

10-1-1996

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Publication Info

Published in *Studies in Philology*, Volume 93, Issue 4, Fall 1996, pages 333-348.

Gwara, Scott. (1996). A Metaphor in "Beowulf" 2487a: gūðhelm tōglād. *Studies in Philology*, 93 (4), 333-348.

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STUDIES IN PHILOLOGY

Volume XCIII

Fall, 1996

Number 4

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 Scyflings:

Ða ic on morgne gefrægn mæg oðerne
billes ecgum on bonan stælan,
þær Ongenþeow Eofores niosað;
gūðhelm toglad, gomela Scyfling
hreas <heoro>blac; hond gemunde
fæhðo 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

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.

² The following are sample readings from editions and translations of *Beowulf*: Gerhard Nickel, *Beowulf* (vol. iii, *Konkordanz und Glossar*), ed. Jürgen Strauss (Heidelberg: C. Winter, 1982), s.v. *gūðhelm*: "Kampfhelm"; s.v. *tōglīdan*: "zerbersten"; David Wright, *Beowulf* (New York: Penguin, repr. 1976), 85: "His helmet was split apart"; C. L. Wrenn, *Beo-*

compound *gūðhelm* arguably cannot mean "helmet" in this context, and the verb *tōglīdan* is even less likely to mean "split" or "shear." Moreover, the collocation *-helm + tōglīdan* 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 Ongenþeow falls dead.

Although I cannot find any references to the origin of current translations for the collocation *gūðhelm tōglād*,³ they may rest on later lines recapitulating Ongenþeow's death:

wulf with the Finnesburg Fragment, rev. W. F. Bolton (London: Harrap, 1973), glossary, s.v. *gūðhelm*: "war-helmet"; s.v. *tōglīdan*: "glide asunder"; Mary E. Waterhouse, *Beowulf in Modern English* (Cambridge: Bowes & Bowes, 1949), 86: "The battle-helmet split"; Michael Swanton, *Beowulf* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1978), 153: "The war-helmet split apart"; Burton Raffel and Robert P. Creed, *Beowulf: A New Translation* (New York: New American Library, 1963), 100: "Efor / . . . cracked / His helmet"; Lucien Dean Pearson and Rowland L. Collins, *Beowulf* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1965), 109: "the war-helmet split apart"; Edwin Morgan, *Beowulf: A Verse Translation into Modern English* (Berkeley: University of California Press, repr. 1967), 68: "the war-helmet shattered"; William Ellery Leonard, *Beowulf: A New Verse Translation for Fireside and Class Room* (New York: D. Appleton Century, 1923), 107: "And war-helm of Ongentheow / was split in plate and ring"; Ruth P. M. Lehmann, *Beowulf: An Imitative Translation* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1988), 88: "warhelm split wide"; Charles W. Kennedy, *Beowulf: The Oldest English Epic* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, repr. 1966), 80: "Helm split asunder"; John R. Clark Hall and C. L. Wrenn, *Beowulf and the Finnesburg Fragment: A Translation into Modern English Prose* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1911; repr. 1963), 145: "the helm of battle split asunder"; Lesslie Hall, *Beowulf: An Anglo-Saxon Epic Poem* (Boston: D. C. Heath, 1892), 84: "The helmet crashed"; Kevin Crossley-Holland and Bruce Mitchell, *Beowulf* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, repr. 1977), 103: "the helmet split"; Clarence Griffin Child, *Beowulf and the Finnesburgh Fragment* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1904), 68: "The war-helmet split apart"; A. J. Wyatt, *Beowulf with the Finnesburg Fragment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1925), s.v. *gūð-helm*: "WAR-HELM"; s.v. *glīdan*: "[GLIDE asunder] fall to pieces"; Walter John Sedgwick, *Beowulf* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1910), s.v. *gūðhelm*: "war-helmet"; s.v. *tōglīdan*: "slip or fall off"; George Jack, *Beowulf: A Student Edition* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1994), 72-73: "war-helmet . . . split"; Bernard F. Huppé, *Beowulf: A New Translation* (Binghamton, N.Y.: Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies, 1987), 102: "Eofor . . . hewed the helmet"; Moritz Heyne, *Beowulf* (Paderborn: Ferdinand Schöningh, 1898), s.v. *gūð-helm*: "Kampfhelm"; s.v. *glīdan*: "(zergleiten) auseinander gehen, zerfallen . . . (der Helm Ongenþeows gieng durch Eofors Schlag auseinander)"; E. Talbot Donaldson, "Beowulf," in Joseph Tusso, *Beowulf: The Donaldson Translation* (New York: Norton, 1975), 43: "the war-helm split."

