Hygelac’s only daughter: a present, a potentate and a peaceweaver in *Beowulf*

ALARIC HALL

The women of *Beowulf* have enjoyed extensive study in recent years, but one has escaped the limelight: the only daughter of Hygelac, king of the Geats and Beowulf’s lord. But though this daughter is mentioned only fleetingly, a close examination of the circumstances of her appearance and the words in which it is couched affords new perspectives on the role of women in *Beowulf* and on the nature of Hygelac’s kingship. Hygelac’s only daughter is given as part of a reward to Hygelac’s retainer Eofor for the slaying of the Swedish king Ongentheow. *Beowulf* refers to this reward with the unique noun *ofermāðnas*, traditionally understood to mean “great treasures”. I argue, however, that *ofermāðnas* at least potentially means “excessive treasures”. Developing this reading implies a less favourable assessment of Hygelac’s actions here than has previously been inferred. I argue further that the excess in Hygelac’s treasure-giving derives specifically from his gift of his only daughter, and the consequent loss to the Geats of the possibility of a diplomatic marriage through which they might end their feud with the Swedes. A reconsideration of Hygelac’s only daughter, then, offers new perspectives on the semantics of *ofermāðum*, on Hygelac’s kingship, and on women in *Beowulf*.

Hygelac’s daughter is mentioned in the speech which is delivered by the messenger who announces Beowulf’s death to the Geats after Beowulf’s dragon-fight. The announcement made, the messenger goes on to describe the career of Beowulf’s predecessor Hygelac and the unresolved conflicts between the Geats and their neighbours hanging over from Hygelac’s reign. He concludes by predicting the Geats’ own destruction. The messenger’s speech is dominated by an account of how Hygelac gained his kingship. The Geats, led by their then king Hæthcyn, Hygelac’s older brother, had attacked the Swedes and seized the wife of the Swedish king Ongentheow. Subsequently, however, Ongentheow regained his wife, killing Hæthcyn in the process. Ongentheow seemed set to slaughter all the remaining Geatish raiders as well until Hygelac arrived with Geatish reinforcements—two of whom, Wulf and Eofor, attacked Ongentheow, Eofor killing him. His brother Hæthcyn dead and his martial reputation assured, Hygelac ascended to the Geatish throne. This narrative closes with the scene (lines 2991–98) which is my concern here.1 It describes how

> geald þone guðræs  geata dryhten  
> hrǣles eafora  þa he to ham becom  
> iofore ond wulfè  mid ofermaðnum  
> sealde hiora gehwæðum  þund þusenda  
> landes ond locenra beaga  ne dorfte him þa lean ðæwitan  
> mon on middangearde  syđðan hie  þa mæða geslogan  •  
> ond  þa iofore forgeaf  angan dohtor  
> hamweordunge  hyldo to wedde

When he returned home, the lord of the Geats, the son of Hrethel [Hygelac], rewarded Wulf and Eofor for that battle-rush with *ofermāðnas*. 

DOI: 10.1080/00393270600774719
He gave to each of them a hundred thousand [units]
of land and linked rings–no-one in the world
need have criticised him/them for those rewards, after they won that glory–
and then he gave to Eofor his only daughter,
household-honour, a pledge of his favour.

