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A Metaphor in "Beowulf" 2487a: gūðhelm tōglād

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A Metaphor in *Beowulf* 2487a: *gūðhelm tōglād*

*by Scott Gwara*

In many respects the *Beowulf*-poet’s art defies comparison, as few authors from pre-Conquest England match his linguistic sophistication.1 Perhaps one failing of readers has therefore been to define words without serious scrutiny where the sense seems obvious. The poet’s depiction of Ongenþeow’s death serves as an object lesson, for one half-line in the episode has been misconstrued in dictionaries, glossaries, and translations. Line 2487a, *gūðhelm tōglād*, occurs in a scene describing the death of Ongenþeow, king of the Scyldings:

> Pa ic on morgne gefrægn mæg ðerne
> billes ecgum on bonan stælan,
> þær Ongenþeow Æfores niosað;
> gūðhelm toglad, gormel Scylding
> hreas <heoro>blac; hond gemunde
> fæhdo genoge, feorhswenge ne ofteah.
> (2484–89)

Critics have devised any number of interpretations of this verse, but most agree on the general sense “the battle-helm split.”2 Yet the nominal

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1 I am grateful to my colleagues, Professors Dorothy Disterheft, University of South Carolina, George Brown, Stanford University, and Roy Liuzza, Tulane University, who carefully read and commented on a draft of this paper, to my great advantage.


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compound *gūðhelm* arguably cannot mean “helmet” in this context, and the verb *tōglidan* is even less likely to mean “split” or “shear.” Moreover, the collocation *-helm + tōglidan* exists as an idiom apparently familiar to the poet. In my view, *gūðhelm* literally denotes a “battle-shroud,” metaphorically the fury of war, which dissipates as Ongenpeow falls dead.

Although I cannot find any references to the origin of current translations for the collocation *gūðhelm* *tōglād*, they may rest on later lines recapitulating Ongenpeow’s death:

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3 There are no germane references to either term in Angus Cameron et al., Old English Word Studies (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1983); in Birte Kelly, “The Formative Stages of Beowulf Textual Scholarship: Parts I, II,” ASE 11 (1983): 247-74; 12 (1984): 239-75; or in Mariann Reinhard, On the Semantic Relevance of the Alliterative Collocations in “Beowulf” (Bern: Francke, 1976). Yet others have been unsettled by the verse, as Caroline Brady was: “nor is [the first element, *gūð-*] demanded . . . by a need to establish a war-like meaning in contrast to that of other -helm compounds in the
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Let se hearda Higelaces þegn 
brad<ne> mece, þa his brōðor læg, 
ealdswæord eotonisc entiscne helm 
brecan ofer bordweal; þa gebeah cyning, 
folces hyrde, wæs in feorh dropen.
(2977–81)

When his “brōðor” Wulf has been injured, Eofor (Higelaces þegn) reaches over Ongenjeow’s shield (bordweal), strikes the helmet (entiscne helm), and kills the Swedish king. It appears that the mention of a helmet in this context (2979b) has made readers think that the compound gūðhelm should also mean “helmet,” and that Ongenjeow’s death was remembered for this peculiar detail. Correspondingly, the verb brecan “to break, strike” (2980a) seems to have been taken as a variation of tōglidan, supplying the unrecorded sense “split” for generations of translators. Eofor’s sword-stroke, too, could be viewed as a retribution for Wulf’s; Wulf falls when his helmet is slashed (2973). Finally, some readers may no doubt have recalled other passages of Beowulf, such as

orcas stondan, 
fyrdmanna fatu, feormendlease, 
hyrstum behrorene . . .
(2760b–62a)

in which the ornamented plates of drinking vessels “disintegrate” or “glide off” from rust.5 For contextual reasons, then, “the battle-helm split” as a translation of gūðhelm tōglād has achieved passive acceptance in Beowulf scholarship.