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

Let se hearda Higelaces þegn
 brad<n>e mece, þa his broðor læg,
 ealdsweord eotonisc entiscne helm
 brecan ofer bordweal; ða gebeah cyning,
 folces hyrde, wæs in feorh dropen.

(2977–81)

When his “broðor” Wulf has been injured, Eofor (*Higelaces þegn*) reaches over Ongenþeow’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 Ongenþeow’s death was remembered for this peculiar detail. Correspondingly, the verb *brecan* “to break, strike” (2980a)⁴ seems to have been taken as a variation of *tōglīdan*, 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 stonðan,
 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

poem (*niht* 1789b and *scadu* 650a)” (“Weapons in *Beowulf*: An Analysis of the Nominal Compounds and an Evaluation of the Poet’s Use of Them,” *ASE* 8 (1979): 79–141, esp. 85 ff. and 135–36). See Otto Krackow, *Die Nominalcomposita als Kunstmittel im altenglischen Epos* (Weimar: R. Wagner, 1903), 55–56. Because the *Beowulf*-poet has invented other compounds in *gūð-*, some of which describe weapons, *gūðhelm* has appeared as a typical formulation: *gūðbeorn*, *gūðbyrne*, *gūðcearu*, *gūðcræft*, *gūðdeað*, *gūðfloga*, *gūðgetawa*, *gūðgewæde*, *gūðgeweorc*, *gūðhorn*, *gūðhred*, *gūðpleoð*, *gūðmod*, *gūðreow*, *gūðscear*, *gūðsceaða*, *gūðsele*, *gūðsweord*, *gūðwerig*, *gūðwiga*, *gūðwine*.

⁴ DOE s.v. sense 1. Ashley Crandell Amos et al., *Dictionary of Old English* (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1991 [fasc. B], 1988 [fasc. C]).

⁵ DOE s.v. *behreosan* sense 2: “*hyrstum behroren* ‘deprived, divested of ornaments’”; cf. *to-hreosan*, discussed below, p. 345.

omits details in re-telling events,⁶ and such parallelism in depictions of Ongenþeow'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 *gūðhelm tōglād* must be subordinate 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 Ongenþeow's death, as far as they can be trusted to transmit a common legend, do not corroborate any detail concerning Ongenþeow's helmet. If Ongenþeow can be identified as the berserkr Angantýr I Arngrímsson in *Hervarar Saga* (i.e., *Heiðreks Saga*, incorporating verses found also in *Orvar-Odds Saga*),⁷ he himself is slain by Hjálmar, whose own helmet and mailcoat are slit in the contest:

hjálmar et þinn hōggvinn,
en á hlið brynja⁸

While the name *Hjálmar* ("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 Hjálmar's shorn helmet.)⁹ Klaeber suspected this identification of Angantýr as well, and he rejected the saga parallel.¹⁰

The connection between Ongenþeow and Óttar Vendilkráka (i.e., Othere, Ongenþeow's son in *Beowulf*) from *Ynglinga Saga* in Snorri Sturluson's *Heimskringla* is more germane but little more revealing. Augmenting a copy of Þjóðólfr's *Ynglingatal*, Snorri Sturluson attributes the death of Óttar to the characters Vötrr and Fasti, but details about

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 Ongenþeoes* (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.