The unique word *ofermaðum* here has hitherto been understood—to cite a few
standard authorities—to mean “a very valuable treasure, a treasure of surpassing
worth”, “costly treasure”, “exceeding treasure” or “exceedingly great treasure”.²
Gneuss, indeed, considered it an example of words which prove that “noun and
adjective combinations with *ofer* in the sense of ‘great x’ are semantically and
morphologically perfectly legitimate and do occur”.³ Notwithstanding *ofermaðum*,
and the frequent difficulty of deciding confidently how we should interpret the
prefix, there are convincing examples of *ofer-* in the sense ‘great’ and as a simple
intensifier, among them *oferheaf* (“great need”), *oferneod* (“great necessity”), and
*ofereald* (“very old”).⁴ But “exceedingly great treasure” is not, at a lexical level, the
most obvious interpretation of *ofermaðum*: more often, and with less frequent
ambiguity, the Old English prefix *ofer-* denotes excess, implying “excessive treasure”.
Regardless of how we understand it in *The Battle of Maldon*, *ofermod*, literally
“over-courage”, is clearly attested otherwise in the negative sense of “pride”.
*Ofer(ge)drync* (“drunkenness”), *ofereaca* (“surplus”), *ofergemet* (“excess”), *ofer-
mete* (“gluttony”), *oferlufu* (“excessive love”), and copious other examples are
available.⁵ Likewise, in Middle English “the most frequent sense” of *over-* “is
‘excessive(ly)’ etc., about 42 per cent of the *over-* words”; the sense of “superior-
” accounts for only about 15 per cent.⁶ Since *ofermaðum* occurs only once in Old
English, it is not unlikely that it was coined by the *Beowulf*-poet. Encountering the
word for the first time, *Beowulf*’s audience would presumably have been more likely
to infer the common meaning “excessive-” rather than the rarer “superior-”.
The word might have been coined, of course, partly for metrical convenience, but with
unrivalled skill and a large lexicon of treasure to draw on, the *Beowulf*-poet cannot
be assumed to have invented *ofermaðum* merely to escape a metrical tight spot
without considering the likelihood that it would be interpreted to denote excess. The
reading of *ofermaðnas* as “excessive treasures” was undoubtedly possible for Anglo-
Saxons, and if nothing else introduces to *Beowulf* an ambiguity which deserves
further consideration.

Proceeding to the context in which *ofermaðum* appears, we are left in no doubt
that Hygelac gave more to Wulf and Eofor than he needed to. Whether *him* in line
2995 implies that no-one could reproach Hygelac for giving the land and rings as a
reward, or that no-one could reproach Wulf and Eofor for receiving them, the poem
states explicitly that land and rings were sufficient reward for killing Ongentheow.
It then adds, however, that Hygelac also gave away his only daughter (in a note
marked off, and thereby arguably emphasised, by the manuscript pointing). If
*ofermaðum* does imply excess, then it is clear that Hygelac’s daughter is the part of
his reward to Wulf and Eofor which he neither need nor should have bestowed. Two
issues arise here: is the criticism of Hygelac which is implicit in my reading consistent
with other parts of the poem? And where is the excess in Hygelac giving away his
daughter specifically? The answer to the latter question is surely that women in
*Beowulf* are important resources for rulers wishing to forge peace-treaties through
political marriages. At the point when Hygelac gave his rewards to Wulf and Eofor,
the Geats and the Swedes had each lost a king. Hygelac, the new king of the Geats,
had an ideal opportunity to make peace with his new counterpart, and in the world
which *Beowulf* portrays, a marriage alliance be an obvious component in such
diplomacy. Such a marriage would, moreover, afford a symbolic counterbalance to
the Geats’ previous theft of Ongentheow’s wife. But Hygelac married his daughter instead to reward a key perpetrator of the feud. I consolidate and elaborate this reading here first by discussing Beowulf’s portrayal of Hygelac and then its portrayal of political marriages.

We might note, before assessing Beowulf itself, that although Hygelac’s other appearance in Anglo-Saxon literature, in the Liber monstrorum, puts him at the less monstrous end of a spectrum of anthropomorphic monsters, the fact that he is included there at all is hardly flattering. In Beowulf itself, Hygelac enjoys the reflected glory of his retainer Beowulf, and Beowulf’s own devotion to him itself encourages respect. But Kaske and Irving have emphasised Hygelac’s faults. His first appearance as a protagonist in the poem is marked by his startlingly to-the-point speech at Beowulf’s return from Denmark, in which he shows that he had misjudged Beowulf’s youthful potential and had opposed his journey (lines 1987–98). Hygelac does not emerge as much of an orator here; moreover, we know from a speech by Beowulf elsewhere in the poem that “snotere ceorlas” (“wise men”) had advised his journey to Denmark (lines 415–18; cf. 2183–89). The implication, if we do not take this merely as an inconsistency, is that Hygelac is not snotor.

