

## BEOWULF AND HYGELAC: PROBLEMS FOR FICTION IN HISTORY

by John McNamara

Nothing could appear more commonplace than describing *Beowulf* as a union of historical and fabulous elements. This commonplace is usually expressed by some such formula as "epic synthesis," for which we can adduce endless examples from Homer onward. But like all such commonplaces, it tends to gloss over the complexity with which history and fable interact within the poems themselves. The formula also concentrates our attention on the effects of such interaction, without considering the esthetic problems created by the very attempt to introduce fabulous heroes into history.<sup>1</sup>

It is easy enough to see how such a hero's feats, in a historical context, assume a "reality" equivalent to that of the context and how, to put it the other way around, otherwise mundane history rises to a new level of significance through acquiring the hero. The matter becomes much more complex, however, when we consider that the hero's behavior is circumscribed by two equally important requirements imposed by the historical context. His actions must first of all be believable, which is to say that they must fall within the limits of action considered possible by the historical society of which he has become a member. We will tend to accept the most fabulous feats if those around the hero accept them, especially if those accepting the feats are themselves authentic historical figures with some reputation for reliability. The second problem is that of maintaining our sympathy for the hero, which requires conformity to the ethical norms of the society and, generally, the acceptance of reputable persons as proof of this conformity. An additional factor enters when the ethical norms of the society within the poem are shared by the audience for whom the poem was composed. As we shall see later on, this creates special problems in *Beowulf*.

In *Beowulf*, the key historical figure with whom the hero interacts is Hygelac, and Arthur G. Brodeur has convincingly demonstrated that their relationship is central to the entire poem.<sup>2</sup> But while Professor Brodeur has focused on the thematic importance of this relationship, I shall turn here to the formal problems it creates and attempt a formal explanation of how the poem works to resolve these problems. In doing so, I shall concentrate

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especially on the relationship between Hygelac and Beowulf in Frisia, since this episode is crucial to the narrative action and reveals, in a reasonably clear way, the difficulties incurred by Beowulf's entry into history.

The importance of Beowulf's relationship with Hygelac appears early in the poem. When the narrator first mentions Beowulf, he does not introduce him as a great warrior or wise leader, but simply as "Hygelac's thane" (194b).<sup>3</sup> Beowulf later identifies himself to the Danish coast guard (261) and to Hrothgar (407b-408a) as Hygelac's retainer, and the formula recurs at crucial points throughout the rest of Part One: just before the fight with Grendel (737a), during that fight (813b), and during the fight with Grendel's mother (1574b). Later, when Beowulf returns home, Hygelac expresses deep affection for him (1987-98), Beowulf in turn gives up his prizes to his lord (2148-51), and the narrator steps forward to applaud the young hero's loyalty (2166b-71). Now there is nothing unusual about the theme of loyalty in Old English poetry, but its conventionality does not diminish its importance here. For we may well ask how, aside from his professions of loyalty, Beowulf lives up to these professions when Hygelac is in greatest need—during the Frisian disaster. The question is inescapable since Beowulf and the narrator refer to events in Frisia no less than four times (1202-14a, 2354b-68, 2498b-2508a, 2910b-21). The close correspondence between accounts of this episode inside the poem and in outside historical references implies that however much the *Beowulf*-poet embellished his story, he and his audience took it as basically true. The most important question this account raises, however, concerns what it tells us about Beowulf's relationship with Hygelac, a relationship which is at once fictional and yet circumscribed by history.

If a warrior wishes to prove his loyalty to his lord, surely there is no more crucial time to do so than when the lord falls in battle. Tacitus, in his *Germania*, provides the classic statement of the heroic code:

14. When they go into battle, it is a disgrace for the chief to be surpassed in valour, a disgrace for his followers not to equal the valour of the chief. And it is an infamy and a reproach for life to have survived the chief, and returned from the field. To defend, to protect him, to ascribe one's own brave deeds to his renown, is the height of loyalty. The chief fights for victory; his vassals fight for their chief.<sup>4</sup>

Tacitus has sometimes been accused of exaggerating the good qualities of the Germanic peoples in order to censure, by contrast, what he considered the degeneracy of contemporary Rome.<sup>5</sup> But there is ample evidence in Old English literature that Tacitus did not overstate the importance of loyalty in the heroic code. The *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* records that in A.D. 786 the thanes of King Cynewulf of Essex chose to fight to avenge their lord's death, even though they were offered terms of peace and knew that in continuing to fight they would all be killed.<sup>6</sup> This tradition continues throughout the Old English period, through the tenth-century *Battle of Maldon*<sup>7</sup> to the

eleventh-century Laws of Cnut<sup>8</sup> and King Ethelred's Code of 1008.<sup>9</sup> These laws were themselves formal codifications of the customary law that Wiglaf invokes against the deserters after Beowulf's death, reminding us that however fictional Beowulf may have been in his inception, the poem has placed him in a world governed by the same ethical code as the world of history outside the poem.