⁷ Christopher Tolkien, *The Saga of King Heidrek the Wise* (Edinburgh: Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1960), viii (see Appendix A [II], pp. 69–72 for a comparison of the common verses); R. Boer, *Orvar-Odds Saga* (Leiden, 1888), 96–106. For a somewhat outdated view of Scandinavian parallels to *Beowulf*, see Kemp Malone, *The Literary History of Hamlet* (repr. New York: Haskell House, 1964), 117–78.

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

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

¹⁰ F. Klaeber, *Beowulf*, 3rd ed. (Boston: D. C. Heath, 1950), xlii–xliii.

a helm cannot be found in either text.¹¹ While Saxo recounts a similar legend in the *Historia Danorum*, he likewise fails to mention the exact manner of Ongenþeow's (i.e., Óttarr's) death.¹² Ari's *Íslendingabók* and *Historia Norvegiae* also omit any pertinent details.¹³ 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.¹⁴ In these contexts polysemous *helm* has a variety of meanings.

SENSES	POETRY	PROSE	GLOSSES
protector/lord	39	20	24
helmet	37	0	0
foliage (of trees)	4	5	8
covering, sky, protection	?2	0	0
skull, head	0	1	2

¹¹ Snorri Sturluson, *Heimskringla*, ed. Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson, Íslenzk Fornrit 26–28 (Reykjavík: Hið Íslenzka Fornritafélag, 1941–51), 54–55.

¹² J. Olrik and H. Ræder, *Saxonis Gesta Danorum* (Hannover: Levin and Munksgaard, 1931–57), 138–39.

¹³ Ari Thorgilsson, *Íslendingabók*, ed. Jakob Benediktsson, Íslenzk Fornrit 1 (Reykjavík: Hið Íslenzka Fornritafélag, 1968), 27; and Gustav Storm, ed., *Monumenta Historica Norvegiae* (Oslo: Alas and Wahl, 1973).

¹⁴ OE *helm* derives from PIE **kel* (+PIE infix **-mo-*) and is related to Olcel *hjálmr*, OFris, OS, OHG *helm*, and Goth *hilms*. The Germanic simplex also denotes "protection" or "shelter"; see Winfred Philipp Lehmann, *A Gothic Etymological Dictionary* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1986), 10, 67, 174, 183, 189, 193; Sigmund Feist, *Vergleichendes Wörterbuch der gotischen 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.¹⁵ 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), *hæleðhelm*/*heoloðhelm* (V), *lyfthelm* (V), *misthelm* (V), *nihthelm* (V), **sceaduhelm* (V), *sundhelm* (V), *cynehelm* (P), **isenhelm* (G), **leperhelm* (G), *wuldorhelm* (P), *helmberend* (=“warrior” in V, =“crown of a tree” in G), **helmweard* (G).¹⁶

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

Angan hine þa gyrwan godes andsaca,
 fus on frætwwum, (hæfde fæcne hyge),
 hæleðhelm 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 *hæleðhelm* “hero-helmet.”¹⁷ Eric Stanley has lately shown that *hæleðhelm* in *Genesis B*

¹⁵ See Scott Gwara, “OE *helm*, *hamel*, *healm*: Three Lexical Problems in Glosses to Aldhelm’s Prose *De Virginitate*,” *N&Q* 235 (1990): 144–52.

¹⁶ OE *heapuhelm* and *wæterhelm* are ghost-words.