While such contextual arguments are cogent, they nevertheless remain inferential. Significantly, the Beowulf-poet often adds, refines, or

5 DOE s.v. behrösan sense 2: “hyrstum behroren ‘deprived, divested of ornaments’”; cf. to-hrösan, discussed below, p. 345.
omits details in re-telling events, and such parallelism in depictions of Ongenpeow’s death, an aesthetic of modern criticism, may have no relevance here. Because literary criticism rests on language first and foremost, contextual readings of the verse gúðhelm tögláð must be sub-ordinate to the philological interpretation of the words.

On the one hand, no contextual necessity demands that lines 2484–89 correspond in detail to lines 2977–81. On the other hand, Scandinavian versions of Ongenpeow’s death, as far as they can be trusted to transmit a common legend, do not corroborate any detail concerning Ongenpeow’s helmet. If Ongenpeow can be identified as the berserkr Angantýr I Arngrímsson in Hervarar Saga (i.e., Heiðreks Saga, incorporating verses found also in Orvar-Odd’s Saga), he himself is slain by Hjálmarr, whose own helmet and mailcoat are slit in the contest:

\[
\text{hjálmarr et þinn hæggvinn,} \\
\text{en á hlið brynja . . . . Ș}
\]

While the name Hjálmarr (“Helmet”) could have had resonances for the Beowulf-poet, the disparate origins of the sources make the hypothesis unfeasible. (Indeed, the irony of the verse rests on Hjálmarr’s shorn helm.) Klaeber suspected this identification of Angantýr as well, and he rejected the saga parallel.  

The connection between Ongenpeow and Óttar Vendilráka (i.e., Othere, Ongenpeow’s son in Beowulf) from Ynglinga Saga in Snorri Sturluson’s Heimskringla is more germane but little more revealing. Augmenting a copy of Þjóðólf’s Ynglingatal, Snorri Sturluson attributes the death of Óttarr to the characters Vóttarr and Fasti, but details about

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6 The re-castings occur mainly in Beowulf’s dramatization to Hygelac of his fight with the Grendelkin. But incidents need to be reconciled even in trivial matters, as when Hygelac is described as bona Ongenpeoes (1968a). On variant narratives in a homily, see Paul E. Szarmach, “Three Versions of the Jonah Story: An Investigation of Narrative Technique in Old English Homilies,” ASE 1 (1972): 183–92.


8 Tolkien, Heidrik, 7: “cleft is your helmet / and the coat on your side”; cf. 8, slitna brynja (“slit is my corselet”).

9 The Beowulf-poet does remark on the injury done to Wulf, whose role parallels Hjálmarr’s: “ac he him on heafde / helm ær gescer” (2973). Hjálmarr is slain in the Scandinavian sources, whereas Wulf is only injured in Beowulf.

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A helm cannot be found in either text. While Saxo recounts a similar legend in the Historia Danorum, he likewise fails to mention the exact manner of Ongentew’s (i.e., Ottarr’s) death. Ari’s Íslendingabók and Historia Norvegiae also omit any pertinent details. Hence, translating gūðhelm tōglād as “the battle-helm split” need not rest on any pseudo-historical element discoverable in Germanic legend or on any subtle textual congruity. On the contrary, a philological exploration of the half-line exposes a metaphor, which has been overlooked since the 1815 editio princeps of Beowulf.

I

A study of the simplex helm and nouns compounded from it reveals some unobserved facts, particularly relating to the compounds. By my count, about 80 occurrences of helm are attested in Old English verse, 40 in prose, and 40 in glosses, in addition to 5 ambiguous attestations and one presumably hypocoristic proper name. In these contexts polysemous helm has a variety of meanings.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SENSES</th>
<th>POETRY</th>
<th>PROSE</th>
<th>GLOSSES</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>protector/lord</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>helmet</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>foliage (of trees)</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>covering, sky, protection</td>
<td>?2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>skull, head</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