When we apply this code to Beowulf's actions in Frisia, however, some disturbing questions arise. Beowulf boasts that he always fought alone in front of the troop in order to protect his lord (2490-98a). In that case, why was Beowulf unable to protect him during the Frisian disaster? Furthermore, once Hygelac had fallen, why did Beowulf not avenge his death? In consoling Hrothgar for the loss of Aeschere, Beowulf had claimed that a warrior should seek revenge for a fallen friend rather than mourn his loss (1384b-85). Much later, after becoming king, Beowulf avenges Heardred's death by helping Eadgils against Onela (2391-96). Since the poem everywhere insists on vengeance as a moral imperative, we may well wonder why Beowulf fails to seek retribution for his lord's death.

It is, of course, inconceivable that Beowulf was anything less than heroic during the Frisian raid. His grim victory over Daeghrefn, the narrator's consistent praise of his prowess in Frisia, and Hygd's offer of the crown when he returns home all prove the high esteem with which everyone regards Beowulf after the disaster. Some scholars have therefore offered a heroic solution to the question of vengeance by proposing that Daeghrefn was "very likely"<sup>10</sup> or "almost certainly"<sup>11</sup> Hygelac's slayer. In this view, Beowulf would have avenged his lord by the grisly manner in which he disposed of the enemy champion. Yet this is by no means evident in Beowulf's own account of the episode, delivered before he does battle with the dragon:

Ic him þā māðmas,      þē hē mē sealde,  
 geald æt gūðe,      swā mē gifede wæs,  
 leohtan sweorde;      hē mē lond forgeaf,  
 eard ēðelwyn.      Næs him ænig þearf,  
 þæt hē tō Gifðum      oððe tō Gār-Denum  
 oððe in Swiorice      sēcean þurfe  
 wyrсан wigfreca,      weorðe gecýpan;  
 symle ic him on fēðan      beforan wolde,  
 āna on orde,      ond swā tō aldre sceall  
 sæcce fremman,      þenden þis sword þolað,  
 þæt mec ær ond sīð      oft gelæste,  
 syððan ic for dugeðum      Dæghrefne wearð  
 tō handbonan,      Hūga cempa;—  
 nalles hē ðā frætwe      Frēscyning[e],  
 brēostweorðunge      bringan mōste,  
 ac in campe gecrong      cumbles hyrde,  
 æþeling on elne;      ne wæs ecg bona,  
 ac him hildegrāp      heortan wylmas,  
 bānhūs gebræc.      (2490-2508a)

(I repaid him [Hygelac] in battle for the treasures he gave me, as it was granted [by Fate] to me to do, with the bright sword; he gave me land, a home to enjoy. There was not any need for him to seek among Gifthas or Spear-Danes, or in Sweden, an inferior warrior, to buy him with treasure; always I would be before him in the troop, alone in front, and so forever shall I do battle while this sword endures that has often served me, early and late, since before the hosts I slew Daeghrefn, champion of the Hugas; not then could he bring decorated armor, the breast ornament, to the Frisian king, but fell in battle, guardian of the standard, an aetheling in valor; nor was the sword his slayer, but a hostile grasp crushed his body, the surgings of his heart.)

Beowulf begins with a general observation on his loyalty to Hygelac in order to support his claim to a long, consistently heroic life and to justify his promise to act heroically in the time remaining to him. He then shifts to the sword with which he plans to fight the dragon, suggesting that he will use it now with the same vigor that he has exercised for many years—since even before he slew Daeghrefn without the assistance of the sword. Careful analysis shows that Beowulf is not claiming here to have killed Daeghrefn to avenge Hygelac's death, nor does anything in the passage point to Daeghrefn having been the one who struck Hygelac down. Beowulf is simply reminiscing about his former heroism, gathering his courage to a point so that he may go forth to face the dragon. If Daeghrefn had killed Hygelac, it seems highly improbable that Beowulf or the narrator would have passed over the opportunity to celebrate Beowulf's revenge in unmistakable terms.<sup>12</sup>

In fact, however, the narrator does no more than relate the heroic effort by which Beowulf made his escape home from Frisia:

	Nō þæt læsest wæs
hondgemōt[a].	þær mon Hygelāc slōh,
syððan Gēata cyning	gūðe ræsum,
frēawine folca	Frēslondum on,
Hrēðles eafora	hiorodryncum swealt,
bille gebēaten.	þonan Biowulf cōm
sylfes cræfte.	sundnytte drēah;
hæfde him on earme	(āna) þrītig
hildegeatwa.	þā hē tō holme (st)æg.
Nealles Hetware	hrēmge þorf(t)on
fēðewiges.	þē him foran ongēan
linde bāron;	lýt eft becwōm
fram þām hildfrecan	hāmes niosan!
Oferswam ðā sioleða bigong	sunu Ecgðēowes.
earm ānhaga	eft tō lēodum.