¹⁷ On the translation “helmet of invisibility,” see F. Klaeber, *The Later Genesis* (Heidelberg: C. Winter, 1913), 51; and “Zur Jungeren Genesis,” *Anglia* 49 (1925): 371; Theodor Braasch, *Vollständiges Wörterbuch zur sog. Caedmonischen Genesis* (Heidelberg: C. Winter, 1933), 59; Charles W. Kennedy, *The Caedmon Poems* (London: Routledge, 1916), 21; Wolfgang Golther, *Handbuch der germanischen Mythologie* (Leipzig: S. Hirzel, 1895), 135; May Lansfield Keller, *The Anglo-Saxon Weapon Names* (Heidelberg: C. Winter, 1915), 251; Richard Jente, *Die mythologischen Ausdrücke im altenglischen Wortschatz* (Heidelberg: C. Winter, 1921), 313; E. Philippon, *Germanisches Heidentum bei den Angelsachsen* (Leipzig: B. Tauchnitz, 1929), 215; R. E. Woolf, “The Devil in Old English Poetry,” *RES* n.s. 4 (1953): 3–4; Roland Zanni, *Heliand, Genesis und das Altenglische* (Berlin: W. de Gruyter, 1980), 69–70. Timmer proposed that OE *hæleðhelm* might be an accurate phonological transcription of OS *heliðhelm* (*The Later Genesis* [Oxford: Scrivner Press, 1948], 23–24).

arose from the translator's confusion over two homophonic elements: OS *helið* ("hiding")¹⁸ and *helið* ("hero," "warrior").¹⁹ OS *heliðhelm* denotes a disguise or the cover of darkness, either masking devils or misleading the unwary. Hence, both the spelling *hæleðhelm* 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 *heolophelm*, 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 *heolod-* and *hæleð-* leave no room for ambiguity." Other critics who have explored the lexical confluence of OE *heolod/hæleð* and OS *helið* have not considered the possibility of homonymy. Hence, the "mechanical association" of *heolop-* and *hæleð-*, which George Krapp invoked to explain the spelling *hæleðhelm*, 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 Junius Manuscript* [New York: Columbia University Press, 1931], 166-67).

²⁰ The term "helithhelme" in the Old Saxon *Heliand* substantiates the etymological meaning. In lines 5449-52a the devil (Satan) wrapped in a *helithhelm* (*an helithhelme bihelid*) appears before "Pilate's bride" to deceive her with visions: "That uif uuarð thuo an forahon, / suiðo an sorogon, / thuo iru thi u gusiuni quâmun / thuru thes der-nien dâd / an dages liothe / an helithhelme bihelid" (Otto Behaghel, *Heliand und Genesis* [repr. Tübingen: M. Niemeyer, 1984], 192). The GenB-poet manipulates the figure (if he understood it at all), making the *hæleðhelm* a literal helmet. The cognate in Old Icelandic poetry, *huliðshjálmr*, occurs in *Alvíssmál* str. 18.4 (*hiálm huliz*; see Gustav Neckel and Hans Kuhn, *Edda* [Heidelberg: C. Winter, repr. 1983], 122); and in *Hákonarkviða* str. 4.3 (*huliðshjálmr*; Finnur Jónsson, *Den Norsk-Islandske Skjaldedigtning* [Copenhagen: Rosenkilde and Bagger, 1914], BII 119). The term denotes, respectively, the gloom of hell and the charisma with which Christ endows Hákon. Similar attestations corroborate the poetic sense of concealment: in *Vilhjálms Saga Sjóðs*, Agnete Loth, *Late Medieval Icelandic Romances*, Editiones Arnarnagæanae, ser. B, vol. 23 (Copenhagen: Munksgaard, 1964), 63; *Ólafs Saga Tryggvasonar*, ed. Jakob Benediktsson, Íslenzk Fornrit 26 (Reykjavík: Hið Íslenzka Fornritafélag, 1941-51), 312; *Fóstbræðra Saga*, ed. Bjorn K. Thorolfsson and Guðni Jonsson, Íslenzk Fornrit 6 (Reykjavík: Hið Íslenzka Fornritafélag, 1958), 167; *Þorsteinn Bæarmagnis Saga*, ed. C. Rafn, in *Fornmanna Sögur Norðurlanda*, (Kaupmannahofn, 1827), 3: 184; and *Bosa Saga Herrauds*, ed. Finnur Jónsson, *Fornaldur sögur Norðurlanda* (Reykjavík, 1959), 3: 307. *Non vidi Úlfs Saga Uggasonar* cited in Inge M. Bøberg, *Motif-Index of Early Icelandic Literature*, Bibliotheca Arnarnagæana 27 (Copenhagen: Munksgaard, 1966), 71. Perhaps the author was familiar with a common biblical trope; see *Patrologiae Latinae Cursus Completus*, ed. J.-P. Migne (Paris, 1844-), 112.864: "Arma, nequitiæ diaboli, ut in Evangelio: 'Omnia arma ejus auferet' [Lc 11:22], id est, omnes nequitiæ ejus annihilabat"; and 193.318-19: "In Scriptura Sacra armorum nomine, aliquando . . . fraudes diaboli . . . designantur."

