

WULFGAR AT THE DOOR: *BEOWULF*, 11. 389b-90a

The problem of the lacuna posited in *Beowulf* at 11. 389b-90a has recently been reopened by Kevin Kiernan. The lines, as they stand in Klaeber's edition (I include the two preceding half-lines to complete the sentence), are as follows:

“gesaga him eac wordum, þæt hie sint wilcuman
Deniga leodum.” [þa to dura eode
widcuð hæleð.] word inne abead: (11.388-90)¹

The immediate context is Hrothgar's welcoming of Beowulf. Hrothgar has just ordered Wulfgar to bring the Geats in and to bid them welcome, and here Wulfgar begins to execute those orders. Editors have generally dealt with this passage much as does Klaeber here above. They postulate a lacuna of two half-lines and fill it with narrative which identifies Wulfgar as the speaker and gets him from Hrothgar to the door.² Kiernan, on the other hand, arguing that defective alliteration is not sufficient grounds for the conjectural restoration of supposedly missing text,³ would allow the manuscript reading to stand. An examination of the passage from the perspective of direct speech, however, suggests that neither approach fully addresses all the points at issue here.

There are no physical grounds for postulating a lacuna: *Deniga leodum* is followed immediately in the manuscript by *word inne abead*. Kiernan suggests that the manuscript reading can be made to make sense simply by placing closing quotation marks after *Deniga leodum* and opening quotation marks after *word inne abead*.⁴ With this punctuation, *Deniga leodum* remains, as has been traditional, part of Hrothgar's speech (“Tell them also with words that they are welcome to the people of the Danes”), and *word inne abead* becomes the introduction to Wulfgar's speech, with the understood third person pronoun of *abead* identifying the speaker (“He announced the words within”).

The problem with the passage is not simply a matter of alliteration, however. The manuscript reading, even with the question of alliteration set aside, is so much at odds with the poet's treatment of direct speech elsewhere in the poem that emendation still seems justified. Under the poet's normal practices, both the identity of a speaker and the location from which he speaks are adequately accounted for. These points, previous emendations have addressed. However, in this poem direct speech invariably terminates with the full poetic line. What has not hitherto been taken into account in any treatment of the passage is the anomalous ending of Hrothgar's speech, and the consequent likelihood that part of the lost material came not from the narrative but from that speech.

The *Beowulf*-poet is, by and large, remarkably careful in matters pertaining to direct speech. As a rule, speakers are explicitly identified, whether by proper name, descriptive phrase, or epithet. Beowulf, in the early speech exchanges, is variously *se yldesta* (l. 258a), *wisa werodes* (l. 259a), *ellenrof* (substantive, l. 340a), and *wlanc Wedera leod* (l. 341a), as well as “Beowulf,” and Wulfgar himself appears twice under his own name (11. 348a and 360a) and once as the *wlanc hæle ð* (l. 331b). In fact, only in four cases (out of over forty instances) is the identity of a speaker left implicit, with simply an understood pronoun, and in all these cases, the understood pronoun occurs between two speeches by the same character.

In three cases, the intervening passage involves reports of commands or greetings by the person who has just spoken and is about to speak again. Thus Beowulf, in direct speech, tells Hygelac about his Danish adventure, gives orders that Hrothgar's gifts be brought in (11. 2152-54, in the narrative), and then speaks again – without having been explicitly identified the second time. Similarly, Beowulf speaks *beotwordum* to his followers just before the dragon-fight, greets them for the last time (11. 2516-18a), and then speaks again of the coming encounter. And finally, Beowulf, having given orders in direct speech for the building of his barrow, turns over to Wiglaf his helm and neck-ring with the command that Wiglaf use them well (11. 2809-12, in the narrative), and then speaks his dying words. In all these cases, with their intervening narrative commands or greetings, the same speaker remains responsible throughout. Consequently, even with the understood pronoun, the identity of the speaker is absolutely clear.

