Hrothulf’s childhood and Beowulf’s: a comparison

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The only time we see Hrothulf and Beowulf together is a third of the way into *Beowulf*, when Queen Wealhtheow compares one man with the other.[[1]](#footnote-1) Grendel is dead and the Danes are in high spirits. With their hall in bunting, the “Lay of Finnsburh” is sung, a tribal epic on Scylding glory which the poet distils as a foreign queen’s tragedy (lines 1071-80). Then Wealhtheow steps into the light before King Hrothgar, his nephew Hrothulf and Unferth their *þyle* “?speaker”. She gives one speech in which she depreciates Beowulf and backs Hrothulf for regent after Hrothgar (lines 1178-87) and another in which she exhorts Beowulf to care for her boys in an advisory role (lines 1216-32).

A comparison between childhoods is encouraged in Wealhtheow’s first speech, which refers to adoption (the formal fostering of a child by any relative). After citing the Geats as gift-worthy *en masse*, she complains about Hrothgar’s earlier offer to adopt Beowulf. Hrothgar was clear enough at the time:

“Nu ic Beowulf þec

secg betsta me for sunu wylle

freogan on ferhþe; heald forð tela

niwe sibbe.” (lines 946-49)

[“Now Beowulf,

best of men, I will love you in heart

as a son to me; keep well from this time forth

a new kindred.”]

In her speech Wealhtheow rehearses this offer negatively, without mentioning Beowulf by name:

“Me man sægde þæt þu ðe for sunu wolde  
hereri[n]c habban.” (lines 1175-6a)

[“It was said to me that for a son you would

have yourself a raiding man.”]

Hereby she blocks Hrothgar’s plan. Her words blame the old king for misjudgement, for she means that instead of matching gift to deed appropriately, as a man should do, he plans to give his kingdom to a stranger.[[2]](#footnote-2) Her word *hererinc* is no cypher for “man” as “war-fighter”, as its elements might recommend, but is here employed negatively. This is not only because *hererinc* elsewhere describes St Juliana’s laughing pagan persecutor Eliseus (*Juliana*, line 189), as well as Boethius, whom Emperor Theodric takes to be a usurper as he calls on his men to arrest him (*The Meters of Boethius*, I, line 71).[[3]](#footnote-3) More particularly, in its relation to OE *here* “war-band” and *herian* “to plunder”, Wealhtheow’s *hereri[n]c* means “raiding man”, i.e. “pirate”. This term diminishes both Beowulf’s rank and his deliverance of the Danes from Grendel, a true predator. The queen, moreover, with the words *me man sægde* “it was said to me” or “someone told me”, implies that Hrothgar lacked the courtesy to tell her of this plan himself. But we know how publicly Hrothgar announced his decision that morning, for it was *on stapole* “on a pillar” (line 926) that he did so, outside Heorot and with Wealhtheow and her ladies in attendance. It is after these mandarin words on Beowulf that Wealhtheow endorses Hrothulf as the next Danish ruler by referring to him as their truly adopted son (lines 1185b-87).

Nearly all of *Beowulf*’s surviving Norse analogues give Hrólfr and Bǫðvarr Bjarki as lifelong friends, one as the king and the other as his champion, and it can be argued that the English tradition before *Beowulf* had Hrothulf and Beowulf in similar roles.[[4]](#footnote-4) But the poet of *Beowulf* keeps them apart, using Wealhtheow to make them rivals. The effect of the queen’s two speeches is to portray Beowulf as an interloper, to silence Hrothgar concerning his offer of adoption and to safeguard her daughter’s marriage with Ingeld as well as the Danish throne for Hrothulf. By the time she refers to her adoption of Hrothulf at the end of her speech about not adopting Beowulf, we know enough about both men to compare their childhoods. This essay will attempt to do this and then show why it matters.

**Hrothulf’s childhood**

The poet briefly alludes to Hrothulf’s birth not long into the poem, by way of his genealogical reference to Halga as *til* “excellent” or “virtuous” (line 61). This line-final moral agnomen might be passed over in silence, were it not for the unwittingly immoral turn of events in Scandinavian analogues in which King Helgi begets Hrólfr on his own daughter. The oldest source for the story is preserved in Arngrímur Jónsson’s 1596 Latin abstract or adaptation of a large but now-lost vernacular fragment of *Skjǫldunga saga* “history of the Scyldings” (*c*. 1190).[[5]](#footnote-5) Here, after early adventures which include a childhood on the run with his brother Roas (Hróarr, i.e. Hrothgar), as well as a more grown-up encounter with Yrsa’s mother, it is said that:

Helgo deinde Daniæ Rex ad rapinam et piracticam reversus Sveco bellum intulit, vicit: Reginam Yrsam surripuit secumqve avexit in Daniam, ignarusqve pater cum filia nuptias celebrat, etiam contra voluntatem et consilium fratris Roæ, qvi suam agnoscere se dicebat ex vultu consangvineam; his filius natus Rolfo, postea cognomento Krag.[[6]](#footnote-6)

[King Helgo of Denmark later turned back to plundering and piracy, made war on Sweden, and was victorious; he snatched the queen Yrsa, carried her back with him to Denmark, and thus while ignorant did a father wed his own daughter, even if contrary to the will and advice of his brother Roas, who said he knew her from her features to be kin to them in blood; the son born to them was Rolfo, later nicknamed *Krag*.]