In the scene where Hygelac makes his speech, his court is prominently described with reference to his wife Hygd, and through her contrast with another queen whose name is conventionally, but disputably, read as Modthrytho. “Wis wel þungen” (“wise, accomplished”), Hygd exhibits a canny understanding of the political necessities of her volatile world which Modthrytho lacks. The characterisation is fitting, as her name transparently means “thought”. Moreover, we later discover that after Hygelac’s death, Hygd was to ask Beowulf to become king instead of her son Heardred. Beowulf refused, but in consequence Heardred was killed and Beowulf’s accession merely delayed (lines 1925–31, 2367–76): it would appear that Hygd’s judgement, then, was sound. The contrast which Beowulf draws between Hygd and Modthrytho invites the further comparison of Hygelac both with his prudent wife and with Modthrytho’s husband Offa. Neither Hygelac’s actions nor his name—probably meaning “thought-play”—makes the comparison with Hygd favourable. Meanwhile, Beowulf observes that Modthrytho’s husband Offa “wisdom heold/e ðel sinne” (“held his homeland with wisdom” ll. 1959–60), which, as Orchard has emphasised, is hard to say of Hygelac.

Most importantly, however, Beowulf describes Hygelac’s disastrous raid on the Franks—four times, “more often”, by Brodeur’s reckoning, “than any other event” (1959, 79; lines 1202–14, 2349–99, 2492–2509, 2910–21). In the first account, the raid is explicitly undertaken “for wlencu” (“out of pride”), Hygelac losing not only his life but also the “Brosinga mene” (“neck-ring of the Brosingas”) given to him by Beowulf (lines 1192–1214). Characteristically, Beowulf juxtaposes Hygelac’s raid with some other events in the history of the neck-ring: it was given to Beowulf as a reward for a worthy and successful foreign expedition, and it had previously been successfully brought by Hama from enemy territory (lines 1192–214). Hygelac fails to match up either to Beowulf or to Hama in his use of the treasure—and the political consequences of this failure are far-reaching.

The final account of Hygelac’s raid on Frisia is that of the messenger who mentions ofermaðnas. First, he explains that Beowulf has fallen (lines 2900–10), but he goes on to refer to Hygelac’s raid on the Franks, describing how it is one of the reasons why the Geats can expect a disastrous period of strife, as the Franks seek revenge (lines 2910–21). He then continues by saying “Ne ic te Sweoðode sibbe ðode treowe/þilte ne wene” (“nor do I hope for expect any peace or faithfulness from the Swedes”; lines 2922–23), his explanation for this culminating in Hygelac’s gift of
The messenger follows the mention of *ofermaðnas* immediately with the comment

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{þæt ys sio fæhdo ond se feondscipe} \\
\text{wælnið wera ðæs ðe ic [wen] hafo} \\
\text{þe us secead to sweona leoda}
\end{align*}
\]

That is the feud and the enmity, 
the slaughter-hatred of men, of which I have expectation, 
for which the people of the Swedes will attack us…

The juxtaposition of this bitter statement with Hygelac’s victorious gift-giving is entirely compatible with the conclusion that Hygelac’s military success was, in the long run, fatally undermined by his failure to bestow his daughter wisely in the interests of peace. Even if we choose to view Hygelac positively on the basis of other parts of *Beowulf*, then, the idea that the messenger is criticising Hygelac complements the rest of his speech neatly.

Despite marshalling several of the criticisms of Hygelac described above, and characterising him as “a simple-minded and reckless marauder”, Irving considered that

the other great event in Hygelac’s life sets him in a much better light. It is the way he acts at the battle of Ravenswood, where with great panache he rescues a trapped Geatish army and later rewards the young warriors Wulf and Eofor for their killing of the Swedish king Ongentheow… Here he performs as a fine king, both gallant and generous… Ravenswood is an event we are presented with to judge for ourselves, and we surely judge it favourably, not listening to words but looking at actions. On the basis of these, we can say truly that it is too bad the Geats lost this good king in his prime.14

Rereading *ofermaðnas* suggests a more consistent assessment of Hygelac. His victory at Ravenswood is magnificent, but his response to that victory belongs to a long list of Geatish diplomatic failures.

