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Beowulf's Tears of Fatherhood

MARY DOCKRAY-MILLER

Virginia Woolf's oft-quoted remark about the equation of women with sex—"sex —woman, that is to say"—seems no longer appropriate in gender studies.¹ While we still read and study in a world where libraries shelve history books into "history" and "women's history" sections, men and masculinity are being legitimately studied as gendered entities rather than as quasi-neutral universals. The examination of women prompted by the feminist movement of the seventies and eighties has led us to an examination of men as well, in history, in literature, in culture at large.

The figure of Hroðgar, aging king of the Danes, forces an analysis of the relationships among age, maleness, and masculinity in *Beowulf*. Masculine characters, while enacting the poem's complex reciprocities and social transactions in the hall and on the battlefield, accrue status and power through assertions of control and dominance, through knowledge and use of the rituals of hierarchy, and through manipulation of the variety of relationships that exists in the social world of *Beowulf*. The complexities of masculine assertion of power go beyond simple won/lost lists in the innumerable battles detailed or alluded to in the poem, although fighting prowess stands at the top of the list of masculine attributes.

Two specific incidents within the text exhibit Hroðgar's growing inability to exert power over others and to enact this masculine heroic ethos. The first is heterosexual, a departure to and return from his wife's bed; the second homosocial, his leave-taking of Beowulf. While this second instance is actually a scene in which Hroðgar tries to assert

¹ Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own* (1929; rpr. New York: Harvest, 1957), 27.

masculine power, Hroðgar's masculinity is undermined as he oversteps the bounds of heroic society. The emotional and homoerotic nature of the farewell scene shows that the "normal" male-male relationship of the *comitatus*, with which the Danes have been having so much trouble since Grendel's coming, has broken down to the point where Hroðgar cannot find an unambiguously masculine gesture of parting from the younger man.

In psychoanalytic terms, Hroðgar must renounce his Fatherhood, without even the consolation of death made complete by knowledge that he struggled to maintain his masculine, patriarchal power to the end. In psychoanalytic theory, the Father has become a signifier, a metaphor, or a Law-wielding phallus discussed only in relation to the child. However, to be Father to a child with a resolved Oedipus complex necessarily imparts a good deal of phallic power to the Father. This psychoanalytic model of generational power informs Hroðgar's relationship with Beowulf; Hroðgar *tries* to be Beowulf's Father (I capitalize to indicate the psychoanalytic associations of the word), and his failure in that role indicates that he does not have the power of the phallus. Hroðgar, the proto-masculine great king, is actually *losing* masculine status within the social networks and battles of the poem because he does not wield power and dominate others in the manner that Beowulf can. In *Beowulf*, Hroðgar does not die; he just fades away.

Masculinity in pre-Christian Scandinavia, and in *Beowulf* in particular, has been the subject of much recent critical attention. Carol Clover, Allen Frantzen, and Clare Lees have each discussed this inextricable relationship between masculinity and power in early Scandinavian culture; Lees and Frantzen comment specifically on *Beowulf*. A meeting of Clover's more general analysis of a gender continuum in early Scandinavian cultures and the gendered politics of *Beowulf* allows an interpretation of masculinity, in the world of the poem, as power and the social status that power engenders. Within Clover's rubric, stereotypical oppositions such as masculine/feminine or dominant/dominated evaporate so that the poem can be read within an economy of masculinity: to be more powerful, both socially and militarily, is to be more masculine. As Lees puts it, "*Beowulf* ritualizes aggression both physically *and* verbally to enforce obedience of the dominated to the dominant";² both parties, in this situation, are usually male.

² Clare Lees, "Men and *Beowulf*," in *Medieval Masculinities*, ed. Clare Lees (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994), 142; italics hers.

In her analysis of the sex or gender system constructed in the Norse sagas, Clover describes a system in which "there was finally just one 'gender,' one standard by which persons were judged adequate or inadequate, and it was something like masculine."³ Drawing on the one-sex model of Thomas Laqueur, Clover uses incidents from the sagas to show that while men had inherent advantage in Norse heroic society, their superiority was by no means assured. Women were frequently lauded for the way in which they wielded power, men frequently ridiculed for their lack of power. Along this continuum of power, biological sex did not fix a subject's place; as Clover says:

[G]ender, if we can even call it that, is neither coextensive with biological sex, despite its dependence on sexual imagery, nor a closed system, but a system based to an extraordinary extent on winnable and losable attributes.⁴

Women who settled feuds, controlled land, defended themselves, and went on Viking raids were "masculine," while men who stayed home to dally with servant girls were not. Clover attributes the "frantic machismo of Norse males" to this cultural system "in which being born male precisely did *not* confer automatic superiority."⁵ Masculinity, and its power, had to be earned.

The relationship between gender and power is one of Frantzen's subjects in his essay "When Women Aren't Enough," in which he argues that men and masculinity in medieval texts must be investigated just as women and femininity have been.⁶ Frantzen disparages those critics who ostensibly write about gender but have ignored men and masculinity because "to write about men was unnecessary, for everything already written was written about them."⁷ To read Clover with Frantzen is illuminating; Frantzen's brief analysis of Hroðgar as a "manly man" places him (Hroðgar, that is) at the most masculine, most powerful point of Clover's continuum. The poet calls Hroðgar's actions *manlice* (1046);⁸ Frantzen's analysis of editors' equation of "manly"

³ Carol Clover, "Regardless of Sex: Men, Women, and Power in Early Northern Europe," *Speculum* 68 (1993): 363-88, at 379.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 379.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 380 (her emphasis).

⁶ Allen Frantzen, "When Women Aren't Enough," *Speculum* 68 (1993): 445-71.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 449.

⁸ Textual citations are from Fr. Klaeber, ed., *Beowulf and The Fight at Finnsburg*, 3rd ed. (Lexington, Mass.: D. C. Heath, 1950), by line number.

with "nobly" or "generously" shows that "Hroðgar seems to define the word 'manfully' rather than to be described by it."⁹ While Frantzen prefers to read *manlice* as a reference to class, *manlice*, via Clover, lexically places Hroðgar at the pinnacle of masculine power: high in status by virtue of class and gender.

Hroðgar's designation as a "manly man," like many of the poet's epithets that describe the aging king, belies the inherent weakness of his position within the narrative. Clover discusses the weakness that comes, inevitably, with old age for those "men once firmly in category A who have slid into category B by virtue of age."¹⁰ Hroðgar is just such a man, though Clover, in her only citation of *Beowulf*, refers to the lament of the old man who must watch his son die on the gallows rather than to Hroðgar as an example of a man "whose lamentation is precisely the effect of disabled masculinity."¹¹ Hroðgar's frequently cited grief for the horrors in Heorot is another Beowulfian example of this "disabled masculinity," a gender construction defined by lack of previously exerted power. His grief is almost always presented in indirect narrative rather than in direct, spoken statement; for example, "Swa ða mæl-ceare maga Healfdenes / singala seað" ("Thus the son of Healfdene continually brooded over the time-sorrow," 189-90).¹² 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 men," 473-74). More usually, the narrator speaks Hroðgar's emotions for him.¹³

Lees looks at "Men and *Beowulf*" (the title of her essay) as well as men in *Beowulf* as she examines the way that male and female critics have read *Beowulf* in the last sixty years, taking Tolkien specifically as an example of a male critic who assumes an ideal, implicitly male reader for the poem: "'Man' in Tolkien's essay emerges as the liberal humanist construct of the universal male."¹⁴ This assumption of masculinity has impeded examination of the text's male characters; Lees proceeds with just such an examination, showing how the poem exposes the inherent weakness of male-based patrilineal genealogy, though such

⁹ Frantzen, "When Women Aren't Enough," 461.

¹⁰ Clover, "Regardless of Sex," 381.

¹¹ Ibid., 383 n68.

¹² Translations are my own, and are as literal as I have been able to make them.

¹³ See similar constructions in lines 129-30, 146-49, 170-71.

¹⁴ Lees, "Men and *Beowulf*," 133.

genealogy "is the only institution available."¹⁵ According to Lees, the strongest male-male bonds in the poem are those of lord and retainer, not of father and son, so that the weakest of bonds forms the basis of society.