(2354b-68)

(Not the least of hand-encounters was that where Hygelac was slain, when the Geats' king in the rushes of battle, the lord of the people, Hrethel's son, died in Frisia of sword-draughts, beaten down by brand. From there Beowulf came by his own strength, swam away; he had on his arm thirty outfits of armor when he came to the sea. No cause had the Hetwaras to exult in their fight on foot when against him they bore shields; few ever came afterwards from that warrior to visit their homes again! Then the son of Ecgtheow swam over the expanse of water, wretched and alone, back to his people.)

This account merely mentions Hygelac's death and gives its main attention to Beowulf's extraordinary swimming feat, "over the expanse of water," carrying with him an impressive quantity of enemy armor. Nevertheless, the heroism of Beowulf's escape does not alter the fact that it is an escape, an escape from the field where his lord has fallen. Nor does the passage explain why Beowulf did not exercise his great strength in defending Hygelac in the first place, or at least in avenging his death. Furthermore, this account raises yet another troublesome question. The narrator had earlier told how, after his death, Hygelac's body was stripped of armor and ornament by Frankish warriors:

Gehwearf þā in Francna fæþm      feorh cyninges,  
brēostgewādu,      ond se bēah somod;  
wyrsan wīgfreca      wæl rēafedon  
æfter gūðsccare,      Gēata lēode  
hrēawic hēoldon.

(1210-14a)

(Then fell into the hands of the Franks the body of the king, his breast-armor and the ring together; inferior warriors plundered the slain after the slaughter; the Geat-people occupied corpse-dwellings.)

We may well ask why, since Beowulf evidently had time and opportunity to gather booty from dead enemies before swimming to safety, he did not at least protect his own lord's corpse from desecration. But once again the poem remains silent.

The whole problem dissolves, of course, if we accept Professor Magoun's suggestion that Beowulf was with another element of the Geatish forces when Hygelac fell.<sup>13</sup> Yet if such were the case, why should the narrator fail to point it out? When Grendel's mother killed Aeschere, the narrator took care to explain that Beowulf was not in Heorot at the time (1299b-1301), presumably to forestall any questions about Beowulf's failure to defend the murdered Dane. Since the narrator was so scrupulous in that case, we may wonder why he was not equally scrupulous to protect Beowulf's honor in the far more serious case of the hero's failure or inability to save Hygelac in Frisia. Nor does Magoun solve the problem by postulating an earlier version of the story in which Beowulf was known to have separated from Hygelac before the lord was ambushed. This is the argument from silence with a vengeance. Where the poem itself is silent on a perplexing point, we are asked to grant the existence of an account for which there is no evidence. But if we cannot turn to some external source, we are forced back on the poem itself at precisely that point at which the poem appears to fail us.

Turning to the poem as a poem, some scholars might object that the problem I have raised is a false one in the first place. What we have learned about oral composition in recent years should make us wary of attempts to impose alien standards of unity on *Beowulf*.<sup>14</sup> Perhaps we should simply

expect looseness of structure in such a poem, and then we could accept unanswered questions about Beowulf's actions in Frisia as the inevitable consequence of oral composition. Still, we must not forget that whatever its method of composition or presentation, the poem does assume an ethic of loyalty whose fulfillment is left in some doubt in the Frisian episode. This is not a matter of minor details, mere "loose ends" left dangling through the poem's mode of creation. As we have seen, there was no more stringent requirement in the warrior code than loyalty to one's lord in battle, a loyalty that extended even beyond his death. Even a listening audience should be satisfied on a point of such importance.

At this point it seems useful to return to a distinction made at the outset: that the poem must induce us to believe both in the "reality" of Beowulf and in the ethical soundness of his character. For all my questions about the Frisian episode presuppose that the fictional hero's "reality" is assured by his membership in a society whose history included Hygelac's fateful raid and, at the same time, that his behavior is to be judged according to the ethical standards of that society, which are well attested in history. Although the distinction makes clear the duality of the esthetic problem, we shall see that its two "parts" depend on one another in an interesting way.

