



FIG. 1. *Beowulf*, ll. 1-3.

## The Opening Sentence

Figure 1 is a picture of the opening sentence of *Beowulf*, without a voice speaking it or listeners hearing it, and altogether abstracted from time. Inert though it is, it offers a representation of this synoptic sentence that may help make clear some fundamental aspects of the verbal art of this remarkable early poem.

That art cannot be comprehended in the written text alone, when the poem is regarded as the string of words recorded in the one manuscript to preserve it. It is desiccated, a text without voice or audience, with only its linear representation to convey little more than the crudities of its temporal and prosodic dimensions. The very first word **Hwæt** is ambiguous as it stands, even when written majuscule. Because it is at the very beginning of the text, about all we know is that it won't be the beginning of a verb-complement clause, such as  *Ic nāt hwæt hē sȳ*. When it comes along in writing there is no way to know whether it is the opening of a question—*Hwæt eart þū?*—or an exclamation *Hwæt!*

Rather, the poem ought to be regarded as a verbal composition for reading and hearing, and therefore not capable of existing outside the dimension and measure of time. When it is performed, each phrase of the poem also will have a specific prosodic pattern and would not be spoken without it. The first word has to have the intonation of *Hwæt?* or *Hwæt!* or *Hwæt....*

In the tree-like picture there are two structural patterns represented, even in the one plane: in boldface type are the verse lines in customary lineal arrangement as they are to be read in sequence—from left to right, and from top down—and without editorial punctuation; in normal type (roman and italic) are labels of the syntactic constituents of the sentence, with lines in the diagram showing what attaches to what, in hierarchical order.

While linear order is imposed by the speech medium of the language, the sequence of words is meaningless without its syntactic order—the hierarchical groupings of the constituents of that utterance. And it is just there in the adverse relation of sequential utterance and constituent-structure understanding that a verbal art can develop, no verbal art so clearly patterned as that of verse. The few words subsequent to **Hwæt** begin new patterns of text. **Wē** and **Gārdena** are two words in the sequence, but can only belong to two different syntactic elements of the sentence that is just beginning (their morphology shows that). And since this is verse in its ordinary form in Old English, with **Wē Gārdena** will be completed the first half of what we now call a line—the largest regularly recurring metrical pattern of the text. Measured by a pattern involving phrase and word boundaries, phrase-accent, word-stress, and syllable-length, a halfline has passed by. In their succession three words are recognized by their morphology and meanings, one halfline is recognized by its metrical form, and (setting aside **Hwæt**) two elements are recognized that must have their places in two different parts of a sentence: **Wē** 'we' can be only a sentence subject; **Gārdena** 'Spear-Danes' can be only a dependent segment of some other

syntactic unit in the sentence.<sup>1</sup> Also, in spoken form this initial string of words will end with some kind of separation being signaled prosodically because, as is found next, a quite separate part of the sentence succeeds it.

Next **in gēardagum** 'in past-days' passes by as another metrical halfline. It is the second of the two halflines that make up the normal recurring unit of the meter, and it has a requisite syllable (**gēar-**) in its first accentable position that alliterates with an accentable syllable (**Gār-**) in the preceding halfline. That is its metrical aspect. In regard to syntax, it is yet another part of the sentence underway—not attaching immediately to any part that has gone before it; also, it is a complete constituent in itself. Intonation will again signal a point of separation from what follows, since this particular construction is not extended.

Another halfline is filled by **þēodcýninga** 'nation-kings.' It can not be a continuation of **in gēardagum**; it repeats the morphology of **gārdena**, though, and sets a new alliterative stave.

Thus far, the time phrase **in gēardagum** is the only completed unit in the syntax of the sentence that has begun—the only one for which the lines in the diagram show how its necessary constituent parts are attached to each other. A subject **Wē** lacks its predication, and **gārdena** and **þēodcýninga** lack a phrasal head to which they can attach as complements. (Cover up any part of the diagram to the right of any of these words: the linkage to a corresponding element cannot be traced.)

In the next metrical halfline come the elements that have been lacking for a complete sentence pattern. First, **þrym** 'might, glory' is a noun that can head two noun phrases **gārdena þrym** and **þēodcýninga þrym**: the two genitive plural nouns are alternatives syntactically, and complementary in reference. Then, **gefrunon** 'heard tell of' is a finite verb appropriate to head a predicate for **Wē**—appropriate both semantically and syntactically—and completing the basic sentence pattern of subject and predicate; at the same time, it is a transitive verb, whose necessary complement is already in place (**þrym**). If elements of spoken text are also restored to the composition, prosodic prominence can be inferred for **þrym**. Partly this will be assigned because it is completing (and heading) the noun phrase(s), but chiefly it will occur because **þrym** is the last significant ('newsworthy') content word in its clause. Assuming Old English to be like other Germanic languages in this respect, in any clause there will be one word carrying principal clausal stress (or accent); **þrym** is positioned right for it in this clause, and no other word either calls for it or attracts it rhetorically. These factors together signal in turn 'end-of-clause' with completion of the halfline construction, hence another point of separation is to be marked in the speech prosody.