Further on, we learn that *Helgo post qvinqvennium in bello occubuit* “Helgo five years later died in battle” (ch. 11). The poet reiterates the tale when Rolfo becomes king:

Rolfo cognomento Krake vel Krag Danicè (est nomen, qvo cornice marem notamus) ex tali concubitu natus, cæso Helgoni patri avoqve eidem octennis successit. Roas patruus Rolfonis Paulo post à patruelibus Rærico et Frodone Ingialldi filiis occisus est.[[7]](#footnote-7)

[Rolfo, nicknamed Krake, or, in Danish, Krag (the name by which we know the sea-crow), born of such cohabitation that Helgo was at once his father and grandfather, succeeded at eight years old. Not long after, Roas, Rolfo’s uncle, was slain by his own first cousins, Ræricus and Frodo, sons of Ingialldus.]

Before we go on, a defence of *Beowulf*’s Norse analogues is in order, since the essentials of these often fill gaps in the poem’s narrative. The analogues, for example, have already told us that Halga is Hrothulf’s father – the poem does not. Arngrímur’s digest descends through *Skjǫldunga saga* from a story associated with a genealogy, the *Langfeðgatal* “list of forefathers”, which was probably created by the Icelander Sæmundr *inn fróði* “the learned” Sigfússon (1056-1133) in *c*. 1120.[[8]](#footnote-8) It is thought that Sæmundr’s great-grandson, Bishop Páll Jónsson of Skálholt, fleshed out this genealogy in *Skjǫldunga saga* in *c*. 1190.[[9]](#footnote-9) The remaining analogues descend from a related but less learned tradition. The oldest of these is *Bjarkamál in fornu* “the old lay of Bjarki”, which portrays King Hrólfr’s (i.e. Hrothulf”s) last stand in his hall in Lejre. The king’s champion is called variously *Bjarki* “little bear”, *bǫðvar-Bjarki* “battle Bjarki” or *bǫðvarr Bjarki* “battle-ready Bjarki”, or just Bǫðvarr. Bjarki is the Norse analogue of *Bēo-wulf*, whose “bee-wolf” name is a kenning for “bear” and whose cognate epithet *beadwe heard* “battle-hard” (line 1539), in the fight with Grendel’s Mother, aligns him even closer with *Bǫðvarr*.[[10]](#footnote-10) *Bjarkamál* may be as old as the tenth century; it survives in three forms: a translation by Saxo Grammaticus, canon of Lund, into Latin hexameters towards the end of the twelfth century in his *Gesta Danorum* “deeds of the Danes”;[[11]](#footnote-11) two Old Norse stanzas quoted in Snorri’s *Óláfs saga Helga* “saga of St Óláf” (*c*. 1230);[[12]](#footnote-12) and an Icelandic prose paraphrase which is to be found in chs. 32-33 of *Hrólfs saga kraka* “saga of pole-ladder Hrólfr”.[[13]](#footnote-13) Saxo’s *Gesta*, which was influenced in *c*. 1200 by a text of *Skjǫldunga saga*, is itself an analogue of *Beowulf*.[[14]](#footnote-14) So is *Hrólfs saga*, from a text which existed in *c*. 1200 but which is now fully extant only in a seventeenth-century manuscript, albeit the text itself is datable to *c*. 1400.[[15]](#footnote-15) There is lastly an incomplete ballad, *Bjarkarímur* “rhymes of Bjarki”, which was created partly out of *Hrólfs saga* in the fifteenth century.[[16]](#footnote-16)

Patchy and late as these varied prose and verse Skjǫldung narratives are, their narrative outlines have much in common with *Beowulf*.[[17]](#footnote-17) The prose analogues, in this case, tally with Wealhtheow’s statement that she and Hrothgar brought up Hrothulf *umborwesendum* “when he was a child” (line 1187). Arngrímur’s Latin version of the lost *Skjǫldunga saga* lets us work out that Roas has looked after Rolfo for three years: between Helgo’s death (when Rolfo is five) and his own (when Rolfo is eight). The moral charge of Halga’s *til*-agnomen (*Beowulf*, line 61) might therefore tell us that the poet has the same story but omits most of it as distasteful, protesting only that Halga was both father and grandfather to Hrothulf through no fault of his own.