Lees is correct when she points out that patrilineal succession is the ideal in *Beowulf*, although it is not firmly achieved by any of the major characters.¹⁶ She does not address, however, the strong male-male bond exhibited in the poem by uncle and nephew, when the nephew is the son of the sister. While this bond is also that of lord to retainer (Hygelac and Beowulf, possibly Beowulf and Wiglaf), it privileges specific kinship over the more general *comitatus*.¹⁷

But these variations of the male-male relationship, with kin or not, expose the fragility of masculinity in the text, for those bonds are inevitably broken by forces within or without the tribe. Ultimately, for Lees, "power is played across the bodies of individual men" in a struggle that is necessarily fruitless since "desire, channeled through the institutions of heroism and family, comes to rest in the dead body of Beowulf . . . the only good hero, after all, is a dead one."¹⁸ Only a dead hero can rest with his reputation, and hence his masculinity, intact. Lees sees *Beowulf* as a poem primarily about power relations between men: how they dominate each other, how they define their masculinity through ritualized aggression.

Within the context of these three readers, Clover, Frantzen, and Lees, I undertake my own exploration into masculinity in *Beowulf*, specifically into the figure of Hroðgar, the man too old to be a man. Critical judgment about Hroðgar, especially before 1985, tends to fall into one of two categories: one group sees Hroðgar as wise old king, the other as weak old king. No matter which category these critics fall

¹⁵ Ibid., 142.

¹⁶ The only king in the poem who passes his kingdom intact to his son is Offa, father of Eomer and husband of the enigmatic Modpryðo.

¹⁷ Rolf Bremmer shows that the relationship between sister's son and mother's brother is an important one throughout most cultures; in *Beowulf*, Bremmer argues, that relationship is often mutually satisfying, while the father's brother-son relationship is fraught with tension. See Rolf Bremmer, Jr., "The Importance of Kinship: Uncle and Nephew in *Beowulf*," *Amsterdamer Beiträge zur Alteren Germanistik* 15 (1980): 21-38.

¹⁸ Lees, "Men and *Beowulf*," 145-46.

into, however, almost all agree that Hroðgar's main function in the poem is to provide some sort of foil for Beowulf.

Those critics who see Hroðgar as prudent and explicitly celebrated are best represented by John Leyerle, who in 1965 argued that Hroðgar's choice not to fight Grendel himself is an example of kingly prudence.¹⁹ The duty of kings is to protect their people; had Hroðgar fought Grendel (and inevitably lost), his people would be leaderless, much as the Geats are after Beowulf's fight with the dragon.²⁰

Another interpretation of Hroðgar as wholly good and praiseworthy focuses on his act of creation in the building of Heorot, a symbol of harmony in a civilized world.²¹ Critics also tend to praise Hroðgar's diplomatic expertise.²² For example, at Beowulf's arrival in Denmark (lines 457–72), Hroðgar makes it clear to Beowulf that he views Beowulf's offer not so much as a godsend but as a requital for a debt Beowulf owes him through Ecgþeow, Beowulf's father; he lets Beowulf know that Beowulf owes Hroðgar, not the other way around.

All of these critics and others like them rely on the voice of the poet, who continually tells the audience that Hroðgar is *god cyning*, *helm scyldingas*, or *mære þeoden* (a good king, protector of the Scyldings, a great lord).²³ Most of the critics who fall in the opposite camp, arguing that Hroðgar is weak, read these epithets somewhat ironically: how can Hroðgar be "protector of the Scyldings" if Scyldings are routinely being eaten by a monster?²⁴ Even critics who admit Hroðgar's basic

¹⁹ John Leyerle, "Beowulf the Hero and the King," *Medium Ævum* 34 (1965): 89–102.

²⁰ For a similar reading see A. E. C. Canitz, "Kingship in *Beowulf*," *Mankind Quarterly* 27 (1986): 97–119.

²¹ See, for example, John Halverson, "The World of *Beowulf*," *ELH* 36 (1969): 593–608; Michael Swanton, *Crisis and Development in Germanic Society 700–800: Beowulf and the Burden of Kingship* (Göppingen: Kummerle Verlag, 1982); Raymond Tripp, "The Exemplary Role of Hrothgar and Heorot," *PQ* 56 (1977): 123–29.

²² Most recently discussed by John Hill, "Hrothgar's Noble Rule," in *Social Approaches to Viking Studies*, ed. Ross Samson (Glasgow: Cruicne, 1991), 169–78, and by Stephanie Hollis, "Beowulf and the Succession," *Parergon* n.s. 1 (1983): 39–54.

²³ For similar praises of Hroðgar as good if not ideal king, see Malcolm Brennan, "Hrothgar's Government," *JEGP* 84 (1985): 3–15; John Gardner, "Fulgentius's *Expositio Vergiliana Continentia* and the Plan of *Beowulf*: Another Approach to the Poem's Style," *Papers on Language and Literature* 6 (1970): 227–62; Marie Nelson, "It is More Honorable to Give . . ." *Neuphilologische Mitteilungen* 74 (1973): 624–29; and Levin Schuecking, "The Ideal of Kingship in *Beowulf*," in *An Anthology of Beowulf Criticism*, ed. Lewis Nicholson (Bloomington: Notre Dame University Press, 1963), 35–49 (originally "Das Koenigsideal im *Beowulf*," *Modern Humanities Research Association Bulletin* 3 [1929]: 143–54).

²⁴ For recent analyses of Hroðgar as a weak king, see John Niles, *Beowulf: The*

weakness but praise his wisdom have to grapple with his ineffectuality; Robert Kaske points out that the supposedly wise Hroðgar makes some very bad decisions: marrying Freawaru to Ingeld, letting Hroðulf stay at his court, and forgetting to tell Beowulf that there was a second monster after the first one had been killed. These decisions undermine his reputation for wisdom as well.²⁵

Finally, Hroðgar has been accused of that worst of medieval Christian vices, pride. Much of the critical discussion of Hroðgar centers on his "sermon" (or "harangue" as Klaeber and others have called it), in lines 1700–1784, usually interpreted as a lesson to Beowulf about the pitfalls of kingship and power.²⁶ Critics have alternately discussed the patristic sources of this speech and affirmed its inherently secular nature.²⁷ Critical focus on the speech suggests that it is, as Stephen Bandy says, "the ethical center of the poem."²⁸ With examples and gnomic statements, Hroðgar warns Beowulf about the sin of pride, and there is a veritable critical industry that focuses solely on whether Beowulf took that advice (an industry to whose products I am not going to add here).

More recently, the decline of structuralism and the rise of post-structuralist criticism have led to an acceptance of ambiguity rather than opposition in textual analysis; rather than Hroðgar being weak and old (or prideful) in opposition to Beowulf's strong youth, critics in the late eighties and early nineties have viewed Hroðgar as a source of tension in the poem. That tension, I contend, comes from his faltering masculinity.

Poem and its Tradition (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1983); Edward Irving, "What to Do with Old Kings," in *Comparative Research on Oral Traditions*, ed. John Foley (Columbus, Ohio: Slavica Press, 1987), 259–68; R. Derolez, "Hrothgar King of Denmark," in *Multiple Worlds, Multiple Words*, ed. Hena Maes-Jelinek et al. (Liège: Université de Liège, 1987), 51–58.

²⁵ Robert Kaske, "*Sapientia* and *Fortitudo* as the Controlling Theme of *Beowulf*," *SP* 55 (1958): 435.

²⁶ Klaeber outlines the speech into four divisions: an introduction (1700–1709), the Heremod section (1709–24), "the 'sermon' proper" (1724–68), and the conclusion (1769–84). Most critics have followed these divisions in their analyses of the speech.

²⁷ For the classic exegetical reading, see Margaret Goldsmith, *The Mode and Meaning of Beowulf* (London: Athlone, 1970); for secular or heroic analyses, see Michael Cherniss, *Ingeld and Christ: Heroic Concepts and Values in Old English Christian Poetry* (The Hague: Mouton, 1972) and Robert Kindrick, "Germanic *Sapientia* and the Heroic Ethos of *Beowulf*," *Mediaevalia et Humanistica* 10 (1981): 1–17.