This rereading of *ofermaðnas* and of Hygelac is predicated on the assumption that Hygelac could have disposed of his daughter more effectively. But, as has long been noted, *Beowulf* focuses on two unsuccessful political marriages, those of Hildeburh and of Freawaru (lines 1063–1159, 2020–69),15 and this portrayal does not discourage one from accepting Beowulf’s own observation (lines 2029–31) that

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{oft seldan hwær} & \\
\text{æfter leodhryre lytle hwile} \\
\text{bongar hudeæ þæh seo bryd duge}
\end{align*}
\]

It tends to be rare that 
the slaughter-spear rests [for even] a short while 
after the fall of men, even though the bride may suffice.

Conceivably, Hygelac did well to abandon peacemaking and to concentrate instead on rewarding his retainers. Ongentheow’s successor seems to have been his son Onela, and *Beowulf*’s defective line 62 has often been emended to make him brother-in-law to the Danish king Hrothgar.16 It is possible, then, that Onela was already married when Ongentheow died; but this is rather empty speculation. Equally, *Beowulf* certainly refers to dynastic infighting over Ongentheow’s succession (lines 2379–96). If Hygelac had given his only daughter to Ongentheow’s first successor, he might simply have found that he had backed the wrong horse and been no better off than before. But the dispute over the Swedish throne seems to have been encouraged by the Geats, who gave support to Onela’s nephews against Onela himself. The
Geats not only lost their own king Heardred in the process, but the involvement on Onela’s side of Weohstan also ensnared his son Wiglaf in the feud (lines 2611–25), which spells further trouble for the Geats when Wiglaf succeeds Beowulf. This train of events gives ample reason to think that whatever the obstacles, the Geats would have done better to encourage peace and stability rather than conflict in their relations with the Swedes.

Hill’s recent reanalysis of feuds in Beowulf, and the place of women in them, supports these arguments. His readings of the failure of peacemaking focus not on the women and marriages involved, but on other failures of the men: in Hildeburh’s case Finn’s imposition of humiliating terms upon the Danes, in Freawaru’s the Danes’ parading of arms seized from the groom’s people at her wedding.17 As Beowulf’s words imply, it is not the brides in these narratives who are at fault: it is men who are unable, “æfter leodhryre”, to keep from further violence. Hill argued further that Beowulf also presents a powerful counter-example to its pessimistic portrayals of Hildeburh and Freawaru, in Hrothgar’s queen Wealhtheow.18 Although the poem hints at how she lacks power to constrain impending feuding within her children’s generation (lines 76–85, 1163–87), there is no suggestion that her own marriage to Hrothgar has been anything but a success. That Wealhtheow came from a people other than the Danes is suggested by her identification at her first appearance as “ides helminga” (line 620), though it might in theory be that the Helmingas were a scion of the Danish people. Her foreign origins are also suggested, however, by her name, which literally means “foreign servant/slave”.19 Beowulf’s audience, as Robinson and Harris have shown, was surely attuned to the significance of unusual, lexically meaningful names and their literary implications, and there is no reason why Wealhtheow should not have been among these.20 Reading Wealhtheow as a prominent example of a peace-pledge between peoples was discouraged by Sklute’s assessment in 1970, reprinted in 1990, of the meaning of friðusibb, the hapax legomenon by which Beowulf characterises Wealhtheow when he describes Hrothgar’s court to Hygelac: Beowulf calls her the “friðusibb folca” (“friðusibb of (the) peoples”, line 17). Sklute rightly emphasised that the similar epithet freoðuwebbe (“peace-weaver”) need not imply that its bearer wove peace through marriage, but rather through her part in diplomatic negotiations; he then assumed that friðusibb “seems to function in the same way”.21 But as Hill pointed out, and as the Dictionary of Old English entry for the word implies, this ignores the semantics of friðusibb’s second element, which are entirely different from those of webbe. Sibb, when denoting a person, is surely to be taken in the sense “relation” or, if the person is to be understood metaphorically as their place in a kin-group, “relationship”, making Wealhtheow the “peace-relation(ship) of the peoples”.22 Much the most likely interpretation of this is that Wealhtheow was married from the Helmingas to the Danes, in an inter-group exchange which was surely successful.

