

A Note on *Beowulf* 748b–49a

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In the passage that depicts the conflict between Beowulf and Grendel, the hero's determination to fight with the monster is described in terms of the compound *inwitþancum* (749a). The term *inwit* is generally understood to imply "malice, deceit." However, its application to Beowulf has been the subject of considerable debate, with various interpretations of the compound being proposed. Many editors and translators of the epic have sought to provide the compound *inwitþancum* with neutral or positive interpretations that diverge to some extent from its original meaning. Others avoid the negative image of Beowulf by associating *inwitþancum* with Grendel's malicious intentions or with Grendel himself. In the present paper, I shall revisit one of the Beowulfian cruxes and attempt to present a new alternative reading with reference to multiple perspectives of the *Beowulf* poet.¹

Keywords: Old English; *Beowulf*; textual criticism; *inwitþancum*; narrative perspective

In 2017, the 33rd annual congress of the Japan Society for Medieval English Studies was held at Rikkyo University, where I participated in the special symposium entitled "The Art of Reading Slowly: A Philological Appreciation of Medieval English Texts."² That symposium ventured to practice conventional close reading of literary texts, in other words, the art of reading slowly. In the present paper, I will continue reading Medieval English texts slowly, with a particular focus on the greatest epic of Old English literature, *Beowulf*. By reading *Beowulf* slowly, I would like to reexamine one of the unsolved cruxes in the epic.

The following is the passage that depicts the conflict between Beowulf and Grendel:³

Forð near ætstop,
nam þa mid handa higeþihtigne

¹ This article is an expanded version of the paper given in the symposium entitled "Approaches to Old English Textual Criticism" at the 41st Congress of the Japan Society for Medieval English Studies (JSMES) on 13 December 2025. I am grateful to the audience as well as the panelists for their comments and suggestions.

² The collected papers read in the symposium appear in *Studies in Medieval English Language and Literature*, no. 35 (The Japan Society for Medieval English Studies; see Terasawa 2020).

³ The *Beowulf* text is taken from Fulk, Bjork, and Niles (2008). Hereafter, unless otherwise noted, modern English translations are mine.

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rinc on ræste. He hi(m) ræhte ongean,
 feond mid folme; he onfeng hraþe
inwitþancum ond wið earm gesæt.
 (*Beowulf* 745b–49, emphasis mine)

In the first sentence (745b–47a), the understood subject of the verb *ætstop* and *nam* is Grendel. The phrase *higepihtigne rinc* “strong-hearted warrior” refers to Beowulf, so the sentence would mean “(Grendel) stepped forth nearer, then took with his hand the strong-hearted warrior (i.e., Beowulf) at rest.”

Turning to the following sentence (747b–48a), it is necessary to make some preliminary observations regarding 747b. In this half-line, the manuscript reads *ræhte ongean*, which is metrically short (in Sievers’ system) or a rare pattern of Type E (2E1a in Bliss’ notation). As Fred C. Robinson (1997a, 55–57) points out, a thorough examination of the manuscript reveals a space between *ræste* (the final word in 747a) and *ræhte* (the first word in 747b) that contains the remnants of five or six erased letters: the first of these appears to be *h*.⁴ Fulk, Bjork, and Niles (2008), from which we cite the passage, propose the reconstruction *He him ræhte ongean*, which supplements both subject and object pronouns.⁵ Note that the subject pronoun *he* refers to Grendel, which is appositive to *feond* in the next line, while the object pronoun *him* refers to Beowulf. Therefore, the sentence would be rendered as “He, the fiend (i.e., Grendel), reached toward him (i.e., Beowulf) with his hand.”

In the last sentence (748b–49), the roles of subject and object are reversed: the subject *he* refers to Beowulf and the understood object of the verb *onfeng* is Grendel.⁶ The term *inwitþancum* is employed to denote the hero’s determination to engage in combat with the monster. As the first element of the compound is defined as “evil, deceit, treachery,” *inwitþancum* may signify “malicious or treacherous thoughts.” Accordingly, the rendering of the sentence would be “he (i.e., Beowulf) quickly seized (Grendel) with malicious intentions and sat up against his arm.”