²¹ A. N. Doane, *The Saxon Genesis* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1991), 277-78.

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 biþeaht*), bears it to hell:²²

þonne þæt gecnawed of cwicsusle
 flah feond gemah, þætte fira gehwylc
 hæleþa cynnes on his hringe biþ
 fæste gefeged, he him georgbona
 þurh sliþen searo siþþan weorþeð
 wloncum ond heanum, þe his willan her
 firenum fremmað, mid þam he færinga,
 heolophelme biþeaht, helle seceð,
 goda geasne, grundleasne wylm
 under mistglome, swa se micla hwæl,
 se þe bisenceð sæliþende
 eorlas ond yðmearas.

(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).

²² The profile of hell-dwellers as *heolodcyn* (“a race living in a place of concealment [?]”; “alt. a race capable of concealment, the shades of men,” Joseph Bosworth and T. Northcote Toller, rev. Alistair Campbell, *An Anglo-Saxon Dictionary* [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1882; 1921, 1972]). In the *Christ* text the passage refers to the shades of evil men. OE *heolodcyn* is cognate with OS *helið-kunni*, found in the *Heliand* 1411 and 2624. The term is almost universally mistranslated as “hero-kin” (cf. Edward Henry Sehr, *Vollständiges Wörterbuch zum Heliand und zur altsächsischen Genesis* [Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1966], s.v. *heliðkunni*, 246: “Menschengeschlecht”).

²³ Toller’s *Supplement* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1921) reads s.v. *hæleþ-helm*, “Take this as *heolop-helm*.” Neither term is mentioned in Campbell’s *Enlarged Addenda and Corrigenda* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1972).

²⁴ The following represents a partial list: *lyfthelme beþeaht* (*Ex* 60b), *beþeaht mid þiostrum* (*Met* 28.44a), *þystrum beþeahte* (*GenA* 76a), *þrosme beþeahte* (*ChristA* 116a), *beþeahte mid þystre* (*Hell* 55a), *wintre beþeahte* (*Sol II* 469b), *beþeahton þeostru* (*PPs* 54.5). The verb can be used in reference to clothes or bodily covering: *biþeahte mid þearfan wædum* (*ChristC* 1422a), *leafum beþeahton* (*GenA* 845b). See DOE s.v. *be-peccan* 1.a.i, 2, 5.a.

Juliana 470b 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*):

Oft ic syne ofteah,
 ablende bealoponcum beorna unrim
 monna cynnes, misthelme forbrægd
 þurh attres ord eagna leoman
 sweartum scurum. . .

(468b–72a)

Here the devil’s *misthelm* deludes countless men (*beorna unrim*) with grim thoughts (*bealoponcum*). 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*:

Hu seo þrag gewat
 genap under nihthelm . . .

(*Wan* 95b–96a)

Nihthelm geswearc
 deorc ofer drihtgumum . . .