Wealhtheow alludes to Hrothulf’s childhood when she draws attention to Hrothgar’s death as imminent and to the possibility that Hrothulf, his nephew, might succeed him:

“Ic minne can

glædne Hroþulf, þæt he þa geogoðe wile

arum healdan gyf þu ær þonne he,

wine Scildinga, woruld oflætest;” (1180b-83)

[“I know my

gracious Hrothulf, that these youths he will

keep in favour, if you, sooner than he,

friend of Scyldings, leave the world”]

With the words *þa geogoðe* “these youths”, Wealhtheow refers to her sons with Hrothgar, whose names are later given as Hrethric and Hrothmund (line 1189). The definite article in her construction defines these boys as the *magum* “kinsmen” to whom she has just reminded Hrothgar to bequeath his kingdom (line 1178). The poet uses Wealhtheow’s construction *arum healdan* later for Beowulf’s regency over his own young cousin Heardred on the death of Hygelac, Heardred’s father and his uncle: *freondlarum heold / estum mid are oð ðæt he yldra wearð* “with friend’s teaching he kept him / kindly in favour until he grew older” (lines 2377b-78). Wealhtheow’s words thus show that she creates an obligation for Hrothulf to be regent to her boys, should they still be minors when Hrothgar dies:

“wene ic þæt he mid gode gyldan wille

uncran eaferan gif he þæt eal gemon,

hwæt wit to willan ond to worðmyndum

umborwesendum ær arna gefremedon.” (lines 1184-7)

[“I expect that he will repay our heirs

with advantage, if he remembers all the

favours that we two for his will and honour

performed for him before when he was a child.”]

From these words we may infer a story which was better known to the audience, whose knowledge of Scylding tales is given as an expectation in lines 1-3 of the poem. It appears from what Queen Wealhtheow says that she and Hrothgar have brought up Hrothulf in the Danish court because Hrothulf lost both parents when he was a child. With her word *gyldan* “repay”, Wealhtheow redefines the *arna* “favours” which she and Hrothgar then showed him as an advance payment for the *arum* which she now tells him to be ready to show her children. If there were evidence that Hrothulf had been groomed for this role, we might even call this “long-term reciprocity”. To emphasize her point at the end of the fitt (XVII), Wealhtheow faces Beowulf who is seated alongside Hrethric and Hrothmund, *be þæm gebroðrum twæm* “by those brothers” (line 1191).

The seating seems contrived to make Beowulf into a new son of Hrothgar – although not for much longer, since the queen’s speech thwarts Hrothgar’s plan to adopt him. In her view, King Hrothgar’s offer brings with it Beowulf’s succession to the Danish throne. By backing Hrothulf for immediate successor instead, to be regent to Hrethric and Hrothmund should Hrothgar predecease their majority, Wealhtheow keeps her sons’ hopes of power alive for the future. In doing so, she represents Hrothulf’s adopted childhood as something both happy and secure.

**Beowulf’s childhood**

Although Beowulf’s birth does not come about through incest, like Hrothulf’s, his childhood trajectory seems similar. With his father either dead or missing, Beowulf is adopted, in his case by his grandfather (on the turmoil affecting Beowulf’s uncles, see below). When we first see him in the poem, Beowulf appears *in medias res*, a man on a mission with fourteen followers (lines 205-09), but the poet still alludes to his childhood early on. We learn something of this through Beowulf’s words about his father to the Danish Coastguard:

“Wæs min fæder folcum gecyþed

æþele ordfruma Ecgþeow haten,

gebad wintra worn ær he on weg hwurfe

gamol of geardum; hine gearwe geman

witena welhwylc wide geond eorþan.” (lines 262-66)

[“My father became famous to the peoples,

frontline noble captain, Ecgtheow by name,

endured a great many winters before he passed on,

old, from his dwellings; he is readily recalled

by every wise man widely across the earth.”]

For the picture of a parent honoured in old age, this one is hard to match. Its positivity compares well with the poet’s *til*-epithet for the unfortunate Halga, but there the resemblance ends. If Beowulf’s statement is true and his father died as an old man, Ecgtheow must have fathered him late, for Beowulf is young when we meet him. Wealhtheow calls him *hyse* “lad” (line 1217). To Heorot’s doorman Wulfgar, who has come to request Beowulf’s entry, King Hrothgar reveals a story which predates the period of Grendel’s attacks:

“Ic hine cuðe cnihtwesende,

wæs his ealdfæder Ecgþeo haten

ðæm to ham forgeaf Hreþel Geata

angan dohtor.” (lines 372-75)

[“I knew him when he was a boy,

his late father was called Ecgtheow

to whom at home Geatish Hrethel gave

his only daughter.”]

That is, Ecgtheow brought Beowulf to Denmark twelve or more years earlier. Beowulf’s age on this visit may be put at a bit younger than seven, because it was at this age that his grandfather adopts him (line 2428), so we may deduce that Beowulf is presently aged between eighteen and his mid twenties.

To those in the poet’s assumed audience who know Beowulf’s story less well than they do the stock of Scylding tales, Hrothgar’s words in lines 372-75 make it possible to place Beowulf as Hygelac’s sister’s son, with a blood-link to the Geatish royal house on his mother’s side. There is evidence within the poem that Beowulf’s maternal connection makes him inferior by birth: the poet calls the Geatish *lond* “lands” and *eard eðelriht* “homeland by right of inheritance” *swiðor* “more strongly” Hygelac’s than Beowulf’s, referring to Hygelac as *selra* “higher-ranking” (line 2196-99); Hrothgar avows or reveals ignorance of Beowulf’s mother’s name when he says that *swa hwylc mægða* “whichever maid” (line 943) bore this young man, she may say that God blessed her in childbirth; and Hrothgar, when he says that a king may say *þæt ðes eorl wæs / geboren betera* “that this gentleman was born [to be] of higher rank” (lines 1702-3), shows that Beowulf’s eligibility for kingship does not speak for itself. Outside the poem, there is historical evidence that the usual requirement for succession was a paternal link to the royal line.[[18]](#footnote-18)

