Chapter 1

Eight Notes on the Beowulf Text

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In 1998 Bruce Mitchell and Fred C. Robinson published their landmark edition of Beowulf (Mitchell & Robinson 1998). The work can truly be considered as a summa of scholarship on this epic text. The following eight notes discuss individual passages in which some modifications of the traditional interpretations seem possible. In the individual cases the vocabulary does not present major problems, but difficulties arise in the syntactic analysis. All quotations are taken from Mitchell and Robinson (1998). Diacritics have been omitted unless required by the linguistic argument. The notes deal with eight half-lines of the Beowulf text: (1) meodosetla ofteah (5b), (2) feond on helle (101b), (3) swylcum gifepe bið (299b), (4) seon sibbegedriht (387a), (5) wiste þæm ahlæcan (646b), (6) word oper fand (870b), (7) þa hine se broga angeat (1291b) and (8) on fæder stæle (1479b).

1 meodosetla ofteah (5b)

The initial three lines of Beowulf refer to the glory of the Danish kings in former times. Then the mythical founder of the dynasty is introduced:

Oft Scyld Scefing sceapena þreatum
monegum megþum meodosetla ofteah
(Beo 4–5)

Liuzza translates the two lines as follows: “Often Scyld Scefing seized the mead-benches from many tribes, troops of enemies” (Liuzza: 2000: 53). The at first sight almost obvious interpretation of meodosetla ofteah as ‘he pulled away the mead-benches’ is grammatically not acceptable, however:
meodosetla is certainly a genitive of the plural, but the verb ofteon ‘pull away’ governs the accusative.

The correct interpretation of meodosetla ofteah was suggested in an early paper by Holtzmann (1863) and repeated with further material by Sievers (1904): the form ofteah is not the preterite of oftēon ‘pull away’ (strong verb of class II going back to Gmc. *teuh- and related to German ziehen), but must be interpreted as the preterite of oftōn ‘refuse’. OE of-tōn is a strong verb of class I, points back to Gmc. *teih- and is related to German zeihen (in verzeihen ‘to pardon’). If we wanted to normalize the reading we could put in the form oftāh, which may have been the authorial version. But the two verbs OE tion (< Gmc. *teih-) and tōn ‘draw’ (< Gmc. *teuh-) were not consistently kept apart; on this development see Campbell (1959: 308).

Whether the two lines really mean that Scyld Scefing subjugated other tribes by taking away their mead-benches is anything but certain. Since the underlying verb is definitely of-tōn (< Gmc. *teih-, class I of strong verbs) we should posit the verb’s meaning as ‘refuse’. The message would then be that Scyld Scefing did not allow other tribes to achieve independence; they had to remain under his rule. The half-line sceapena preatum may be used in instrumental function and could refer to Scyld Scefing’s own troops. The two quoted lines may thus be translated as follows: ‘Often Scyld Scefing, together with his troops of warriors, refused mead-benches to many tribes’ (i.e. he did not allow them independence).

2 feond on helle (101b)

Hrothgar decides to build a wonderful hall named Heorot. But only for a certain period of time can his Danish subjects enjoy the pleasure of Hrothgar’s generosity, because the monster Grendel disturbs the peaceful proceedings and wreaks murderous havoc in the hall:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Swa ða drihtguman} & \quad \text{dreamum lifþon} \\
\text{eadiglice} & \quad \text{oð ðæt an ongan} \\
\text{fyrene fremman} & \quad \text{feond on helle}
\end{align*}
\]

(Beo 99–101)

These three lines have been translated as follows: “Thus these noble men lived blessedly in joy, until a certain fiend from hell began to wreak evil”
(Swanton 1978: 39). The translation is acceptable, and the vocabulary
does not present notable difficulties. The half-line feond on helle is trouble-
some, however. Since on does not mean ‘from’, Swanton’s translation ‘a
certain fiend from hell’ cannot immediately be allowed to stand. Kemble
had translated quite literally: “So the vassals lived in joy, happily; until
that one began to practice crime, a fiend in hell” (Kemble 1837: 5). But
this translation is also quite doubtful because Grendel was not in any
sense ‘in’ hell at the time.

Many editors and commentators assume that on helle somehow func-
tions as an adjective and means ‘hellish’, and indeed ‘a hellish fiend’
would be meaningful in the given context, since there is no doubt that
Grendel was considered a devilish foe. No parallels for the assumed
construction have been offered, however. It may therefore be doubted
whether feond on helle can really mean ‘a hellish fiend’.