²⁸ Stephen Bandy, "*Beowulf*: The Defense of Heorot," *Neophilologus* 56 (1972): 91.

Most representative of this sort of argument is Edward Irving's determination that there is no one definitive identity for Hroðgar; Irving sees "contempt as well as respect" for the figure of the old king in literature (he discusses Priam, Nestor, and Charlemagne in addition to Hroðgar).²⁹ Like most critics, Irving sees Hroðgar as a foil to Beowulf; Irving sees this contrast working in two ways: Hroðgar as a foil for Beowulf the young hero and for Beowulf the fighting old king. Hroðgar's passivity contrasts with Beowulf's action as an old man; where Hroðgar waited, Beowulf acts. The ambiguity stems from the results of that action and inaction: in the end, both the Danes and the Geats are torn apart by feud, the Danes from within, the Geats from without.

Critics like Irving³⁰ are taking *Beowulf* criticism in the direction described and taken by Gillian Overing in *Language, Sign, and Gender in Beowulf*. Overing notes in her introduction that "Teaching this poem can be in itself a deconstructionist exercise in dismantling hierarchical oppositions"; among the oppositions that need to be dismantled is "whether Hroðgar is weak or strong."³¹ Overing's reading of the many layers of signs in the "sermon" does not just dismantle but goes beyond the opposition weak/strong to examine "the remarkable and multifaceted prism of sign interaction" throughout the scene: not just the words Hroðgar speaks, but the signs carved on the hilt of the sword and the hilt itself.³²

Although Overing's discussion of gender ultimately focuses on the feminine, her discussion of the "masculine economy" of *Beowulf* provides a vocabulary for my analysis of Hroðgar's fading masculinity. In Overing's terms:

In the masculine economy of the poem, desire expresses itself as desire for the other, as a continual process of subjugation and appropriation of the other. The code of vengeance and the heroic

²⁹ Irving, "What to Do with Old Kings," 260.

³⁰ Sara Higley also discusses the ambiguity of Hroðgar's status in "Aldre on Ofre, or the Reluctant Hart: A Study of Liminality in *Beowulf*," *Neuphilologische Mitteilungen* 87 (1986): 342-53.

³¹ Gillian Overing, *Language, Sign, and Gender in Beowulf* (Carbondale: University of Southern Illinois Press, 1990), xv.

³² The sign systems of the giantish sword are also discussed by Allen Frantzen, "Writing the Unreadable *Beowulf*: 'Writan' and 'Forwritan,' the Pen and the Sword," *Exemplaria* 3 (1991): 327-57, and by Richard Schrader, "The Language on the Giant's Sword Hilt in *Beowulf*," *Neuphilologische Mitteilungen* 94 (1993): 141-47.

choice demand above all a *resolution* of opposing elements, a decision must always be made.³³

For Overing, masculinity in *Beowulf* entails dominance and resolution; no ambiguity—of hierarchy, of gender, of decision—is permissible. She continues:

A psychoanalytic understanding of desire as deferred death, of the symbolic nature of desire in action, is often not necessary in *Beowulf*; death is continually present, always in the poem's foreground: the hero says "I will do this or I will die." Resolution, choice, satisfaction of desire frequently mean literal death.³⁴

Men in *Beowulf*, for Overing, live in a world of absolutes: they will fight the monsters or die, they will avenge a death or die. Overing reads Beowulf himself as a figure to trouble this absolute assertion, but acknowledges that the absolute resolution is intact even at the end of the poem. The masculine characters define themselves against an unfavorable Other: men are strong, noble, generous (recalling the definitions of *manlice*, discussed by Frantzen, which I noted above); the Other is weak, ignoble, miserly—and might as well be dead, for within the masculine economy of this poem, those attributes have no value.³⁵

In Clover's terms, Hroðgar's masculinity is slipping away from those positive values of strength, nobility, and generosity towards effeminacy, towards Otherness. In a world where masculinity is defined by power, control, and assertion of status, he asserts his status only through gift-giving—one aspect, but not the most important one, of presentation of himself as a *manlice* king. He cannot control Grendel, as is obvious from the events of the poem, and, while he tries to control Beowulf, he does not succeed even partially.

The poet continually reminds us, throughout the Danish sections of the poem, of the tenuousness of Hroðgar's kingdom. As the feast celebrating Grendel's defeat begins, the poet remarks that "nalles facenstafas / ðeod-Scyldingas þenden fremedon" ("Then the Scylding princes did not perform treacheries," 1018-19), implying that there would be

³³ Overing, *Language, Sign, and Gender*, 70; italics hers.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ In an interesting breakdown of binarism, the two most obvious examples of the miserly Other in *Beowulf* are masculine, not feminine: Heremod, the king who perished in exile because of his closed-handedness, and the Dragon, whose treasure becomes useless because it is not used in an economy of exchange.

treachery in the future; similarly, in the introduction of Hroðgar and Heorot, the poet notes that Heorot will burn in a feud among kin:

Sele hlifade
 heah ond horngeap; heaðowylma bad,
 laðan liges; ne wæs hit lenge þa gen,
 þæt se ecghete aþumsweoran
 æfter wælniðe wæcnan scolde. 81-85

The hall towered high and wide-gabled; it waited for hostile flames, for hateful fire; nor was it still long [to wait] then, that the sword-hate among in-laws would awaken on account of deadly hostility.

Hroðgar's hall, the scene of much of his masculine status-building—in gift-giving, diplomacy, and advising—will fall, and the poet never lets Hroðgar relax, as it were, as lord of Heorot; we can never forget the feuds that follow his death and end in the destruction of his legacy.

Hroðgar does not and cannot make, in Overing's terms, the ultimate masculine statement—I will defeat the monster or die—no matter how *manlice* he is in his distribution of gifts or in the building of alliances. The richness of his gifts betokens his status as a kingly gift-giver, but perhaps the greatness of those gifts is an attempt, on some level, to make up for his inability to kill the monster himself. In two scenes that have received surprisingly little critical attention, these slips in his masculinity become apparent: his departure to and return from Wealhþeow's bed, and his farewell to Beowulf. Both scenes underscore the weakness of Hroðgar's subject position in a society where men assert their masculine status through the complex power structures of their relationships with other men.

The first of these scenes is actually two scenes separated by the fight with Grendel, and is explicitly heterosexual, unusual in a poem that tends to avoid any mention of sexual relationships. Overing notes and expands upon Fred Robinson's observation that there is very little romantic love in *Beowulf*:

Robinson has noted the absence of "love" or "romantic passion between the sexes" in *Beowulf*. . . the secondary nature of the emotional marital bond provides a possible explanation for the hero's apparent celibacy. While scholars have pondered over Beowulf's

marital status, Robinson suggests that the poet might simply have considered that "Beowulf's marital status was of insufficient interest to warrant mention in the poem."³⁶

For Overing, "marriage is valued as an extension of this larger emotional context," the context of male-male relations, cemented by a marriage alliance.³⁷ But Hroðgar's marriage is a complex exception to this lack of attention to domesticity in *Beowulf* and other Old English poetry. In the poem, only Hroðgar obviously (even ostentatiously) goes to the women's quarters to find a woman (Wealhþeow). Rather than assert the bond between lord and warrior by sleeping in camaraderie with his men, Hroðgar chooses to sleep with the queen.

The entrance and exit, in which Hroðgar leaves Heorot and then returns the following morning, frame Beowulf's fight with Grendel:

ða him Hroþgar gewat mid his hæleþa gedryht,
 eodur Scyldinga, ut of healle;
 wolde wigfruma Wealhþeo secan,
 cwen to gebeddan. 662-65

Then from him [Beowulf] Hroðgar went with his troop of heroes, the prince of the Scyldings, out of the hall; the war-chief wished Wealhþeow to seek, the queen as a bed-companion.