(*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”):

Sæ mec fedde, sundhelm þeahte . . .

(*Rid* 77 1)

Sundhelm ne mæg
 losian ær mec læte . . .

(*Rid* 2 10b–11a)

In *Exodus* and *Maxims II* the *lyfthelm* signifies the air or atmosphere:²⁵

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.

wæron land heora lyfthelme bepeaht . . .
(Ex 60)

Brim sceal sealte weallan,
lyfthelm and laguflod ymb ealra landa gehwylc,
flowan firgenstreamas.

(Max II 45b-47a)

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 *gūðhelm tōglād* 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*:

Him se ar hraðe,
wlitig wuldres boda, wið þingode
ond be naman nemde, (nihthelm toglad) . . .
(El 76b-78)

Nihthelm toglad,
lungre leorde.
(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*,

²⁶ See J. R. R. Tolkien, *Finn and Hengest: the Fragment and the Episode*, ed. Alan Bliss (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1982), 88: "*Banhelm* must be nominative, either parallel to, or a mere expression equivalent to, *cellod bord*. *Sceolde sg.* is not decisive against *banhelm* as the name of a different weapon. The word only occurs here, so we are left guessing. Can *ban-helm* mean 'screen of the bones (or body),' equivalent to 'shield'? Could it mean 'helmet with horns,' for which there is some archeological evidence? [See Bruce Dickins, *Runic and Heroic Poems of Old Teutonic Peoples* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1915), 64-69.] Could it even stand for *bar-helm* 'boar helmet'?"

²⁷ See C. Mastrelli, "La Formula Germanica: 'Sotto L'elmo,'" *Studi Nederlandsi/Studi Nordici* (Annali dell'Istituto Universitario Orientale, Napoli) 22 (1979): 187.

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, *grīmhelm* and *gūðhelm* 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, *isenhelm* and *leperhelm* in the Antwerp glossaries,³⁰ and *cynehelm* in various sources, mostly homilies.³¹ Almost eighty attestations of *cynehelm* 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, *isenhelm* and *leperhelm* 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, *wuldorhelm*, found in four prose homilies, exemplifies the meaning in poetic texts, for it always denotes a nimbus or halo representing sanctity:

1. *HomS* 12: Hy beoð fleogende ymb drihtnes wuldorhelm utan . . .
(66)

²⁸ Klaeber, *Beowulf*, glossary (p. 347), s.v. "(vizored) helmet."

²⁹ See Bosworth-Toller s.v. *grīma* 1 "a mask, vizor, helmet," 2 "a spectre." Frederick Tupper, *Riddles of the Exeter Book* (Boston: Ginn, 1910), 165: "*grīma*. The word, which is elsewhere used both as simplex and compound in the sense of 'mask' ('helmet'), appears here with the meaning 'specter.'" See W. G. Stryker, "The Latin-Old English Glossary in MS Cotton Cleopatra A.III" (diss., Stanford University, 1951): "*masca grīma*" (296), "*mascam grīming*" (306). A compound *egesgrīma* denotes a spirit or ghost; see J. J. Quinn, "The Minor Latin-Old English Glossaries in MS Cotton Cleopatra A.III" (diss., Stanford University, 1956), 209; J. H. Hessels, *An Eighth-Century Latin-Anglo-Saxon Glossary* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1890); Stryker, "Glossary," 267; J. D. Pfeifer, *Old English Glosses in the Épinal-Erfurt Glossary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1974), 31 (no. 569); and Arthur S. Napier, *Old English Glosses, Chiefly Unpublished* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1900), 190. The Anglo-Saxons described spirits as shimmering.

³⁰ L. Kindschi, "The Latin-Old English Glossaries in Plantin-Moretus MS 32 and British Museum MS Additional 32246" (diss., Stanford University, 1955).

³¹ I omit proper names from this list.

³² DOE s.v. *cynehelm*.