⁴ Robinson (1997a, 57) describes the process of scribal error, stating that “when the scribe went to write *him*, his eye was caught by the neighbouring word *hand* in his exemplar, and he copied that. Then noticing his mistake, he erased *hand*, all except for the initial *h*, which he intended to complete as *him*. But he neglected to complete the correction.” He proposes the reading *him ræhte ongean*, which is adopted in Mitchell and Robinson (2006).

⁵ Klaeber (1950) reads the half-line as it is in the manuscript, followed by Wrenn-Bolton (1973, 1988, 1996) and Jack (1994). On the other hand, earlier editions such as Chambers (1914) and Sedgfield (1910, 1913) adopted the reading *ræhte ongean(es)* proposed by Sievers (1885, 265).

⁶ At first glance, it might seem that the sentence in question could be interpreted as having Grendel as the subject and Beowulf as the object, with the subject unchanged in the sentences before and after it (in which case, Grendel would have the upper hand over Beowulf in the battle). However, the subsequent context reveals that Grendel wants to retreat upon realizing Beowulf’s strength. Consequently, identifying Grendel as the subject of lines 748b–49 would create a logical contradiction.

Concerning the use of the compound *inwitþancum*, Dobbie (1953) states that “[i]t has been objected that *inwit*-, which normally implies malice, does not fit Beowulf’s character . . .” (153). In *Beowulf*, *inwit* always occurs as the first element of the compounds, and there are eight other such compounds.⁷ Each of the occurrences is associated with malice or employed to characterize malevolent characters. For instance, the compound *inwitfeng* (1447) is defined as the “malicious grasp” by Grendel’s mother while *inwitgæst* “malicious foe” (2670) refers to the fire-breathing dragon.

While it occurs only once in *Beowulf*, *inwitþanc* is attested five times in other Old English verse texts: two instances in *Andreas*, one instance in *Elene*, and two instances in the *Meters of Boethius*.⁸ In *Andreas*, both examples are employed in a negative sense:

þæt ða arleasan *inwidþancum*,
Iudea cynn wið godes bearne
ahof hearmcwide.
(559–61a, emphasis mine)

[It happened] that those impious people of the Jews, *with malicious intentions*, uttered insulting speech against the Son of God.

Huscworde ongan
þurh *inwitðanc* ealdorsacerd
herme hyspan
(669b–71a, emphasis mine)

Out of *malicious intent* the high priest insultingly began to mock with derisive word.

Inwidþancum (559) refers to the malicious intentions of the Jews who verbally defamed the Son of God while *inwitðanc* (670), appositive to *huscworde* “with derisive word” and *herme* “with insult,” refers to the evil thought of the people who despised and mocked Jesus.

The occurrence of *inwitþancum* in *Elene* denotes the malicious intentions of the Jewish people who fabricated a false accusation and executed Christ:

Swa ge modblinde menga ongunnon
lige wið soðe, leoht wið þystrum,
æfst wið are, *inwitþancum*

⁷ *Inwit-feng* (1447), *inwit-gæst* (2670), *inwit-hrof* (3123), *inwit-net(t)* (2167), *inwit-nið* (1858, 1947), *inwit-sear* (2478), *inwit-searo* (1101), and *inwit-sorh* (831 *inwid*-, 1736).

⁸ For verse texts other than *Beowulf*, instances are cited from Krapp and Dobbie (1931–53).

wroht webbedan.
(306–9a, emphasis mine)

So you, spiritually blind, began to mingle falsehood with truth, light with darkness, envy with honor, and fabricated slander *with malicious thoughts*.

Finally, one of two instances of *inwitþanc* in the *Meters of Boethius* refers to the corrupt schemes of Nero, alongside a catalogue of his evil conducts such as *gewed* “madness,” *unrihthæmed* “adultery,” *arleasta fela* “many of disgraceful deeds,” *man and morðor* “crime and murder,” and *misdæda worn* “many of evil deeds.”

Wælhreowes gewed wæs ful wide cuð,
unrihthæmed, arleasta fela,
man and morðor, misdæda worn,
unrihtwises *inwidþoncas*.
(9.5–8, emphasis mine)

The madness of the fierce one was very widely known, his adultery, many of his disgraceful deeds, his crime and murder, many of his evil deeds, *evil thoughts* of the wicked one.

