courage in the dragon fight, which is more than can be said for Heardred, Hreðric and Hroðmund, and even Hroðulf. As discussed above, Wiglaf is himself a hero with lineage and war-gear.\(^2\)

However, it is unclear whether or not Beowulf actually intends for the young warrior to take his place on the Geatish throne. Hill argues that by asking Wiglaf to distribute the treasure, the main function of a lord, Beowulf urges him to become king, though Wiglaf chooses to bury

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\(^2\) Hill discusses the strange specificity of Wiglaf’s character in relation to the vagueness of his connection to Beowulf: “We should note that the poet identifies Wiglaf eight times, with high, half-line consistency, as Weohstan’s son, and upon introducing Wiglaf the poet offers an extensive identification of him only as that son, a beloved shield warrior and man of the Scyldings, and Aelfhere’s kinsman” (“Anglo-Saxon Warrior Ethic” 19).
the treasure with Beowulf instead. Yet for some reason Wiglaf still cannot take up the throne of the Geats. As Eliason points out, the poem does not end with “long live king Wiglaf” (Eliason 104), or even mention that as a possibility. The desperation of the ending counteracts any thought that anyone will fill the position that Beowulf has left vacant.

There is no explicit reason why this is the case. Drout reasons that Wiglaf is suitable to rule only by deeds. His blood claim to the Geatish throne is too weak or non-existent (Drout 216-218). Hill discusses Wiglaf’s familial relationship to Beowulf, concluding that he is “potentially dear but somewhat removed” (“Anglo-Saxon Warrior Ethic” 22). He uses potentially, because he argues that the sense of a close relationship between Beowulf and Wiglaf may only have become special through the shared experience of fighting the dragon rather than an existing close relationship, beyond that of normal lord-retainer, motivating Wiglaf to join the fight.

Even if the two kinsmen share a close bond, Wiglaf’s background is problematic for his succession. He is a Wægmunding, related to the Swedes, which means that he shares familial ties with the very enemies who are past and possibly future invaders of the Geats. Eliason finds it strange that despite ample opportunity to do more than list Wiglaf’s unidentifiable father and nationality, the poet does nothing more to define Wiglaf’s connection to Beowulf as the “endelaf usses cynnes / Wægmundinga” (2813b) [the last remnant of our kin, of the Wægmundings]) (Eliason 95). He suggests that the poet is intentionally vague about the kin relationship between the hero and the thane so as not to contradict the historical framework into which he drops his fictional characters.93 Beowulf himself has an unnamed mother and historically untraceable father whose name, Ecgþeow, does not alliterate with the other Wægmundings (Wiglaf and

93 As Berger and Leicester (and others) note, “the Danes outlast Hroðgar, and in the poem the Swedes outlast Ongentheow. We know about the Danes and Swedes. But who has heard of the Geats?” (Berger 63). If the poet is filling a historical gap with fictional characters (much as King Arthur fills a gap in English history), then there needs to be a certain amount of blurriness around the edges where the historical details meet the fictional. The dynastic family of the Geats cannot extend indefinitely if the Geats no longer existed in the time of the poems composition.
Weohstan) as is traditional within Anglo-Saxon families (Eliason 98). Despite this vagueness, the poet makes it clear that although Beowulf is undoubtedly a Geat, somehow Wiglaf is not enough of a Geat and so presumably cannot be king.

Regardless of the opening genealogy, there are many other examples of imperfect succession in the poem. As Drout points out, “less-than-ideal successions are more the norm than the exception in Beowulf” (Drout 203). Hroðgar’s situation is one example of how children are no guarantee of political or social stability. Hroðgar’s sons are both too young (still sitting among the youths at the feast) to rule even though Hroðgar himself is old. Mary Dockray Miller sees this as a failure for the old king (Dockray-Miller 14). Even after the cleansing of Grendel from Heorot, the future of the Danes is full of foreshadowed succession strife.

Hæþcyn’s killing of Herebald, accidental or not, is another example of children complicating the political situation of a hall rather than stabilizing it. Instead of either of the two eldest sons taking the throne, the Geatish kingdom passes to young Hygelac. And while he has a son, not only is Heardred too young to rule effectively upon his father’s death, relying on Beowulf’s stewardship, but he is also killed relatively early as the result of the entangling feuds with the Swedes. Both the Danish and Geatish houses, regardless of any initial stability, have fallen into succession chaos within a few generations, not to mention the Swedish infighting between Onela and his nephews Eanmund and Eadgils after Ohthere’s death. Drout summarizes ideal succession in Beowulf as “the father reproduces himself only once, in the person of his son and worthy successor” (Drout 200), but such a model is unsustainable, not just ultimately but imminently. There are just too many things that can go wrong if the best succession situation is to have only one heir, a male heir, and one that is both old enough to rule when the king is too old or dies, as well as strong and wise enough to be a good king himself. This heir also cannot
die, by accident or otherwise, before he holds the throne and produces another heir following the same formula. It is impossible to keep up this process indefinitely if only in terms of mathematical probability, and in Beowulf it does not last more than three generations in any family. As Drout observes, “Blood inheritance preserves peace, but it is always at risk of failure and extinction” (Drout 207). To preempt the possibility of an heir’s death, a king can have more sons to increase the odds that one will be suitable to rule and live long enough to claim the throne. However, having more heirs creates motivation for kin-killing. Hroðgar’s dead older brother Heregar, the hunting accident between Háþcyn and Herebeald, and even the precarious situation of Hroðgar’s own sons prove that being a royal heir is a dangerous position.