The next two halflines (to abridge the explication) make up a clause which, even though it begins with **hū**, is recognizable from its word order as other than a question clause as soon as the next word or two are heard. It turns out to be another complement of **gefrunon**, an explicating variant of the preceding verb-complement **þrym**. It is another transitive structure, with subject first,

followed by a noun phrase complement to the verb, then clause-final verb (SOV structure).<sup>2</sup> With a second complement to the main (preceding) verb taking clausal form and taking up a full verse-line, the whole sentence appropriately ends, the separation being signaled in speech by both prosody and syntax.<sup>3</sup>

Now, *Beowulf* as a study in the dry bones of root-meanings, grammatical inflections, and syntax and meter seems to have given good returns to many for a very long time. I suspect, though, that the best returns have come to those who revived the text with elements of performance, using whatever intuitive guidance was ready to hand. The purpose of this picture of the first sentence of *Beowulf*—and more of the same kind to follow—is to help in finding a way to breathe life into a splendid literary text whose own voice, and audience, Wyrð has long since swept away.

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0001 HWÆT <sup>3</sup> WE <sup>2</sup> GĀR-<sup>1</sup>-DE/na <sup>3</sup> in <sup>0</sup> gēar-<sup>3</sup>-dagum. <sup>6</sup>  
 0002 þēod-<sup>2</sup>-cýninga / þrym <sup>2</sup> ge-<sup>2</sup>-frūnon <sup>4</sup>  
 0003 hū <sup>0</sup> ðā <sup>3</sup> æpe<sup>2</sup>lingas <sup>3</sup> ellen / fre<sup>2</sup>me<sup>1</sup>don. <sup>6</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>The grammatical structure of this part of the opening sentence was questioned and explicated at length in a discussion on ANSAXNET beginning 25 September 1995; the discussion is archived at <http://www.mun.ca/Ansaxdat>.

<sup>2</sup>In the ANSAXNET discussion of the opening sentence, the function of ðā was debated for about two months: semantics, morphology, Germanic tradition, Biblical style, collocations (there are, for example, fourteen occurrences of hū ðā at the onset of a halfline in the surviving poetry [Hutcheson 5 Nov 95])—just about everything was invoked to settle the matter. Everything, that is, except graphotactic features of the only text written by native speakers of Old English. This spacing pattern points to ðā as a prominent demonstrative: ‘how *those* noble-ones carried out mighty deeds.’ Here are the nearest parallels in the early part of the first scribe’s copy:

0003 hū 0 ðā <sup>3</sup> æpe-<sup>2</sup>-lingas <sup>3</sup> ellen / fre-<sup>2</sup>-me-<sup>1</sup>-don. <sup>6</sup>  
 0099 Swā <sup>0</sup> ðā <sup>4</sup> driht- <sup>3</sup> -guman <sup>3</sup> drēamum <sup>3</sup> lifdon /  
 0189 Swā <sup>0</sup> ðā <sup>3</sup> mæl- <sup>3</sup> -ceare <sup>4</sup> ma-<sup>1</sup>-ga <sup>3</sup> healf- <sup>1</sup> -denes <sup>3</sup>  
 0282 7 <sup>0</sup> þā <sup>2</sup> cear- <sup>4</sup> -wylmas <sup>4</sup> colran <sup>3</sup> wurðap /

<sup>3</sup>E. G. Stanley’s commentary on the opening three lines should be set alongside the one just given; it is in ‘*Beowulf*,’ in *Continuations and Beginnings: Studies in Old English Literature*, ed. E. G. Stanley (London 1966), pp. 104–41. Stanley’s focus is the ‘harmony of sense and metre’ (p. 113), as distinct from the interaction of syntax and meter, in the present commentary. This harmony, he says, ‘is possible for Old English poets to achieve if they know how to exploit the relative freedom of word-order permitted in verse’ (*ibid.*). I would change ‘freedom of word-order’ to ‘some flexibility in lineal ordering of sentence constituents’ when they are paced by the measuring of ‘half-lines.’