The other instance in the *Meters* illustrates the malevolent thoughts of an individual who harbors animosity toward others:

Ac þæt is unriht æghwelcum men
þæt he oðerne *inwitþoncum*
fioge on færdæ,
(27.22–24a, emphasis mine)

But it is wrong for any man that he should hate another in his mind *with evil thoughts*.

As the compound *inwitþanc* and the element *inwit-* are commonly associated with negative connotations, the use of *inwitþanc* does appear to be ill-suited to describe Beowulf’s heroic intentions. Consequently, the interpretation of the sentence in question has been the subject of much debate. In order to avoid the malicious image of Beowulf, three different readings and interpretations have been proposed. Some scholars regard *inwitþancum* as an instrumental dative modifying Beowulf’s action with the neutral or even positive interpretations of the compound. Others take *inwitþancum* as a direct object of the verb *onfon* with the compound referring to Grendel’s malicious intentions. An alternative interpretation is that *inwitþancum* is an adjective used as a noun referring to the treacherous Grendel himself.

Previous readings and interpretations

Many editors and translators of the epic have sought to provide the compound *inwitþancum* with neutral or even positive interpretations that diverge to some extent from its original meaning. Klaeber (1950, 155) posits that the understood object of the verb *onfon* is Grendel and that *inwitþancum* is an instrumental dative modifying Beowulf's action: he construes the sentence in question as "he (Bēowulf) received him . . . with hostile intent," thereby emphasizing Beowulf's unfriendly attitude toward the monster without any hint of malice or treachery.⁹ This interpretation is followed by most of recent editors, including Jack (1994), Mitchell and Robinson (1998, 2006), Alexander (1995, 2000), and Fulk, Bjork, and Niles (2008).

In his edition and translation of the five texts from the *Beowulf* manuscript, Fulk (2010, 135) renders *inwitþancum* as "with a belligerent aim." In the translation of *Beowulf* by J. R. R. Tolkien, the compound is rendered as "with hate in heart" (Tolkien 2014, 34). In the most recent translation, Shippey and Neidorf (2024, 95) employ the term "angrily" to translate *inwitþancum*. In each of these three translations, emphasis is placed on Beowulf's aggression or anger, with no indication of any malevolent intentions on the part of the hero. Bradley (1982, 431) renders *inwitþancum* as "with astute presence of mind." Heaney's translation (2000, 51) reads "the alert hero's comeback . . . forestalled him utterly." It is evident that both Bradley's and Heaney's interpretations are positive in nature and deviate considerably from the original. The neutral or even positive interpretation of *inwitþancum* is problematic, because, as previously mentioned, it would overlook the negative connotations strongly associated with *inwitþanc* and *inwit-* compounds.

Let us turn to the second reading that attempts to avoid the malicious image of Beowulf. As the verb *onfon* takes a dative object, some editors and translators regard *inwitþancum* as a direct object of the verb and associate the compound *inwitþancum* not with Beowulf but with Grendel. In his first and second editions of the epic, Wrenn (1953, 1958), for instance, construes *onfeng* as a verb of perception taking a dative object and regards *inwitþancum* as Grendel's malicious intention. He renders the sentence in question as "Quickly did he (Bēowulf) perceive that plan of malice" (198).¹⁰ Wrenn's interpretation has been

⁹ A similar interpretation can be found in one of the earliest translations of *Beowulf* by Kemble (1837) where the sentence in question is rendered as "he suddenly caught the foe with his hand, with hostile thoughts" (31, emphasis mine). Note that Kemble regards *feond* (748a) as the direct object of the verb *onfeng*. I hasten to add that Thorkelin (1815, 58), the earliest editor and translator of the epic, renders *inwitþancum* as *dolosum mente* "with deceitful mind."

¹⁰ This interpretation might have first appeared in Thorpe (1855) where the sentence under consideration is rendered as "he instantly perceiv'd the guileful thoughts" (51).

endorsed by a significant number of scholars, including Von Schaubert (1963), Swanton (1997), Trask (1998), Crossley-Holland (1999), and Slade (2002).