Critics like James Earl, Harry Berger Jr. and H. Marshall Leicester, Jr. see the doom of the Geats at the end of Beowulf as an inevitable result of the social structure of heroic society. In “Beowulf and the Men’s Hall,” Earl discusses how the hero and king function in hall dynamics, emphasizing the tension between a kinship loyalty system, in which blood is the unifying factor, and a kingship system based on loyalty oaths. In Beowulf the kinship system is represented by thrones and war-gear being inherited by sons or other family members, and the kingship system is represented by the thane-lord relationship within the troop and obligations expressed through boasting. According to Earl the kinship system is the more problematic of the two, inevitably leading to kin-feuds and other entanglements based on showing favoritism to specific people or groups.\(^94\)

Every dynasty in the poem has been affected by kin-strife motivated by the inheritance

\(^94\) Drout also sees problems with a family-based system: “the requirement that inheritance has some blood component leads inexorably to extinction” (Drout 225). However, Drout argues that such a system is better at controlling within-group violence. It is simply unsustainable in the heroic world.

Berger and Leicester argue that it is the interplay of the two systems that causes the problem. “The backlash from the comitatus is felt within dynastic kingroups. Kinstrie is intensified… because the stakes are higher, the crown more attractive, the sanctions against kinmurther less potent” (Berger 43). Essentially, because the kingship system developed after the kinship system, Berger and Leicester see the former as the destabilizing force.
within the kinship system: Hroðgar’s implicit fratricide of his brother Herogar to claim the Danish throne, Hroðulf’s foreshadowed murder of his cousins to claim the Danish throne, Onela’s exile and feuding with his nephews, one of whom returns to murder him to claim the Swedish throne, and Haþcyn’s hunting “accident” resulting in the death of his older brother Herebald to claim the Geatish throne, although he does not ultimately become king. The kinship system rewards kin-killing, making a family member’s life, rather than martial ability or wisdom, the only thing separating younger members of a dynastic family from power. The result is clear: royal families are decimated in the poem on account of internal strife far more often than on account of external feuding.

The problems of the kinship system are also played out by the monsters in the first half of the poem. Grendel is not implicated in the killing of his own kin specifically, but his lineage as the offspring of Cain frames his violence in relation to kin-strife. Grendel’s mother’s continuation of his feud against Heorot after his murder emphasizes the violent consequences of kin ties and results in Æschere’s decapitation. As in cases of explicit kin-killing, this feud cannot be settled. Neither Grendel nor his mother will accept wergild. The only means of solving such a feud is, essentially, genocide, which Beowulf enacts in killing first the son and then the mother. He seeks out and slays the woman and children of whatever “race” the Grendelkin may be a part. As much as genocide is morally problematic, in the world of the poem it is effective as a method of completely eliminating the source of a past conflict and the potential for future conflict. 95 But

95 There is no suggestion in the poem that genocide of either monsters or people was considered morally wrong. It is never openly condemned in the poem, and even the future strife of the Geats, while sad, is not framed in the language or good versus evil. There is also the possibility that the poet is actually celebrating large-scale military actions of this kind in the opening lines of the poem when he praises the Danish king Scyld. There is a scribal error in line 6a, “egsode eorl” [terrified the earl], with the singular eorl not stylistically parallel with the rest of the plural objects in the passage (eorl could also be a singular subject, although that would be even more stylistically divergent). Klaeber and others have emended the half-line to “egsode eorlas” [terrified the earls]. However, there is also the possibility that eorl is a misspelling of the name of a particular Germanic people called the Herulians, which would make the half-line “egsode Erle” [terrified the Heruli]. If the poet were referring to Scyld’s agression
wiping out an entire group to settle a feud is not a solution that could ever possibly work within the families of men in *Beowulf*.

At the beginning of the poem good king Scyld comes to the Danes as a foundling from across the sea and is thus outside the entanglements of the kinship system. Likewise, by not having children Beowulf ends the cycle of possible kin-killing within his own family, because there are no heirs to contend for the throne. As a thane he remains strictly loyal to first Hygelac and then Heardred, despite Heardred’s initial youth. Then through the death of Hygelac in his Frisian raid and the death of Heardred in the war against Onela, the poet eliminates the issue of family strife for king Beowulf by killing off all his relatives. Beowulf does not have to murder Heardred to become king. The poet does that for him. Once Beowulf does take command of the Geats, his lack of children and thus kinship-based heirs ensures that kin-strife remains out of the picture. He dies as one of the last of his kin, leaving behind only Wiglaf, a relation too distant to inherit. Maybe Beowulf’s abstinence from participation in the kinship system is what allows him to keep peace within his kingdom for fifty years; internal strife is responsible for a significant portion of the violence in other warrior-bands.

At the end of the first half of the poem Hroðgar’s farewell speech to Beowulf looks forward to the hero’s future kingship:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Wen ic talige,} \\
gif \text{hæt gegangeð} \quad \text{hæt ðe gar nymeð,} \\
hild heorugrimme \quad \text{Hreþels eaferan,} \\
adl òþðe irement \quad \text{ealdor ðinne,} \\
fölces hyrde, \quad \text{ond þu þin feorh hafast,} \\
hæt þe Sæ-Geatas \quad \text{selran næbben} \\
to geceosome n cyning ænigne, \\
hordweard hæleþa, \quad \text{gyf þu healdan wylt} \\
maga rice. \quad (1845b-1853a)
\end{align*}
\]

against a specific tribe as part of his praise, then that would suggest not just a neutral, but a positive attitude towards genocidal behavior. For a full discussion of the emendation of line 6a, see Klaeber 112.
[I consider it likely that if it should happen that the spear, sword-grim battle, sickness or iron carries off the son of Hreðel (Hygelac), your lord, the guardian of the folk, and you keep your life, that the Sea-Geats will not have chosen any better king, guardian of the treasure of warriors, if you wish to hold the kingdom of kinsmen.]