Bugge (1887) had indeed earlier pointed out that feond on helle is prob-
lematic, and added the following observation: “Auch begann wol Grendel
nicht erst jetzt fyrene fremman ‘frevel zu üben’; das hatte er wol schon
früher getan. Allein jetzt fing er an, frevel in der halle Heort zu üben,
und dies war es, das dem freudigen leben in Heort ein ende machte.”
[“Furthermore it was not only then that Grendel started fyrene fremman
‘to perpetrate evil deeds'; this he had done before. Only then did he start
to perpetrate evil deeds in Heort, and it is this that brought an end to the
joyful life in Heort.”] This argumentation seems very plausible. Con-
sequently Bugge suggested the following emendation of the text: oð-dæt
ðæt ongan    fyrene fremman feónd on healle (to mean ‘until one fiend in the
hall began to perpetrate evil deeds’; Bugge 1887: 80). Klaeber notes Bugge’s
suggestion in his apparatus, but does not admit Bugge’s reading into his
text. Palaeographically Bugge’s suggestion can indeed hardly be defended:
why should a scribe have changed the perfectly clear form <healle> to
<helle>, above all if the word for ‘hall’ was meaningful in the given
context?

Ultimately, however, Bugge’s idea may be right. It would certainly
be meaningful to say that Grendel, who is likely to have perpetrated
various kinds of mischief before, began to wreak havoc “in the hall
(Heorot)”. In an Anglian version of the epic text the half-line may there-
fore have read (feond on) halle with retraction of æ before l + consonant.
A West-Saxon scribe did not allow the sequence <-all-> to remain
unchanged, but instead of the phonologically correct form healle he sub-
stituted helle.
Grendel is literally associated with “hell” a second time in the text of Beowulf: ðy he þone feond overcwom, gehægde helle gast (Beo 1273b–4a). The sequence helle gast, frequently viewed as a compound, can certainly mean ‘the creature of hell’. One could suggest, however, that the original version was <halle gast>: the form halle would then be a dative-instrumental in locatival function; we could translate the half-line as ‘he subdued the creature [Grendel] in the hall’. But the reading helle in line 1274a cannot really be objected to, even if halle ‘in the hall’ would perhaps be slightly better from the semantic point of view. The half-line feond on helle (Beo 101b), on the other hand, is hardly acceptable. It is likely that the authorial version of the epic text read on halle ‘in the hall’, and the form <halle> was incorrectly transcribed into West-Saxon as <helle>.

3 swylcum giseþe bið (299b)

Upon their arrival in Denmark, Hrothgar’s coastguard intercepts Beowulf and his companions, but, on being informed of Beowulf’s noble lineage and his intention to rid the king’s hall Heorot of the monster Grendel the coastguard allows the foreigners to proceed: he shows them the way to Hrothgar’s hall and promises to request that his attendants look after the vessel, so that Beowulf’s party can safely return to their homeland after their mission is accomplished. The coastguard concludes his speech as follows:

Gewitaþ forð beran
wäpen ond gewædu; ic eow wisige;
swylce ic maguþegnas mine hate
wið feonda gehwone flotan eowerne,
niwyrwydne nacan on sande
arum healdan op ðæt eft byrêd
ofer lagustreamas leofne mannan
wudu wundenhals to Wedermearce;
godfremmendra swylcum giseþe bið
þæt þone hilderæs hal gedigeð
(Beo 291b–300)

The vocabulary of this passage does not present notable problems, and the translation provided by Swanton would at first sight seem more or less acceptable: “Proceed, bearing weapons and armor; I will guide you.
Moreover, I will instruct my young thanes to guard your ship honorably against all enemies, the newly-tarred vessel on the sand, until the timbers with curved prow carry back the beloved man over the sea’s currents to the Weders’ coastline. May it be granted to one of such noble deeds that he survive the onslaught of the battle unharmed” (Swanton 1978: 49).

A major difficulty in interpreting the coastguard’s speech, though, lies in the temporal subclause introduced by *op ðæt* ‘until’, because the referent of the grammatical object belonging to *byræd* ‘carries’ is not immediately clear: it could be assumed that *leofne mannæ* (Beo 297b) should refer to Beowulf, but then it is doubtful who is meant by the genitive plural *godfremmendra* and the following relative construction introduced by *swylcum gifēpe bið*. Swanton’s rendering seems ultimately unacceptable mainly for two reasons: since both *bið* and *gedige* are indicative forms there is no basis for assuming that any wish is expressed as would be indicated by the clause starting with “May it be granted. . . .”; furthermore, *godfremmendra* seems to be the genitive plural of either *godfremmend* or *godfremmende*, but in either case the word cannot mean ‘noble deeds’, because the form in -end(-e) (belonging to the paradigm of the present participle) clearly functions as an agent noun meaning ‘(one) doing good’, if god- is correctly transmitted. In any case, *godfremmendra* seems basically to mean ‘warriors’. That *godfremmendra* should begin a separate main clause, as Swanton’s translation indicates, seems quite unlikely. The traditional syntactic interpretation according to which the temporal subclause introduced by *op ðæt* ends with *gedige* seems indeed probable. But the construction of that temporal clause also poses problems. The following considerations may be of use in dealing with this difficulty.