It is often the case that verbs which mean “to grasp” are employed metaphorically to mean “to understand or recognize.” In Old English, however, the metaphorical use of *onfon* seems to be rather rare. In his supplement to *An Anglo-Saxon Dictionary*, Toller (1921) provides three instances of the verb *onfon* taking a non-material object, including the example from *Beowulf* previously discussed. One of the remaining two instances is found in *Daniel* where the verb *onfon* is used in a sense of “perceive, understand.” Consider the passage from *Daniel* containing the verb *onfon*:

siððan he gesæde swefen cyninge,
 þæt he ær for fyrenum *onfon* ne meahte,
 Babilonie weard, in his breostlocan.
 (165–67, emphasis mine)

[Daniel had a great reputation . . .] after he had explained to the king the dream which he, the ruler of the Babylonians, had not before been able to *understand* in his heart because of his sins.

In *Beowulf* the verb *onfon* occurs eight times. With the exception of the aforementioned instance, however, it is never employed metaphorically with the meaning of “perceive, understand.”¹¹ Consequently, the second reading that attempts to avoid the malicious image of the hero also poses a problem because a metaphorical use of the verb *onfon* is rare in Old English, not otherwise attested in *Beowulf*.

In order to prevent negative or malicious images of the hero, other scholars have associated the compound *inwitþancum* with Grendel in a different way to the second reading mentioned above. Kock (1921, 115) takes *inwitþanc* as an adjective used as a noun to denote Grendel with the meaning of “(one) with wicked thought.” Holthausen (1948) accepts Kock’s reading and emends MS. *inwitþancum* into the adjectival form (i.e., *inwitþanc[l]um*). This interpretation was later adopted by Wrenn-Bolton in their third and subsequent editions (1973, 1988, 1996). Their translation of the sentence in question is “he quickly lay hold of the one evil in thought” (1996, 128). This reading would not, however, be very probable, since none of the numerous compounds in *-þanc* is otherwise attested in an adjectival sense in Old English.

¹¹ Cf. lines 52, 688, 852, 911, 1169, 1214, and 1494.

A new alternative reading

As demonstrated above, each of the three readings fails to offer a persuasive interpretation of the passage containing the compound *inwitþancum*. In what follows, the Beowulfian crux will be revisited, and a new alternative reading will be presented with reference to multiple perspectives of the *Beowulf* poet.

Despite the fact that many scholars have found it challenging to interpret the compound *inwitþancum*, the malicious meaning of which does not fit the hero's character, there are other passages in *Beowulf* where negative epithets are used for characters worthy of high praise. Consider the following passage in which the poet illustrates the episode of Sigemund just before the story of Heremod:

Sigemunde gesprong
 æfter deaðdæge dom unlytel
 syþðan wiges heard wyrn acwealde,
 hordes hyrde.

 Hæfde *aglæca* elne gegongen
 þæt he beahhordes brucan moste
 selfes dome; sæbat gehleod,
 bær on bearm scipes beorhte frætwa
 Wælses eafera;
 (884b–87a, 893–97a, emphasis mine)

For Sigemund there sprang up no little glory after his death-day, after the brave one at battle had killed a dragon, guardian of a hoard . . . *The hero* (or *The wretch*?) had accomplished a courageous act so that he might enjoy the ring-hoard at his own choice; the son of Wæls loaded a sea-boat and carried the bright treasures in the bosom of the ship.

In the passage above where Sigemund slew a treasure-guarding dragon and carried the treasure to his ship, the word *aglæca* is used for Sigemund in line 893. In the twenty instances of the noun *aglæca* in *Beowulf* including *aglæc-wif*, the majority are used for Grendel, his mother, or the dragon. There are only three exceptions observed in the context of human referents, with one notable exception being Sigemund, as just mentioned. The remaining two refer to Beowulf or sea-beasts (cf. 1512) and Beowulf and the dragon (cf. 2592).¹²

In his glossary, Klaeber (1950) defines *aglæca* as “wretch, monster, demon, fiend” when employed in reference to Grendel, his mother and the dragon.