This comment seems completely misplaced if directed at a warrior who is not in line for the throne. And in fact all of Hroðgar’s warnings about generosity and ring-giving address the hero as if he is a direct heir to the Geatish throne. By saying that the Geats could choose no better king, he foreshadows Beowulf’s success as lord and the Geats’ inability to replace him after his death. Berger and Leicester observe that “a good king may fail as well as Heremod, and the consequences of his failure for his people may be as grave, or even graver . . . Nor is it enough merely to say that in part II the good king somehow fails. Rather, he fails precisely because he is a good king” (Berger 59). They argue that accepted social structures, like gift-giving, create a cycle of self-perpetuating violence that is not acknowledged by the characters within that system. The very institutions of the lord and the war band and its relation to kin-based succession breed violence. The irony exists then in the fact that Beowulf’s success suppressing violence for fifty years by avoiding destructive familial ties and external feuds is what inevitably renders the Geats lordless after his death, bringing down upon them the ultimate violence of extermination.

Although Beowulf avoids the pitfalls of the kinship system during his reign, we should acknowledge that he cannot be completely divorced from the societal structures in which all men in the poem operate. It is his status as Hygelac’s nephew that allows him to claim the Geatish throne after Heardred’s death. In the first half of the poem he asserts his relationship to Hygelac by verbally expressing loyalty to his uncle again and again.96 Furthermore, he engages the

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96 Beowulf introduces himself and the Geats in relation to Hygelac: “We synt Higelaces / beodgeatas” (342b-343a) [We are Higelac’s companions at table], and “Ic eom Higelaces / maeg ond magoðegn” (407b-408a) [I am Hygelac’s kinsman and retainer]. Before the Grendelkin fights Beowulf asks that Hroðgar send his battle-garments back to Hygelac (435b-436a, 452-455a, 1481b-1487). Beowulf is also described by the poet as “Higelaces þegn”
Swedes in war twice to revenge the deaths of family members, first against Ohtere for the death of Hygelac and then against Onela for the death of Heardred. He attacks Onela even though the Swedish king is described as having allowed Beowulf to maintain the throne after Heardred’s death:

\[
\text{him eft gewat} \quad \text{Ongen\text{o}es bearn} \\
\text{hames niosan} \quad \text{syð\text{o}n Heardred læg,} \\
\text{let ðone bregostol} \quad \text{Biowulf healdan,} \\
\text{Geatum wealdan} \quad (2387-2390a)
\]

[the son of Ongen\text{o}w departed with him afterward to seek home, since Heardred lay dead, let Beowulf hold the gift-seat, rule the Geats]\(^97\)

Even if Onela is only responsible for letting Beowulf become king by not continuing to attack the Geats, Beowulf’s war of revenge for Heardred serves as evidence that he is anything but exempt from the ties of the kinship system. Despite his actions in pursuit of revenge earlier in his reign, which could be driven as much by his lord-thane relationship as by his kin relationship, by the end of his life his hall is completely cleansed (if we borrow the term that Wealh\text{o}ew uses of Heorot) of even the possibility of kin-strife. But the cost of this “cleansing” is ultimately lordlessness.

The fact that being a good king and achieving peace while alive does not translate into being a good king after death suggests the double bind scenario discussed in chapter two with relation to the retainers in the dragon fight. Beowulf can be a great king and hero but being so does not guarantee that his works in life will remain after his death or that his achievements,

\(^{97}\) The \textit{let} in line 2389a is a crux. According to the Bosworth-Toller Anglo-Saxon dictionary, \textit{lætan} means (1) to \textit{let}, \textit{allow}, \textit{permit}, \textit{suffer} or (2) to \textit{leave}, \textit{allow to remain}, \textit{abstain from taking away}. It is unclear whether it is used to say that Onela let Beowulf keep the throne in the active sense of giving it to him as a benefactor, or in the passive sense that he simply did not continue to attack the Geats after Heardred’s death. Heardred was killed after becoming entangled in a dynastic struggle between Onela and his two nephews Eanmund and Eadgils for the Swedish throne (Heardred supported the exiled Swedes against Onela). After Onela killed Heardred and secured his throne, it is possible that he saw no further reason to attack.
even fifty years of peace, will translate into lasting success for his kingdom. Analyzing the institutions that order “or rather tangle” (Berger 44) the world of Beowulf (feuding, raiding, gift-giving), Berger and Leicester argue that the two types of strife in the poem, internal and external, cannot be simultaneously resolved. The lord relieves internal tension through gift-giving, which unites thane to lord and lord to thane in a reciprocal relationship as discussed above. Of course gift-giving comes with pitfalls of its own: “the public nature of the ceremony is such as to tempt onlookers to envy” (Berger 49). It spurs competition among the war band even as it reinforces the basic ties that unite them. Gift-giving is more problematic in the implicit problem that a constant supply of treasure must come from somewhere, and in the same vein there must also be a constant supply of chances for thanes to prove their loyalty through service. In the poem, treasure and honor are achieved through raiding and feuding with neighboring people, that is, by creating external tension. It is a vicious cycle of strengthening internal peace while creating external enemies. The violence is not resolved, merely transferred. Berger and Leicester argue that the very social structures that are taken for granted within the poem are what has “done wrong” here.

