Beowulf’s Inglorious Youth

by Norman E. Eliason

INES 2177–89 of Beowulf, telling us that the hero of the poem was considered worthless when young, comes as a stunning surprise, for this is contrary to what we expect of a hero and at odds with everything we have been told about Beowulf. Up to this point in the poem, he has seemed a perfect hero, flawless in ability and matchless in prowess. His deeds, especially in his victorious encounters with the two monsters, Grendel and his dam, have been glorious and have been made to seem doubly so by virtue of his youthful age.1

Our surprise turns to utter dismay later (2428–34) when we learn that at the age of seven Beowulf was regarded as a lovable and promising boy, for then the reference to his inglorious youth (2177–89) becomes glaringly inconsistent. Of the many discussions about this, the two best I have found are those of Brodeur and Malone, the one endeavoring merely to excuse the inconsistency and the other trying to explain it away. Brodeur says this:

We should not expect [Beowulf] to be flawless. Much attention has, indeed, been given to the inconsistencies in the narrative; some, I think, are imagined. . . . Most instances are of no particular importance, and may be matched in the longer works of other great poets. Yet three are real, and deserve attention.

1Who by Klaeber’s reckoning was no more than 20 years old at the time of his encounter with the monsters (Fr. Klaeber, Beowulf and the Fight at Finnsburg [Boston, 1950], p. xlv. I cite this edition hereafter simply as “Klaeber.”) Beowulf’s other youthful deeds—his slaying of several sea-monsters (419–24a) and his swimming match with Breca (532–81a)—antedate this encounter.
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The first of these is the disparity between what Beowulf is permitted to tell of his own heroic deeds in youth (lines 419a–424a; 532b–581a) and the poet's account of the hero's youth as inactive and inglorious. . . .

[This] inconsistency is . . . easy to understand and pardon; the author's fondness for contrast misled him into attempting to enhance Beowulf's heroism in young manhood by setting it off against an imagined sluggishness in youth. The flaw lies in the total absence of anything outside this single passage to support a tale of the hero's early inactivity. It seems probable that a "male Cinderella" tradition had associated itself with the figure of Beowulf, and that the poet, knowing of it, made the mistake of using it. It is contradicted not only by Beowulf's own reports of his youthful exploits, but also by his direct statement that he was loved and highly regarded in his childhood by King Hrethel. . . .

[The other two discrepancies—in the twofold accounts of the feast at Heorot and of the burial of the treasure—] represent errors of judgment, not errors of artistic taste; the only error of taste is to be found in the tale of Beowulf's sluggish youth, which is out of harmony with the hero's character and career as these had already been represented. And this much the poet may be forgiven.²

If, as I believe, Brodeur's defense of the passage as a forgiveable error is feeble, Malone's justification of it is unconvincing. Like Brodeur, he also conjectures that the poet "found the [sluggish youth] motif in his source material, already attached to the hero, and," Malone further conjectures, "conscientious monk that he was, found himself unwilling to cast it aside. . . . [H]e tried, indeed, to explain it away." He did so, Malone argues, by distinguishing three stages in the development of young Beowulf. First [in the Breca contest and other youthful exploits] we have the hero as a boy, reckless enough, full of the spirit of adventure, unaware of the moral purpose inherent in God's gift to him of great strength; during this stage, he seemed to the Geats a youth of great promise. Secondly, [in the inglorious-youth passage], the hero becomes aware of his obligations to God, and refuses to use his strength for anything trivial; he awaits God's call to service in a great cause. During this stage he falls out of favor at home; his fellows, and even his lord, knowing as they do the greatness of his strength, cannot understand his refusal to use it in the rough and tumble of everyday life in the hall; they attribute his inactivity to sloth and want of spirit. Thirdly, the hero hears of Grendel and realizes that his call has come. . . . Thenceforth Beowulf moves triumphantly on his appointed course.