Eode scealc monig
 swiðhicgende to sele þam hean
 searowundor seon; swylce self cyning
 of brydbure, beahhorda weard,
 tryddode tirfæst getrume micle,
 cystum gecyþed, ond his cwen mid him
 medostigge mæt mægþa hose. 918-24

Many a man went valiant to the high hall to see the curious wonder [Grendel's arm]; just so the king himself from the bride-bower, the guardian of the ring-hoard, stepped glorious with a great troop, known for excellence, and his queen with him traversed the mead-[hall] path with a troop of maidens.

³⁶ Overing, *Language, Sign, and Gender*, 73-74. Overing is quoting Fred Robinson, "Teaching the Backgrounds: History, Religion, Culture," in *Approaches to Teaching Beowulf*, ed. Jess Bessinger and Robert Yeager (New York: MLA, 1984), 118-19.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 74.

This exit and entrance are juxtaposed with Beowulf's fight, which Overing would term an ultimately masculine action in that Beowulf has asserted that he will kill Grendel or die trying.

An initial sense that perhaps Hroðgar's "grand" departure and subsequent entrance here are less than heroic is strengthened by John Niles's reference to the Danes' sleeping quarters during Grendel's twelve-year control of Heorot. In the process of documenting the decline of the Danish line ("The glories of the Danes are now past,"³⁸) Niles notes that when the Danes leave Heorot to Grendel, they probably go to sleep in the women's quarters:

Faced with the sudden loss of thirty of his thanes, Hroðgar simply sits, immobilized by his sorrows. None of his surviving retainers offers to challenge the monster, and the aged king is unwilling or incapable of undertaking the task himself. The only thought his retainers have seems to be to find themselves a more secure place to sleep *æfter burum*, "among the bedchambers" (140a), presumably among the women's quarters.³⁹

Grendel is not interested in the women's quarters (Niles points out that the surest way to avoid being eaten is simply to leave Heorot).

The change in sleeping locale is obviously a reduction in masculine, heroic status for the men; to sleep in the same space as women, rather than merely to have sex with them and then go sleep in the hall with other men, is to taint oneself with effeminacy, with cowardice. Sleeping in the hall, dressed for battle, is an expression of masculinity, a form of "male bonding" in the poem that affirms the heroic ethos. The Danes regain some of this masculinity associated with sleeping in the hall after the fight with Grendel:

Reced weardode
unrim eorla, swa hie oft ær dydon.
Bencþelu beredon; hit geondbræded wearð
beddum ond bolstrum. Beorscealca sum
fus ond fæge fletræste gebeag.
Setton him to heafdon hilderandas,
bordwudu beorhtan; þær on bence wæs
ofer æþelinge yþgesene
heaposteapa helm, hringed byrne,

³⁸ Niles, *Beowulf: The Poem and its Tradition*, 108.

³⁹ Ibid.

þrecwudu þrymlic. Wæs þeaw hyra
þæt hie oft wæron an wig gearwe,
ge æt ham ge on herge, ge gehwæþer þara,
efne swylce mæla swylce hira mandryhtne
þearf gesælde; wæs seo þeod tilu. 1237-50

A countless number of earls occupied the hall, as they often had done before. They bore the bench-planks; it [the hall, the benches] was over-spread with bedding and bolsters. One of the beer-drinkers ready and fated [for death] sank into hall-rest. They set for themselves at their heads the battle-shields, the bright board-wood; there on the bench was for the nobles easily visible the battle-towering helmet, the ringed byrnie, the strength-wood [spear] magnificent. It was their custom that they often were ready for battle, whether at home or in the army, each of them, even at such of times as need befell their man-lord.

Even in this scene, however, the Danes' preparedness does them little good. Grendel's mother, frightened by their drawn swords, still does manage to seize Æschere, probably the "one" referred to in line 1240. But the lengthy description of the preparations here indicates their importance to the construction of a warrior's masculinity; the loving description of the weapons and clothes of war of the sleeping troop affirms that sleeping in the hall with comrades is an assertion of masculinity. One may infer that repeatedly sleeping in the women's quarters is definitively not.

Hroðgar's noted departure for the women's quarters on the eve of battle, then, highlights a lack of masculinity in his choices rather than affirming some sort of masculine, sexual prowess. His chosen relationship on this night is with a woman, not another man or group of men. In both of these passages there are some evident ironies. Hroðgar the "war-chief" is seeking his queen, not a valiant battle; indeed, he and his "troop of heroes" are very conspicuously *leaving* the scene of battle, calling into question, by their actions, the veracity of these epithets.

In the following passage describing Hroðgar's return to the hall, the poet uses a form of exaggeration which accentuates Hroðgar's lack of masculinity as he returns to his hall that (he thinks) has been purged for him. Why does Hroðgar need "a great troop, known for excellence" when he is going only from one place of safety (the women's quarters) to another (daylit Heorot)? How *tirfæst*, glorious, can he be when another man has succeeded in making the ultimately masculine statement—I have killed the monster—that Hroðgar was unable to make?

Raymond Tripp argues that the diction and structure of this return to the hall conveys "an implication that Hroðgar returns like a cock with his flock of hens."⁴⁰ Tripp comments on the relatively large number of hapax legomena (most notably *brydbure*, bride-bower, which Tripp also reads as, pun-like, bird-bower) to show that there is humor, specifically "avian humor" in this scene that presents Hroðgar as an Anglo-Saxon Chanticleer. While Tripp relies on some shaky connections with much later Middle English words for his argument, I think he is correct in asserting the humor of this scene. What Tripp does not see is that the humor of this scene is at Hroðgar's expense. If Hroðgar is something of an Anglo-Saxon Chanticleer, then just as Chanticleer is a figure of exaggerated, pompous masculinity in Chaucer, Hroðgar here becomes a ridiculous, randy old man. Hroðgar and his Danes, although they have repeatedly tried to purge their hall of Grendel, have failed; Beowulf has done what they could not. Hroðgar might sleep with the queen, but he does not fight the monster or die, and as such his masculinity is imperilled rather than affirmed by his obvious and unique heterosexual relations in the poem.

The final irony in this scene is that Hroðgar's sexual activity has failed to produce a son of the correct age, old and strong enough to continue Hroðgar's line. Hroðgar's age and the relative youth of his sons (too young to defend themselves against their cousin Hroðulf) suggest that he has had some trouble in conceiving sons. His sons were probably not born until he was already past his prime. The poet refers to the boys as *byre* (sons, boys, 1188) and *bearn* (children, sons, 1189); both words indicate childhood or a lack of maturity. Wealhþeow calls them *geogoðe* (1181) and the poet refers to them as *giogod* (1190); the translation of "youths" (Klaeber's), implies that while they might be considered more than children, they are still inexperienced.

In an ideal Beowulfian world, Hroðgar's sons would "now" be the same age as Hroðulf (definitely fully grown) and ready to take over most of Hroðgar's duties (including, presumably, monster-fighting). Instead, they are still in need of protection. His daughter Freawaru is old enough to be married to Ingeld the Heaðobard, suggesting that she is the eldest of his children even if not dramatically older than her brothers.

⁴⁰ Raymond Tripp, "Beowulf 920b-24: Avian Humor and Hrothgar's Approach to Heorot," in *Literary Essays on Language and Meaning in the Poem Called Beowulf* (Lewiston: Edwin Mellon Press, 1992), 61.

The notion of a paternal masculinity that is strengthened by the births of sons and weakened by the births of daughters is assumed in a poem notoriously interested in paternity, in "patrilineal genealogy" (to use Lees's term) of father and son. While the agnatic kinships of brothers (like Hreðel's three sons) or the previously mentioned sister's son-mother's brother kinships are important, the father-son relationship is sustained as the most prominent and idealized relationship. Beowulf is referred to as Ecgþeow's son fourteen times in various formulations.⁴¹ In contrast, he is called Hygelac's thane or kinsman only eight times.⁴² Daughters, as critics from Eliason to Overing have noted, usually do not even appear as names in genealogical lists. A daughter does not increase a man's masculine prestige in the way the son does. Hroðgar, unlike Ecgþeow, has not produced a warrior-son who can increase the father's own masculine prestige.