³³ Helmut Gneuss, *Lehnbildungen und Lehnbedeutungen im Altenglischen* (Berlin: E. Schmidt, 1955).

³⁴ As calques for Lat. *cassis* and *galea*, respectively, see W. M. Lindsay, ed., *Isidori Hispalensis Etymologiarum sive Originum Libri XX* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1911), XVIII.xiv.1: "*Cassis de lammina est, galea de coreo*." See also Samuel Kroesch, "Semantic Borrowing in Old English," *Studies in English Philology*, ed. Kemp Malone and Martin B. Ruud (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1929), 50-72; and Herbert D. Meritt, "Some Minor Ways of Word-Formation in Old English," *Stanford Studies in Language and Literature* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1941), 74-80.

2. *LS* 30: swa miccle ma sceal ic þrowigan þæt ic þurh þæt wuldorhelm onfo. (301)
3. *HomS* 14: Moyses onfeng scinendum wuldorhelme . . . (178)
4. *HomU* 6: [and] unrim haligra beoð gefylled mid þy gewuldredan 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 tōglād*. 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 *tōglīdan*. The unaffixed form *glīdan*, 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 *glīdan*, however, *tōglīdan*, which is attested at least seventeen times, including twice in each of Wærferth'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 slæpe onbrægd, / eofurcumble beþeapt . . . (nihthelm toglad) . . . (75b–78b)

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."

- 2b. *El*: Nu synt geardagas / æfter fyrstmearce / forð gewitene, / lifwynne geliden, / swa <lagu> toglideð, / flodas gefysde. (1266b-69a)
3. *Met*: þær he mæge findan / eaðmetta stan / unigmet fæstne, grundweal gearone; se toglidan ne þearf . . . (7.32b-34b)
4. *Max I*: Hy twegen sceolon tæfle ymsittan, / þenden him hyra torn toglide, / forgietan þara geocran gesceafta . . . (181a-82a)
5. *ChristC*: Hell eac ongeat, / scyldwreccende, / þæt se scyppend cwom. . . . Hyge wearð mongum blissad, / sawlum sorge toglidene. (1159b-63a)
6. *Fates*: <wynn> sceal gedreosan, / <ur> on eðle, / æfter tohreo-san / læne lices frætewa, / efne 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 *tōglīdan*.

The citations show further that OE *tōglīdan* must mean "glide away, glide from." In *Andreas*, *nihthelm* glides away, as the following verses suggest (cf. *leordan* and *æfter*): . . . *lungre leorde. / Leoht 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 eðle, / æfter tohreo-san* (*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 wearð mongum blissad* 1162b). And anger is shed by those who play board games in *Maxims I*: "Hy twegen sceolon tæfle ymsittan, / þenden him hyra torn toglide, / forgietan þara geocran gesceafta" (181a-82a). In none of these poetic citations of *tōglīdan* 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 *frætewa* with the help of runic [*wynn*] and [*ur*] and the figure of water gliding away. . . . [T]he signature [emphasizes] the body's mortality and the impermanence of its physical and wordly 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 *hrēosan*, see below, pp. 347-48. OE *tōhrēosan* 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 *þæs toglidenan wæges* 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 ðær swegde ða stemn. ðæs heofonlican fæder. healice of wolcne . . . and þæt wolcn toglad. (137.11)
2. *ChronC*: By ilcan geare wæs gesewen blodig wolcen . . . þonne hit dagian wolde, þonne toglad hit. (979.3)
3. *HomS* 40.3: oferlufu eorðan gestreona . . . gelice rena scurum . . . toglidað. (319)
4. *HomU* 27: swa læne ys seo oferlufu eorðan gestreona; efnes hit bið gelic rena scurum, þonne hi nyðer of heofonum swyðost dreosað and eft raðe eall toglidað . . . (149.4)
5. *HomS* 7: lufu eorðgestreona . . . gelice rena scurum . . . toglideð. (158)
6. *HomS* 40.1: swylc is seo oferlufu eorþan gestreona: efne hit bið gelic rena scurum, þonne hy of heofenum swyðost dreosað and eft hraðe eall toglidað . . . (293)
7. *HomU* 3: Hwi! nyte ge þæt all þæt tofaræð and toglit, swa swa monnes sceadu dæp? (4)
8. *Lch* II (3): Sona þæt sar toglit . . . (69.3.2)
9. *Mart* 5: swa swa rec þonne he toglideð. (SE26/A/6)