14 OE helm derives from PIE *kel († PIE *mo) and is related to Oclus hjálmr, Ofris, OS, OHG helm, and Goth hilm. The Germanic simplex also denotes “protection” or “shelter”; see Winfried Philipp Lehmann, A Gothic Etymological Dictionary (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1986), 10, 67, 174, 183, 189, 193; Sigmund Feist, Vergleichendes Wörterbuch der gothischen Sprache (Halle: M. Niemeyer, 1923); Alois Walde, Vergleichendes Wörterbuch der indogermanischen Sprachen (Berlin: W. de Gruyter, 1927–32), 1: 442. For my semantic study and word-counts, I have relied on Antonette di Paolo Healey and Richard L. Venezky, A Microfiche Concordance to Old English (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1980), although I have checked the published sources cited there whenever possible. Abbreviations can be found in the List of Texts and Index of Editions.
OE *helm* in the second category is widely attested to mean “helmet,” and the frequency of this poetic sense has, I think, misled readers in certain ambiguous cases. By contrast, most compounds in which *helm* forms either the first or second element are rare in the lexicon. In the following list, words marked by (V) are found only in verse, by (P) only in prose, and by (G) only in glosses (hapax legomena are designated by *)

*banhelm (V), grimhelm (V), hælep helm/heolehelm (V), lythhelm (V), misthelm (V), nithhelm (V), *sceaduhelm (V), sundhelm (V), cynehelm (P), *isenhelm (G), *lferhelm (G), wulfodhelm (P), helmberend (=“warrior” in V, =“crown of a tree” in G), *helmweard (G).

An examination of these attestations reveals an unnoticed fact about compounds formed from the simplex *helm*. Many of them denote a physical or metaphorical covering: darkness, mist, shadow, or disguise. In fact, some of the compounds which scholars once believed to mean “helmet” have uncertain etymologies or mistaken meanings.

OE hælep helm found in Genesis B represents an equivocal case. A devil physically straps on (ful hearde geband . . . spenn mid spangum, 444b–45a) a helmet (hælep helm, 444a) as he prepares to tempt Eve (angan hine pa gyryan, 442a):

Angan hine pa gyryan godes andsaca, 
frus on fraetwum, (hæfdæ faecne hyge),
hælep helm on heafod asette and þone full hearde geband, 
spenn mid spangum . . .

It has long been known that Genesis B was translated from Old Saxon, a circumstance accounting for the peculiar term hælep helm “hero-helmet.” Eric Stanley has lately shown that hælep helm in Genesis B

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16 OE heapuhelm and waeterhelm are ghost-words.
arose from the translator’s confusion over two homophonous elements: OS *helið* (“hiding”)\(^{18}\) and *helið* (“hero,” “warrior”).\(^{19}\) OS *helīðhelm* denotes a disguise or the cover of darkness, either masking devils or misleading the unwary. Hence, both the spelling *heleōdhelm* and the putative sense “hero-helmet” in Old English must be credited to an Anglo-Saxon translator’s misinterpretation or deliberate pun.\(^{20}\) Most recently, A. N. Doane has translated the phrase “helmet of deceit” but did not make note of the idiom.\(^{21}\)

Other Old English compound nouns in -helm raise potential difficul-

\(^{18}\) Cognate with OE *heolohelm*, found in *Whale*, as discussed below.

\(^{19}\) E. G. Stanley, “The Difficulty of Establishing Borrowings Between Languages,” in *An Historic Tongue: Studies in English Linguistics in Memory of Barbara Strang*, ed. Graham Nixon and John Honey (London: Routledge, 1988), 12: “In Old Saxon the compound is ambiguous; in Old English the different vowels of *heolo*- and *hæle*- leave no room for ambiguity.” Other critics who have explored the lexical confluence of OE *heolo*/hæle* and OS *helið* have not considered the possibility of homonymy. Hence, the “mechanical association” of *heolo*- and *hæle*-, which George Krapp invoked to explain the spelling *heleōdhelm*, implied that a translator mistook one Old English word for another with a different phonology. Krapp intimates that the mix-up occurred after the Old Saxon text was translated, probably in subsequent transcriptions (George Philip Krapp, *The Juniun Manuscript* [New York: Columbia University Press, 1931], 166–67).


