DEDICATION

This issue of *Annual Mediaevale* is dedicated to Herbert H. Petit, Editor Emeritus of this journal. He has won the affection of his students, the respect of his colleagues, and the gratitude of the community of scholars for his wit, sound judgment, integrity, and kindness.

Through his distinguished teaching, scholarship, editorial skill, and academic leadership he has done more for the profession of humane letters during his career at Duquesne University than any man I know.

Frank T. Zbozny, Editor

GOLD AND ITS SIGNIFICANCE IN *BEOWULF*

The gold and treasure in *Beowulf* are so much a part of the texture of the poem that the reader tends to dismiss them as another commonplace of the heroic age, like mead-benches and armor, included by the poet to set his scene. The centrality of the hoard in the second part, however, demands that all of the references to gold in the poem be examined carefully to determine the metal's symbolic value, and to uncover the relationships between the dragon's hoarded treasure and that distributed so freely by Hrothgar, since it must be assumed that a poet of such subtlety and allusiveness would use the one as a referent to the other. There is a prismatic quality in *Beowulf* which enables the poet to sustain several angles of vision concurrently by allusions that escape the bounds of sequential time. Connotative words, shifts in narrative point of view, and references to past and future events allow us to catch glimpses of the end from the beginning as well as to look back at earlier events when we have reached the conclusion. It is the application of this quality to gold that I wish to examine.

I began this investigation with the view that gold has a positive moral value in the poem, one exemplified by the many references to ringgivers and withholders; treasure, it appears, is to give and it is given freely in Part One. Hoarding, hiding and refusal to distribute it are misuses, seen most often in Part Two and apparently condemned by the poet. This subject has been dealt with in a study by Michael D. Cherniss who believes that "a hero's treasure-hoard represents more than just his financial solvency." Cherniss maintains that treasure and individual merit in the heroic society are interdependent and that the better man is the richer man. He also notes that "the plundering which follows a battle provides the victorious tribe with its primary source of communal treasure."[1] These elements, the moral value of wealth and the source from which it is derived, must be kept in mind by the reader who wishes to establish the esthetic effect of treasure themes in the poem.

Both elements are present in *Beowulf* although a superficial reading of the poem may overlook the close dependence of the wealth that character-

[1]Michael D. Cherniss, "The Progress of the Hoard in *Beowulf*," *PQ* 47 (1967), 473-486.

izes good men—or more specifically, good kings—on the wars and plundering that begot the wealth. To determine the extent to which such a connection may be found, I examined all words dealing with gold and treasure—*maoum, frætwe, gestréon, sinc, hord, béag,* and *gold* itself—as well as verbs of giving, taking and partaking, and found a pattern emerging in which uses of gold which are made explicit in the latter part of the poem are implicit in the earlier section.[2] I use here only the word *gold* and its compounds to demonstrate this pattern in which treasure is linked to plunder.

I have already indicated that there are two basic uses of gold in the poem: the bad is concerned with plundering, cursing, hoarding or refusal to give, and the good is to adorn people, places and weapons and, above all, to give to deserving warriors. There is, of course, some oversimplification of categories here, but the two uses, without undue distortion of significance, might be labeled acquisition and distribution.[3] Further, the uses are clearly associated with moral qualities. Virtuous kings are called *sinces brytta, gold-wine,* and *gold-gyfa* along with epithets like *folces hyrde, eorla hléo,* and *snottra fengel.* Probably the least admirable character in the poem, apart from the monsters, is Heremod, who kills his hearth-retainers and does not give rings, apparently shortcomings of equal magnitude.

That part of Hrothgar's sermon that refers to Heremod and, immediately after, to a man overcome by pride who forgets his destiny and does not give rings illustrates the chief beneficent use of treasure, the payment of warriors. The prideful man is clearly wrong in withholding the treasure, and his successor sets things right when he gives rings without grieving or fearing the diminution of the hoard. There are several significant giving words in these lines: *God . . . snyttur bryttað* (1725-26), *Seleð* (1730), *worolde dǽlas* (1732), *oferhygda dál* (1740), *nallas on gylp seleð* (1749), *God sealde* (1751), *weorðmynda dǽl* (1752), and *mádmas dǽleþ* (1756). Giving is obviously a major theme of the passage and, in five cases, the giver is God. Irving Says, "God has provided a model of behavior here: things are to be distributed as generously by human rulers as God has distributed them among men."[5] This assessment appears completely accurate in the context, yet there are two points to be noted that modify it somewhat. The first is that God gives from limitless bounty as men cannot. The second is that an examination of the circumstances under which kings give treasure makes Irving's distinction of generosity and stinginess an understatement of the case. The king's obligation concerning distribution of the hoard seems based on a far stronger moral imperative than generosity.