The hero, so conceived, seems remote from the realities of camp and hearth. But the poet was not striving after realism; he was concerned to make a champion in terms of his own monkish ideals.³

The three stages which Malone detects are certainly not clearly distinguished by the poet, nor are the “monkish ideals” apparent which prompted the poet to trace the three stages in Beowulf’s growing awareness of his “obligation to God.” If we adopt the tack taken by Malone, we must conclude that the poet completely failed to make his meaning clear about what was for him, a “conscientious monk,” of vital significance. If, on the other hand, we adopt the tack taken by Brodeur, we must admit, as he does, that the passage in question is not only an astonishing instance of inconsistency but also a lamentable error of taste which Brodeur is willing to forgive but I cannot.

The tack I shall take is quite different, for I propose that the passage should be read as referring to the inglorious youth of Hygelac rather than Beowulf. Unlike Beowulf’s youth, about which, as we have seen, much is said and all of it highly creditable, Hygelac’s youth receives little mention in the poem—so little that if he was considered worthless when young, this would not seem unduly surprising nor require defense for its inconsistency. Indeed, the mention of Hygelac’s inglorious youth would both accord with the one other reference to him as a boy and prepare us for the otherwise inexplicable way he is referred to there. It occurs in the account about King Hrethel’s three young sons, Herebeald, Haethcyn, and Hygelac (2434–71), where, properly enough, attention is centered upon the first two, for Hæthcyn, we are told, accidentally killed his older brother, Herebeald—a tragic event which caused Hrethel to die of grief. The account is perfectly clear save for the elegiac “digression” there (2444–62), the relevance of which has perturbed critics. Though recognizing that the lament obliquely voices the distress of Hrethel—bereaved as he is of one son and unable to endure the prospect of avenging his death by having the other son hanged—they fail to see that it voices his distress more directly and completely. For included there is what I take to be a reference to Hrethel’s third son, who certainly ought to be mentioned somewhere in the account, especially if he also is a cause of Hrethel’s distress. All that is said about this third son is that the old man cannot bring himself to abide or to endure this other heir of his (ōðres ne gýmeð to gebidanne . . . yrfeweardas [2451b–53a]). Construed as it regularly is to mean “his heart has no hope of another heir,”4 the remark is both senseless and pointless. As I construe it, it makes sense, but only if we have been forewarned of why Hrethel cannot

4Charles W. Kennedy, Beowulf (New York, 1940), whose translation of the remark accords essentially with the interpretation of all editors. I cite the Kennedy translation here and later mainly because it is clear and, though not literal, accurate enough.
abide this third young son. We have this forewarning in the passage which, as I read it, tells of Hygelac’s inglorious youth.

The passage is, I admit, not as clear as it might or should be about this, but in this respect it is not unique. In *Beowulf*, clarity, especially when it depends upon the correct identification of the subject or object of a verb or of the reference of a pronoun, is often lacking, and we are required to scrutinize the text very carefully and to resolve any uncertainty there through consideration of the context. The broad context, as we have seen, indicates that the inglorious-youth passage ought not to refer to Beowulf and suggests the possibility at least that it may refer to Hygelac—a possibility evident also in the immediate context (2152–99) of the passage.

These lines are concerned primarily with two men, Hygelac and Beowulf, telling first (2152–66a) how Beowulf, on his triumphant return to Geatland, presents to King Hygelac rich gifts which Hrothgar had given him in reward for his glorious achievements in Denmark and then (2190–99) how Hygelac in turn presents even richer gifts to Beowulf. This much of its context provides no clue as to which of the two—Hygelac or Beowulf—is referred to in the passage. The possibility that it may be either is obscured by the mention of two other matters in the lines immediately preceding the passage, the first of these (2166b–71) commending the generous behavior of both men and the second (2172–6) telling how Beowulf presents gifts also to Hygd, Hygelac’s queen. Were it not for the mention of these matters, I think it would long since have occurred to someone to question whether the inglorious-youth passage was intended to refer to Beowulf.