ties for modern students, for they rarely mean “helmet” in verse. OE *heolophelm* occurs uniquely in Whale, in which a devil snatches a soul from earth and, enveloped by a *heolophelm* (*heolophelme bipeaht*), bears it to hell:22

```plaintext
þonne þæt gereawed of cwicsusle
flah feond gemah, þæte fira gehwylc
hæleþa cynnes on his hringe biþ
fæste gefeged, he him georgbona
þurh sliþen searo siþan weorpēð
wlonecum ond heanum, þe his willan her
firenum fremmǣð, mid þam he faerīnga,
heolophelme bipeaht, helle secede,
goda geasne, grundleasne wylym
under mistglome, swa se micla hwæl,
se þe bisenceð sælifende
eorlas ond yðmearas.
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(38–49a)

OE *bepeccan* belies the definition “[a] helm which conceals or makes invisible the wearer” proposed in Bosworth-Toller for *heolophelm*.23 At least eight times in the Old English corpus *bepeccan* alludes to the obscurity of darkness, fog, or mist, and many other occurrences of *-helm(e) . . . bepeccan* in Old English describe a state of camouflage.24 OE *bepeccan* seldom pertains to clothing, never to helmets or other headgear. In Whale the compound clearly refers to darkness or cloud-cover (-helm understood as the neutral term “covering”), glossed later in the text with the parallel expression “under mistglome” (“beneath the misty gloom,” 47a).


24 The following represents a partial list: *lythelme bepeaht* (Ex 60b), *bepeaht mid þiþstrum* (Met 28.44a), *þiþstrum bepeaeht* (GenA 76a), *þrosme bepeaeht* (ChristA 116a), *bepeaeht mid þiþstr* (Hell 55a), *uhte beþaehte* (Sol II 469b), *beþaehton þiþstro* (PPs 54.5). The verb can be used in reference to clothes or bodily covering: *beþaeht mid pearfan wædum* (ChristC 1422a), *leåfum beþaehton* (GenA 845b). See DOE s.v. *be-peccan* 1.a.i, 2, 5.a.
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Juliana 47ob further supports the generic meaning “cover of darkness, fog, mist” for many Old English compounds in -helm. A devil confesses that he dims the lights of men’s eyes (eagna leoman) with dark showers (sweartum scurum) and a veil of mist (misthelm):

\[\text{Oft ic syne ofteah,}\]
\[\text{ablende bealoþoncum beorna unrim}\]
\[\text{monna cynnes, mithelm forbrægd}\]
\[\text{þurh attres ord eagna leoman}\]
\[\text{sweartum scurum}. \ldots\]

(468b–72a)

Here the devil’s misthelm deludes countless men (beorna unrim) with grim thoughts (bealoþoncum). In Juliana and Whale, then, compounds in -helm do not denote helmets. As in Genesis B these compounds reflect a widespread belief in the devil’s disguise. His covering is physical, for he conceals himself, and metaphorical, for he deludes observers.

A similar definition of such nouns holds true for lyfthelm, nihthelm, sundhelm, and sceaduhelm. In the Wanderer, for example, nihthelm must denote a physical or metaphorical darkness (night or mystery), as it does in Beowulf:

\[\text{Hu seo þrag gewat}\]
\[\text{genap under nihthelm} \ldots\]

(Wan 95b–96a)

Nihthelm geswearc

deorc ofer drihtgumum \ldots

(Beo 1789b–90a)

In Riddle 77 seawater (sundhelm) covers an oyster, just as the sea-floor is covered by the sundhelm in Riddle 2 (solution is “undersea earthquake”):

\[\text{Sæ mec fedde, sundhelm þeahete} \ldots\]

(Rid 77 1)

Sundhelm ne mæg

losian ær mec lætê \ldots

(Rid 2 10b–11a)

In Exodus and Maxims II the lyfthelm signifies the air or atmosphere:\textsuperscript{25}