A closer analogy to God is to be found, I think, in the frequent use of the words *dǽl* and *dǽlan* which mean respectively "a share or portion" and "to divide or share out." God allots to men their share of wisdom or land or honor as the king allots them their share of the treasure they have helped acquire in battle. Even the privative use of *dǽl* as applied to Grendel earlier in the poem, *dréamum bedǽled* (721), carries a connotation that the monster has, for whatever reason, been dealt out of human joy. The earliest mention of Hrothgar tells us that he will:

> eall gedǽlan
> swylc him God sealde . . . . .
> búton folcscare ond feorum gumena (71-73)[6]
> [. . . share out all as God gave to him . . .
> except for common land and the lives of men.]

This all, it is made clear at line 80 *béagas* and *sinc æt symle.* The reference to God here may be a simple piety but it cannot be literal, for what is to be dealt is no other than treasure that has either been plundered in battle or collected as tribute, and those to whom it will be given are the retainers who fought to acquire it and are entitled to a share. Indeed, the point of lines 64-85 is that Hrothgar has attracted so many retainers that he must build Heorot to house them, all this as a result of *herespéd,* "battle success." A major activity at Heorot will be a division of spoils.

We hear, in the poem, of three uses other than payment of warriors to which the hoard may be put. Beowulf gives a negative demonstration of one of them, payment of mercenaries to reinforce the strength of the comitatus, when he says of Higelac:

[2]I use line 2200 here as the beginning of the second part of the poem although, as will be made clear later, I consider II. 1887-2199 a transitional passage between Parts One and Two.

[3]Adornment might be considered still a third use of gold, but I find it to be closely related to patterns of distribution, and have so categorized it here.

[4]Lines 1724-57.

[5]Edward B. Irving, Jr., *A Reading of Beowulf,* (New Haven: 1968), 151.

[6]All lines quoted are from Fr. Klaeber, *Beowulf,* 3d ed. (Lexington, Mass: 1950).

Næs him ænig þearf,
þæt hé tó Gifðum oððe tó Gár-Denum
oððe in Swíorice sécean þurfe
wyrsan wigfrecan weorðe gecýpan (2493-96).
[There was no need that he should seek among the Gifthas nor among the Spear-Danes nor in Sweden to buy with treasure a lesser warrior.]

In addition to this, a portion of the hoard must also be available to reward extraordinary service, as Hrothgar does after Beowulf has killed the monsters. The poet's extravagant descriptions of the rewards are sometimes read as further indications of Hrothgar's generosity, but such a reading reduces the significance of Hrothgar's magnificent hoard and the magnitude of the service rendered; both are raised above the ordinary and the treasure given shows that Hrothgar has the wealth to recompense Beowulf's deeds adequately. Finally, we see the use of treasure as wergild and sealer of treaties as in Hrothgar's reference to Beowulf's father, Ecgtheow:

sende ic Wylfingum ofer wæteres hrycg
ealde mádmas; hé mé ápas swór (471-2).
[I sent old treasures to the Wylfings over the sea's spine; he swore oaths to me.]

Although I have not dealt specifically here with the use of treasure to adorn weapons and armor and mead-benches, it is possible to see this use as an extension of the king's obligation to his retainers. It is his responsibility to provide a place to recoup strength and spirit between battles and, in the "we who are about to die . . . " tradition, it should be the best of places. From the foregoing it should be clear that the ringgiver was something more than a philanthropist distributing his excess wealth; he was rather, once we recognize his function as guardian of the national treasury, a statesman conducting the affairs of his country wisely and equitably. Certainly it is not strange to learn that Grendel is unable to approach the *gifstól*, the throne from which treasure is distributed, since he does not stand in any of the above relationships to the ring-giver. The irony of line 168 is that an expression properly used in regard to one who might justly expect recompense from the throne is applied to a character who should, in fact, be paying wergild.