Since the immediate context raises rather than settles the issue, we turn to the text of the passage itself (cited from Klaeber) for clarification. But there, as we shall see, doubt rather than certainty confronts us. Following the text are two readings of it—the traditional one as set forth in Kennedy’s translation and my own, where for the sake of clarity, I adhere to his translation as closely as possible and italicize my departures from it.

2177  Swā bealdode  bearn Ecgðæowes,
guma gūðum cūð,  gōðum dæðum,
drēah æfter dōmē;  nealles druncne slōg
2180  heordγenēatas;  næs him hrēoh sefa,
ac hē mancynnes  mæste cœfē
  gifæstan gife,  þē him God sealde,
héold hildedēor.  Hēan wæs lange,
So the son of Ecgtheow bore himself bravely,
Known for his courage and courteous deeds,
Strove after honor, slew not his comrades
In drunken brawling; nor brutal his mood.
But the bountiful gifts which the Lord God gave him
He held with a power supreme among men.
He had long been scorned, when the sons of the Geats
Accounted him worthless; the Weder lord
Held him not high among heroes in hall.
Laggard they deemed him, slothful and slack.
But time brought solace for all his ills!

By the traditional reading, the whole issue is pretty well settled in
the first two lines of the text, where bearn Ecgðæowes (i.e., Beowulf) is
taken to be the subject of the sentence and accordingly becomes the
man referred to throughout the passage. The crux here, however, is
not the subject but the verb bealdode (2177a), which, since it is a verb
used nowhere else in Old English, needs cautious interpretation. Be-
cause its root-meaning and derivation are perfectly clear,5 it seems to
pose no problem; but it does, for its transitive status is doubtful. If
bearn Ecgðæowes is in fact its subject, then the verb must be intransi-
tive, meaning "to be bold," and it is thus that all scholars construe it.6

5A Weak II verb with beald, "bold, confident," as its base.
6Or like Klaeber, recognizing the inherent probability that it is transitive, they make
it yield an intransitive meaning nonetheless by glossing it as "show oneself bold or
brave."
If, however, it is transitive, meaning "to make bold, prominent, to support," it must have an object, which here can only be bearn Ecgþæowes, and its subject then is either he (omitted here as it often is in Old English) or guma "man" in the next line. Stylistically, I admit, this analysis is less satisfactory than the traditional one. But stylistic preference is not a sure criterion, particularly in an instance like this where the poet, by using the nonce-word bealdode, left the syntax uncertain.

The wicked behavior, briefly mentioned in the next two lines (2179b–80), is clearly an allusion to Heremod, who, as is evident in the two mentions of him earlier in the poem (901–15 and 1709–22), was a very promising youth but turned out to be a very bad ruler. In both instances this reversal in Heremod's career is obviously intended as a contrast, but in neither is it very apt—a fact generally acknowledged by labeling both passages "digressions." Here, however, the contrast is perfectly apt, for the reversal mentioned in the last two lines (2188b–89) is the exact opposite of Heremod's. This contrast applies to Hygelac a little better than it does to Beowulf since Hygelac, like Heremod, is a ruler whereas Beowulf is not; but it does not clearly indicate that Hygelac is the man referred to in the passage.

Up to this point, my reading of it, especially the first two lines, may well seem forced; but this is also true of the traditional reading, where in the remaining lines it is not only forced but does violence to the syntax as well. The first instance of this (2181–83a) is less glaring than the second, becoming apparent in scholarly notes on the text rather than the text itself. The problem here is determining the object of the verb hêold (2183a), which I take to be the following word hildedêor, producing the meaning "He (Hygelac) sustained or held in esteem the battle-brave one (Beowulf)." By the traditional meaning, however, hildedêor modifies or is in apposition with he, an analysis which, because of the position of hildedêor, is somewhat strained and becomes increasingly strained by the necessary conclusion that the object of hêold must then be ginfæstan gife (2182a). But this phrase seems clearly to be a variant of mæste cæfta (2181b); and if so, a knotty problem arises, which scholars have not yet resolved. The simplest and

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7As most scholars recognize. The striking similarity between nealles druncne slôg hærþgenêstas (2179b–80a) and brêt bolgenmöð beþgenêstas (1713) can hardly be explained otherwise.