¹² In addition to the three exceptional instances of *aglæca* with human referents, Roberts (2003, 245) interprets *þæm ahlæcan* (646) as referring to Beowulf rather than Grendel.

Conversely, Klaeber assigns the meaning “warrior, hero” when it is used for Sigemund and Beowulf. Robinson (1997a, 51), criticizing the “double definition,” regards *aglæca* as a neutral term and translates it as “assailant,” “fierce combatant,” or “antagonist.” The *Dictionary of Old English (DOE)* offers definitions of “awesome opponent, ferocious fighter,” which are pertinent to both the hero and the monstrous adversary (s.v. *āg-læca*).

As previously indicated, the *Beowulf* poet shows a marked predilection for the negative use of *aglæca*. This observation pertains to the use of the term in other verse texts. *Aglæca* occurs fifteen times in other Old English poetry: fourteen of these instances refer to Satan, devils, the whale (as a symbol of the devil), or the heathen cannibals (Mermedonians). The only exception is the use of the term for Andrew, which I will discuss later. The distribution of positive and negative senses of the term appears to be significantly imbalanced, which lends support to the hypothesis that the primary sense of the word is “wretch, monster, demon.”¹³

The heroic episode of Sigemund provides another instance of a disapproval term for the hero.¹⁴ In the passage below, the heroic deeds of Sigemund are described as *fæhðe ond fyrena*:

welhwylc gecwæð

þæt he fram Sigemunde[s] secgan hyrde
 ellendædum, uncupes fela,
 Wælsinges gewin, wide siðas,
 þara þe gumena bearn gearwe ne wiston,
fæhðe ond fyrena
 (874b–79a, emphasis mine)

(A thane of Hrothgar) told everything that he had heard about Sigemund’s deeds of valor, many unknown, the struggle of the son of Wæls (i.e., Sigemund), extended ventures, which the sons of men did not know at all, (his) *feuds and crimes*.

This is a passage in which Hrothgar’s thane recounts the adventures of Sigemund. The term *fæhðe* is defined as “feud, enmity” while *fyren* “sin, wicked deed, crime” is imbued with a strongly negative connotation. Furthermore, almost identical phrases with minor variations such as *fæhðe ond fyrene* (137) and the transposed *fyrene ond fæhðe* (153) are employed with reference to Grendel’s hostile acts: the former refers to Grendel’s slaughter in Heorot while the latter denotes Grendel’s long-standing occupation of Heorot.

¹³ In prose the word is attested once as a complimentary adjective in Byrhtferth’s *Enchiridion*: Bede is referred to as *se æglæca lareow* “the awesome teacher” (Baker and Lapidge 1995, 66). See also a positive use of the adjective *egleche* “brave, fearless” in Middle English (see *MED*, s.v. *ēglēche* adj.).

¹⁴ For the negative images of Sigemund, see Griffith (1995).

Given the moral disapproval associated with the term *fyren*, it has been proposed that a euphemistic translation be used in reference to the heroic deeds of Sigemund. Robinson (1997b) hypothesizes that the *Beowulf* poet might have employed the word *fyren* without moral opprobrium. This interpretation is adopted in Mitchell and Robinson (2006), with the noun *fyren* given such a neutral meaning as “suffering” in the glossary. Fulk (2010, 145) adopts Robinson’s reading of the phrase *fæhðe ond fyrena* (879) as “feuds and suffering,” which implies no critique of Sigemund’s actions. In the most recent translation, Shippey and Neidorf (2024, 101) have opted for the interpretation of *fæhðe ond fyrena* (879) as “feuds and troubles,” which avoids the negative connotations associated with the word *fyren*.

While, as Robinson (1997b) argues, it can be used with a neutral sense, the word *fyren* combined with *fæhðe* certainly creates a negative connotation (cf. lines 137 and 153). Thus, it is evident that the euphemistic interpretations of the phrase *fæhðe ond fyrena* (879) would constitute a substantial deviation from the original text. Why did the *Beowulf* poet apply negative expressions such as *aglæca* and *fæhðe ond fyrena* to an exemplary hero like Sigemund?