There are fifty-three occurrences of the word *gold* and its compounds in *Beowulf*. Not surprisingly, the thirty-one found before line 2200 are references to beneficent uses of gold, with the possible exception of line 1107.[7] The occurrences are about evenly divided, with the twenty-two in the latter part of the poem being improper uses except for four references to Beowulf as *gold-wine* or *gold-gyfa* and these, I hope to demonstrate, fit the pattern as well.

Our first sight of gold is the light flashing off the helmets of Beowulf and his retainers as they debark at Denmark:

Eoforlíc scionon
ofer hléorber[g]an gehroden golde,
fáh ond fýrheard (303-5).
[Boar figures shone over cheekguards, adorned with gold, shining and fire-hardened.]

It is a significant first view. The gold-adorned objects are war gear, they reflect light, and they are described by adjectives—*fáh ond fýrheard*—that will be closely associated with gold throughout the poem, sometimes in ambiguous contexts. There follow references to other gold-decorated armor and weapons, to the gold-hall Heorot and its furnishings, and to gold-adorned people. Among these last are Wealhtheow, Freawaru and Modthritho, women who are themselves in some sense gifts, sent as they are to be peace-weavers with present or potential enemies.[8] Beowulf tells Higelac of Freawaru:

Sío geháten (is),
geong goldhroden, gladum suna Fródan;
(h)afao þæs geworden wine Scyldinga,
rices hyrde, ond þæt ráed talað,
þæt hé mid ðý wife wælfáehða dæl,
sæcca gesette (2024-29).
[She has been promised, that young woman adorned with gold, to Frodo's gracious son. The friend of the Scyldings, the guardian of the king-

[7]This is the ambiguous and emended passage in which gold is taken from Finn's hoard either to seal an oath or to place on Hnaef's funeral pyre.

[8]I accept here Klaeber's reading of 1931, which makes *módþryðo* the name of a woman rather than the abstraction some critics have taken it to be.

dom, has agreed to it and considered it a sound policy that he might settle the conflict through the woman, compose part of the deadly feud.]

Fifteen of the references to gold-decorated objects and people are to gifts or are mentioned at scenes of gift-giving, reinforcing the sense that treasure being distributed is the positive and constructive use of gold.

These first part references are often associated with light, another positive reinforcement since light and dark imagery plays such an important role in the development of the themes in *Beowulf*. Sometimes, as at line 303, the light is the gleam of the gold, as it is also, perhaps in a symbolic rather than literal sense, when the poet says that Heorot, *goldfáh, líxte se léoma ofer landa fela* (311). [gold-adorned, its light shone over many lands.] Sometimes the association is with the sun's light as at line 1800 where the hall, again *goldfáh*, awaits the dawning of the sun, *heofenes wynne*. Sometimes the connotations are less joyful, as when we see the shining floor of Heorot reflecting the *léoht unfáeger* of Grendel's eyes.

Even more frequent are the associations of gold in Part One with hall-joy, and particularly with ale-benches, wine cups and feasting:

> medubenc monig mine gefræge
> golde geregnad (777-8).
> [I have heard of many mead-benches fitted with gold.]
> ne gefrægn ic fréondlícor féower mádmas
> golde gegyrede gummanna fela
> in ealobence óðrum gesellan (1027-29).
> [Nor have I heard of many men giving to others more graciously four gold-bedecked treasures at the ale-bench.]
> Mé þone wælráes wine Scildunga
> fættan golde fela léanode,
> manegum máðmum, syððan mergen cóm,
> ond wé tó symble geseten hæfdon (2101-4).
> [For this battle-storm the friend of the Scyldings presented me with much plated gold, many treasures, after morning came and we sat down to the feast.]

It is a world of song and laughter, lighted by the gleam of gold, made peaceful by heroic triumphs and ornamented by the exalted speeches of praise that accompany the giving of magnificent gifts. Yet the poet has made it clear by his references to Finn, to Higelac's fate, to Heremod, and to the Heathobard invasion that scenes of peaceful rejoicing must be illusory in this society of broken oaths and predatory expeditions. He has given us reason to question the significance of the scenes at Heorot in light of the later events of the poem. Here, descending to the particular, I want to contrast the presence of gold in the latter part of *Beowulf* with its presence and function in the earlier portion.