Ecgtheow, moreover, as Hrothgar makes clear to Wulfgar, and a little later to Beowulf himself, is not a Geat but a foreign interloper, and more infamous than famous. Beowulf is introduced as Hygelac’s thane (lines 194 and 261), not as Ecgtheow’s son. The wildness of Ecgtheow’s record emerges in Hrothgar’s reply to Beowulf’s offer to help him. Half-way through Beowulf’s opening pitch it is already clear that he takes the king’s leave to fight Grendel for granted. This assumption the king answers with mocking ambiguity when he says that it is *f[or w]erefyhtum* “for manly fighting” and *for arstafum* “for kindness” that Beowulf has sought him out (lines 457 and 458). If we, perhaps like the young hero, first believe that the old king means these qualities to be Beowulf’s, we receive a check in his following lines, which establish the fighting as Ecgtheow’s, the kindness as his own:

“Gesloh þin fæder fæhðe mæste,

wearþ he Heaþolafe to handbonan

mid Wilfingum; ða hine *Wede*ra cyn

for herebrogan habban ne mihte.

Þanon he gesohte Suð-Dena folc

ofer yða gewealc.” (lines 459-64)

[“Your father by killing began the greatest feud,

with bare hands he was the bane of Heatholaf

among the Wylfings; then the Weather-Geatish kin

for terror of raids could not keep him.

Thence he sought Danish folk southwards

over rolling of waves.”]

So it seems that the itinerant Ecgtheow stopped in Geatland just long enough to marry the princess and to be a father to their son. Then his past catches up with him. Having to light out for Denmark with Beowulf, Ecgtheow reveals two things to us: one is that Beowulf’s mother, not caring for Beowulf in Ecgtheow’s absence, is probably dead (in childbirth?); the other is a record for reckless violence which may work against his son in later years. It is even possible that Wealhtheow, a Wylfing herself (if we connect her Helming family in line 620 with King Helm in *Widsith*, line 29), purposely leaves Beowulf’s welcome to the last in her round of Heorot in lines 620-24.[[19]](#footnote-19)

The next stage in Beowulf’s childhood is revealed by the man himself fifty years later, before his fight with the Dragon, when he tells his bodyguard that his grandfather, King Hrethel of the Geats, took him from Ecgtheow at the age of seven (line 2428). If this was because of death, it is unlikely that Ecgtheow’s passing was as peaceful as Beowulf presents it to the Coastguard in lines 262-66. Even if Ecgtheow died years later, he emerges as a liability, an unknown force. His bare-handed dispatch of Heatholaf anticipates Beowulf’s technique not only with Grendel but also years later with Dæghrefn, Hygelac’s Frankish or Alemannic slayer whom Beowulf hugs to death on the beach in Frisia (lines 2501-2 and 2506-08). If we take into account the analogues, Ecgtheow’s style fits with the fate of Bjarki’s father in *Bjarka þáttr* “Bjarki’s tale”, in the middle of *Hrólfs saga* (chs. 17-24), where Bjǫrn (“bear”), as he is called, is forced to haunt the margins as a real bear. His pregnant peasant wife, Bera (“bear”), having been made to eat of his flesh, gives birth to three sons of whom Bjarki (chs. 18-20), is the third; *Bjarki* “little bear” projects a mighty bear spirit to ravage Hrólfr’s enemies outside the hall during their last stand in Lejre (ch. 33). Nor in *Beowulf* can the hero’s great height (lines 247-50), his strength of thirty men (lines 379-81), his wrenching of Grendel’s arm from the shoulder (lines 815-18), and his long-distance swim from Frisia to Geatland (lines 2367-8) be regarded as entirely human in the case of a man whose name may be read as a kenning for “bear”.[[20]](#footnote-20) This aspect appears to be what Beowulf inherits from Ecgtheow.

Ecgtheow’s foreign status and physical legacy allow Beowulf less integration with his mother’s family than he admits in his final speech to the honour guard (lines 2428-34). Unferth, a trusted adviser of King Hrothgar, seizes on Beowulf’s exclusion when he puts down Beowulf over an incident from his youth. His discrediting story is about Beowulf’s rowing or swimming race with an opponent named Breca.[[21]](#footnote-21) Indicating that he got this from Breca himself, Unferth says that both boys went in for *dolgilpe* “mad boasting” (line 509), followed by *sorhfullne sið* “a venture bringing sorrow” (line 512);[[22]](#footnote-22) and that Breca beat Beowulf, completing the distance in Norway, from where he returned to his *swæsne eþel, / leof his leodum* “beloved homeland, a man dear to his people” and to the *freoðoburh fægere þær he folc ahte / burh ond beagas* “fair protecting fortress where he had a tribe, township and rings” (lines 520-21 and 522-3). A “Breoca” is named king of the Brondings in *Widsith*, line 25, and furthermore it seems that *Beowulf*’s Breca son of Beanstan is not far from becoming king of his own land. Unferth, however, cites Breca’s advantages in order to present them as things which Beowulf does not have. By citing them just before he says that Breca fulfilled his vow to Beowulf (lines 523-4), thus winning the contest, Unferth gives Beowulf to be a trouble-making boy without family.