\[\text{25 See Peter J. Lucas, Exodus (London: Methuen, 1977), 84 note to line 60: “Lyfthelm rather denotes the cloud-cover (dægsceld 79) which is later revealed to be the same thing as the cloud-pillar.” The comment that -helm in lyfthelm is “from the language of protective armour” is unsubstantiated in Lucas’s edition.}\]
As in other examples drawn above, the use of *bepeccan* in Exodus makes plain the meaning of *lyfthelm* there and elsewhere. Ultimately, all the foregoing cases in which the component -helm denotes a covering have to mean obfuscation, darkness, or concealment.

Interestingly, parallels with the phrase *gūdhelm toglād* become even more striking when we examine attestations of *nihthelm* in Andreas and Elene. In these works the term is concatenated with the verb *tōglīdan*:

\[ \text{Him se ar hraðe,} \]
\[ \text{wītig wuldres boda, wīð pingode} \]
\[ \text{ond be naman nemde, (nihthelm toglad)…} \]
\[ \text{(El 76b–78)} \]

*Nihthelm toglad,*
\[ \text{lungr eorde.} \]
\[ \text{(And 123b–24a)} \]

These occurrences suggest that Anglo-Saxon poets recognized the idiom: the covering described by compounds in -helm "glides away" from what is obscured.

Exceptions in Old English to the sense “covering” for compounds with -helm as a second element are few: *bānhelm* in The Battle of Finnesburh 30a, and *grīmhelm* in Exodus 174b and 330a, in Elene 258b, and in Beowulf 334b. A hapax legomenon, *bānhelm* may in fact mean "shield," as if "bone-covering." 26 Interestingly, most poetic compounds denoting a helmet have the second element -grīma or the first element grīm-, meaning "visage" or "covering." 27 Klaeber noted that *grīmhelm* in Beowulf,
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Exodus, and Elene may specifically denote a helmet with a mask covering the face.28 As a simplex, grīm(a) may denote either a metaphorical or a physical mask, a kind of disguise, glossing Latin terms masca or mascus.29 Hence, grīmhelmb and grūdhelm constitute the only exceptions to the observation that compounds in -helm rarely denote a helmet in Old English poetry.

In Old English prose wuldorhelm is attested in homiletic texts, isenhelmb and leperhelmb in the Antwerp glossaries,30 and cynehelmb in various sources, mostly homilies.31 Almost eighty attestations of cynehelmb in Old English prose from a wide range of texts make the word exceptional in the lexicon.32 The term may even have been coined as a calque to Latin corona.33 In fact, isenhelmb and leperhelmb are almost certainly contrived by a scholiast intending to write specific definitions for certain Latin terms.34 Moreover, the first elements isen and leper may be interpreted as adjectives, making the evidence equivocal. Finally, wuldorhelmb, found in four prose homilies, exemplifies the meaning in poetic texts, for it always denotes a nimbus or halo representing sanctity:


(66)

28 Klaeber, Beowulf, glossary (p. 347), s.v. "(vizored) helmet."
31 I omit proper names from this list.
32 DOE s.v. cynehelm.
2. *LS 30*: swa miccle ma sceal ic þrowigan þæt ic þurh þæt wuldor-helm onfo. (301)
3. *HomS 14*: Moyses onfeng scinendum wuldorhelme . . . (178)
4. *HomU 6*: [and] unrim haligra boð gefylled mid þy gewulderdan wuldorhelme. (41)

The meanings of compounds based on OE *helm* vary in verse and prose, of course, but the cited examples are consistent enough to draw conclusions about *gūðhelm*. In nearly all poetic contexts in which the sense of *-helm* compounds is recoverable, either the term does not denote a helmet, or the poet engages in an obvious paronomasia. Unless it contravenes Old English noun morphology, *gūðhelm* therefore constitutes deliberate word-play. As we shall see, the intentional word-play shows up in an investigation of the collocation *gūðhelm toglād*. In my view, the *Beowulf*-poet manipulates this formulaic expression and, correspondingly, the expectations of his audience.