That Beowulf manages to navigate such a system peacefully for so long is worth acknowledgement. Niles goes further and places the accomplishment in a historical context:

No historical Anglo-Saxon king ruled longer than Offa of Mercia, I believe, who held the throne for forty years; the reign of most was considerably shorter. The magnitude of Beowulf’s accomplishment as king of the Geats is not to be taken lightly, even though the poet does not choose to make a great issue of these years of peace. (Niles 245)

He does admit that the number fifty is round and probably not meant to be read as the literal length of Beowulf’s reign, but the point is that Beowulf keeps the peace in a violent world for a long time. Niles suggests that the poet glosses over those peaceful years rather than highlighting them because peace is not a very exciting subject for heroic poems, certainly not compared to
monster fights. This observation is rather obvious, but it implies the way the Anglo-Saxons constructed narrative, as a series of heroic or tragic moments. Since the majority of Beowulf focuses on strife and violence – monster attacks, war and feuding, betrayal, kin-killing – Beowulf’s fifty years of peaceful rule, however briefly described by the poet, seem like a welcome stay against the chaos of the rest of the poem.

Like Berger and Leicester, Niles sees the human interactions in the poem as central to our understanding of it. His focus is less on society as a system and more on the poem as an exploration of “community: its nature, its occasional breakdown, and the qualities that are necessary to maintain it” (Niles 226). Considering the ending of the communities in Beowulf, the breakdown of community is not just occasional. It is constant and inevitable. Niles points out a problem with some of the scholarship that criticizes Beowulf’s actions:

Beowulf’s adventures are not recounted in a vacuum as they might have been. They do not take place on a deserted mountain or on an island at the world’s end. From the beginning, they are embedded in a historical context that relates them to the neighboring courts of Denmark and Geatland, each of which provides examples of gracious social behavior and serves as a nexus of kinship ties and reciprocal obligations among a variety of people. The setting of the poem contributes to its theme by showing the why and wherefore of heroic action. (Niles 227)

Regardless of the inevitable failure of a society that cannot sustain ideal succession, there are still kings like Scyld and Beow within that society that do achieve the ideal. The audience feels like Beowulf should as well, because mythically heroes are an embodiment of the best. Whether or not we want to believe it, the poet does not make Beowulf great in one aspect but not in another, which is why even the possibility of failure on the part of the hero has drawn outright condemnation from critics. But if the poet creates such a hero, we should let him.

To soothe our sense of injustice, let us examine the logic of the tragic hero not just as an actor within a social structure but also as a literary character. Consider hypothetically the
narrative implications of Beowulf having a child. If he has a son who manages to live until adulthood and takes over the Geats after Beowulf’s death, there are two options. The first possibility is that his son will be weaker than he is (considering the rarity of Beowulf’s extreme strength, this outcome is likely). If Beowulf has a weaker son, even a son who is good by normal warrior standards, there is no guarantee that invasion and extinction will be avoided. According to the messenger’s speech before the funeral, Beowulf himself is the reason that the Swedes do not attack the Geats during his reign, as opposed to the strength of the Geatish army:

“Þæt ys sio fæhðo ond se feondscipe, wælnið wera, ðæs þe ic [wen] hafø, þe us seceð to Sweona leoda, syððan hie gefricgeað frean userne ealdorleasne, þone þe ær geheldon wið hettendum hord ond rice æfter hæleða hryre.” (2999-3005a)

[That is the feud and the hostility, the deadly hate of enmity according to what I hold expectation of, when the people of the Swedes seek us, after they learn of our lifeless lord, he who before held the hoard and treasure against enemies, after the fall of the heroes.]

It is Beowulf who holds the kingdom against enemies, and so the Geats expect doom even with a dragon-stabbing hero like Wiglaf in their ranks. A war-worthy king is not enough to ward off the invasion that is coming. The Swedes attacked Geatland before Beowulf became king and are predicted to attack after he is dead. It is unlikely that the Geatish army would be particularly better suited to handle these invasions with a lord at their head than they are currently. Wiglaf heroically calls the troop to battle during the dragon fight to join their own lord, but they cower in the woods:

“Nu is se dæg cumen
þæt ure mandryhten ðægenes behoфаð
godra guðrinca; wutun gongan to,
heþpan hildfruman þenden hyt sy,
gledegesa grim. God wat on mec
[Now has the day come that our liege-lord has need of the strength of good warriors; let us go there to, to help the war-chief as long as it might be, the fierce fire-terror. God knows that to me it is greater loved that my body should embrace the flames along with my gold-giver.]

Wiglaf’s speech also makes clear that these are Beowulf’s hand-chosen men:

“Ic ðæt mæl geman, ðær we medu þegun, þonne we geheton, ussum hlaforde in biorsele, ðe us ðæs beagas geaf, ðæt we him ða guðgetawa gyldan woldon gif him þyslicu þearf gelumpe, helmas ond heard sweord. De he usic on herge geceas to ðýssum siðfate sylfes willum, onmundu usic mæða, ond me þas maðmas geaf, þe he usic garwigend gode tealde, hwate helmberend” (2633-2642a)

[I remember that time, where we partook of mead, when we promised our lord in the beer-hall, he who gave us these rings, that we wish to repay to him those war-equipments, helmets and hard swords, if such need happened to him. He who chose us with his own wishes from among the army for this adventure, considered us worthy of glory, and gave me these treasures, because he reckoned us good spear-warriors, vigorous helmet-bearers]

And yet he cannot spur them to battle. The troop is willing to let Wiglaf lead them in the funeral preparations, so it is not that they are unwilling to follow him at all. They are just unwilling to follow him onto the battlefield, which suggests that it is unlikely that having a lord at their head will significantly alter their situation with regards to the coming invasions.

Leaderlessness is not the only thing pushing the Geats towards extinction.