Many critics have written about Hroðgar's attempted adoption of Beowulf: "Nu ic, Beowulf, þec, / secg betsta, me for sunu wylle / freogan on ferhþe" ("Now, Beowulf, best of men, I wish to love you like a son in spirit," 946-48).⁴³ This attempt begins a series of speeches and actions representative of the complex transactions that take place in Heorot and indicate the fluctuating status and power relationships among the hall's occupants. Hroðgar follows his offer of adoption with kingly gifts: fine armor, eight superb horses, and a rich saddle fit for a king. He could be "setting up" Beowulf as a son by giving him the royal family heirlooms.

The social power in the hall continues to shift after Hroðgar's gift-giving. After the interlude of the song of Finn—an exercise in the problems of exogamy and peace-weaving—Wealhþeow presents Beowulf with a rich necklace and indicates through her speeches that she is attempting to protect the rights of her sons to inherit the kingdom; she asks Beowulf to look after their interests (which presumably would exclude accepting Hroðgar's offer and usurping their kingdom).

⁴¹ All but two of the uses of Ecgþeow's name in *Beowulf* are genitive compounds with *bearn*, *sunu*, or *maga*. See Klaeber, page 434.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 438.

⁴³ For analyses of the legal and emotional action of this scene, see John M. Foley, "Beowulf and the Psychohistory of Anglo-Saxon Culture," *American Imago* 344 (1977): 133-53; Elaine Tuttle Hansen, "Hrothgar's Sermon in *Beowulf* as Parental Wisdom," *Anglo-Saxon England* 10 (1982): 53-67; John Hill, "Hrothgar's Noble Rule"; Hollis, "Beowulf and the Succession"; Irving, "What to Do with Old Kings."

I find Beowulf's lack of response to these speeches and gifts the most startling part of this entire sequence. Beowulf's only speech during these lines is a regret to Hroðgar that he did not kill Grendel right there (958–79). He does not acknowledge the offer of adoption, of kingly power; he does not even thank Hroðgar and Wealhþeow for their gifts. The dynamics of power in this scene revolve around Beowulf: giving him gifts, making him offers, waiting for him to respond. I would like to suggest that Hroðgar's attempted adoption of Beowulf may be a strategy of Hroðgar's to recoup some of the power and status of masculinity that he no longer commands: by adopting a powerful, strong, intelligent, adult son who does make the absolutist, masculine statements that Hroðgar no longer can, a son who can kill the monster.

This lure of a powerful, prototypically masculine son colors all of Hroðgar's dealings with Beowulf. Their relationship, even more than Hroðgar's physical relationship to his queen, determines his slip away from masculinity on Clover's continuum. Not only does Hroðgar sleep with the women, he no longer can dominate men in the way a *mandryhtne* (man-lord, 1249) should. In the relationship between Beowulf and Hroðgar, Beowulf is unquestionably the one with the power, both physical and emotional.

Nowhere in the text is this power made more apparent than in the second scene under discussion, the farewell scene before Beowulf and his Geats go back to their boat. Beowulf has affirmed the alliance between the Geats and Danes, promising to return if Hroðgar is ever again in need and promising Hreðric, Hroðgar's son, a warm welcome should Hreðric ever venture to Geatland (1818–39). In this speech, Beowulf's offer of allegiance, through future hospitality to the king's son, may indicate his gratitude and esteem for Hroðgar and the gifts the Danish king has bestowed upon him.

However, the speech also makes the formal leave-taking into an assertion of Beowulf's masculine power and status. Somewhat arrogantly, he asserts that he will come save the Danes again should they ever need him to make again that ultimate masculine statement that they cannot: I will kill the monster or I will die. Next, he offers a friendly place of safety for the young traveling prince, implying that the Geatish hall offers what the Danish hall cannot: protection from monsters and other foes.

In response to these offers, Hroðgar says goodbye to the hero. In these lines, his thoughts and his actions reveal his lack of emotional

control; this lack is yet another instance, like the Grendel-kin attacks, in which Hroðgar's lack of control shows his waning masculinity. In this scene, Beowulf is in control, and as such is the dominant male in a situation that Hroðgar wished to construct so that he as Father would dominate and accrue power from Beowulf as Son:

Gecyste þa cyning æþelum god,
 þeoden Scyldinga ðegn betstan
 ond be healse genam; hruon him tearas
 blondenfeaxum. Him wæs bega wen
 ealdum infrodum, oþres swiðor,
 þæt hie seoððan no geseon moston,
 modige on meþle. Wæs him se man to þon leof,
 þæt he þone breostwylm forberan ne mehte;
 ac him on hreþre hygebendum fæst
 æfter deorum men dyrne langað
 beorn wið blode. Him Beowulf þanan,
 guðrinc goldwlanc græsmoldan træd
 since hremig.

1870–82

Then the king kissed the good nobleman, the prince of the Scyldings took the best thane by the neck; tears fell from him, the grey-haired one. In him, old and wise, was the expectation of two things, the other more strong, that they might not see [each other] afterwards brave in counsel.

The man was by him so loved that he could not forbear the breast-welling; but for him in his spirit (with heart-bonds fast because of the dear man) *secretly the man [Hroðgar] longed with blood.*⁴⁴

Away from him Beowulf thence, the warrior gold-adorned, trod the greensward, exulting in treasure.

This passage spans folios 170v and 171r.⁴⁵ Much of the edge of folio 171 has crumbled away, probably due to damage in the 1731 fire as

⁴⁴ See below for an explanation of my unconventional translation of this half-line.

⁴⁵ The foliation of the *Beowulf* manuscript, Cotton Vitellius A.xv, is a matter of some dispute; I am following what E. V. K. Dobbie, in *Beowulf and Judith*, ASPR 4 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1953) terms the "old" foliation since I am working with the Zupitza facsimile, the only facsimile readily available: Julius Zupitza, ed., *Beowulf*, 2nd ed., EETS o.s. 245 (1959; rpr. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1967).

well as age, but most of the words or parts of words now missing⁴⁶ were recorded in one of the Thorkelin transcripts or are visible in part (like the *w* of *wæs*, 1876).⁴⁷ None of the words in this passage is in question, as far as manuscript presentation goes, though I will below take issue with some editors' choices in grammatical definitions. Frantzen refers to "the ways in which Anglo-Saxon editors have used glossaries to shape translations from their editions";⁴⁸ editors and critics, especially Thomas Wright (the only critic to comment on this scene at length), have interpreted this part of the text in such a way that it glosses over the homoerotics of the scene. The emotional and physical presentation of Hroðgar's farewell underscores the fragility of Hroðgar's masculinity as he tries to assert himself as a Father figure but ends up positioning himself as an effeminate Other.

The erotics in the farewell scene are intense beyond the norm of male-male social relations (the *comitatus*). Lees notes that the lord-thane bond is actually the strongest of bonds in the poem,⁴⁹ and the Geats epitomize that bond throughout the poem. The troop attending Beowulf waits on the bank of the mere after the Danes have given up; Beowulf demonstrates unwavering loyalty to his lord Hygelac and Hygelac's son Heardred; even at the end, as most of the Geats run away, Wiglaf shows Beowulf the kind of loyalty demanded in this male-male bond. Beowulf has made it clear to Hroðgar that his primary loyalty lies with Hygelac (most especially in his pre-battle boasts, 435, 452–54, 1482–88). However, Hroðgar seems almost desperate to have some sort of primary bond with Beowulf; his attempted "adoption" indicates this desire. Lees refers to the farewell scene in her assertion that "the poet reserves his most emotional language to express these displaced bonds [between father and son]"⁵⁰ and Howell D. Chickering goes so far as to say that "it almost seems as though the language of erotic poetry were being misapplied to a father's love for a son."⁵¹

⁴⁶ Missing are the end of *seoððan* (1875), *wæs* (1876), "breost" from *breostwylm* (1877), *on* (1878), "deo" from *deorum* (1879), and "lo" from *blode* (1880). The *no* at 1875 is an emendatory addition.

⁴⁷ Zupitza, *Beowulf*, 86.

⁴⁸ Frantzen, "When Women Aren't Enough," 461.

⁴⁹ Lees, "Men and *Beowulf*," 142.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵¹ Howell D. Chickering, *Beowulf: A Dual Language Edition* (New York: Anchor Books, 1977), 348.

The unusual physical and emotional description in the scene highlights this desire as well.