II

The second problem interpreting *Beowulf* 2487a rests on the verb *tōglādan*. The unaffixed form *gīlān*, always intransitive, is attested approximately twenty times in Old English. In verse texts it frequently describes the rays of the rising sun (*And 1248b, 1304b, Phoen 102b, Beo 2073a, Brun 15a*). In prose sources, ships, birds, and fish glide. In the Old English *Martyrology*, a devil is depicted gliding from a body like smoke (*Mart 5 JA17/A/23*).

Unlike OE *gīlān*, however, *tōglāan*, which is attested at least seventeen times, including twice in each of Waerferth’s translations of Gregory’s *Dialogues*, *HomU* 3, and *HomS 40.1*, has a narrower semantic range. In poetic texts, often of the Cynewulf group, the verb is consistently intransitive, occasionally found with a dative of separation:35

1. *And*: nihthelm toglad / lungre leorde. / Leoht æfter com, / dægredwoma. (123b–25a)
2a. *El*: He of slaēpe onbærgd, / eofurcumle bepeaht . . . (nihthelm toglad) . . . (75b–78b)

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35 See Bruce Mitchell, *Old English Syntax* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1985), § 1065(a): “when a compound verb consisting of a prefix and an intransitive verb remains intransitive, the prefix has an adverbial function”; as Mitchell (§ 870) notes, “prefixes such as ‘a-, be-, for-, ge-, of-, to-’ . . . are often described as means of expressing perfective aspect. . . . [I]t is clear that this is not the sole function of any of these prefixes.”
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2b. El: Nu synt geardagas / æfter fyrstmearce / ford gewitene, / lif wynne geliden, / swa <lagu> toglideð, / flodas gefysde. (1266b–69a)

3. Met: þær he mæge findan / eaðmeta stan / unigmet fæstne, grundweal gearone; se toglidan ne þearf . . . (7.32b–34b)

4. Max I: Hy twegen sceolon tætle ymbsittan, / þenden him hyra torn toglide, / forgietan þara geocran gesceafa . . . (181a–82a)

5. ChristC: Hell eac ongeat, / scyldwrecende, / þæt se scyppend cwom. . . . Hyge weard mongum blissad, / sawlum sorge togli- dene. (1159b–63a)

6. Fates: <wynn> sceal gedreosan, / <ur> on edle, / æfter tohreosan / læne lices frætewa, / efnæ swa <lagu> toglideð. (100b–102b)

Two citations (2b, 6) refer to water (if the rune may safely be interpreted as lagu),36 two (1, 2a) refer to darkness, and two to emotion (4, 5); one reference in the Meters of Boethius (3) refers to a wall. This citation describes the crumbling of a foundation, a sense found elsewhere only in Book 2 of Gregory’s Dialogues.37 With the exception of the Meters, then, the verse texts uniquely preserve the base meaning of “glide” for the verb toglide.

The citations show further that OE toglide must mean “glide away, glide from.” In Andreas, nihthelm glides away, as the following verses suggest (cf. leordan and æfter): . . . lungre leorde. / Leoft æfter com (124). Cynewulf also understands the verb to mean “slip away,” as preceding half-lines in Elene and Fates of the Apostles indicate: lifwynne geliden (El 1268a); <wynn> sceal gedreosan, / <ur> on edle, / æfter tohreosan (Fates 100b–101b).38 In Cynewulf’s runic signatures joy frequently gives way to sorrow. Sorrow glides from souls consoled by the Harrowing of Hell in Christ C (Hyge weard mongum blissad 1162b). And anger is shed by those who play board games in Maxims I: “Hy twegen sceolon tætle ymbsittan, / þenden him hyra torn toglide, / forgietan þara geocran gesceafeta” (181a–82a). In none of these poetic citations of toglide does