The gold after line 2200 never appears in a context of festivity or victory but is, on the other hand, either hidden in the ground, seized as plunder, or cast on the funeral pyre; in only one instance is it given, although it is frequently fought over and, in Beowulf's case, died for. In a poem which uses as many nominal constructions as *Beowulf* does, the verbs take on a greater significance simply because they are fewer. I anticipated that verbs of giving would be less frequent in Part Two, an anticipation that was only partially justified; more interesting is the initial occurrence in this part of the poem of verbs that have no place in Part One. Just as *dælan* is to some extent a definitive verb for the distribution of gold earlier, verbs of plunder, *reafian*, and trade, *bycgan, céapian,* take on central importance later. Six times the poet refers to Beowulf's giving up his life for the gold. Wiglaf says:

> gold unríme grimme gecéa(þo)d,
> ond nú æt síðestan sylfes féore
> béagas (geboh) te (3012-14).
> [Limitless gold grimly he bought and now at the end with his own life he purchased rings][9]

This is a paraphrase of what Beowulf himself has said:

> Nú ic on máðma hord mine bebohte
> fróde feorhlege (2799-2800).
> [Now I have prudently bartered my life-span for the treasure-hoard.]

[9]For a heroic poem, *Beowulf* is singularly free of battle scenes in which the hero takes an active part. However, the first clause of this passage, "golde . . . grimme gecea (þo)d . . . " may be a reference to earlier battles in which Beowulf acquired plunder to enhance his hoard, although at lesser cost than that exacted in the final battle with the dragon.

He asks Wiglaf to show him the gold so that he may more gently,

> æfter máððumwelan mín álætan
> líf ond léodscipe (2750-51).
> [give up my life and kingship for treasure-wealth.]

In three cases individuals are bereft of gold: Ongentheow's wife is *golde berofene* (2931) when she is rescued from the carnage at Ravenswood, it is predicted that Beowulf's people will be *golde bereafod* (3018) after his death, and the slain dragon is *since bereafod* (2746). Even the gold itself is bereft when the golden cups lose their ornaments, *hyrstum behrorene* (2762). The verbs *behréosan, beréafian, beréofan* and *réafian* are newcomers to the poem, with one notable exception at line 1212 which deals with Higelac's expedition against the Franks.

The poet's sights are cast down in the second part of *Beowulf* from the gleaming roof of Heorot to the ground. From the Last Survivor's appeal to the earth to hold the gold to the poet's last gnomic utterance there are seven mentions of *eorðe, hrúse, grund* or *wong* in connection with gold. One of these has given interpreters a great deal of trouble, and may express the poet's feelings about the uses of gold:

> Sinc éaðe mæg,
> gold on grund(e) gumcynnes gehwone
> oferhígian, hýde sé ðe wylle! (2764-66)
> [Treasure, gold in the earth, may easily overcome
> any man, hide it who will!]

However the difficult words, *oferhígian,* "delude" or "overpower," and *hýde,* "heed" or "hide," are glossed, the sense of the passage seems clearly to be a warning about the effect of gold on men.

Five times gold is associated with the building of Beowulf's funeral pyre; this use may have been anticipated in the Finn episode if we accept Klaeber's emendation of line 1107.[10] It should be noted that the poem ends with both burning and burial of gold, a conclusion which may be compared with one of the earliest adjectives used of gold, "fire-hard." Of course, pyres, deaths and bereavements are central themes of Part Two

[10]Klaeber emends the ms. reading, *að,* "oath," to *ad,* "pyre. But even if *að* is retained, the pyre figures in the passage immediately after: "Here-Scyldinga/betst beadorinca wæs on bæl gearu." (1108-9).

and frequently spoken of; the instances I have cited are only those where gold is closely associated with the subjects.

From this analysis the reader might conclude that gold has felicitous associations in the first part of the poem and unpropitious ones in the second, but such a conclusion begs the question of what constitutes the significance of gold in the poem as a whole. Unless we are to go back to such theories of authorship as Magoun's A, A', B, and an interpolater,[11] we must seek an overview that sees both parts of *Beowulf* as a whole and preserves thematic unity throughout.