There is good reason, then, to think that Hygelac would have been wise to use his daughter to bring about peace rather than to reward a killing. Understanding oforumaðnas to mean “excessive treasures” makes sense linguistically and contextually. Identifying Hygelac’s only daughter as both a potential token in diplomacy and as the portion of Hygelac’s mæðnas which he should not have given to Wulf and Eofor fits recent readings of Beowulf. The congruence of the linguistic and literary evidence affords a reliable platform from which we may gain a significant new perspective on Beowulf’s attitude to women and diplomacy. Diplomatic marriages are a central feature of Beowulf’s political world, and one which the poem’s wiser characters would encourage. Where such marriages fail, it is because of the flaws of men and not of women or marriages per se; the flawed man identified here is Hygelac.
NOTES

This paper gained much in its genesis from a discussion with Norman Gray during a session of an Old English reading group, to whom I am indebted. The reading group was held under the auspices of the Glasgow Centre for Medieval and Renaissance Studies.


4 E.g. “Forði is ælcum men oferpeafer, þæt he him georne wið ðone leahter gebeorge” (“Therefore there is an oferpeafer upon each person, that he protect himself zealously against that sin”), Arthur Napier (ed.), Wulfstan: Sammlung der ihm zugeschriebenen Homilien nebst Untersuchungen über ihre Echtheit, Sammlung englischer Denkmäler in kritischen Ausgaben, 4 (Berlin: Weidmann, 1883), p. 134; “Gif hwa þonne for hwiclice untrunnesse oððe for hwiclice oferneode fastan ne mæge, cyðe þæt þær scifre” (“If anyone then cannot fast because of any lack of strength or because of any oferneod, he should make it known to his confessor”), N. R. Ker, “Three Old English Texts in a Salisbury Pontifical, Cotton Tiberius C 1”, in The Anglo-Saxons: Studies in Some Aspects of the History and Culture Presented to Bruce Dickins, ed. by Peter Clemoes (London: Bowes and Bowes, 1959), pp. 262–279 (at p. 278); “Forði þonne ... ælc oðer, oferlyde and geogeþe, healde his endbyerdnesse” (“Therefore let each other [person], the oferlyde and kepe, keep his place”), Arnold Schröder, Die angelsächsischen Prosaborbeitungen der Benediktinerregal, 2nd ed. (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1964), p. 155 (the phrase has no direct parallel in the original, LXIII.7, Rudolf Hanslik (ed.), Benedicti Regula, Corpus scriptorum ecclesiasticorum latinorum, 75 (Vindobonae: Hoelder-Pichler-Tempsky, 1960), p. 146). The examples were found by searching the Dictionary of Old English Corpus (Toronto: Dictionary of Old English, 2000); accessed from <http://ets.umd.umich.edu/eoe/>.


17 John M. Hill, The Anglo-Saxon Warrior Ethic: Reconstructing Lordship in Early English Literature (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2000), pp. 48–49, 53–68. Shippey, “Wicked Queens”, para 15, has also suggested regarding Freawaru’s marriage that “the successful strategy for Hrothgar might have been not to waste Freawaru on a foreign and less immediate threat, by having her marry a stranger, but to have her defuse a closer threat by marrying her first cousin Hrothulf”. Though somewhat speculative, this reading is attractive, and would bring another example of a misplaced marriage into Beowulf.

18 The Anglo-Saxon Warrior Ethic, pp. 52, 59, 64.

19 The etymology has been disputed–see Helen Damico, Beowulf’s Wealththeow and the Valkyrie Tradition (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1984), pp. 58–68–but this is not significant for the synchronic meaning of the name within the poem.