These attestations describe physical obscurities, just as compounds *lyft-helm* and *misthelm* (perhaps *nihthelm*) 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 + tōglīdan* would likely recognize it as a poetic for-

³⁹ Hans Hecht, *Bischof Wærferths von Worcester Übersetzung der Dialoge Gregors des Grossen* (repr. Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1965); Gregorius Magnus, *Dialogi*, ed. Adalbert de Vogüé, Sources Chrétiennes 260 and 265 (Paris: Editions du Cerf, 1979–80).

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 *nihthelm*. Metaphorically he compares Grendel's approach to the advent of shadow:

Syððan 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: "Nihthelm geswearc, / deorc ofer dryhtgumum." Furthermore, just before Beowulf prepares himself to meet Grendel, the poet describes the coming night in almost these same terms: "siððan hie sunnan leoht / geseon meahton, / oþ þe nipende / niht ofer ealle, / scaduhelma gesceapu / scriðan cwoman wan under wolcnum" (648a-51a). The word *sceaduhelm* 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. Ongenþeow's helmet does not fall from his head, nor is it "split." Most likely, Ongenþeow'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 *hrēosan* ("to fall, slide") in the following *a*-verse. Throughout *Beowulf* OE *hrēosan* occurs in martial contexts describing the deaths of warriors (1074, 1430, 1872, 2488, 2831),⁴⁰ 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, *hrēosan* boasts a semantic range comparable to that of *tōglīdan*. In my examples 6 and 7, moreover, *hrēosan* and *tōglīdan* are used synonymously.

1. *El*: Ða sio werge sceolu / under heolstorhofu hreosan sceolde . . . (762b-63b)

⁴⁰ Except in 2760b-62a: "orcas stonda, / fyrnmanna 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 / <hrusan> bindeð . . . (102)
5. *PPs*: nænig moste heora hrorra hrim æpla gedigean. (77.47)
6. *HomS* 7: Hwilc is seo lufu eorðgestreona, efne bið gelice rena scurum þonne hi of heofonum swyðast hreosað efne hraþe eal toglideð . . . (158)
7. *HomS* 40.1: Swylc is seo oferlufu eorðan gestreona: efne bið gelice rena scurum, þonne hy of heofenum swiðost hreosað and eft hraþe eall toglideð . . . (293)
8. *HyGl* 2: [elata mens ne corruat] þæt upahafene mod þæt ne hreose (25.4)
9. *Mart* 4: ðær to cuome stronggestan windes ystæ, [and] ðæt se sua stronglice hrure on ða ciercean . . . (MYO5/A/22)

The evidence suggests that the half-line *hrēas [heoro]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 *nihthelm + 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 Scylfing slipped, (battle)-pale."

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⁴¹ See DOE, *blāc* senses 2.a and 2.b. On the emendation *heoro-* (or *hilde-*)*blāc*, see Alan Bliss, *The Meter of Beowulf* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1958), 78.

⁴² I do not think that the poet alludes to conventional Anglo-Saxon "obits" stating that someone "chose the (eternal) light" at death. See Thomas D. Hill, "The 'Variegated Obits' as an Historiographic Motif in Old English Poetry and Anglo-Latin Historical Literature," *Traditio* 44 (1988): 101-24; F. Klaeber, "Die christlichen Elemente im *Beowulf*," *Anglia* 35 (1911-12): 462-67.