A closer examination yields some interesting data on the gold environments of Part One. I have already noted the early allusions that prepare for the catastrophic end of the poem; it is, I think, illuminating to consider how many of these allusions occur within a few lines of mentions of gold. The gold-adorned mead-benches of line 777 immediately remind the poet that all of this will one day be in the flames' embrace. The adornment of Heorot with shining gold at 994 similarly provokes the poet to remark that fire deeds will be done here by the enemy. Nor are these the only instances of the salutary gold of Part One being paired off with things or events of direful significance. In line 308 Heorot sheds its light over many lands, but in 318 the coast guard announces his function:

> Ic tó sǽ wille,
> wið wrað werod weard healdan (318-19).
> [I will return to the shore to keep watch against
> hostile troops.]

Hostile troops are an ever-present danger to the Danes. At line 1027 Hrothgar gives Beowulf four *golde-gegyrede* treasures and at 1041 we are told that they never failed when men fell in battle. The treasures are weapons and armor designed for violent use. When Beowulf tells Hrothgar, at line 1651, of his encounter with Grendel's mother, we are almost too caught up in the story to note that the golden hilt he carries with him is called *sǽlác,* sea booty. But when it is noted we recall that all of the gold spoken of in the poem has at some time been booty.

[11]F. P. Magoun, Jr., "*Beowulf* ': A Folk Variant," *Arv: Journal of Scandinavian Folklore,* 14 (1958), 95-101; and "*Beowulf B:* A folk-tale of Beowulf's Death," in *Early English and Norse Studies Presented to Hugh Smith in Honour of His Sixtieth Birthday* (London: 1963), 127-140.

I referred earlier to the use of the word *fáh* as descriptive of gold. It occurs twenty-eight times in the poems, variously glossed as "shining," "stained," or "guilty," and another seventeen times in compounds, four with *gold,* one with *sinc,* and the others with words of more pejorative connotations such as *blód, gryre, swát* and *wæl.* The "stained" connotation appears to be the dominant one, and the juxtaposition, when Grendel's arm is hung up in Heorot, of *golde fáhne* in line 927 and *blóde fáh* in 934 suggest more than a contrast betwen the shine of the gold-ornamented hall and the stain from Grendel's blood. It is more as if the poet sees a taint in both. I cannot help but find a similar suggestion in the account of Grendel's coming to Heorot; the hall is described first as *fættum fáhne* (716) before the monster treads on the *fágne flór* (725). The second *fáh* has been variously translated, but to me the image is of a floor stained wth the blood of those Grendel has previously devoured; the association, at any rate, comes closer to the spirit of the scene than such translations as "tesselated."

Even more compelling than these suggestions that gold is not always as good as its distributive use seems to suggest are those echoes that sound in both directions, forward and back, in the poem. Time does not exist in any chronological sense, and similar images are used in circumstances that seem to be opposed. When at lines 3015 ff. the messenger prophecies the end of the Geats—the people shall be *golde bereafod* and the raven shall plunder the battlefield—it is impossible not to recall the black raven who announces the coming of morning to *goldfáh* Heorot at line 1800. Having recalled these associations of ravens and gold, we must also remember that Beowulf's only human adversary is mentioned somewhere between the two passages, that his name is Dæghrefn, and that Beowulf concludes his account of the battle by saying:

> Nú sceal billes ecg,
> Hond ond heard sweord ymb hord wigan
> (2508-9).
> [Now shall the falchion's edge, hand and hard sword, contend over the hoard.]

Gold is taken from the battlefield presided over by the raven of death, and there it will ultimately return unless it is burned or buried. The ravens of the battlefield appear to be saying that the raven at Heorot betokens something other than hall-joy.

When the same messenger says that laughter will be put aside, we recall the laughter of heroes as gold-adorned Welhtheow first enters the hall at line 611. Further, the drinking cups of the mead-hall which are so frequently associated with gold become the unpolished cups of the hoard in Part Two:

> Him big stódan bunan ond orcas,
> discas lágon ond dýre swyrd,
> ómige þurhetone, swá hié wið eorðan faeðm
> þúsend wintra þáer eardodon (3047-50).
> [Cups and plates lay about him, dishes and a precious sword eaten through by rust, as they had remained there close to the earth's bosom a thousand winters.]