36 See R. W. V. Elliott, “Coming Back to Cynewulf,” in Old English Runes and Their Continental Background, ed. Alfred Bammesberger (Heidelberg: C. Winter, 1991), 236. The remarks on p. 234 are germane to my discussion: “Cynewulf spells out the body’s transitory fraetæs with the help of runic [wynn] and [ur] and the figure of water gliding away. . . . The signature emphasizes the body’s mortality and the impermanence of its physical and worldly appurtenances.”

37 GD 2(C) 11.125.18, and GD 2(H) 11.125.16 (the same context).

38 For a discussion of the verb hrėosan, see below, pp. 347–48. OE tôhrëosan most often describes a decaying corpse.
the verb connote any swift or sudden action, as the Beowulf reference could suggest. Instead, tōglīdan implies a gradual diminution, wearing away, or degeneration.

Prose texts document the same range of meanings as the verse texts but in different proportions. OE tōglīdan can refer to crumbling walls, as in Book 2 of Gregory’s Dialogues, where pæs toglidan wages translates “conlapsi saxa parietis.”39 Passages in several homilies refer specifically to gimmas toglidene “crushed” or “broken gemstones” (HomS 7, HomS 40.1, HomU 40.3, HomU 3, and HomU 27). In other contexts, however, smoke (rec), rainshowers (rena scurum), or clouds (wolcen) are signified:

1. ÆCHom II, 14.1: ac dær swegde ða stemn. dæs heofonlican fæder. healice of wolcne . . . and þæt wolcn toglad. (137.11)
2. ChronC: Þy ilcan geare wæs gesewen blodig wolcne . . . þonne hit dagian wolde, þonne toglad hit. (979.3)
3. HomS 40.3: oferlufu eordan gestreona . . . gelice rena scurum . . . toglídað. (319)
4. HomU 27: swa læne ys seo oferlufu eordan gestreona; efnes hit bið gelic rena scurum, þonne hi nyðer of heofonum swyðost dreosad and eft raðe eall toglídað . . . (149.4)
5. HomS 7: lufu eordgestreona . . . gelice rena scurum . . . toglídað. (158)
6. HomS 40.1: swylc is seo oferlufu eordan gestreona: efne hit bið gelic rena scurum, þonne hy of heofonum swyðost dreosad and eft hraðe eall toglídað . . . (293)
7. HomU 3: Hwi! nyte ge þæt all þæt tofaræð and toglit, swa swa monnes sceadu dæþ? (4)
8. Lch II (3): Sona þæt sar toglit . . . (69.3.2)
9. Mart 5: swa swa rec þonne he toglídað. (SE26/A/6)

These attestations describe physical obscurities, just as compounds lyft-helm and misthelm (perhaps nínthelm) prefigure cloud (1, 2), showers (3, 4, 5, 6), shadow (7), and smoke (9). Example 8 potentially refers to pain as an emotion which passes away, just as a wound would stop hurting.

In light of this abundant evidence, an Anglo-Saxon audience hearing the collocation -helm + tōglidan would likely recognize it as a poetic for-
mula describing dawn or dusk. Indeed, it would be difficult to argue that the Beowulf-poet did not deploy the half-line in this way. Beowulf had earlier described to Hygelac the setting sun in terms reminiscent of the ensuing darkness of nithelm. Metaphorically he compares Grendel’s approach to the advent of shadow:

Syðdan heofones gim

glad ofer grundas, gæst yrre cwom,
eatol æfengrom user neosan. . . .

(2072b–74)