If we assume that *leofne mannæ* refers to Beowulf himself then it is conceivable that the genitive plural *godfremmendra* could refer to his companions. It is likely that *swylcum* introduces a relative clause: *godfremmendra swylcum gifēpe bið* probably means ‘the one (= every one) of the warriors to whom it is given . . .’. We know that not all companions returned home: Hondscio was killed by Grendel. The issue will arise again in the note on *on fæder stæle* below. Liuzza’s translation is correct: “Go forth, and bear weapons and armor – I shall guide your way; and I will command my young companions to guard honorably against all enemies your ship, newly-tarred, upon the sand, to watch it until the curved-necked wood bears hence across the ocean-streams a beloved man to the borders of the Weders – and such of these good men as will be granted
that they survive the storm of battle” (Liuzza 2000: 62). But the dash after Weders is superfluous.

4 seon sibbegedriht (387a)

When Wulfgar announces to Hrothgar that the Geatish hero Beowulf has come to Denmark in order to rid the hall Heorot of the monster Grendel, the ageing Danish king praises Beowulf’s noble descent and former heroic achievements. Hrothgar urges Wulfgar to usher in the Geatish party:

Beo ðu on ofeste, hat in gan
seon sibbegedriht samod ætgædere,
gesaga him eac wordum þæt hie sint wilcuman
Deniga leodum.

(Beo 386–9a)

This invitation to Beowulf and his companions to enter the hall, where “they will be welcome to the Danes” does not present serious problems with regard to its vocabulary. It should be mentioned, however, that what has frequently been printed as a compound sibbegedriht may represent a syntagm consisting of the genitive of sibb ‘relationship, friendship’ followed by its head gedryht ‘troop, body of retainers’. The inherited compound would be expected as sibgedriht (three syllables) and is attested in Exo 214a, Guth 1372a (sibgedryht) and Phoen 618a (sibgedryht). The sequence has been translated as ‘band of kinsmen’, which is acceptable, although ‘kinsmen’ must not be taken literally.

What is not agreed upon is who precisely is meant at this point by sibbegedriht. Theoretically, sibbegedriht could refer to the Danes, that is, to Hrothgar’s retainers, or to Beowulf’s companions. Mitchell and Robinson opt for the first alternative: “OE idiom and the element order combine to suggest that sibbegedriht is the object, not the subject of seon: ‘bid [them, the Geats] come in to see the band of kinsmen [the Danes]’” (Mitchell & Robinson 1998: 61). The translation offered by Swanton is quite similar: “Make haste, bid them enter to see the noble company of kinsmen assembled together” (1978: 53). Basically the same rendering is found in the translation accompanying what has been called “the first real edition” of Beowulf (Klaeber 1950: cxvii): “Be thou in haste, bid them enter, and see our friendly troop collected together” (Kemble 1837: 17).
Although this interpretation is certainly not to be rejected immediately, one wonders whether the object “them [the Geats]” could have been omitted in what is obviously assumed to be an accusative-and-infinitive construction. Apart from this minor objection, it must be asked what the objective of Hrothgar’s invitation could be. There is hardly any reason why Hrothgar should invite Beowulf and his companions to “see” (‘inspect’?) the Danish “band of kinsmen”, since we know that the Danes were unable to cope with Grendel and had to bear up with the mischief wrought by the monster at night for twelve years: Hrothgar could not present his “band of kinsmen” with any satisfaction or pride. It would be pointless for him to invite Beowulf to come in and “have a look” at the Danes.

Since in line 729 the sequence *sibbegedriht* definitely refers to Beowulf’s party, we may inquire whether *sibbegedriht* in Hrothgar’s invitation may also refer to the Geats. It would definitely be meaningful for Hrothgar to say “let the [Geatish] band of kinsmen all of them together come in.” Can the manuscript reading be grammatically analysed in this sense? Above all, what is then the function of *seon* in line 387a?

Since *hatan* ‘bid’ can be followed by an accusative-and-infinitive, it is reasonable to assume that *hat in gan* (seon) *sibbegedriht samod ætgedere* means ‘bid the company of kinsmen all together come in’. This interpretation was offered by Grein (1974: 600), Bugge (1887: 86), and Klaeber (1950: 142). But it has by no means been accepted generally. Johannes Hoops preferred to identify the *sibbegedriht* with the Danes, but he also discussed the alternative and noted: “*seon* wäre dann eine Variation zu *in gan*, *sibbegedriht* wäre gleichfalls Subjekts-Akk. zu *hat*, und zu *seon* wäre als Objekt *me* zu ergänzen; also: ‘heiß sie hereingehn, (heiß) die Sippenschar zusammen miteinander (mich) sehen’” (Hoops 1932a: 62).