In the matter of Beowulf's "reality," we may see that within the imaginative space of the poem, both the fictional Beowulf and the historical Hygelac appear equally "real." Yet this equal "reality" obscures an important difference in the way the two characters are composed. The events of Hygelac's death were evidently too well known to be altered without sacrificing historical authenticity, but there is a sense in which Beowulf has no history in Frisia, or anywhere else, except that given him by the poem. Hygelac was an actual human being whose career was no doubt filled with many events, many more of which may have been known to an Anglo-Saxon poet and his audience than are available now. But the poem selects from these only such details as are esthetically useful for evoking an illusion of history: his lineage, his kingship over the Geats, the identity of his wife and offspring, some political alliances and battles he fought, and finally his death in Frisia. Now Beowulf's case is quite the opposite. Since he has no known existence outside the poem, the illusion of his "reality" is evoked by the many details the poem itself creates. But it is up to the audience to exercise imagination, to fill out the picture of a "real" Beowulf, utilizing the details given—all of which are, by implication, but parts of a complex whole. In other words, while the method of Beowulf's composition differs from Hygelac's, the way in which we are forced to construct his "reality" out of partial details parallels the way we must (re)construct Hygelac's reality, his total history, from a handful of details. Even so, the details in question have different origins, and this is crucial. Because the details about Hygelac are more or less fixed prior to his presentation in the poem, there is a severe



limitation on the creative freedom with which he can be treated. On the other hand, the freedom with which Beowulf can be developed is likewise limited by the necessity of bringing him into relation with Hygelac.

This limitation on Beowulf is especially confining when we consider the ethical code by which he is circumscribed in his relations with Hygelac. For instance, the poem could not fail to place Beowulf in Frisia, without raising serious questions, because the heroic code required his presence, as a sign of loyalty, when his lord died. Having placed him there, however, the poem could not permit Beowulf to fail in an effort to save Hygelac, even if his effort were heroic, without justifying his failure at much greater length than the episode deserves in the total economy of the narrative. If Beowulf were an actual historical person, we would dig for further facts to ascertain just what he did do before passing final moral judgment, though in the meantime wondering if his moral dilemma excluded acceptable alternatives. But this is art, not life, and so the solution is an artistic one. As noted above, it is idle to ask what Beowulf did in Frisia, apart from what is described, because he does not "really" exist beyond those few details, though we may generate as much life for him in our own imaginations as we wish. Nevertheless, we are given just the right "facts" about his activities: his loyalty to Hygelac, his great victory over Daeghrefn, his marvellous swimming feat, and his honorable reception back home. Since there are no other "facts," we are left to fill in the picture with what we have, a maneuver which shifts our attention away from what we do not have. We may now infer that Beowulf *must* have supported Hygelac as well as he could in that final battle. Thus the poem uses the very inability of art to create a whole reality, out of words alone, to quite remarkable advantage here. For it preserves the hero's honor as much through its silence as through what it does say.

Yet we may still ask why the poem takes this risk at all. Surely there were other historical kings whom Beowulf could have served nobly without placing him in such a perplexing situation. We shall probably never know if there was a prior literary tradition associating Beowulf with Hygelac, and even if we did this would still beg the question of why they were associated in the first place. Perhaps the answer is to be sought in the nature of the historical episode itself. As far as we know from evidence outside the poem, Hygelac actually met an ignominious death in Frisia, allowing his greed to outwit him, while carrying out a raid that one eminent scholar has called "piratical."<sup>15</sup> Within the poem itself, the narrator observes that Hygelac brought disaster upon himself through his over-reaching ("for wlenco," line 1206).<sup>16</sup> In general, however, the poem presents Hygelac sympathetically, largely through his association with Beowulf. We do not know why, but it was evidently important to the society for whom the poem was composed to remember this obscure episode in history. The episode might not have risen above the level of thievery among tribal chieftains, except that

Beowulf lends it the ethical stature of his presence. As I suggested above, Hygelac is relatively fixed by the pressure of history from outside the poem. But this applies only to his actions, as attested in various historical records, not to the value placed on those actions. In contrast, Beowulf's high ethical standard is already well established before we see him for the first time in company with Hygelac, but his range of possible action is still fairly open because he is a fiction created by the poem.