There is something in the hero himself that is irreplaceable. Berger and Leicester expand John Halverson’s assertion that the individual is the central locus of power in a heroic society:

Halverson observes that ‘in an altogether personalistic era, the center of order is conceivable only as a person. One cannot yet say, “The king is dead, long live the king,” but only “Beowulf is dead — what will happen now?” One can say, however, ‘the king is
dead, long live the hero,’ and this seems closer to the sentiments expressed by Beowulf. (Berger 63)\footnote{Berger and Leicester quote John Halverson.}

If indeed power is not located in the office of the king as much as it is located in the specific king himself, then the replacement of Beowulf even in the form of a son is not possible. The emendation that Berger and Leicester suggest, *long live the hero*, is threatened by the possibility of a lesser son. If heroic sons reflect positively upon their fathers as Beow does upon Scyld, then theoretically non-heroic sons reflect negatively upon their fathers. A hero should beget a hero. Even though practically that is not how children work, the ideal of the hero requires it. To not do so would be a disappointment that would create an anticlimax to Beowulf’s great life. Somehow the atmosphere at the end of the poem, dense and sad as it is without any heir, cannot sustain the added tragedy of an inadequate heir shadowing the legacy of the hero.

The second possibility is that Beowulf’s hypothetical son could be as heroic or even more heroic than Beowulf himself. This narrative also cannot be. It changes the motivations of the entire poem. If Beowulf can be outshone by his son, then the poet would have written the poem about that great hero whose father Beowulf was also but not quite so great. But *Beowulf* is not a story about Ecgþeow, however great he might have been, but about his son. Nor does the poet write a story about the god cynings Scyld, Beow or Halfdane. However great they are, they are not Beowulf. Even if the poet did decide to give Beowulf a heroic son, the plot of the second half would have to be altered beyond recognition. Old Beowulf would not fight the dragon if his son could do so. He would not have the opportunity to die a hero’s death and would instead live on until whatever age it is that heroes live to when they die peacefully. Of course the Geats would continue to live on too, although according to the historical framework, the Geats have to disappear at some point. In terms of the narrative, this solution is as unsatisfactory as the other.
While Beowulf producing an heir seems like a solution to avoid future Geatish strife, it does not make sense logically or thematically in the poem. The poet never criticizes him for leaving no son to take his place through narration or other characters, as Wiglaf criticizes Beowulf for fighting the dragon. Furthermore, the poet complicates succession within the other dynasties of the poem to lessen the sense that heirs are the solution to the problem of dead kings. Narratively in *Beowulf* a successor does not work, which is why the poet creates Wiglaf as the character that he is. He plays the role of the symbolic son in accepting the war-gear of his fallen king and kinsman, but because he cannot ascend to the throne himself, he does not threaten the legacy of the hero. He is a lesser hero who in the end remains on the poem’s periphery, where he and all others except the real hero belong. The story that the poet has created cannot end with Beowulf’s son triumphantly taking his place on the throne, no matter how badly we want the Geats to be saved. The poet does not choose to do this, because saving the Geats would mean killing the hero.
Do[o]m

At the end of *Beowulf*, the audience grieves for the hero alongside the Geats. Beowulf says, “Selre bið æghwæm / hæt he his freond wrecce þonne he fela murne” (1384b-1385) [it is better for everyone that he avenges (the death of) his friend than mourn much], but the fact is that there is no way to avenge Beowulf. The Geats and the audience by extension cannot take revenge or receive compensation from the dead dragon or the elusive *wyrd* [fate] that seems to have some role in his death. Hill argues that the treasure hoard is essentially Beowulf’s “manprice” (“Anglo-Saxon Warrior Ethic” 34) that the Geats refuse to take, burning and burying it with their lord instead. But no amount of treasure can replace such a hero. So we are left to mourn *fela* [much, too much] the loss of a friend and lord who cannot be avenged.

Critics respond to this sense of injustice by seeking a flaw in Beowulf’s character that might be responsible for the state of the world at the end of *Beowulf*. Starting with Tolkien, critics have relied upon a negative interpretation of the final lines of the poem as evidence of the poet’s reproach of his own hero. At Beowulf’s funeral his men grieve over his death and praise their lord: “he wære wyruldcyning[a] / manna mildu ond mon(ðw)ærust, / leodum liðost ond lofgeornost” (3180-3182) [he was of the earthly kings the most generous of men and the most kind, the most mild to the people and the most eager for fame]. The crux of the word *lofgeornost* [most eager for fame] is whether seeking glory is a virtue in the world of *Beowulf*. If it is, then Beowulf is eager to be the very best that heroic society can offer, but if it is not, then he may be guilty of placing his own desires for fame before the needs of his people.

However, fame is not negative within the context of the poem. Tolkien describes *lof* (the root of *lofgeornost*) as “the merited praise of the noble . . . the praise of one’s peers” (“*Beowulf:
The Monsters and the Critics” 40). Bertha Phillpotts defines fame in a way that bypasses its automatic associations with pride and pride with sin:

Fame is for the man who has the courage to choose: whether he chooses resistance to the uttermost against hopeless physical odds, knowing that his death is ordained, or whether he chooses one course rather than another of two that are hateful to him, and makes something magnificent of it by a single-minded pursuit of it. (Phillpotts 13)

Beowulf seems himself to be caught in just such a position when one day, out of nowhere, a fifty-foot, fire-breathing, venomous dragon burns down his hall. He decides not to be like Hroðgar, who when Grendel expels him from Heorot neither engages his enemy nor escapes from him. If fame is the reward for those who choose responsibility over passivity, which fits the warrior ethos expressed elsewhere in Beowulf and Anglo-Saxon poetry, then the poem’s concluding epithet for Beowulf and concluding word, loftgeornost [most eager for fame], can only be the highest praise. In a world of action he is the most eager to act, to be the man who has the courage to do what others cannot or to make the choices that others will not, and to gain the respect of the men around him. In Beowulf the hero covets a weightier type of fame than merely a glorious reputation. It is not the reputation itself that he desires but to be deserving of such a reputation.

