GRENDEL’S DEATH (BEOWULF 850–852)

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Abstract

The personal pronoun him in line 852b of Beowulf does not refer to Grendel. Its reference is either to his ‘life’ (singular) or to his ‘life and soul’ (plural). Grendel managed to reach the cave he inhabited together with his mother. It is there that Beowulf ultimately beheaded the monster.

Grendel had been fatally wounded by Beowulf in Heorot during their nightly encounter and just barely managed to flee. The following morning Grendel’s tracks could be seen, and everybody was grateful that the murders committed by the monster in the preceding twelve years had been avenged. The following three lines concern Grendel’s death:

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\begin{align*}
\text{deafæge deog} & \text{ siððan dreama leas} \\
& \text{in fenfreoð feorh alegde} \\
& \text{hæþene sawle;} \quad \text{þær him hel onfeng.}
\end{align*}
\]


The form deog, a hapax legomenon, has been discussed frequently, but no generally accepted interpretation has been found. That deog represents the predicate of its clause is not in doubt, and the grammatical structure of the clause is also clear. If for the moment we assume that deog means ‘(he) hid himself’, then the following translation is acceptable: ‘Doomed to death he hid himself when, bereft of joys, he laid down his life, the heathen soul, in the swamp refuge; there hell received him.’ (Swanton, 1978: 75). A similar German translation was recently offered by Dietz: ‘Der Todgeweihte [Grendel] hatte sich verborgen, als er freudlos das Leben, seine heidnische Seele im Schutz des Sumpfes aufgab; dort empfing ihn die Hölle’ (Dietz, 2000: 203). One could wonder why in this translation ‘heidnische Seele’ is accompanied by the possessive pronoun, whereas ‘das Leben’ stands without it. But this is a very minor point.

Only rarely has the last half-line of the quoted text been commented on by Beowulf scholars. A translation like ‘there hell received him’ seems
evidently correct. But Klaeber was apparently somewhat uncertain about this, because in his commentary he added the following note: ‘No conscious personification is contained in the expression þær him hel onfeng’ (Klaeber, 1950: 158). Klaeber had also dealt with this passage in his influential paper on the Christian elements in Beowulf (Klaeber, 1912: 267). He is likely to have been aware of the fact that the translation ‘there hell received him’ is in disagreement with what the epic text tells us about Grendel’s physical death seven hundred and thirty-five lines further on.

After Grendel’s mother had avenged her son by killing Æschere Beowulf promised to fight the ogress. He had to swim to the bottom of a lake, where Grendel’s mother was awaiting him. Beowulf’s fight against Grendel’s mother, which occurred in a dry underwater cave, was notoriously difficult for the Geatish hero, but in the end he prevailed. When he had killed the ogress, Beowulf recognized Grendel’s corpse and cut off his head: to þæs þe he on ræste geseah guðwerigne Grendel licgan aldorleasne . . . ond hine þa heafde becearf (Beowulf 1585b–1590b).

From this account we may conclude that Grendel had fled from Heorot, traversed the fen and somehow reached the underground cave he inhabited together with his mother. Consequently it is unlikely that þær him hel onfeng in line 852b can mean ‘there hell received him (= Grendel)’ in any literal sense, because the action described in this passage occurred on Grendel’s way from Heorot to the underground cave. That him should refer to Grendel had been assumed by Kemble, who translated (rather freely) ‘there death clutched him!’ (Kemble, 1837: 36). This seems still to be the universally accepted interpretation of the passage. But the context does not really allow that the personal pronoun him should refer to Grendel: If the half-line really meant ‘there hell received him (= Grendel)’, this would be contradicted by the further text.

Grammatically him in line 852b can be parsed as the dative singular of he (masc.) or hit (ntr.) or the dative plural of the gender-indifferent pronoun hie ‘they’. The obvious nouns for him to refer to are feorh (851b) and sawle (852a). Of these two, feorh ‘life’ is given as either masculine or neuter, sawle belongs to the feminine sawol ‘soul’. It is generally assumed that hæþene sawle is a variation on feorh, which is certainly possible. We can then surmise that him refers to feorh. If we are willing to allow that feorh alegde, hæþene sawle means ‘he laid down his life (and) his heathen soul’, then him as dative plural could refer to both, and we would translate ‘there hell received them (= Grendel’s life and his heathen soul)’. This question may have to remain undecided.

What seems reasonably certain is that him in þær him hel onfeng (852b) does not refer to Grendel: The monster was not physically received in hell. What the epic text tells us is that Grendel lost his ‘life’, and