Nor does the poet contradict him. After Beowulf gives his version of events, claiming (with himself as sole witness) that he stayed with Breca for five days until the current drove them apart, the poet makes Beowulf look more isolated by saying nothing. Initially Beowulf averts the disputed outcome with a disclaimer, saying that he and Breca swore to compete in this way *cnihtwesende* “when we were boys” (line 535) and that they only made vows to do this because *wæron begen þa git / on geogoðfeore* “we were both still youths at this time” (lines 536-7). But by the end of his riposte, despite showing personal force, Beowulf has vindicated Breca by treating him as Unferth’s ally. When he says that *ne gehwæðer incer* “neither of you” could perform such a feat, his dual for Unferth and Breca divides him from his friend. As neither man is Beowulf’s equal, it is true that he stands out from them, but his words reveal a youth in isolation.

Fifty years later Beowulf represents his childhood as fulfilled (lines 2428-34), but by then we know that it was filled with misery. Soon after Beowulf’s return, his reunion with Hygelac, his mother’s brother, and his elevation to the rank of ealdorman, the poet flies back to the hero’s childhood following his adoption by King Hrethel:

Hean wæs lange

swa hyne Geata bearn godne ne tealdon

ne hyne on medobence micles wyrðne

drihten We*der*a gedon wolde; [MS *wereda* “of hosts”

swyðe wendon þæt he sleac wære,

æðeling unfrom. Edwenden cwom

tireadigum men torna gehwylces. (lines 2183b-89)

[Long was the shame,

such that children of Geats reckoned him

no good, nor of much on mead-bench did

the Weather-lord wish to make him worthy;

very much they supposed he was a slouch,

a prince without prospects. A reversal

of each grief came to the glorious man.]

This allusion also accounts for a time in Beowulf’s life after his vagrant earlier childhood and before the ungoverned youth which may be inferred from his friendship with churls and from his rowing (or swimming) race with Breca. The *drihten* “lord” in question cannot be Hæthcyn or Hygelac, given their own youth, the former’s brief reign and the latter’s welcoming attention (lines 1992-98); but must be Hrethel, Beowulf’s grandfather. So startling is this passage that its relevance to Beowulf has prompted widely different interpretations: Eliason reads it on little evidence and for even less purpose as a reference to the younger Hygelac, whereas Tripp, associating the passage with Beowulf, nonetheless aligns it with “his later and altruistic refusal to accept Queen Hygd’s offer of the throne after Hygelac’s death”.[[23]](#footnote-23)

However, the timing of this *edwenden* “reversal” defines its miserable earlier subject as Beowulf. The poet places it just before Hygelac rewards Beowulf with full honours, with Hrethel’s sword, 7,000 hides and a princely seat (lines 2190-96). As Fred Biggs says, the passage “praises the system that allows the best-suited member of a kin-group to advance”,[[24]](#footnote-24) but its typology also shows the teen Beowulf to have been seen as a slacker who became a hero suddenly, by rising to a challenge. The *sleac* descriptor accords with the typology of the “coal-biter” or “ash-lad” archetype of thirteenth-century Norse legend, for which two prominent examples are the orphaned Starkaðr Stórvirksson in *Gautreks saga* and the fatherless half-Norwegian Víga-Glúmr Eyjólfsson in *Víga-Glúms saga*.[[25]](#footnote-25) And so now we see Beowulf through doubting relatives’ eyes.[[26]](#footnote-26) Hygelac says that he tried to stop Beowulf going (lines 1992-95). However, the poet says that wise churls encouraged him (lines 202-4, 415-16), and now Hrothgar has given him honours. Up to this moment of *edwenden* in their eyes, the poet gives his hero a history of exclusion: how Beowulf spent his youth outside; how his parentless childhood was full of *torna* “griefs”; how, at least to start with, other children despised him; how his father made him a charge on his relatives; how his link to the house through his mother defined him socially as an inferior; how even Hrethel seems to have regretted adopting him. In short, it seems that Beowulf’s adopted childhood has been neither happy nor secure.

**Hrothulf’s response to his childhood**

Like Beowulf, Hrothulf is adopted by a kinsman after the loss of his father, but unlike Beowulf, he appears to have been shown *to willan ond to worðmyndum / umborwesendum ær arna* “favours before, for his will and honour, when he was a child” (lines 1186-7). It has been suggested that Wealhtheow’s if-clause construction, in *gif he þæt eal gemon* “if he remembers all that” (line 1185), casts doubt on her nephew’s gratitude,[[27]](#footnote-27) but there is no doubt that he is feted in Heorot just for being there. Hrothulf has his family to thank for social inclusion, as the alliterative link between his name and Hrothgar’s shows, not only in *Beowulf* (line 1017), but also in *Widsith* (line 45). At the start of victory celebrations, says the poet, when the Danes settle down with their guests to the most splendid carousal, never did a greater army behave more decorously before their giver of treasure (lines 1011-12). The longevity of Hrothgar, his adoptive father, has given Hrothulf a period of security stretching into the narrative present:

Bugon þa to bence blædagende,

fylle gefægon; fægere geþægon

medofull manig magas þara

swiðhicgende on sele þam hean

Hroðgar ond Hroþulf. Heorot wæs

freondum afylled; nalles facenstafas

þeod-Scyldingas þenden fremedon. (lines 1013-19)

[Moved then to bench magnificent nobles,

rejoiced in their fill; exquisitely partaking

of many a mead-cup were their kinsmen,

thinking valiant thoughts in that high hall,

Hrothgar and Hrothulf. Heorot was

filled up with friends; not at all were criminal acts

as yet practised by nation-Scyldings.]