It is now appropriate to direct our attention once again to *aglæca*. As already mentioned, this expression is attested in Old English verse texts other than *Beowulf*, always in association with wretched beings with one exception. In the following passage from *Andreas*, the poet employs the term *aglæca* for Andrew, who is regarded as a saint but not a villain or a demon:

Utan gangan eft,
 þæt we bysmrigen bendum fæstne,
 oðwitan him his wræcsið. Habbað word gearu
 wið þam æglæcan eall getrahtod!
 (1356b–59, emphasis mine)

Let us go back so that we may insult him, fixed in his fetters, and reproach him for his wretchedness. (We) have words ready and all prepared against *the wretch*.

This passage is part of speech made by one of the devils, who fails to kill Andrew and plead with Satan to undertake the mission in his place. Although the pejorative term is used for Andrew, it is the devil’s speech where the saint was called *aglæca*. If the conflict between Andrew and the devil is viewed from the perspective of the devil himself, the use of the term *aglæca* for Andrew can be considered legitimate.

With these in mind, let us now go back to the use of *aglæca* for Sigemund. As was the case with the use of *aglæca* for Andrew, it can be hypothesized that the use of *aglæca* for Sigemund reflects the dragon’s perspective. This would also be

the case for the use of the abusive phrase *fæhðe ond fyrena* in reference to the Germanic hero.

The recognition of varied narrative perspectives in *Beowulf* has the potential to shed a new light on the interpretation of *inwitþancum*, which has puzzled numerous scholars until recent times. Many scholars have been reluctant to attribute negative connotations to the compound, preferring instead to focus on its heroic implications or to associate the compound with Grendel's malicious intentions or Grendel himself. However, if we assume that the narrative is presented from Grendel's point of view, the application of *inwitþancum* to Beowulf becomes unproblematic.¹⁵

The sympathy expressed by the *Beowulf* poet for the monstrous beings is evident elsewhere. When Grendel was defeated in combat by Beowulf, the poet, speaking from his mother's point of view, refers to the battle between the two as *guð-ceare*, translated as "sorrow-bearing conflict" (1258). Had the poet chosen to articulate the sentiments from the perspective of Beowulf, it is conceivable that he would have designated the event in terms of *guð-hreð* "glorious contest" (cf. 819). When Grendel's mother sets forth toward Heorot seeking vengeance, the journey is described as a *sorhfulne sið* "grief-filled journey" (1278) and *siðode sorhfull* "traveled full of grief" (2119), thereby emphasizing the mother's grief at the loss of her son. Later in the heroic poem, the man who sneaks into the dragon's lair to steal the treasure is designated as *feondes* "(of) the enemy" (2289) while Beowulf and Wylaf, who engage in combat with the dragon, are referred to as *fionda* "(of) fiends" (2671) and *laðra manna* "(of) hateful men" (2672). In this context it is evident that the poet is sympathetic to the dragon.

The multiple perspectives of the *Beowulf* poet, as revealed in the present paper, recall the appositive style advocated by Robinson in his *Beowulf and the Appositive Style*:

A poet who, in a deeply Christian age, wants to acknowledge his heroes' damnation while insisting on their dignity must find and exercise in his listeners' minds the powers of inference and the ability to entertain two simultaneous points of view that are necessary for the resolution of poignant cultural tensions. (1985, 13f.)

Robinson argues that the *Beowulf* poet employs a technique known as variation or apposition to avoid making his own value judgments about Christianity or paganism. Instead, the poet evokes two opposing perspectives in the audience's

¹⁵ One of the panelists at the JSMES symposium, Dr. Rafael J. Pascual, kindly referred me to Renoir (1962), who argued that the *Beowulf* poet meticulously manipulates shifts in point of view: in Grendel's advance and entry into Heorot (702b–21a), the audience is first aligned with the hall's occupants, then (despite their dismay) with Grendel, and finally with Beowulf to intensify suspense and terror.

minds concurrently, thereby leaving the interpretation to the audience. It is hypothesized that the multiple perspectives observed in words like *inwitþanc* and *aglæca* were employed by the *Beowulf* poet as a strategy to accommodate a more holistic picture of the human-monster relationship, thereby supplementing the human-centered view of monsters.

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