Is this meant only to convey that gold, when not put to proper use as Hrothgar has done, signals disaster? I think Part Two is more than a view of the coin's reverse; the dire happenings of the end are implicit at the beginning. The images do not change; their significance does. What, after all, is the mead-hall but a way station between plundering expeditions, pleasant though it may be when the mead-cup is being passed and the scop singing? What are the ornaments but battle spoils used as much for trophies as for decoration? What are the women but tokens of exchange to hold together shaky truces?

The shift in focus so frequently and skillfully employed by the *Beowulf* poet, and here applied to views of gold, begins in what may be called a transitional passage, the lines between Beowulf's departure from Heorot and the dragon's awakening. The passage appears to repeat the themes of hall-joy at Hrothgar's court as Beowulf returns to Higelac and recounts his triumph in Denmark. Yet in examining the five mentions of gold in these lines we find the shining metal even more closely associated with destruction than it has been earlier. The first reference is to gold-adorned Modthritho, a bloody-minded lady, at least at the beginning, who is given as a peace-weaver (1948).[12] Next, Freawaru, serving a similar function and similarly gold-adorned (2025), becomes the occasion of the disastrous expedition against Heorot. A few lines later the *gold-sele* is

[12]Whether or not Modthritho is accepted as a woman's name, there can be no question that some woman, hypothetical or not, is discussed in the passage.

associated with Grendel's killing of Hondscio, and accompanied by an almost lurid description employing words like *múðbonan,* "mouth-killer" or "devourer," and *blódigtóð,* "bloody-toothed." The remaining occurrences of gold in the passage are less grisly, but still connected with battle. We are told how Hrothgar rewarded Beowulf with gold (2102) for *wælráes,* his "murderous onslaught," and Higelac, the "battle-famed king," presents his nephew with a gold-adorned sword (2192); once more the weapon-as-gift calls up associations of plundered corpses and the instrument of slaughter.

The association of gold and plunder, in fact, is sufficiently pointed that we may characterize the poet's view of gold as a metal carrying within it the seeds of doom and destruction. Beowulf and the Danes see only the superficial good of gold and riches and do not connect them with the treasure source—war booty. The poet sees, from the very beginning, something that does not become apparent to the reader until well on in the poem: all of the gold and treasure being dealt out has come as spoils of battle, the hoard exists only because men have died, women have been bereaved, many have suffered. It was, after all, the Danes who plundered Finnsburh, and their plunder has at least a symbolic relationship to Hrothgar's hoard. Heorot was built only because Hrothgar was given *herespéd,* battle success with a harrying army. And Scyld himself, to return to the opening lines of the poem, established the dynasty by depriving many people of hall-seats and exacting tribute from his neighbors.

These underlying factors are not readily connected, in the first part of the poem, with the joy at Heorot, but there is a passage which makes the connection clearly and forcefully. In the midst of the greatest joy, feasting and gift-giving, after the slaying of Grendel's mother, Wealhtheow presents Beowulf with the neck-ring characterized as the best of hoard-treasures. We learn immediately that Higelac will wear that ring to his fatal battle where it will become part of the battle spoil, and we cannot but be put in mind of how that ring came to Hrothgar's hoard; it could only have happened in the same fashion, being taken as battle spoil.[13] A

[13]The comparison of the Brosing's neck ring (1197-1201) with that which Wealhtheow gives Beowulf makes it unclear which Higelac wears in his last battle. Since Beowulf gives Higelac many of the treasures he has brought back from Denmark, it is probable that the neck ring was among them, and is that referred to in 1202.

fruitful comparison may be made of Beowulf's last act as ringgiver and Wealhtheow's words in presenting the ring:

> Brúc ðisses béages, Béowulf léofa,
> hyse, mid háele, ond þisses hrægles néot,
> þéo[d] gestréona, ond geþéoh tela (1216-18).
> [Wear this ring beloved Beowulf, my son, with prosperity, and use this corselet from the people's treasure and speed well.]

As the dying Beowulf gives his battle gear to Wiglaf, the poet says:

> Dyde him of healse hring gyldenne
> þioden þristhþýdig, þegne gesealde,
> geongum gárwigan, goldfáhne helm,
> béah ond byrnan, hét hyne brúcan well
> (2809-12).
> [He took from his neck the golden ring, the glory-minded prince, gave it to the thane, the young spear-warrior, the shining gold helmet, ring and birnie, bade him wear it and prosper.]