In the fourth case, with Wiglaf's condemnation of Beowulf's retainers and his words of encouragement to Beowulf in the midst of the dragon-fight, the speeches are addressed to two different audiences, and the intervening passage involves action rather than reports of

speech. Even so, the text allows no possibility of confusion about who is speaking. After Wiglaf has announced that he shall share sword and helm and byrnie with his lord, two narrative lines,

Wod þa þurh þone wælrec, wigheafolan bær
frecan on fultum, fea word cwæð: (11. 2661-62)

(He went then through the deadly fumes, bore the battle-helm in support to his lord, spoke a few words:

invoke some of the same particulars and provide certain identification both of speaker and of person about to be spoken to.⁵

The case with 11. 389b-90a is different. We know that Hrothgar has been speaking, but *word inne abead* does not tell us who now announces words within. With alternating speakers the poet provides an identification; with understood pronouns the poet keeps the same speaker. By either measure, the unamended text is uncharacteristic of the *Beowulf*-poet's normal practice.

The same holds true with regard to the location of the speaker. With direct speech in general, and speech exchanges in particular, the *Beowulf*-poet takes care to place his speakers in relationship to each other. For example, he moves the shoreguard from the cliff to the beach (11. 234-36) before the shoreguard's first words to Beowulf, and places the shoreguard on his horse (11. 286-87a) before his reply to Beowulf's answer. In another passage, the poet brings Beowulf and his men to the benches outside Heorot. Then, again before permitting his characters to speak, he brings Wulfgar into Hrothgar's presence (11. 356-59) and, later, Beowulf in under the roof of Heorot (11. 402-403a). Wulfgar's movement from Hrothgar's presence to that of Beowulf, the man he has been ordered to welcome, is the only essential movement not specified in the manuscript account of the sequence of early exchanges.

How much text might be required to establish such a movement? The general practice of the *Beowulf*-poet is to employ a minimum of one full line to introduce a speech. However, in the case of alternating speakers or sets of speeches placed back to back, such one-line introductions are mostly of the *mabelode* + epithet type (11. 371, 456, 529, 957, 1383, and 1840); they involve nothing except the announcement of speaker and speech. Whenever any further information appears, more lines seem to be necessary.⁶ For example, a line and a half are required for the shoreguard's reply to Beowulf (11. 286-87a) and two full lines for Beowulf's first address to the shoreguard (11. 258-59). Indeed, when the speech that follows begins on an a-line, as with the address to the shoreguard and Wiglaf's speech of encouragement to Beowulf (11. 2661-62, quoted above), two full lines seem to be the absolute minimum.

All that I have said so far would indicate that the general editorial practice represented by Klaeber's addition of *þa to dura eode widcuð hæleð* provides about what would seem to be required. However, in addition to looking at the *Beowulf*-poet's manner of introducing speeches, we should also examine his characteristic way of terminating speeches. Klaeber provided a beginning for such a consideration when he noted the relative lack of enjambment of direct speeches in the poem and listed the apparent exceptions.⁷ I would like to give further attention to this question.

Very simply, on six occasions the poet begins a speech in the middle of a line.⁸ On no occasion does he so end a speech. Of the two such "endings" tentatively suggested by Klaeber, one belongs to the Finn episode, which can hardly be taken as direct speech at all (Klaeber himself uses no quotation marks at l. 1159a, the ending point he identifies),⁹ and the other belongs to the passage under discussion here.

The consistency of practice is apparent. Speeches do not end in the middle of lines. The lost l. 389b, then, would seem to have belonged to Hrothgar's speech. But this, in turn, would leave only the lost l. 390a and the surviving l. 390b as an uncharacteristically brief introduction to Wulfgar's speech. It seems likely, then, that the manuscript reading may reflect the loss of more than two half-lines. Given the poet's usual treatment of speech, two full lines are probably missing – a half-line belonging to Hrothgar's speech and a line and a half belonging to a full two-line introduction to Wulfgar's speech. The pattern, then, would look like this:

“Deniga leodum ***”
 *** ***
 *** word inne ahead.¹⁰

What might have been in these lines? In the case of Hrothgar’s speech, perhaps an appositive for the *hie* of l. 388b. An awareness of Geatish arms and armor pervades the entire arrival episode, and an appositive couched in terms of that armor would have provided thematic anticipation for the more detailed attention to war gear in Wulfgar’s speech. Perhaps, on the other hand, a variation for Wulfgar’s *ofer sæwylmas* at l. 393b. Wulfgar, in the first half of his speech, seems to try for painstaking accuracy in restating his lord’s welcome. This phrase of Wulfgar’s might well have been paralleled in the earlier speech. And Wulfgar’s introduction? Here the editorial tradition is undoubtedly firm. Somehow Wulfgar must have gotten from Hrothgar to the door.

But I will stop short of offering a reconstruction. My intention has not been to emend the text, but rather to suggest a reconsideration of what, and how much, might have been lost at that point in the narrative sequence when Hrothgar finished speaking and Wulfgar went to welcome the Geats. In closing, I would simply note that the approach used here, with its close attention to the treatment of direct speech, may have utility for other passages in which speakers or speech are at issue.¹¹ At the very least, it highlights the poet’s remarkable consistency in matters of direct speech.

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Notes

1. *Beowulf and the Fight at Finnsburg*, 3rd ed. with 1st and 2nd supplements (Boston: D. C. Heath, 1950). All citations are to this edition.

2. For the editorial history of the passage, see E. V. K. Dobbie, ed., *Beowulf and Judith*, The Anglo-Saxon Poetic Records 4 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1953), p. 136, n. to 389-390. Of current editions, Wrenn-Bolton (3rd ed.), Von Schaubert (Heyne-Schücking, 18th ed.), Chickering, and Magoun have *þa to dura healle Wulfgar eode*, and Nickel has *þa wið duru healle Wulfzar eode*. Klaeber expresses a preference for *þa to dura efste widcuð hæleð*. See his edition, p. 454, n. to 389b-390a in the 2nd supplement, or his “Beowulfiana Minora,” *Anglia* 63 (1939), 406. For convenience, however, I have cited the reconstruction in Klaeber’s main text.

3. “Beowulf” and the “Beowulf” Manuscript (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1981), pp. 185-91.

4. pp. 186-87.

5. Due to a possible lacuna at l. 2792b the introduction to the beginning of Beowulf’s death speech must be excluded from consideration here.

6. In l. 1840, *him on ondsware* replaces the usual epithet. The *mapelode* pattern can be extended beyond one line. Other patterns usually are so extended. So far as location goes, the need for more than one line would seem to apply even when there is no alternation of speakers or sequence of speeches. Wealththeow’s speech to Beowulf after his defeat of Grendel is introduced by *Wealhðeo mapelode, heo fore þam werede spræc* (l. 1215), but the b-line here is more concerned with the public nature of her appeal (she is about to speak of her children) than with her location, which has long since been established. Similarly, her earlier speech to Hrothgar appears to be preceded only by a single half-line, *Spræc ða ides Scyldinga* (l. 1168b), but the introduction to the speech actually begins with l. 1162-64a. The description of Hrothgar and his nephew intervenes.

7. p. lv.

8. Speeches begin at ll. 287b, 342b, 350b, 2511b, 2518b, and 3114b. Interestingly, all of these cases fall in the middle of either groups of alternating speeches or sequences of speeches by the same characters.

9. See Dobbie, pp. 169-70, n. to 1063-1070.

10. For a single-line restoration that attempts to explain the loss paleographically, see S. O. Andrew, *Postscript on “Beowulf”* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1948), p. 142. *The two-line lacuna posited here would be susceptible to similar paleographical analysis. The similarity, in the extant manuscript, of wordum and word + the first three minims of inne (on the line below wordum, and slightly to the right) does seem suggestive.* See Julius Zupitza, ed., *Beowulf: Reproduced in Facsimile*, 2nd ed., rev. Norman Davis, Early English Text Society 245 (London: Oxford University Press, 1959), fol. 138v.

11. As at l. 2792b.