Other critics have argued that loftgeornost is a praise word from the heroic world as opposed to the Christian world. Kaske reads the last lines as creating a balance between the loftgeornost as the “highest manifestation of Germanic wisdom” and the other epithets (mildust [most mild, generous], mon(ð)ærust [most courteous], and lidost [most protective, gentle]) as qualities of the ideal king according to early Christian writers (Kaske 447). The contradictory feel of the last word is not an example of the poet criticizing Beowulf as much as it is a disconnection between the Christian versus heroic systems of values. Burger and Leicester suggest that the order of these adjectives is also important: “Their eulogy moves back and forth
between the king and the hero, but ends firmly fixed on the latter” (Burger 72). The king represents a social function, and all the adjectives before *lofgeornost* are qualities that relate to interactions between people. The hero represents a heroic function that is completely different and, as the focus of the poet’s final praise, more important. There are after all many great kings in *Beowulf* but only one hero.

The scale of Beowulf’s funeral itself is a form of praise for the hero. The size and grandeur of the funeral pyre, “heah ond brad” (3257b) [high and broad], “unwaclicne” (3138b) [not poor, splendid], and which took ten days to build, is evidence of his high status and reputation. The poet’s description of the grand array of weapons surrounding Beowulf’s barrow as “swa he bena wæs” (3140) [as he was deserving], reveals his positive opinion of the hero despite the now desperate situation of the Geatish kingdom. Beowulf’s funeral is an echo of Scyld’s funeral at the beginning of the poem, and both celebrate great men.

By interpreting the sadness at the end of *Beowulf* as the poet somehow blaming Beowulf would make him function more like the heroes of Greek tragedy, in which a character flaw leads to the hero’s downfall. However, in Anglo-Saxon literature tragedy, or perhaps elegy or lament are more appropriate terms, lies less in individual failure and more in the inevitable failure brought about by the inherent tragedy of the world in which humans live and die. It is the sadness of the individual against forces or odds that cannot be overcome no matter how good the hero. Where Greek tragedy mourns the hero because he is not perfect, *Beowulf* mourns the fact that even the perfect hero cannot win. To say a hero fails because of a flaw in his character implies that if he could fix the flaw, disaster could be avoided, but Beowulf is described as the “secg be[el]sta” (947a) [best of men], and there is nothing to fix that will change the future of the Geats. Still, critics blame Beowulf for an abundance of over-pride, a denial of old age, or a
failure to produce an heir. But in the end he need not have a flawed character for the Geats to be doomed.

Untangling the history surrounding the events of the poem is very complex. It does, however, seem to be the case that by the time of the poem’s copying almost no one knew who the Geats were, which suggests that there were no more Geats at that time, at least as an identifiably separate group. If the Geats were already gone at the time of composition, the poet would need to create a reason for the Geats’ disappearance (there are still Swedes and Danes and Franks that survive past the world of the poem), or perhaps the disappearance was the starting point for the conception of the poem. If he were writing his fictitious hero king Beowulf to fill a gap between the historical death of Heardred and a time when the Geats no longer existed, then the Geats need to face extinction at the end of the poem. The ending can be no other way, regardless of the actions or motivations of Beowulf. The Geats cannot survive in the fictional world because they did not survive in the historical one.

The historic framework adds more weight to the idea that the poet is exploring the sadness of the world as it is, rather than using that sadness to suggest that the hero in such a world should be different. As Tolkien has suggested in his essay “Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics” (twenty years before his critical Byrhtnoth essay), in Beowulf the hero is doomed because “He is a man, and that for him and many is sufficient tragedy” (“Beowulf: The Monsters And The Critics” 18). As a man, there are limits to his strength. After the Grendel fight, the poet writes, “Heold hine fæste / se þe manna wæs þægenstrengest / on þæm dæge þysses lifes” (788b-790) [That man held fast to him (Grendel), was with strongest strength on that day in this life]. The wording, on þæm dæge þysses lifes [on that day in this life], implicitly acknowledges

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99 For more on the historical framework, see “The World of Humans” section of Klaeber’s introduction to his edition of the poem (li-lxvi).
that on another day Beowulf may not be the strongest, and his strength might not be enough to hold the monster. Even so, his strength is enough with Wiglaf’s help to kill the dragon, just not enough to withstand the dragon’s poison.

Even if Beowulf survived, it would only be for a while. Tolkien sees *Beowulf* as a world similar to that of Icelandic sagas and the greater northern literary tradition. He expands upon Ker’s assertion that men and pagan gods are “on the right side, though it is not the side that wins. The winning side is Chaos and Unreason” (Ker as cited in “*Beowulf*: The Monsters and the Critics” 8) and that absolute resistance is made more perfect because it is performed without hope. It is drawing from the themes of the Old Norse mythology of Ragnarök, the final battle between the Norse gods and giants in which the gods will ultimately be defeated.¹⁰⁰ As Tolkien observes, “within Time the monsters would win” (“*Beowulf*: The Monsters and the Critics” 9). They are the only constant in the world of *Beowulf*. So Beowulf’s death in the fight against the dragon is just one clash between man and monster. It is not the ultimate clash, and had he survived it would not be the final one, because there will always be another monster to fight. Beowulf can only fend off the world of chaos outside the hall for so long, though longer than a normal man might, before chaos overtakes him and the hall with him.

Clark instead reads the dragon as a real animal in the world of the poem, the disorder of the natural world destroying the order of the hall,¹⁰¹ arguing that the animalism of the dragon is

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¹⁰⁰ Tolkien describes the difference between the Norse mythological system in which the gods partner with the humans against the monsters that will inevitably win, and the Greek/Latin mythological system in which the monsters (as much as the heroes) are the product and offspring of the gods, and pieces manipulated for individual schemes (“*Beowulf*: The Monsters and the Critics” 10). The monsters are part of the essential character of the world of the North, rather than merely inhabiting it.