It is doubtful, however, whether *me* as the object of *seon* can have been left out. Andrew found the ellipsis “harsh” no matter whether *sibbegedriht* referred to the Danes or to Beowulf’s group (Andrew 1948: 71). It must also be pointed out that an invitation for the Geats to enter Heorot in order to “see” (‘meet’?) Hrothgar does not seem entirely meaningful if uttered by the king: since Beowulf and his comrades have come to rid Heorot of Grendel, it would be logical for Hrothgar to ask them to appear before him, so that he could see (= find out, decide) whether they were fit for the job. Either “me” or “us” as assumed objects of *seon* would thus hardly make sense.
Grammatically, though, the manuscript text allows yet another interpretation, which seems to lead to an altogether preferable translation of the whole passage. In Old English the infinitive does not formally distinguish between active and passive functions. With regard to *Ne hyrde ic cymlicor ceol gegyrwan* (*Beo* 38), Wyatt notes expressly that for *gegyrwan* in Modern English the passive inf. would be used (Wyatt 1968: 4). The construction of *hatan* followed by an accusative with passive infinitive is found in lines 198b–9a: *het him yǒlidan godne gegyrwan*, rendered by Andrew as “ordered a good ship to be prepared for him” (Andrew 1948: 134). The infinitive *seon* with passive meaning is attested in the following *Beowulf* passage: *þær mæg nihta gehwæm niþwundor seon* (*Beo* 1365) is usually assumed to mean ‘there (one) can see every night a fearful wonder’, which is possible. But it would also be conceivable that *seon* means ‘can be seen’ with *niþwundor* functioning as its subject: ‘there every night a fearful wonder may be/is to be seen’.

We may therefore assume that *seon* in line 387a has a passive nuance and means (literally) ‘to be seen’. Hrothgar’s invitation becomes then quite clear: he is telling Wulfgar to ‘bid [Beowulf’s] band of kinsmen all together to come in in order to be seen (= in order to appear before the king and his entourage)’. The infinitive *seon* is to be classified as “final” after a verb of motion according to Callaway’s categories (Callaway 1913: 132–48). Hrothgar’s invitation is meant to convey the message that Beowulf and his companions are welcome to enter the hall and appear before the Danish king: all of them, not just a delegation, were to be received honourably and with full diplomatic protocol.

5 *wiste þæm ahlæcan* (646b)

Together with his companions Beowulf is honourably received by King Hrothgar in the hall Heorot. Beowulf promises to rid Heorot of the monster Grendel, who for twelve years has wrought havoc in the hall at night. But Unferth taunts Beowulf, whereupon the Geatish hero elaborates on his former exploits and emphasizes his prowess. The Danes then celebrate Beowulf’s arrival until ‘presently’ (*semninga*, 644b) Hrothgar (*sunu Healfdènes*, 645a, ‘Healfdèn’s son’) ‘wishes to retire’ (*secean wolde æfenræste*, 645b–6a):
Eight Notes on the Beowulf Text

wiste þæm ahlaecan
to þæm heahsele hilde gefinged
siðdan hie sunnan leoht geseon meahton
opðe nipende niht ofer ealle
scaduhelma gesceapu scriðan cwoman
wan under wolcnum.

(Beo 646b–51a)

From the immediate context it is clear that the subject of the predicate wiste (Beo 646b) ‘(he) knew’ is Hrothgar (sunu Healfdenes 645a). Accordingly Mitchell and Robinson translate: “he [Hrothgar] had known an attack [to be] planned by the foe [Grendel] against the high hall from the time that they . . .” (Mitchell & Robinson 1998: 69). In the continuation of the text the insertion of a negative particle ne between geseon and meahton has repeatedly been proposed, but this seems quite futile. The text means that the battle had been assigned “from the time that they saw the light of sun until – at nightfall – when the shadowy creatures began to arrive wan under the clouds” (Mitchell 1992). With regard to ahlaecan in line 646b, however, some further thoughts may be of interest, since the function of this word is not agreed upon by Beowulf scholars.

In the Mitchell and Robinson translation just quoted ahlaecan is analysed as referring to Grendel. This was also Klaeber’s view: “In other words, the king knew that fight had been in Grendel’s mind all day long; Grendel had been waiting from morning till night to renew his attacks in the hall” (Klaeber 1950: 152). Nickel’s translation is quite similar (Nickel 1976: 41). But in 1930 Kemp Malone pointed out that the general context of the poem did not allow this interpretation:

Grendel haunted the hall nights, and hence the king might well infer that the monster would turn up that night as usual. But Hroðgar had every reason to think that Grendel would expect no fighting. The English poet tells us, indeed, that for twelve years the hall had stood empty at night (138ff.; cf. 411ff.). At most, Grendel might hope to catch another victim (712f.); hild was far from his thoughts. Beowulf it was, not Grendel, who all day long had it in mind to fight that night; immediately upon his arrival at the Danish court he told the king of his purpose in coming . . . (Malone 1930: 234ff.)