The first word of the farewell scene, *gecyste*, might seem to set an erotic tone for the scene, but kissing in surviving Old English texts is not necessarily erotic; indeed, more often than not, it is religious. Saints kiss their followers, kisses of peace seal treaties.⁵² The combination of the kiss and the embrace (*be healse genam*), however, suggests that scene is more emotionally charged than the usual goodbye; when Hroðgar starts to cry (*hruron him tearas*), that suggestion is confirmed. While Chickering says that the emotion of this scene, "asks us to widen our conception of the pattern of feelings in heroic life,"⁵³ I contend that the scene shows that Hroðgar's actions are outside the bounds of "heroic life," that to cry, embrace, and kiss at a farewell are distinctly non-heroic gestures that indicate desperation rather than resolution. Nowhere else in Old English poetry do men display such overt emotion towards each other.⁵⁴

A lexical analysis of *blondenfeax*, "grey-haired," a word used repeatedly to describe Hroðgar, confirms this teetering masculinity I see in the beginning of the farewell scene. *Blondenfeax* is used only in poetry, never in prose.⁵⁵ Within *Beowulf*, it refers to Hroðgar (three times) and to the Swedish king Ongenþeow (once). The contrast between Ongenþeow and Hroðgar, lexically linked through their grey hair, emphasizes Hroðgar's incapacity as he strives for the power of the Father in the farewell scene.

⁵² There are over 150 uses of forms of *cyssan* and *gecyssan* listed in *A Microfiche Concordance to Old English*, ed. Antonette di Paolo Healy and Richard Venezky (Newark: University of Delaware, 1980). I will reference the *Concordance* by letter and fiche number; for instance, MCOE G017 refers to fiche 17 of the letter G.

⁵³ Chickering, *Beowulf*, 348.

⁵⁴ One possible exception could be the fantasy of the narrator of *The Wanderer*, who imagines laying his head in his lord's lap (41–44); this emotionally charged moment, however, exists only in the narrator's mind, while the farewell scene occurs within the textual "reality" of *Beowulf*. Another possible exception could be the end of *The Battle of Maldon*, as the thanes prepare to follow their leader into death, an intensely emotionally charged moment. These men, however, are shaking their spears and flinging javelins, not crying and embracing each other.

⁵⁵ MCOE B015. Outside *Beowulf*, *blondenfeax* refers to Sarah and Lot, both in *Genesis A*. Sarah is called grey-haired (2343a) when the poet affirms that one day she will bear a son for Abraham; Lot is called grey-haired when his daughters ply him with drink and commit incest with him to continue his line after the destruction of Sodom (2602b). It is interesting that the other *blondenfeax* characters, like Hroðgar, have trouble conceiving or begetting heirs.

Ongenþeow is the sort of old king who does everything Hroðgar does not. He is called *blondenfexa* as he dies in battle:

þær wearð Ongendiow ecgum sweorda,
blondenfexa on bid wrecen,
þæt se þeodcýning ðafian sceolde
Eafores anne dom. 2961-64

There was the grey-haired Ongenþeow brought to bay by the edges of the sword, so that the people-king must submit to the sole judgment of Eofor.

Ongenþeow dies in battle, enacting Overing's ultimate masculine statement: "I will triumph or I will die." Ongenþeow has already killed Hæðcyn, Hygelac's brother, at Ravenswood; Eofor continues the feud by killing Ongenþeow to avenge Hæðcyn's death. Though *blondenfeax*, Ongenþeow is not passive, feeble, crying, or sleeping with women. He preserves his masculinity intact until the end of his life, showing that, in *Beowulf*, a man's advancing age does not necessarily mean a movement away from masculinity on Clover's continuum.

In contrast to heroic and grey-haired Ongenþeow, the three references to Hroðgar as *blondenfeax* occur at key moments when he is acting in a manner that undermines his masculinity, defined as his ability to make absolute statements or to exert his power and status over other men. The last of these is the use in the farewell scene, to which I will return in a moment; the others occur at Hroðgar's departure from the shore of the mere when the Danes think Beowulf has probably been killed and at one of Hroðgar's retirements to his bed (discussed above as a feminizing action):

Blondenfeaxe,
gomele ymb godne ongeador spræcon,
þæt hig þæs æðelinges eft ne wendon,
þæt he sigehreðig secean come
mærne þeoden. 1594-98

The grey-haired ones, old [knowledgeable] about goodness, together said that they did not expect again this hero, who had come victorious to seek the famous lord.

Wolde blondenfeax beddes neosan,
gamela Scylding. 1791-92

The grey-haired one wished to seek his bed, the ancient Scylding.

In the first of these passages, the word *blondenfeaxe* is plural, referring not only to Hroðgar but to all the Danes who lack the faith in Beowulf that the Geats (who remain by the shore) demonstrate. The second reference occurs the night before Beowulf's departure; again, Hroðgar has deliberately absented himself from the place of battle and the place of male bonding, where warriors sleep in the hall together, ostensibly prepared for battle.⁵⁶ Thus, Hroðgar is *blondenfeax* and ineffectual, in contrast to Ongenþeow, who is *blondenfeax* and heroic and super-masculine.

The emotional tone of the farewell scene, wherein Hroðgar is also termed *blondenfeax*, has elicited relatively little critical comment. Even in editions of *Beowulf*, notes on the scene tend to focus on the odd construction "him wæs bega wen" (1873) or on the lost letters in the manuscript rather than the unusual content.⁵⁷ Chickering devotes a section of his commentary to "Hroðgar's Tears," noting that the emotion in this passage can be appreciated only by parents who have watched children depart.⁵⁸ In 1967 Thomas Wright analyzed the scene in detail, and managed to interpret the scene in such a way that the tension of emotion and desperation disappear.⁵⁹ Wright not only "contorts familiar formulas,"⁶⁰ but reads Hroðgar and Beowulf as representational ideas rather than characters, conveniently dismissing the discomfort the scene produces in the reader.

Wright begins by questioning a reading of the passage that "turns him [Hroðgar] from a stalwart if tragic king to a sentimental ancient whose concern for his own mortality is neither admirable nor Teutonic."⁶¹ Wright is unabashedly in favor of interpreting Hroðgar as active participant in the heroic ethos; he refers to his "interest in restoring Hroðgar to the good eminence he deserves as a vigorous and

⁵⁶ It should be noted that Beowulf does not sleep in Heorot on the night of Grendel's mother's attack—"næs Beowulf ðær / ac wæs oþer in ær geteohhod / æfter maþðum-gife mærum Geate" ("Beowulf was not there but other [accommodation] was previously assigned to the noble Geat after the treasure-giving," 1299-1301). Beowulf, however, was assigned those quarters, while Hroðgar always actively seeks his bed.

⁵⁷ See, for example, the editions of Dobbie and Klaeber (both op.cit.) and of C. L. Wrenn and W. F. Bolton, *Beowulf, with the Finnesburg Fragment*, rev. ed. (Exeter: Short Run Press, 1988).

⁵⁸ Chickering, *Beowulf*, 347.

⁵⁹ Thomas Wright, "Hrothgar's Tears," *MPhil* 65 (1967): 39-44.

⁶⁰ Chickering comments that Wright's conclusions come "at the cost of contorting a number of familiar formulas," *Beowulf*, 348.

⁶¹ I am following Wright's argument, "Hrothgar's Tears," 39-41.

exemplary figure in the epic." Wright also discusses at length "him wæs bega wen," in his translation removing the emendation of *no* in line 1875 so that Beowulf and Hroðgar *do* (rather than do not) expect that they will see each other again. This reading begins Wright's argument that the poet "is at pains to justify and explain Hroðgar's emotional outburst." Wright's use of the word "justify" is illuminating; the emotion of the scene obviously unsettles him and needs to be accounted for.

The second half of Wright's reading focuses on the last three lines of the farewell scene, and he restructures the grammar of the scene in a manner of which I thoroughly approve. Most editors read *langað* as a noun ("longing") and *beorn* as a verb ("burned"); they translate 1879–80, in effect, "secret longing burned within his blood." Like Wright, I reverse these grammatical usages, so that *langað* is a verb ("longs, desires") and *beorn* is a noun ("a warrior, a man").