¹⁰¹ Some readers of *Beowulf* interpret the monsters as symbols for the opposite of human roles in the hall: Grendel as the anti-warrior (who refuses to accept wergild or engage in reciprocal giving), Grendel’s mother as the anti-avenger (who seeks revenge without seeking compensation for her son, who is an outlaw), and the dragon as the anti-king (who hoards gold and does not distribute it, thus destroying the hall). While these observations about the behavior of the monsters provide insight into possible symbolic meanings, they make the role of the monsters in the narrative two-dimensional and over-simplify the structure of the poem.
evident in the language, “stone ða æfter stane” (2288a) [sniffed along the stone], when the
dragon searches for the missing cup (Clark 127). Even Tolkien, who argues that the dragon is not
“dragon enough” admits that “the dragon wields a physical fire, and covets gold not souls; he is
slain with iron in his belly” (“Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics” 24). Clark interprets the
physical nature of the dragon as part of a theme of natural doom in Beowulf. He sees this theme
in the very setting of the second half of the poem, in which there are “wastelands named for the
beasts of battle of the monstrous deep” (Clark 117): Earnanaes [Eagle’s Cape], Hronesnaes
[Whale’s Cape], Hresosnabearh [hill of the fallen, slaughter-hill], Hrefnawudu/Hrefnesholt
[Raven’s Wood]. The beasts of battle are a force of nature that cannot be controlled by men, and Clark sees their inclusion in the very environment that surrounds Beowulf as an expression
of the natural character of the hero’s doom. Similarly, Robert B. Burlin suggests that “the tragic
element is built into the very fabric of life itself and is as natural as the coming of spring or a
dragon” (Burlin 88). The fact is that the world Beowulf lives in is hostile, and the dragon is part
of that world.

There are critics who argue that religion rather than the natural world is what gives the
poem its particular sadness. Tolkien suggests that the source of this sadness as a feeling lies
within the poet himself, mourning for a pagan hero and a pagan heroism that he knows cannot be
saved by the promise of salvation, "that pietas (pity) which treasures the memory of man’s
struggles in the dark past, man fallen and not yet saved” (“Beowulf: The Monsters and the
Critics” 24). Robert Hanning describes Tolkien’s dark past as “history as yet unillumined by the

102 Tolkien argues that the dragon, “approaches draconitas rather than draco” (“Beowulf: The Monsters and the
Critics” 16), more representative of evil – greed, malice, and destruction – than the dragons of fairy story. However,
he also does not consider the dragon to be representative of a Christian evil, a threat to the souls of men.
103 The beasts of battle motif, as discussed in chapter one, includes depictions of the wolf, eagle, raven, and/or hawk,
which appear on the battlefield as carrion beasts eating the bodies of fallen warriors.
104 Klaeber says in his introduction to his edition of Beowulf, “few specialists in Beowulf studies now dispute the
essentially Christian character of either the poem or the milieu in which it arose” (Klaeber xlix).
promise of redemption” (Hanning 86). The tragedy then would be inherent in the world in which Beowulf lives, because it is not a Christian world like that of the poet. Irving suggests that the lack of salvation for the pagan hero elevates the necessity of heroic legacy and that the poem explores “the forces of oblivion trying to loosen the hero’s clutch on a fame that will give him the only immortality his world offers” (“The Nature of Christianity” 20). There is a certain comfort in the idea that while Beowulf’s world is tragically doomed, the light of salvation means that ours is not, but these arguments put greater emphasis on the religious elements that is actually reflected in the text of the poem.

Moorman discusses what he calls the “essential paganism of the poem” (Moorman 6):

The subject matter, the narrative line, and, more important, the tone of Beowulf are far removed from the more patently Christian poems of the Old English period, not only from the saints’ lives and biblical paraphrases, but from those poems — Andreas and Judith, for example — that, like Beowulf, boast a strongly heroic character… all of which end with death and unhappy events—conclude with paeans of triumph and rejoicing in the victories of the servants of God, Beowulf, save for a single reference to Beowulf’s soul having sought out the judgment of the righteous (2820), ends in tragedy and disillusionment. (Moorman 4-5)

Moorman observes that while there are many Christian elements, they are peripheral and can be removed without changing the poem’s overall effect (Moorman 6). He argues that there are hardly any references to the practicing of either Christianity – angels, saints, relics, worship – or paganism – only in a single mention of sacrifices and the two burial scenes, which may be more honorific than specifically pagan (Moorman 7). Hill agrees that there is very little explicit paganism in the poem and points out that the word pagan is not used once (hæpen [heathen] is used instead) (“The Cultural World in Beowulf” 51). Religion is just not part of the essential pessimism of the poem.

What is an essential part is that life in the world of Beowulf is consciously a temporary thing. The lines before Beowulf fights the dragon express the transience of the joys of life:
It is a wonder anywhere when the courageous earl might reach the end of life as ordered by fate, when a man may not long with his kinsmen dwell in the mead hall. So it was with Beowulf, that he sought the keeper of the barrow, the treacherous contest — he himself knew not through what the parting from his world should come to pass.

Alvin Lee argues that “Beowulf is a poem about hell’s possession of middle-earth” (Lee 171), but that is an inaccurate description of a world inherently filled with both sadness and pleasure. The passage describes the many joys of men: the light of the mead-hall, the song of the scop [singing poet], the companionship of the war-band, and the loving friendship of a generous lord. But all men must give up these in death, much like, as Hill points out, Bede’s image of the sparrow, “emerging from darkness, flying through the bright and comfortable hall, then exiting to darkness”105 (“The Cultural World of Beowulf” 52). Tolkien also finds the courage of men in the setting of the “little circle of light about their halls” (“Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics” 7). It is against the backdrop of the dark outside the hall, the dark filled with monsters, that the comforts of the hall seem even more precious. And if Beowulf can fend off the darkness even for a little while, then his life is one well spent.