We have explored, in some detail, what happens to the fictional hero when he occupies the same space as the historical king. Viewed from this perspective, the relationship is problematic, though not unresolvable. But from the point of view of Hygelac's disaster, history has everything to gain from this new association with Beowulf. Beowulf brings to Hygelac both his established reputation and the flexibility of a fictional character to extricate himself from a moral predicament which, as we have seen, comes precariously close to entrapping him. His very admiration for Hygelac functions to assure us that the king's otherwise (potentially) variable reputation has a dignity that is truly worth remembering. Once again, the poem has resolved a problem raised by history with an artistic solution. As an artistic creation, Beowulf has no history outside the poem, but within the poem history has gained new stature by acquiring Beowulf.

## NOTES

1. I have deliberately avoided the term "myth" in this study in order to avoid the burden of proof imposed by archetypal criticism and to focus on another esthetic problem, the way fictional and historical elements interact in the poem. An interesting study of "mythic elements" in *Beowulf* is Alvin A. Lee's *Guest-Hall of Eden: Four Essays on the Design of Old English Poetry* (New Haven: Yale, 1972), ch. 4.

2. *The Art of Beowulf* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California, 1959), especially ch. 3. See also the more recent study by Lawrence E. Fast, "Hygelac: A Centripetal Force in *Beowulf*," *Annuaire Mediaevale* 12 (1971): 90-99.

3. All references to the poem follow Fr. Klaeber, ed., *Beowulf and the Fight at Finnsburg*, 3rd ed. (Boston: D. C. Heath, 1950). Translations from the text are my own.

4. Moses Hadas, ed., *The Complete Works of Tacitus*, trans. Alfred John Church and William Jackson Brodribb (New York: Modern Library, 1942), pp. 715-716.

5. Milton McC. Gatch, *Loyalties and Traditions: Man and His World in Old English Literature* (New York: Pegasus, 1971), p. 54.

6. Cited in Dorothy Whitelock, *The Beginnings of English Society* (Baltimore: Penguin, 1952), p. 32.

7. *Battle of Maldon*, ed. E. V. Gordon (London: Methuen, 1937).

8. 2 Cnut 77; in Dorothy Whitelock, ed., *English Historical Documents, c. 500-1042* (New York: Oxford, 1955), p. 430.

9. Art. 28; in Whitelock, *EHD*, p. 408.



10. Klaeber, p. 215, n. to line 2501.

11. Whitelock, *Beginnings*, p. 30. More recent scholars seem to take this as fact: Stanley B. Greenfield, "Geatish History: Poetic Art and Epic Quality in *Beowulf*," *Neophilologus* 47 (1963): 211; John Leyerle, "The Interlace Structure of *Beowulf*," *University of Toronto Quarterly* 37 (1967): 8; Leonard Tennenhouse, "*Beowulf* and the Sense of History," *Bucknell Review* 19 (1971): 145.

12. For a more detailed analysis of the Daeghrefn episode, see my "*Beowulf*: 2490-2508a," *Explicator* 32 (April, 1974), item 62.

13. Francis P. Magoun, "Beowulf and King Hygelac in the Netherlands," *English Studies* 35 (1954): 201-203. Although I take issue with Professor Magoun on this point, I am much indebted to his thorough study of the sources of the Frisian episode. A convenient recent collection of the relevant historical documents, with translations, may be found in G. N. Garmonsway and Jacqueline Simpson, eds., *Beowulf and Its Analogues* (London: J. M. Dent, 1968), pp. 112-115.

14. As far as I know, the first to bring this problem into clear perspective was J. C. Van Meurs in his "*Beowulf* and Literary Criticism," *Neophilologus* 39 (1955): 114-130; but the problem continues to be much discussed. Adrien Bonjour gives an interesting assessment of its critical implications in his "Jottings on *Beowulf* and the Aesthetic Approach," in Robert P. Creed, ed., *Old English Poetry: Fifteen Essays* (Providence: Brown University Press, 1967), pp. 179-192. Perhaps the most influential defense of the poem's unity in recent years is John Leyerle's "Interlace Structure" (cited in n. 11), but the whole question of searching for unity in medieval narratives has become increasingly vexatious: Arthur K. Moore, "Medieval English Literature and the Question of Unity," *Modern Philology* 65 (1968): 285-300; Peter Haidu, "Making it (New) in the Middle Ages: Towards a Problematics of Alterity," *Diacritics* 4 (Summer, 1974): 2-11; Charles Altman, "Medieval Narrative vs. Modern Assumptions: Revising Inadequate Typology," *Diacritics* 4 (Summer, 1974): 12-19.

15. R. W. Chambers, *Beowulf: An Introduction to the Study of the Poem*, 3rd ed., with a supplement by C. L. Wrenn (Cambridge University Press, 1959), p. 2.

16. This point was first brought to my attention by Professor John C. McGalliard, to whom I offer my thanks here.