Three years later Malone discussed the quoted passage again. In the meantime Hoops had published two important monographs on Beowulf (Hoops 1932a, b). In these works Hoops argued in favour of ahlæcan
Alfred Bammesberger

referring to Grendel. One specific point made by Hoops is that to þæm heahsele implied ‘movement to the hall’, and since Beowulf was already inside the hall this would seem to indicate that the focus was on Grendel, who had to come to the hall (Hoops 1932a: 86ff). Malone accepted this point and published the following revised translation in 1933: “The son of Healfdene wished to seek his bed; he had known all day that a monster-fight (lit. a fight with the monster) was set to come to the high hall” (Malone 1933: 61ff.). This rendering seems possible, although it remains somewhat doubtful whether the dative ahlæcan can really mean ‘with (i.e. against) the monster’.

But before dealing any further with the construction of ahlæcan it is certainly also important to investigate the meaning of this word. Although the Old English noun aglæca has been discussed repeatedly from a variety of viewpoints, neither its meaning nor its etymology can in any sense be said to be agreed upon. In an extensive discussion Kuhn (1979) gave a list of meanings that can be assigned to aglæca. Kuhn himself rendered the meaning of aglæca as “a fighter, valiant warrior, dangerous opponent, one who struggles fiercely” (Kuhn 1979: 218; see also Stanley 1979: 75). Kuhn’s account is based on 36 instances of aglæca, three compounds with a first element aglac- and three attestations of aglac as a separate noun. With regard to the attestations taken into account, he expressly noted that “All instances of these words occur in poetry, none in prose” (Kuhn 1979: 213).

A decade after the appearance of Kuhn’s essay, Alex Nicholls published a paper on aglæca in Byrhtferth’s Manual, which represents the only prose attestation of the word; Nicholls (1991) gives further references to secondary literature that will not be repeated here. Although the sequence Beda, se æglæca lareow (Crawford 1929: 74) has been emended (see Campbell 1972: 2), Nicholls argues convincingly that the manuscript reading should be accepted as correct. The syntax of Beda, se æglæca lareow is not immediately clear, but Nicholls’ suggestion that æglæca is an adjective in the weak declension provides a plausible solution. What is absolutely clear, however, is that æglæca in Beda, se æglæca lareow cannot in any sense carry the meaning ‘monstrous’: only ‘Bede, the formidable/awe-inspiring teacher’ is meaningful in the given context. Nicholls’ article will ultimately be of major importance in accounting for the origin and historical development of OE aglæca.

For the purposes of this note on ahlæcan in Beowulf (646b), it must be kept in mind that Old English aglæca had the connotation ‘awe-inspiring’. For the Beowulf passage quoted above Kuhn offered the following skeleton
for the translation: “he knew battle to be appointed at the high hall for the . . .” and rightly continued: “the referent can be either Beowulf or Grendel”. This is true, and in this sense Kuhn’s observation definitely represents an advance in Beowulf interpretation. But we may go even further. Grammatically, væm ahlæcan can indeed be analyzed as a dative of the singular: this seems to be the usual assumption of Beowulf scholars, and Kuhn’s interpretation is also based on this grammatical analysis. However, this is not the only possibility: there is no objection whatsoever to interpreting væm ahlæcan morphologically as a dative of the plural. The weakening of -um > -an in ahlæcan (<ahlæcum) can be exemplified from our extant Beowulf text, as was shown by Klaeber (1950: lxxxi); on the phonology of this development, see, above all, Campbell (1959: 157). The development of -um > -an is a well-known feature of late Old English.

If we admit that ahlæcan can be analysed as a dative of the plural (dual), then this indirect object would mean that ‘a battle was appointed for the (two) awe-inspiring ones’ ['the terrible ones']. Although in the majority of its occurrences aglæca is used in the singular, in Beowulf (2592) aglæcean is again a non-singular form referring to Beowulf and the dragon. The preposition to does not cause trouble any longer: the battle was appointed to the hall, because Grendel still had to come to the hall, but Beowulf was already inside it.

6 word oper fand (870b)

Beowulf is victorious in his fight against Grendel in the hall Heorot, and the monster, fatally wounded, just barely manages to flee. The following morning everybody rejoices that the twelve-year ordeal of nightly havoc wrought by Grendel has been brought to an end. King Hrothgar’s men make their horses gallop. Then follows a passage about poetic recital:

Hwilum cyninges þegn

  guma gilphlæden  gidda gemyndig
  se ðe ealfela  ealdgesegena
  worn gemunde,  word oper fand
  söþ gebunden;  secg eft ongan
  sîþ Beowulfes  snytttrum styrian
  ond on sped wrecan  spel gerade,
  wordum wrixlan

(Beo 867b–74a)
For the half-line *word oper fand* (870b) two completely different syntactic analyses may theoretically be proposed. The predicate in this half-line is certainly *fand*, ‘found’. The subject of *fand* can be seen in *word* ‘word’; in this case *oper* ‘second’ could function as its object. Grein translated: “ein Wort fand das andere, Wort reihte sich an Wort” (Grein 1974: 514). This interpretation is possible, although one would wish to be given parallels for this usage of *findan*. Whether *word oper fand* could have meant ‘one word found another’ in the sense of ‘a poem was uttered’ seems doubtful, however. Nowadays the more widespread interpretation of *word oper fand* is completely different: the subject of *fand* is assumed to be *cyninges þegn* (Beo 867b), the object of *fand* would then seem to be *word oper*. Syntactically this analysis is unobjectionable: ‘The king’s retainer found (devised) other words . . .’.