Wright does not address the lexical precedents for such translations, so I shall do so here. Although Dobbie attempts to cite some precedent uses of *beorn* (third-person-singular preterite indicative of *byrnan*) as a verb in Old English poetry, none of them is unproblematic.⁶² Dobbie's references to *Guthlac* (938, 964, 980) are actually to the word *born*; *born* occurs in *Beowulf*, as well, as a third-person-singular preterite indicative of *byrnan* (2673). Dobbie's citation of *beorn* in *Christ I* (540) is actually to a "corrected reading" of *b-orn* with an erasure between the *b* and the *o*; however, in their edition of the *Exeter Book*, Krapp and Dobbie suggest the erased letter is an *i*, not an *e*.⁶³ *Beorn*'s usage as a verb at *Beowulf* 1880, if accepted, is unique within the poem and most likely within the poetic corpus; editors can produce no substantive evidence of *beorn* as a verb elsewhere. In contrast, forms of *beorn* mean "man, warrior" ten times in *Beowulf* alone. Lexical evidence in the text and in the corpus points to a reading of *beorn* as a noun meaning "warrior."

Langað occurs seven times in the Old English corpus; all six of the other uses are third-person singular verb forms.⁶⁴ If *langað* is a noun,

⁶² Dobbie, *Beowulf and Judith*, 211.

⁶³ *The Exeter Book*, ed. G. P. Krapp and E. V. K. Dobbie, ASPR 3 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1936), 18.

⁶⁴ MCOE L002. Other uses of *langað* are as follows: (1) *Genesis*, 495–97a, when the devil asks Adam if he *desires* to be with God; (2) *Soul and Body I*, 152–54a, when the soul *longs* for the body to realize its afflictions; (3) *Ælfric's De temporibus anni* 4.44, when the day *lengthens*; (4) *Byrhtferð's Manual*, when the night *lengthens* at midwinter;

it is the only usage of the word in that way; concordance evidence points to Wright's and my grammatical interpretation, that *langað* is a verb rather than a unique noun form. The usual grammatical construction de-personalizes the "longing" and lessens the emotional effect: "the longing burned." The more active, immediate translation of "the warrior desires" conveys a more subject, emotional intensity.

At this grammatical juncture Wright and I part company, however. Wright reads the last lines of this scene within a "generalizing intent of the poet" and sees in the tears not sorrow at Beowulf's departure but joy in "the continuity of valor."⁶⁵ For Wright, Hroðgar is "submitting to tears that acknowledge, not gratitude and regret, but fellowship and a sense of destined succession." His tears show "a bond well known among men who have shared combat together and discovered in their mutual strength unsuspected kinship." Wright seems untroubled that Hroðgar and Beowulf have very specifically *not* shared combat, they have no "mutual" strength (Beowulf conducted both battles alone), and that Beowulf has rejected Hroðgar's offer of kinship by asserting his ties to Hygelac.

Wright's translation of these lines, translating *langað* as the emotionally neutral "belongs to," reads:

for in his heart he held him fast
in the custom that belongs to dear men
as a warrior of the same blood.

My translation emphasizes rather than neutralizes the emotion of the scene:

but in his [Hroðgar's] spirit (with heart-bonds fast because of the
dear man) the man secretly longed for him [Beowulf] with blood.

Where Wright sees a generalized heroic bond, I see an emotional power struggle. Wright's translation puts Hroðgar and Beowulf on relatively even ground; they are each powerful as well as ingratiatingly indebted to the other. His reading depends, however, on ignoring the faltering masculinity and power of Hroðgar that has been constructed in the text previous to the farewell scene; rather than a bonded camaraderie, the farewell scene bespeaks emotion wherein the aging male longs not just

(5) Psalm 81:5 (82:5 in King James version), when the sinners *languish*; (6) *Durham Proverbs* 9, when men *long* most eagerly for love.

⁶⁵ Wright, "Hrothgar's Tears," 43; all quotations in this paragraph are from this page.

for Beowulf's approval and acceptance but for the power implicit in becoming the father of the powerful son.

Beowulf is unmistakably the masculine figure of power in this scene, as throughout the poem. His response to Hroðgar's outburst of emotion is the same as his response to the offer of adoption: he ignores it, thinking about his gain, his treasure, and not about its source. In a striking change of tone, after the poet tells us that Hroðgar is longing for Beowulf in his blood, Beowulf simply walks away ("him Beowulf þanan," "away from him Beowulf thence," 1880). He is thinking not about the man he has just left, the alliance he has forged, or the ties he has formed. Instead, he is "since hremig" ("exulting in treasure," 1882), gloating about the gifts he received and the greatness they signify in him. His power over Hroðgar is absolute, just like everything else about him.

The syntax of one of John Hill's sentences makes Beowulf's absolute control of the situation clear: "He has come to love this great warrior as a son, to hope for a kinship and a continuing relationship in any connection Beowulf might want or allow."⁶⁶ Beowulf has the power to "allow" Hroðgar to have a relationship with him. Later in that essay, Hill defines Hroðgar's love for Beowulf as "anxious."⁶⁷ Similarly, Irving comments on the power Beowulf demonstrates in this scene:

Hroðgar's deep love for Beowulf . . . evident . . . in his outburst of tears when Beowulf leaves to return to his own people, is wholly justified and genuinely touching—but it betrays a terrible dependence.⁶⁸

Irving's sense of Hroðgar's dependence here confirms that, in the farewell scene, Hroðgar does not "move up" on the continuum of masculinity. Rather than a shared masculine bond, his inability to control his emotions and Beowulf's neglect of their expression show him to be a figure of impotence, crying while Beowulf walks away.

Hroðgar's attempt to adopt Beowulf is another strategy that fails; had he succeeded, he would have become the Father to Beowulf the powerful Son

⁶⁶ John Hill, "Hrothgar's Noble Rule," 175.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 176.

⁶⁸ Irving, "What to Do with Old Kings," 263–64.

and as such accrued power through his implicit domination of the son. A brief foray into psychoanalytic theory and psychoanalytic readings of *Beowulf* reveals that fatherhood, as Lees has intimated, is a fragile institution in *Beowulf*, and Beowulf chooses Hygelac, rather than Hroðgar, as the Father to whom he submits himself in his Oedipal drama.

The Oedipus complex is one of the primary concepts in twentieth-century psychoanalytic theory. The Oedipal narrative describes the process by which "the child," implicitly male, grows into a contributing member of society who obeys and accrues status from its laws. The resolution of the Oedipus complex, first described by Sigmund Freud and refined by (among others) Jacques Lacan, is a form of socialization. For Freud, children wish to be able, like Sophocles's Oedipus, to kill their fathers and have sex with their mothers. He says of a spectator of Sophocles's play:

He reacts as though by self-analysis he had recognized the Oedipus complex in himself and had unveiled the will of the gods and the oracle as exalted disguises of his own unconscious. It is as though he was obliged to remember the two wishes—to do away with his father and in place of him take his mother to wife—and be horrified at them.⁶⁹

Lacan's expansion of Freud determines, partially through linguistics,⁷⁰ that the resolution of the drives represented in the Oedipus complex is the child's entrance into language, the Symbolic. This resolution implicitly requires acceptance of the Law of the Father. As the child acquires language, he no longer wants to kill his father and have sex with his mother; the Father becomes a revered figure of power, power in which the child can share, while the mother, the Other without the phallus, is renounced as object.

For Lacan, the phallus and the paternal are entwined. The power to create and regulate language depends on both: the phallus "is a signification that is evolved only by what we call a metaphor, in particular, the paternal metaphor."⁷¹ Lacan links "the signifier of the Father, as

⁶⁹ Sigmund Freud, "The Development of the Libido and the Sexual Organizations," in *Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis*, trans. James Strachey (New York: Norton, 1966), 331.

⁷⁰ Jacques Lacan, "The Meaning of the Phallus," in *Feminine Sexuality*, ed. Juliet Mitchell and Jacqueline Rose, trans. Jacqueline Rose (New York: Norton, 1982), 78.