With this, the first of only three references to Hrothulf by name, comes an example of the poet’s tendency to balance light with dark: *freondum* “friends” with two or more *facenstafas* “criminal acts” (line 1018) which are committed by two or more Scyldings. The adverb *þenden* may mean also “then” or “at that time”, as Mitchell notes when he reads these lines as “a restatement of the ‘noble savage’ theme” by which the old heroes are praised as better than people of today.[[28]](#footnote-28) On the other hand, Orchard points out that *þenden* here is both stressed and carries alliteration “in a way that is unusual, to say the least”.[[29]](#footnote-29) Mitchell, like Sisam and Morgan, generalizes the passage in order to preserve the moral integrity of the Scyldings, but this tribe is no more idealized than the others in *Beowulf*.[[30]](#footnote-30) Elsewhere we see a family insurrection among Swedes (lines 2381-4), some questionable target practice and then family turmoil among Geats (lines 2435-43), and a big breach of contract followed by slaughter in the case of earlier Scyldings in Frisia (lines 1146-58).[[31]](#footnote-31) Against this background it seems more likely that *þenden* here means “as yet”, and that both this adverb and the poet’s later named reference to Hrothulf hint at imminent discord.

*Widsith* gives a glimpse of the Scylding story as it was before *Beowulf*. *Widsith*, a working verse catalogue of names for Germanic and other tribes and their kings in the Exeter Book, shows some stability in the Anglo-Saxon Scylding narrative, which is in any case inferrable from the later Scandinavian texts in Latin and Old Norse. *Widsith* contains five lines on Hrothgar and Hrothulf which bear comparison with Wealhtheow’s hypermetric passage in *Beowulf*, lines 1162b-8.[[32]](#footnote-32) *Widsith*’s dates may be various, dependent on all the unknown stages of composition, but since the Geats but neither Beowulf nor Hygelac are named in *Widsith*, and since *Beowulf* would have been too big for *Widsith* to ignore, it is reasonable to suppose that any resemblance between the poems is owed to their descent from a common tradition.[[33]](#footnote-33) In this case *Widsith*’s notice about “Hrothwulf” may reflect the source from which *Beowulf*’s Hrothulf derives:

Hroþwulf ond Hroðgar heoldon lengest

sibbe ætsomne suhtorfædran,

siþþan hy forwræcon wicinga cynn

ond Ingeldes ord forbigdan,

forheowan æt Heorote Heaðobeardna þrym. (*Widsith*, lines 45-49)

[Hrothwulf and Hrothgar kept most closely

kindred together, uncle and nephew,

when they drove off the tribe of pirates

and crushed Ingeld’s front line,

cut down the Heathobards’ glory at Heorot.]

The adverbial superlative *lengest* means either “most closely” (from *lenge* “near, close at hand”, as in *Beowulf*, line 83), or “for the longest time” (from *long* “long”, as in *Sigehere lengest Sædenum weold* “Sigehere ruled the Sea-Danes for the longest time, *Widsith*, line 28). The former meaning is supported by the usage in *Beowulf*, line 83, in that the poet there says *ne wæs hit lenge þa gen* “nor was it yet close at hand” that the newly built Heorot would burn to the ground. Since this *lenge* refers to the same Heathobard raid which follows the word *lengest* in *Widsith*, line 45, it might be thought to arise from the common source. With either meaning, however, “most closely” or “for the longest time”, *Widsith* implies that the Scylding family unity ends soon after King Ingeld attacks Heorot. It cannot be right, as Mitchell implies, that Hrothgar’s long friendship with his nephew begins in *Beowulf* after the attack, for Hrothgar is already an old king in this poem.[[34]](#footnote-34) The force of the subordinating temporal conjunction *siþþan* in *Widsith*, line 47, is not “after” but “when”, for it highlights Ingeld’s raid as the beginning of Danish change. In this case we have the outline of a story in *Beowulf* in which the Scylding concord ends with the death of King Hrothgar, not long after Ingeld’s defeat.