Ultimately, all vectors in Beowulf point towards Beowulf’s death and the death of the

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105 The sparrow quote appears in Chapter XIII of Bede’s The Ecclesiastical History of the English People:

“The present life of man upon earth, O king, seems to me, in comparison with that time which is unknown to us, like to the swift flight of a sparrow through the house wherein you sit at supper in winter, with your ealdormen and thegns, while the fire blazes in the midst, and the hall is warmed, but the wintry storms of rain or snow are raging abroad. The sparrow, flying in at one door and immediately out at another, whilst he is within, is safe from the wintry tempest; but after a short space of fair weather, he immediately vanishes out of your sight, passing from winter into winter again. So this life of man appears for a little while, but of what is to follow or what went before we know nothing at all. If, therefore, this new doctrine tells us something more certain, it seems justly to deserve to be followed.” (Bede 117)
Geats. Both logically and thematically the poem needs catastrophe. As Tolkien himself points out, before his change of heart in the Byrhtnoth essay, “Higher praise than is found in the learned critics . . . could hardly be given to the detail, the tone, the style, and indeed to the total effect of Beowulf. Yet this poetic talent, we are to understand, has all been squandered on an unprofitable theme” (“Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics” 5). Tolkien points out the paradox of criticism that praises the tone of the poem and then criticizes the very elements that create that tone. To create the beautiful sadness that makes the ending so powerful, it is not just enough for one man to die, no matter how great. Tolkien describes Beowulf’s over-arching theme as “that man, each man and all men, and all their works shall die” (“Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics” 23).

Everything must be lost, which is why the poet leaves the Geats looking into the face of oblivion.

The Lay of the Last Survivor is sad precisely because there is no one left:

“Heald þu nu, hruse, nu hæleð ne m(o)stan, eorlæ æhte. Hwæt, hyt ær on ðe gode begeaton; guðdeáð fornæm, (f)erhbeal(o) frecne fyra ge(h)wylcne leoda minra, þ(o)n(e) ðe þis [lif] ofgeaf; gesawon seledream(as). Nah hwa sweord wege oðdæ f(orð bere) fæted wege, dryncfæt deore; dug(uð) ellor s[c]eoc. sceal se hearda helm (hyr)stedgolde, fætum befeallen; feormynd swefāð, þa ðe beadgriman bywan sceoldon; ge swylcæ seo herepad, sio æt hilde gebad ofer borda gebræc bite irena, brosnāð æfter beorne. Ne mæg byrnan hring æfter wigfruman wide feran, hæleðum be healfæ. Næs hearpan wyn, gomen gleoøames, ne god hafoc geond sæl swingeð, ne se swifta mearth burhstede beateð. Bealocrwealm hafað fela feorh cynna forð onsended.”

(2247-2766)

[Hold you now, earth, now that warriors cannot, the property of nobles. Lo! You had it before those good ones obtained it; battle-death, the deadly life-bale, carried off each of
the people, my people, when they left this life; they beheld the hall-joys. He who does not possess the sword, carry or bear forth the ornamented cup, the dear drinking vessel; the body of retainers are departed elsewhere. The hard helm, shall be deprived of fairly wrought gold, gold plates; the burnisher sleeps when he should polish the war-mask; and likewise the coat of mail, that experiences battle over the crashing of shields, the bite of iron, rusts after the warrior. The rings of the mail-coat cannot go widely after the war-chief, with the warriors by his side. By no means the joy of the harp, the mirth of the glee-wood, nor the good hawk fly through the hall, nor the swift horse beat the courtyard. Baleful death has many of the race of men sent forth]

At the end of *Beowulf* the Geats also give back the treasure to the earth by burying it with their dead lord: “forleton eorla gestreon eorðan healdan, / gold on greote, þær hit nu gen lifað, / eldum swa unnyt swa hyt (æro)r wæs” (3166-3168) [let the earth hold the treasure of men, gold in the ground, there it now lives still, as useless to men as it was before]. Soon there will be no men to use it. For the tragedy of the poem to work, nothing can survive.

The doom at the end of *Beowulf* is not the result of a flaw in the hero. He dies with his heroism intact. The inevitable and universal doom is a fundamental part of the world in which the hero lives. The beauty of *Beowulf* is in its elegy and in the poet’s creation of a world to which men cling desperately for a time. But the Geats are gone, historically even before poetically. Much *Beowulf* criticism seems to suggest that saving the Geats somehow would affirm Beowulf’s heroism, but really it is the disappearance of the Geats that gives the poet the opportunity to *create* Beowulf’s heroism. It could not exist otherwise. Ultimately the poet does not kill the Geats to criticize Beowulf, but to immortalize him.
Family Trees

Family trees of the Danish, Swedish, and Geatish dynasties. Names given here are the ones used in this translation.

THE DANES or THE SHIELDINGS

SHIELD SHEAFSON

Bew

Halfdane

Heorogar

HROTHGAR

m.

Halga daughter

Wealththeow

Hrothweard

Hrothric

Hrothmund

Freawaru

Hrothulf

m.

Ingeld the

Heathobard

THE GEATS

Hrethel

Herebæld

Haethcyn

m.

HYGELAC

daughter

m.

Hygd

Ecgtheow

doughter

Heahred

BEOWULF

m.

Eofor

THE SWEDES

Ongentheow

Orthere

Onela

m.

Eamund

Eadgils

doughter

of Halfdane

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