⁷¹ Jacques Lacan, "On the Possible Treatment of Psychosis," in *Écrits: A Selection*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Norton, 1977), 198.

author of the Law, with death";⁷² in a Lacanian analysis, powerful concepts of death, the phallus, signification, and Law meet in the figure of the Father.

If we are looking for Oedipal Fathers in *Beowulf*, we might compare Hroðgar and the other *blondenfeax* man in *Beowulf*, Ongenþeow, who is killed by the younger Eofor in an inter-tribal feud that also spans generations within the tribes of Swedes and Geats. As such, Ongenþeow could be read as Father in an Oedipus complex in which the son or younger man *succeeds* in killing the Father and (possibly) having sex with the Mother—Ongenþeow's wife was abducted by the Geats before the battle of Ravenswood. Indeed, Ongenþeow is defined specifically as a father, his wife specifically as a mother, in the description of the battle:

Sona him se froda fæder Ohtheres,
eald and egesfull ondslyht ageaf,
abreot brimwisan, bryd ahredde,
gomela iomeowlan golde berofene,
Onelan modor ond Otheres. 2928–32

At once the wise father of Ohthere, old and terrible, returned the onslaught, cut down the sea-king, rescued the bride, the old woman bereft of gold, the mother of Onela and Ohthere.

Appropriately enough, Eofor marries Hygelac's daughter as part of his reward for Ongenþeow's death, receiving a highly suitable bride for his efforts on the (Oedipal?) battlefield. Although dead, Ongenþeow, the old and terrible Father, dies with his masculinity and position as Father intact (as Lees says, "The only good hero . . . is a dead one"⁷³). Hroðgar, in contrast, has to live as a rejected Father, his masculinity faltering.

Psychoanalytic readings of *Beowulf*, like Lacan and Freud, tend to focus on the son, on Beowulf. For example, James Earl argues that readers and listeners of *Beowulf* identify with Beowulf in his position as thane only in the first half of the poem; as Beowulf becomes more of a "superego" in the second half, the reader transfers that identification to Wiglaf.⁷⁴ Hroðgar receives some attention as a father-figure who

⁷² Ibid., 199.

⁷³ Lees, "Men in *Beowulf*," 146.

⁷⁴ James Earl, "Beowulf and the Origins of Civilization," in *Speaking Two Languages*, ed. Allen Frantzen (Albany: SUNY Press, 1991), 84–85.

gives Beowulf advice,⁷⁵ but the focus is rarely on him. One exception is Strother Purdy, who reads Grendel as Hroðgar's dream, a creation of his unconsciousness: Hroðgar and Grendel never appear together because they are, in some way, the same.⁷⁶

Another exception is John Foley, whose essay "*Beowulf* and the Psychohistory of Anglo-Saxon Culture" argues that the poem "transmits the story of the psychological development of individual and of culture."⁷⁷ Foley's analysis takes an odd turn when he reads Hroðgar and Grendel as the good and the terrible fathers that Beowulf must face in his psychological development. For Foley, "the benevolent, positive aspect of the archetype is projected in the character of Hroðgar, under whom the hero-ego Beowulf must serve his heroic apprenticeship";⁷⁸ at the same time, Hroðgar is "a symbolic projection of the ego's successful adjustment to maleness."⁷⁹ While Hroðgar and Beowulf as father and son is nothing new, Grendel as Father strikes me as bizarre. Since Grendel has a mother, he is defined in the poem as a son, not a parent. Grendel functions more as a bad son to Hroðgar or an evil double of Beowulf (as suggested by Hill⁸⁰) than as a "terrible father" whom Beowulf must castrate.⁸¹

These critics seem not to notice that Beowulf implicitly rejects Hroðgar's Fatherhood in a number of ways. He walks away with no comment after Hroðgar's emotional farewell embrace (Hill refers to "the world of a young man who has yet to meet and lose someone dear to him"⁸²). He does not respond to Hroðgar's offer of adoption in his speech that follows the offer (958–79); he does not respond to the "sermon" or "harangue" either, except to sit down and continue feasting (1785–89). He repeatedly affirms his loyalty to Hygelac, *Hygelac min*, his uncle. Hroðgar is a father-figure in the eyes of *Beowulf* critics, but not in the eyes of Beowulf. Hygelac, not Hroðgar, is Beowulf's Father.

⁷⁵ See, for instance, Hansen, "Hrothgar's Sermon."

⁷⁶ Strother Purdy, "Beowulf and Hrothgar's Dream," *ChauR* 21 (1986): 267–68.

⁷⁷ Foley, "Psychohistory," 135.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 138.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 140.

⁸⁰ John Hill, *The Cultural World of Beowulf* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1995), 123.

⁸¹ Foley, "Psychohistory," 150.

⁸² Hill, "Hrothgar's Noble Rule," 177.

Within the terms of Lacanian psychoanalysis, if Hroðgar is *not* the Father, he does not have the phallus. He does not determine signification and metaphor. He does not control the Law, the imposition of cultural norms. He can see himself in the position of powerful masculinity, in the position of Fatherhood, but is not actually there. The last scene in which we see Hroðgar is the farewell scene, his last-ditch attempt to assert masculinity by playing the role of Father to Beowulf as son. If Beowulf had responded at all to Hroðgar's emotion, his tears, the longing in his blood, it would have been an acknowledgement that Hroðgar held some sort of power over him. But he does not respond. Hroðgar is left at the veritable bottom of Clover's continuum, crying as the hero walks away without speaking.

The two scenes I have discussed, Hroðgar's exit from and entrance to Heorot and the farewell scene, show that Hroðgar's masculinity is in jeopardy in this poem that constructs the masculine, as Overing defines and problematizes it, in oppositional absolutes. Neither through heterosexual relations with his wife nor through paternal, quasi-erotic relations with Beowulf can Hroðgar regain his once vital, now fading masculine power. Just as in the medieval Scandinavia that Clover describes, masculinity is an achievable or losable quality in *Beowulf*, and Hroðgar is losing it, despite his pretensions to the contrary. As such, he functions in the text as a warning to other masculine figures about the fragility of that masculinity; perhaps, at some level, Beowulf faces the dragon so that he will be like Ongenþeow and die with his masculinity intact rather than, like Hroðgar, fade into effeminate irrelevance.

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The Parturition of Poetry and the Birthing of Culture: The Ides Aglæcwif and Beowulf

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This essay aims to bring Grendel's mother, the *ides aglæcwif*, to the center of the text we have labeled *Beowulf*.¹ I am indebted in this endeavor to James Earl and John Miles Foley, both of whom have explicated the psycho-historical dimensions of *Beowulf*, although from different perspectives. Earl finds in Grendel's mother a representative of the Freudian, pre-Oedipal monster-mother.² Foley sees a paradigm of Erich Neumann's primitive terrible mother.³

¹ For a fine discussion of the terms, *ides* and *ides aglæcwif*, see Helen Damico *Beowulf's Wealthweow and the Valkyrie Tradition* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1984).

² James W. Earl, "The Necessity of Evil in *Beowulf*," *South Atlantic Bulletin* 44 (1979): 81-98; "Apocalypticism and Mourning in *Beowulf*," *Thought* 57 (1982): 362-70; "The Role of the Men's Hall in the Development of the Anglo-Saxon Superego," *Psychiatry* 46 (1983): 139-60; "Transformation of Chaos: Immanence and Transcendence in *Beowulf* and Other Old English Poetry," *Ultimate Reality and Meaning* 10 (1987): 164-85; "Beowulf and the Origins of Civilization," in *Speaking Two Languages: Traditional Disciplines and Contemporary Theory in Medieval Studies*, ed. Allen J. Frantzen (Albany: SUNY Press, 1986), 65-89. All of the above have been incorporated into Earl, *Thinking About Beowulf* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994). John M. Hill, "Revenge and Superego Mastery in *Beowulf*," *Assays* 5 (1989): 3-36, also applies psychoanalytic techniques to the poem.

³ John Miles Foley, "Beowulf and the Psycho-History of Anglo-Saxon Culture," *American Imago* 34 (1977): 133-53. Gwendolyn A. Morgan, "Mothers, Monsters,