In *Beowulf* Hrothulf grows up at court where he comes to share the challenges of his uncle’s kingship, whether the day-to-day rule of Denmark or the raid from Ingeld which is set for the near future. As we have seen in Wealhtheow’s words to Hrothulf in lines 1181-2, after Hrothgar’s death a regency rather than outright rule will be offered him. The queen’s following words to Beowulf underline the arrangement which she has set in place. Exhorting Beowulf to act in the interest of her sons, as their adviser, Wealhtheow tells him that the Danish court is united under her:

“Her is æghwylc eorl oþrum getrywe

modes milde mandrihtne hold,

þegnas syndon geþwære, þeod ealgearo,

druncne dryhtguman doð swa ic bidde.” (lines 1228-31)

[“Here each gentleman is true to the other,

generous of heart, loyal to his beloved master,

thanes are in harmony, the nation fully prepared,

men of the retinue, having drunk, do as I ask.”]

In keeping with this vision of good queenly governance, the import of the Danes’ status as *þeod ealgearo* “a nation fully prepared” (line 1230) is that they are ready for Hrothgar to die and for Hrothulf to take over.

Ominously for Wealhtheow, however, we have already heard the wording of her declaration of stability in the poet’s assessment of Heorot, just before she speaks to King Hrothgar:

Þa cwom Wealhþeo forð

gan under gyldnum beage, þær þa godan twegen

sæton suhtergefæderan. Þa gyt wæs hiera sib ætgædere,

æghwylc oðrum trywe. Swylce þær *U*nferþ þyle [MS *Hunferþ*

æt fotum sæt frean Scyldinga. Gehwylc hiora his ferhþe treowde,

þæt he hæfde mod micel, þeah þe he his magum nære

arfæst æt ecga gelacum. (lines 1162b-68a)

[Then came Wealhtheow forth

walking beneath a golden necklace to where the two generous men

were sitting, uncle and nephew. Still at this time was their kindred together,

each man true to the other. Likewise there Unferth the man who speaks

sat at the feet of the Scylding lord. Each of them trusted his spirit,

that he had great courage, though to his kinsmen he may not have been

kind in the play of blades.]

The fact that these six lines are hypermetric, as the first and longest of only three such sustained passages in *Beowulf* (the others are in lines 1705-7 and 2995-6), tells us that the poet is making a point about the Danish *sib* “kindred” (rather than “peace”[[35]](#footnote-35)) which he describes. The poet implies that Heorot’s great show of loyalty is about to end, in some way because all three royals have co-opted Unferth into their family despite his history as a fratricide: his fraternal jealousy will become Hrothulf’s.

Beowulf, in his riposte to Unferth earlier (lines 499-248), tells us that a legend of Unferth has spread. Beowulf knows not only his name (line 530) and patronymic (*sunu Ecglafes* “Ecglaf’s son”, line 590), but also that *ðu þinum broðrum to banan wurde / heafodmægum* “you became as a slayer to your brothers, the head members of your family” (lines 587-8). The term OE *hēafodmǣg* does not mean “close kinsman” as Mitchell and Robinson recommend, but “head kinsman”, for Beowulf uses it to name his uncle Hygelac as his one authority when he comes home (line 2151). Likewise Beowulf means that Unferth’s brothers were ranked above Unferth. So, when the poet introduces Wealhtheow’s speech in lines 1162b-68a, saying that her *sib* “kindred” is still united despite trusting Unferth, he means that Unferth will help make it disunited. Unferth is known for having killed his higher-ranking brothers. With *þa gyt* “still at this time” on line 1164, the poet implies that not long from now he will advise Hrothulf to kill his higher-ranking adoptive brothers, the boys Hrethric and Hrothmund.[[36]](#footnote-36)

Where Hrothulf’s later regency for his cousins is concerned, Saxo’s translation of *Bjarkamál*, in which Rolvo is famed for killing Røricus, gives reason to believe that in the future King Hrothulf does kill a man by the name of Hrethric.[[37]](#footnote-37) Moreover, the plural in *facenstafas* “criminal acts” (line 1018) might tell us that Hrothmund is murdered by his cousin as well. The Norse analogues give no cousin relationship between the leading cognates, Hrólfr and Hrœrekr or Hrókr, but the slaying of at least Hrethric by Hrothulf is plausibly a detail held in common. The issue with Hrothulf is not his loyalty to Hrothgar, which we are told is beyond question (lines 1164-5).[[38]](#footnote-38) It is rather how Unferth influences Hrothulf against his adoptive brothers when Hrothgar is dead. Hrothulf’s role in *Beowulf* is to darken the Danish future. By killing, if he does, his younger cousin or cousins for whom he is asked to rule as regent, Hrothulf responds to his childhood with treachery.

**Beowulf’s response to his childhood**

Beowulf’s words on his childhood conflict with the poet’s. The context of his version is important, for he is then speaking to his retinue before leaving them so that he may fight the Dragon alone. Beowulf must convince these hand-picked Geatish warriors that he belongs to a family with experience in war: first there is King Hrethel, who held off the Swedes until his death (lines 2472-4); then there are Hæthcyn and Hygelac, who repaid the subsequent Swedish incursions until Hæthcyn died in battle and Hygelac avenged him (lines 2479-86). Beowulf celebrates his grandfather, saying that for him *on geogoðe* “in his youth” (line 2426) he survived many a battle-charge in times of war. Then he gives the saintly age at which his military training began:

“Ic wæs syfanwintre þa mec sinca baldor

freawine folca æt minum fæder genam,

heold mec ond hæfde Hreðel cyning,

geaf me sinc ond symbel, sibbe gemunde;

næs ic him to life laðra owihte

beorn in burgum þonne his bearna hwylc

Herebeald ond Hæðcyn oððe Hygelac min.” (lines 2428-34)

[“I was seven winters when the prince of treasures,

lordly friend of peoples, took me from my father,

when Hrethel the king kept and held me,

gave me treasure and feasting, remembered kinship;

nor was I in any way to his life a more hateful

trooper in the forts than any one of his children,

Herebeald and Hæðcyn, or my own Hygelac.”]