The problems of the whole passage were discussed by Stanley in his chapter “Beowulf”, first published more than 35 years ago (Stanley 1966). Stanley gave the following translation of lines 867b–71a: “At times the king’s retainer, a man filled with high rhetoric, with the memory of songs, who remembered a multitudinous wealth of ancient traditions, came upon other words (?) bound in truth (?)” (Stanley 1966: 118 fn.1). Structurally this translation is convincing. The second of the two question marks is perhaps not necessary: it would seem reasonable to say that the poet uttered words ‘bound in truth’, which is likely to mean that the contents of his poems were considered to be based on real happenings presented in a reliable way.

But Stanley’s first question mark is fully justified: What, after all, should “other words” refer to? Although *word oper fand* has repeatedly been construed as a reference to poetic variation it is completely uncertain whether innovation was a poetic ideal in Old English times: “there is nothing that might lead one to the view that old traditions in new words represents an ideal among the Anglo-Saxons” (Stanley 1966: 125). It would make sense, however, to say that the minstrel ‘came upon words bound in truth’, because this would be likely to mean that he uttered a poem. Thus the problem lies in *oper*, and it seems that a new possibility of interpreting this word and consequently the whole passage can be suggested.

*Beowulf* offers a further example of *oder* not functioning as the (adjectival) ordinal for ‘second’. It seems best to render *ealodrincende oder sædon* (Beo 1945) as ‘men drinking ale said furthermore (moreover)’. We may therefore assume that *oper* can have an adverbial function and may be translated.
as ‘furthermore, moreover’. In the quoted passage this yields good sense: we are told that hwilum (‘at certain times’) the king’s men made their horses gallop, and hwilum (‘at other times’) the minstrel ‘furthermore [-moreover] came upon words bound in truth’. The position of the stressed adverbial oFer in word oFer fand is identical with that of stunde in word stunde ahof (El 723b). Metrically word oFer fand is a D-verse comparable to secg eft ongan (Beo 871b) and word stunde ahof (El 723b). Further parallels include: word æfter cwæð (Beo 315b), word æfter spræc (Beo 341b) and word inne abead (Beo 390b). In all these instances word may be accusative plural of the neuter a-stem.

It is likely that a strong punctuation mark is required after gebunden, because secg eft ongan begins a new syntactic unit. It is noteworthy, however, that ongan does not necessarily mean ‘began, started’ here. Stanley translated the clause as follows: “The man did then tell with art the exploit of Beowulf, set forth with happy skill a well-told tale, weaving words” (Stanley 1966: 118, fn. 1). That onginnan need not exclusively mean ‘start, begin’ is perhaps most clearly seen in Beowulf’s own words when he says hæbbe ic mær a fela ongunnen on geogoFe (Beo 408b–9a) ‘I have undertaken [performed] many famous actions in my youth’. It is conceivable that the scop ‘undertook to sing in honour of Beowulf’s feat’, but whether he explicitly dealt with Beowulf’s exploits is not really stated in the text. Stanley’s comment on this aspect of the text is worth quoting:

The poet presents the scop to us as singing the hero’s praise in the traditional manner in the traditional poetic medium. Secg eft ongan / sið Beowulfes snyttrum styrian (871–72), we are told; surely, we may expect something about Beowulf himself. Instead we get the ideal which is embodied in Beowulf expressed in terms of Sigemund and Heremod. The relevance of Sigemund, the dragon-slayer, is not made explicit, it is too obvious to need explanation; but how love fell to Beowulf whereas iniquity took possession of Heremod is clearly stated. (Stanley 1966: 132)

Ultimately the quoted Beowulf passage tells us nothing about whether poetic originality was valued in Anglo-Saxon times. Since oFer in word oFer fand (870b) can hardly mean ‘new’ but probably functions as an adverb meaning ‘furthermore, moreover’, it follows that wordum wrixlan ‘exchange words’ in line 874 is also unlikely to emphasize any innovatory aspect of Old English poetic diction.
7 *ða hine se broga angeat* (1291b)