The passage recalls the wording of 1789b–90a, in which night shrouds the warriors in darkness: “Nïthelm geswearc, / deorc ofer dryhtgumum.” Furthermore, just before Beowulf prepares himself to meet Grendel, the poet describes the coming night in almost these same terms: “siðdan hie sunnan leoht / geseon meahton, / òþ þe nipende / niht ofer ealle, / scaduhelma gesceapu / scriðan cwoman wan under wolcnun” (648a–51a). The word scæduhelm here recalls the phrase toglit swa swa monnes sceadu dæþ in HomU 3 (cited above). Use of the verb scriðan implies the inexorable advance of dusk and reflects Grendel’s approach to Heorot.

The parallels noted above imply that the Beowulf-poet was therefore posing a subtlety that has not yet been clarified. Ongenœw’s helmet does not fall from his head, nor is it “split.” Most likely, Ongenœw’s valor or animus, literally his “battle-shroud,” ebbs (glides away) as death overtakes him. This battle-covering could represent strength or fortune. Whatever its exact meaning, however, the poet plays on the sense of waning life with the verb hreósan (“to fall, slide”) in the following a-verse. Throughout Beowulf OE hreósan occurs in martial contexts describing the deaths of warriors (1074, 1430, 1872, 2488, 2831), but the verb also signifies the movement or condition of darkening cloud, hail, or sleet, of falling stones, hills, or towers, of crumbling gemstones, and of the troubled mind. In the following verse and prose citations, hreósan boasts a semantic range comparable to that of tōgliðan. In my examples 6 and 7, moreover, hreósan and tōgliðan are used synonymously.

1. El: ðæ sio werge sceolu / under heolstorhohuf hreosan sceolde . . . (762b–63b)

40 Except in 276b–62a: “orcas stondan, / fyrmanna fatu, / feormendlease, / hyrstum behorene,” in which the ornaments on the vessels have fallen off.
2. *Wan:* gesihð . . . / hreosan hrim ond snaw, / hagle gemenged. (46a-48b)

3. *Phoen:* Þær ne hægl ne hrim / hreosað to foldan. (60)

4. *Wan:* hrið hreosende / <hruþan> bindeð . . . (102)

5. *PPs:* næning moste heora horra hrim æþla gedigeæan. (77-78)

6. *HomS* 7: Hwilc is seo luflu eordgestreona, efnæ bið gelice rena scurum þonne hi of heofonum swyðast hreosad efnæ hraþa eal toglīded . . . (158)

7. *HomS* 40.1: Swylc is seo oferlufu eordan gestreona: efnæ bið gelice rena scurum, þonne hy of heofonum swiðost hreosad and eft hraþa eall toglīded . . . (293)

8. *HyGl* 2: [elata mens ne corruat] þæt upahafene mod þæt ne hreosæ (25.4)


The evidence suggests that the half-line *hræs [heòro]blāc* is credibly appositive, a variation on the preceding a-verse *gūðhelm tōglād*. Ongenþeow’s collapse after a sword-stroke evokes his loss of valor. The lapse of his *gūðhelm*, in turn, responds to the condition of his visage, which turns *blāc* (“pale, white”) after his fall.41 It might almost seem that the poet has the idiom *niðhelm + tōglīdan* in mind when describing Ongenþeow’s death. Just as night gives way to daylight in such collocations, Ongenþeow’s coloration pales as he dies: “he fell [battle]-pale” (2488a). The lines might actually conceal a metaphor contrasting the onset of death with the break of day or the coming of night.42 Notwithstanding my clumsy phrasing “warlike demeanor” for *gūðhelm*, I translate the passage: “his warlike demeanor dissipated; the old Scylding slipped, (battle)-pale.”

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41 See *DOE*, *blāc* senses 2.2 and 2.2b. On the emendation *heoro- (or hilde-)blāc*, see Alan Bliss, *The Meter of Beowulf* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1958), 78.