Beowulf’s bluff words are at odds with the poet’s earlier story of misery and dishonour, for he recalls his childhood being the very picture of good *sibbe* “kinship”, with treasures and public honours and a place alongside Hrethel’s three sons. That Hrethel *mec* … *æt minum fæder genam* “took me from my father” (lines 2428-9) even suggests that it was Beowulf’s young promise, rather than Ecgtheow’s death or delinquency, which made the king bring up the *beorn* “trooper” (by etymology “bear”) with his own *bearna* “children” who, unlike Beowulf, were royal on their father’s side. This spin from King Beowulf is the prelude to his encomium on Uncle Hygelac, and how he gave Beowulf treasures and land and placed him at the head of his army. In context, therefore, Beowulf’s words on Hrethel are a face-saving construction in which the rosy picture of adoption would better fit Hrothgar’s care of young Hrothulf at about the same time. His words might even be read as a sublimation of Hrothgar’s offer (lines 946-9) to adopt him fifty years earlier.

In Denmark, Beowulf seems to see the risk which Hrothulf poses to his cousins. When he takes his leave of King Hrothgar, he tries vainly to get the older boy out:

“Gif him þonne Hreþric to hofum Geata

geþingeð þeodnes bearn, he mæg þær fela

freonda findan.” (*Beowulf*, lines 1836-38a)

[“If in this case Hrethric to the Geatish court

takes his business, a king’s son, he in that place

will be able to find a great many friends.”]

About Beowulf the poet tells us later, just before his revelation of a childhood *hean* “shame” (line 2183), that he did not knock down drunks nor was there *hreoh sefa* “a cruel sensibility” in him (line 2180). So it seems that his offer to foster Hrethric is really one to save him – should the father only see it – from his cousin. After Hygelac’s death, Beowulf resists Queen Hygd’s and the Geats’ offer of the Geatish throne precisely because this would compromise his bond with his own cousin:

No ðy ær feasceafte findan meahton

æt ðæm æðelinge ænige ðinga,

þæt he Heardrede hlaford wære,

oððe þone cynedom ciosan wolde; (lines 2373-75)

[No sooner for this could the destitute ones find

in that prince any terms or conditions

by which he might be a lord to Heardred,

or might wish to choose that kingship.]

Thereafter Beowulf’s friendly counsel to Heardred, as John M. Hill says, “befits an older kinsman and eventual subordinate”.[[39]](#footnote-39) Before dying some fifty years later, Beowulf appears to justify his refusal to rule Heardred when he rejoices that the Lord need not rebuke him for *morðorbealo maga* “murderous slaughter of kinsmen” (line 2742). Earlier in the poem this formula describes Hildeburh’s loss of her son and brother at Finnsburh (line 1079), anticipating a similar bereavement for Wealhtheow. Retrospectively with these words Beowulf appears to contrast the initial survival of his maternal cousin Heardred with the early destruction of Hrethric, paternal cousin of Hrothulf. By supporting rather than killing his own younger cousin, for whom he prefers to rule as regent, Beowulf responds to his childhood with loyalty.

**Conclusion**

A comparison between Hrothulf’s childhood and Beowulf’s is invoked as soon as Wealhtheow raises both men’s adoption in her speech to King Hrothgar in Heorot. As a boy, each man sees little of his father, growing up in the care of kin, but Hrothulf, unlike Beowulf, reaches manhood with the advantage of being royally descended on the father’s side. His claim to rule the Danes is ideologically stronger than Beowulf’s to rule the Geats, or indeed the Danes, and is reconfirmed by the fact that his Scylding father, Halga, is also his grandfather. Beowulf, on the other hand, Geatish only through his mother, has a lower birth which blights both his candidacy for adoption in Denmark and his kingship back home.[[40]](#footnote-40) The irony is that Hrothulf, granted full rights in a childhood completely secure, grows up to betray the family which loves him, whereas Beowulf never fails to help the family which marginalized him when he was a child. For Hrothulf childhood feeds a resentment, whereas Beowulf’s upbringing makes him wiser to Danish family dynamics than either Wealhtheow or Hrothgar, as well as careful not to override the right of his own younger cousin to rule. The poet of *Beowulf* encourages this comparison, the better to contrast Hrothulf’s kingship with Beowulf’s in later years. His view of childhood in the meantime is that the child, not the father, is father to the man.

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33. North, *Origins of ‘Beowulf’*, pp. 134-5. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
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35. Morgan, ‘The Treachery of Hrothulf’, 35. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
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40. See North, ‘Gold and the Heathen Polity in *Beowulf*’ (forthcoming). [↑](#footnote-ref-40)