Whether or not the two neck-rings are identical, as they may be, the effect in both cases is a kind of blessing: enjoy this and prosper.

But neither Beowulf nor Wiglaf can prosper in a system which is built of blood, which obtains its revenue from battle, and this, I think, explains the poet's attitude toward gold. Just as the gift of the necklace brings to mind the source of treasure as battle spoil, the last view of Beowulf at Hrothgar's court shows the reader how clearly committed the hero is to the plunder-reward economy of the heroic society:

> Him Béowulf þanan,
> guðrinc goldwlanc græsmoldan træd
> sinc hrémig (1880-82).
> [Away from him then Beowulf trod across the grassy field, the gold-proud warrior, exulting in treasure.]

Klaeber glosses *goldwlanc* as "splendidly adorned," but the adjective *wlanc* has been used in too many other places as "proud" for the reader not to be suspicious of its application here. It might especially be con-

sidered in the light of the dragon's characterization as *máðmæhta wlonc* (2833). Another word which has ambiguous connotations is *hrémig;* the only others in the poem to whom it is applied are Grendel, in the act of devouring hall-retainers; the Dane at Ingeld's court rejoicing over his plundered Heathobard sword; and, with negative effect, the Hetware in defeat. The kind of exulting implied by this adjective comes very close to gloating. Beowulf, having now established himself as a man of property, is taking pleasure in its significance. His subsequent presentation of a gold-bound sword to the coast guard is a further indication that he, too, now has a hoard from which he can distribute treasure. This is not meant in any sense to downgrade Beowulf; he remains the best of men, certainly the best man in the poem. But he must accept the values of his system, and it is a system that measures virtue in gold and acquires gold by plunder.

Adrien Bonjour has done an admirable analysis of the four Higelac-in-Friesland episodes about which he concludes that the recurring element binding them together is the emphasis on battle spoils. The significance of this for Bonjour is that Beowulf, in returning with the plunder, "managed to perform . . . what his own king should have done . . . but lamentably failed to achieve."[14] Bonjour sees Higelac's failure not in his undertaking of a predatory expedition, but in his not bringing it to a successful conclusion with gold as tangible evidence of its success.

We admire Beowulf for leaving the mere after having killed Grendel's mother without taking more treasure, though he saw much there. It comes then as something of a shock to find him exulting in treasure and, even more, to come to a growing realization that he undertakes the dragon fight with at least as much expectation of gain as hope of freeing the land from the monster's depredations:

> Ic mid elne sceall
> gold gegangan, oððe gúð nimeð,
> feorhbealu frécne fréan éowerne! (2535-37)
> [I shall gain gold valorously or battle, that terrible
> life-bale, will carry off your lord!]

However, the circumstances of the descent into the mere when he is, as it were, under contract to Hrothgar, are not those of the later days when, as

[14]Adrien Bonjour, "The Problem of Daeghrefn," in *Twelve Beowulf Papers*, (Neuchatel: 1962), 77.

king himself, he had taken on the responsibility of providing a hoard for his people, and of maintaining it. His motives for this are pure, even praiseworthy, and in the light of the heroic society of which he is a part, most compelling. Nevertheless, there can be no peace or rejoicing when gold is at stake. Bury it, the poet seems to be saying, either by leaving it unrefined in the ground or by setting some metaphorical dragon to keep men away from it, for it can never do them any good:

> forléton eorla gestréon eorðan healdan,
> gold on gréote, þáe hit nú gén lifao
> eldum swá unnyt, swá hi (t æro)r wæs (3166-68).
> [They let the earth keep the earls' treasure, gold
> in the ground, where it now is still, as useless to
> men as it was before.]

If this assessment of the poet's view of gold is correct, it precludes any acceptance of a Christian viewpoint from which Beowulf is convicted of avarice. The fault does not lie in the character, but in the society. In fact, it has not been my purpose to determine the poet's moral values, but only to demonstrate his attitude toward one important thematic element in the poem. A closer examination of the gnomic utterances in *Beowulf,* or of the *ubi sunt* passages, may disclose a philosophical or theological system underlying this attitude. Whatever such a system may be, it almost certainly included a view that any good uses made of gold by the heroic society were negated by its methods of acquisition.

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