8Accounting, I presume, for Kennedy's ignoring the word in his translation.

9Klaeber (note on 2181) construes ginfæstan gife as accusative, the object of the verb, and mæste cæfta as dative, thus denying the variation there and remaining puzzled
best solution, it seems to me, is to construe both phrases as dative, used in a causal sense,10 thus producing the meaning “Hygelac sustained or esteemed Beowulf because of Beowulf’s great strength (mæste cærafte), the glorious gift (ginfæstan gife) which God had given him.”

It is in the following lines (2183b–86) that the traditional reading does the most violence to the syntax, utterly destroying what seems to be a clear and effectively constructed clause, the swā-clause (2184 ff.). Here the complement of the verb ne tealdon ought to be both hyne . . . gōdne (2184) and, as the nice parallelism clearly indicates, hyne . . . wyrðne (2185). If so, the meaning of the sentence is, “He (Hygelac) was long scorned (Hēan was lange) so that or when (swā) the Geatish warriors did not consider him good nor worthy of the great honor (micles) which God (drihten wereda) was to do (gedôn wolde) for him.” Syntactically, the only objection which might be raised concerns line 2186, which I construe as a relative clause without an expressed relative pronoun. Such a clause, however, is not exceptional, for at least one other instance of it occurs in Beowulf.11

In the traditional reading, the obvious parallelism of hyne . . . gōdne and hyne . . . wyrðne is ignored, with the result that the swā-clause ends with ne tealdon and is followed by another clause (2185–6) which, translated literally, means, “Nor would the king of the Geats (drihten Wedera) put him (i.e., Beowulf) in possession of much”—a meaning produced not only by distorting the syntax but also by wrenching the sense of wyrðne gedôn12 and by emending wereda to Wedera.13

However the whole passage is read—the traditional way or my way—one thing is certain: the text is not crystal clear as to whether

10 Doubts about a causal dative in Beowulf seem to me quite unwarranted. At any rate, the three instances cited as dubious by S. O. Andrew (Postscript on Beowulf [Cambridge, England, 1945], p. 78) are not dubious at all.
11 I.e., in lines 1173–4, where geofena gemynig . . . þū nú hafast, “mindful of the gifts which you now have,” is construed thus by Hoops and by Wrenn, who (Beowulf [London, 1953], note on 1173–4) says, “. . . here we may have the earliest example of the relative pron. being left unexpressed.” Hoops’s explanation, though more cautiously stated, is essentially the same.
12 As Klaiber’s note on the line testifies.
13 An emendation defensible only in order to avoid the contradiction between God’s bounty to Beowulf (2182) and the reluctance of God (drihten wereda) to be bountiful to him.
Beowulf or Hygelac is referred to. Lack of clarity is not unusual in Beowulf, particularly when the poet shifts from one person to another, as he does here, evidently expecting his audience to sense aright whom he means. His audience must often have been puzzled about this, however, and perhaps felt free to ask him for clarification. We are less fortunate, for we have to seek out the clarification for ourselves, looking first at the text of any puzzling passage to make sure that we have read it correctly, then at its immediate context, and finally at the context of the whole poem in order to resolve any lingering doubts. This is what I have done here, but in reverse order. If, as I have tried to show, neither the text of the passage nor its immediate context reveals unmistakably whether the inglorious youth was Beowulf or Hygelac, the issue can be settled only by considering the careers of the two as recounted in the rest of the poem. And there, it seems to me, all that we are told about the glorious career of young Beowulf and the little we are told about the career of young Hygelac lead to the conclusion that the inglorious-youth passage refers to Hygelac. The lack of clarity about this is a flaw, to be sure, but not an exceptional flaw requiring special pleading. The passage as I think it must and legitimately can be read is not, as it has hitherto seemed, the most glaring example of inconsistency in the poem or the one error of taste in it.

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