Grendel’s mother comes to Heorot in order to avenge her son’s death. The events which lead to Æschere being killed by the ogress are described in eight lines:

\[
\begin{align*}
& \text{Da wæs on healle} & \text{heardæc togen} \\
& \text{sweord ofer setlum} & \text{sidrand manig} \\
& \text{hafen handa fæst;} & \text{helm ne gemunde} \\
& \text{byrnan side} & \text{ða hine se broga angeat.} \\
& \text{Heo wæs on ofste,} & \text{wolde ut ðanon,} \\
& \text{foere beorgan,} & \text{ða heo onfunden wæs;} \\
& \text{hraðe heo æþelinga} & \text{anne hæfde} \\
& \text{fæste befangen,} & \text{ða heo to fenne gang.} \\
\end{align*}
\]

(Beo 1288–95)

This passage has recently been discussed by Elder (2002), and some of the points made in that paper seem plausible. That *broga* ‘terror’ in line 1291b could refer to Grendel’s mother is conceivable, and the parallel for *broga* rendering Latin *monstrum* is convincing. Elder translated lines 1290b–91b “no one thought of helmet or roomy mail-coat when that monstrous thing perceived him” (Elder 2002: 316). That *broga* in line 1291b is personified and refers to Grendel’s mother had already been suggested by Isaacs, but his translation is not convincing at all: “The helmet was not mindful of broad byrnie, when Grendel’s dam (or terror, personified) seized him” (Isaacs 1963: 124).

But some lingering doubt remains whether this can be correct. In the immediately preceding lines we are told that the warriors drew their swords. It is therefore very surprising that it allegedly occurred to nobody to use helmet and mail-coat. The main problem certainly lies in the translation of *angeat*. That a warrior should have been frightened into inaction when Grendel’s mother ‘perceived’ him is intrinsically unlikely. What semantic nuance ‘perceived’ could precisely convey here is unclear anyway: the meaning ‘understand’ would certainly not be suitable, but ‘see, recognize’ could hardly apply either, because it was of course dark. We clearly have to investigate the meaning of the verb *ongietan*.

With regard to the semantic range of *ongietan*, Elder comments as follows: “…‘perceive’ is almost always a possible translation of this verb, whether or not alternatives like ‘understand,’ ‘be sensible of,’ or
‘see’ are preferred in a particular context” (Elder 2002: 316). This statement is perhaps acceptable, although there is no doubt that in Old English poetry and prose ongietan is very widely used in the sense of Latin intelligere (‘understand’). The meaning ‘understand’ represents a semantic development of ‘seize’, and a comparable development is encountered in grasp, comprehend, assume, and other verbs in this semantic field (Buck 1949: 1207, 1020). Beowulf scholars widely assume that angeat in line 1291 should have the original meaning ‘seized’, but Elder maintains that a basic sense like ‘seize’ is nowhere else attested for Old English ongietan. It would then be very unlikely for angeat to mean ‘seized’ in the quoted Beowulf passage.

Although ongietan often occurs in the secondary senses of ‘understand’ or ‘perceive’, in at least one passage this kind of meaning will hardly do. In the Old English translation of Gregory’s Cura Pastoralis the following clause refers to St Peter: Dæt rice & ðone anwalð he na ne angeat wið Corneliuð ða ða he hine suðlice weordian wolde. Sweet translated: “He did not acknowledge his power and authority in the case of Cornelius, when he wished to honour him so excessively” (Sweet 1871: 114ff). The translation is acceptable: Gregory showed that Cornelius had behaved humbly towards Peter, and therefore Peter did not assume authority, whereas he definitely reprimanded sinners like Ananias and Sapphira. Neither ‘understood’ nor ‘perceived’ would be suitable as translations of angeat, whereas ‘assumed’ or ‘took’ seem quite possible. Perhaps the quoted clause may be rendered as ‘He (Peter) did not assume power and authority against Cornelius since he wanted to honour him so greatly.’ The corresponding passage in Gregory’s original reads as follows: quod honore sibi uelhementer impenso coram bene agentibus fratribus non agnouit (Judic 1992: 210); the Old English translation is not literal, and on the reception of Gregory’s work in early Ireland and England Judic’s informative chapter “Diffusion et Influence” (Judic 1992: 88–102) should be consulted.

A translation like ‘took’ or ‘seized’ for angeat in Beowulf line 1291b may therefore be taken into consideration after all. In at least one further Beowulf passage the preterite ongeat may mean ‘attacked’, although admittedly the usual translation as ‘perceived’ cannot be ruled out. In order to avenge Æschere Beowulf had swum down to the bottom of the mere, where the ogress was waiting for him. She seized him and carried him away. Beowulf recognized (ongeat, 1512b) that he was in a dry underwater cave. He saw light (1516b). Ongeat þa se godo grundwyrgenne, / merewif mihtig (1518–19a) may mean ‘the good one [Beowulf] then
Alfred Bammesberger

recognized (perceived, saw) the monster of the deep, the powerful water-woman’, but in the given context ‘attacked, seized’ would certainly also make sense. Penttilä’s remarks are fully relevant here: “With OE ongietan – perceptional in character – the visual impression is often preceded by an effort to see something. As pointed out by Rittershaus, the verb is often found in contexts in which it is doubtful whether the writer refers to grasping in the physical sense or grasping by means of the eyes” (Penttilä 1956: 173).

The clause helm ne gemunde / byrnan side  па hine se broga angeat still requires a comment from the syntactic point of view. We may analyse па hine se broga angeat as a subclause, but the main clause seems to lack a subject: “An indefinite subject, ‘any one,’ ‘the one in question’ is understood” (Klaeber 1950: 181). Klaeber’s wording is ambiguous because ‘anyone’ and ‘the one in question’ are by no means synonymous. Usually the first suggestion, namely the indefinite ‘anyone’, is adopted by editors and commentators. But the second suggestion, namely a definite ‘the one in question’ seems in fact superior here: ‘the one in question’, namely Æschere, did not think of putting on helmet and mail-coat because there was absolutely no time for him to do so when the ogress seized him. The unexpressed subject of the main clause is identical with hine, the object of the subordinate clause. Kemble’s translation is acceptable in this respect: “he [i.e. the warrior] remembered not his helmet, nor his wide mail-shirt, when the terror fell upon him” (Kemble 1837: 53).

If we follow in the main Elder’s rendering, but work in the above considerations, then the passage may be translated: ‘Then in the hall the hard-edged sword was drawn above the benches, many a broad shield was raised fast in hand; the one in question [Æschere] did not think of helmet and wide mail-coat when the monster seized him. When she was discovered, she was in haste; she wanted to get out of there to save her life. Swiftly she had taken one of the noblemen firmly in her grasp; then she went to the fen’.

8 on fæder stæle (1479b)

Before setting out for his fight against Grendel’s mother Beowulf addresses King Hrothgar and makes final arrangements in case he should succumb in the enterprise:
The vocabulary of this passage does not present any particular problems. Kemble translates the last three lines of the quoted text as “if I at thy need should cease to live, that thou wouldst ever be in the place of a father to me, when I had departed” (Kemble 1837: 61). Subsequent translations are similar, as may be seen from Liuzza’s recent rendering: “if ever in your service I should lose my life, that you would always be in a father’s place to me when I have passed away” (Liuzza 2000: 98).

One difficulty with these lines evidently lies in the conclusion of the *fæt*-clause, because it is by no means obvious in what ways Hrothgar could ‘be in the place of a father to me’, that is to the then-dead hero Beowulf. Swanton wants *fæder* to refer to Beowulf’s father: “that if I should relinquish life in your cause, you should always take the role of my father when I passed away” (Swanton 1978: 105). It is completely unclear, however, how Hrothgar could possibly assume the role of Beowulf’s father in the circumstances envisaged by the Geat: Beowulf’s father Ecgþeow is mentioned by name in the epic text but is dead by the time of the fight against Grendel and Grendel’s mother, and plays no role of any significance in the action. The prepositional phrase *on fæder stæle* occurs once in Old English prose: _Cristenum cyninge gebyra Brihte, þæt he sy on fæder stæle cristrena þeode_ (Jost 1959: 40), and here its function is clear: ‘for a Christian king it is right that he should be in the function of a father [protector] to Christian people.’ The meaning ‘in the function of a father [protector]’ is definitely suitable also in the quoted _Beowulf_ passage, and the immediately following lines make clear what Beowulf’s intentions are:

Wes þu mundbora minum magþegnum,
hondgesellum, gif mec hild nime;
swylce þu ða madmas, þe þu me sealdest,
Hroðgar leofa, Higelace onsend.

(Beo 1480–3)
Some grammatical and contextual details must now be dealt with. The sequence *me . . . forðgewið num* in the *pæt*-clause (Beo 1478b–9a) is possibly to be interpreted as an absolute construction meaning ‘if I am dead’ (literally ‘[with] me departed’); an adverbial rendering would be ‘after my death’ (on absolute constructions in Old English see in particular Mitchell 1985: 914–40). It is likely that *me* is not a dative object belonging somehow to *wære*. The *gif*-clause may then be translated as follows: ‘If I should lose my life in your need then you should after my death forever assume the function of a father [protector]’. The following four lines indicate wherein this function lies: ‘Be a protector for my followers, my companions if the battle should carry me away; and, dear Hrothgar, also send the treasures that you have given me to Higelac’. The word *fæder* is used in a metaphorical sense. Should Beowulf die, Hrothgar is requested to assume legal functions that are Beowulf’s as long as the Geatish hero is alive: Hrothgar is asked to adopt Beowulf’s companions into his household and to pass on to Higelac the gifts that were bestowed on Beowulf in recognition of his victorious fight against Grendel.

**References and Further Reading**


