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The Heroic Code and the Challenge of Time in *Beowulf*

By Robert Rois

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The Heroic Code and the Challenge of Time in *Beowulf*

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Abstract- In this study we endeavor to explain significance by viewing the hypothetical statements. Recurring syntactic units in a text, such as "if clauses," allow us to decipher meaning by relying on rhetorical semantics. We combine the social, religious and political roles of the Homeric Zeus with basic notions for evaluating behavior in primitive warring societies. The roles of Zeus as protector of guests, suppliants, and those laboring under the sworn word, yield as paradigms the categories of boast, prayer, and oath. Opposing binary structures generate from these categories as challenge, curse, and betrayal respectively. We may classify as a heroic code the combined non-truth conditional statements that define or approximate equivalence to each one of the mentioned categories. Oscillation between positive and negative correspondence leads to character motivation and plot development in *Beowulf*. The reader is left to interpret conceptually the relevant symbolism, drawn from the hypothetical expressions, which commit the decision to act to a narrative dimension. We close our study with a suggestion that eager attempts to extend the will in time may inevitably fail, even in a predetermined heroic context.

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I. Introduction

The epic poem *Beowulf* begins and ends with a burial scene. The hero is praised at death. Treasures are placed in the ship that bears Scyld Scefing's corpse, as he asked, *swa he selfa baed* [29].[1] Similarly, a great hoard of wealth is piled on Beowulf's funeral pyre. The respect earned is proclaimed at the end of the poem in words which become emblems that recall the memory of a dead hero, kindest, *mildust* [3181], and most eager for praise, *lofgeornost* [3182]. [2] Glory depends on the performance of heroic deeds. The monarch earns the right to govern and counts on support from his indebted vassals. Consequently, governance is aligned to the giving of gifts. The throne is *gifstol* [168], the palace is *gifhealle* [838]; the monarch is a giver of treasures, *beaggyfan*, *sincgyfan, goldgyfan* [1102, 1342, 2652]. Pervasive use of "*gyfan*" compounds stresses the duties of king and subject. The heroic code depends on the combination of rights and corresponding duties. [3] Syntactic structures reflect the lexical expressions. Conceptual semantic analysis of the hypothetical statements reveals that the balance of rights and duties depends on the exercise of social, religious and political intentions. The boast before an antagonist becomes a challenge; a warrior's prayer for victory turns into a curse for the enemy, and an oath of loyalty opens liability for betrayal from other members of a tribal society. Historical and legal implications of this study remain possibilities for further development and research.[4]

At the opening of the poem the poet asks the audience to heed exploits of bygone princes. The glory of the kings, "*Þeodcyninga Þrim*," is the performance of princes, "*hu Þa aeÞelingas ellen fremedon*" [2-3]. Such concern for posterity, imminent from the start, is explored subsequently in the tale of Scyld Scyfing who a) was picked up as castaway [6b-7a], b) found consolation for this misfortune [7b], and c) eventually overcame kingdoms which paid him tribute [9,11]. The warrior prince himself becomes the heroic king. By giving gifts the young prince earns support from men for times of need:

> So should a (young) man, in his father's hold,
> do good by giving splendid gifts,
> so that later in life his men stand by him
> in turn, his people fast by, when war comes.
> By glorious deeds in any tribe a man prospers [20-24].[5]

> *Swa sceal ge(ong) guma gode gewyrcean,*
> *fromun feohgiftum on faeder (bea)rme,*
> *Þaet hine on ylde eft gewunigen*
> *wilgesiÞas, Þonne wig cume,*
> *leode gelaesten; lofdaedum sceal*
> *in maegÞa gehwaere man gebeon.* [20-24a]

From the very beginning of the epic we see that the king, Scyld Scefing, answered the crisis of leaderless anarchy, "*aldorlease*" [15], and, while fulfilling the people's needs, he is justified in expecting support in return. Thus each party has the right to the promise of performance. The magnanimity of the prince who dispenses gifts is dependent on the promise of support by the subjects at a time of need. Since their society subsists among warring pre-feudal tribes, loyalty is

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[1] Quotes from the original text are from *Klaeber's Beowulf*. Fulk 4.

[2] Fred C. Robinson remarks how *lofgeornost*, "most vain glorious,… occurs most often in homiletic discussions of the cardinal sins… the only documentation for the positive sense of the word, 'most eager to deserve praise,' is the last line in *Beowulf*." *Style* 81.

[3] In his *The Cultural World of 'Beowulf'* John M. Hill remarks how "Beowulf's world is one in which gift exchange and feud are central." Hill 85.

[4] M.T. Clanchy remarks in his *From Memory to Written Record* that: "The most difficult problem in the history of literacy is appreciating what preceded it." Clanchy 27. The first *Beowulf* manuscript dates back from the mid-twelfth century. Orchard 12. Albert B. Lord insists that "the technique of formulaic repetition proves that *Beowulf* was composed orally." Lord 198-199. Andy Orchard states that estimates for the poem's origin range actually from the seventh to the eleventh century. Orchard 6-7. We may consolidate all these remarks by allowing for the existence of an oral tradition.

[5] Translations from the original text are mine.

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tested by courage in battle. The phrase which introduces the six lines quoted above is "*Swa sceal ge(ong) guma*," a formula recurring with slight variation:

1172b – when Queen Wealtheow asks Beowulf to give a discourse on friendship, for so should a man do, while she hands him the drinking cup [1169];

1534b – then in the *scop's* description of a Beowulf fearless against Grendel's dam, and ready to trade life for glory, as becomes a man;

2166b – also in Beowulf's speech to Hygelac about Hrothgar's recompense to him before leaving his court, as befits a kinsman;

2708 – evidently, as Wiglaf's assistance proves vital in the final encounter. So a thane should be to a lord in need;

3174 – and, finally, at the end of the epic, in mourning a dead king it is fitting for a man to speak praise.

These scenes of giving and acceptance show that remembrance is meaningful; yet, among our examples, the most gruesome encounters, the Beowulf-Grendel's dam duel and the hero's death in the final battle, show that expectation itself can prove useless because the future is unpredictable.

The oral epics in the Western World at times share parallel schemes of symbolic representation. The prevalent influence over different cultures across geographic borders is Homer.[6] In order to achieve proper interpretation for the plot of *Beowulf* we recall the three roles for the Homeric god which Hugh Lloyd-Jones outlines in his *The Justice of Zeus*. Zeus Xeinios is the protector of guests and hosts; Zeus Hikesios is the god of suppliants, and Zeus Horkios is the lord presiding over oaths.[7] The functions of the divinity are derived from the words for guest, *xenos*, suppliant, *hikete*, and oath, *horkos*. These three categories reveal respectively a social, religious, and political perspective. Since in the oral epic the reader encounters a society of warriors, the three socio-cultural functions for the role of the divinity are manifested in human behavior as boast, prayer and oath. In his *Structural Anthropology* Claude Lévi-Straus has pointed out how opposing binary structures reflect tribal customs in a primitive society.[8] Consequently, we may view the three linguistic categories boast, prayer, and oath, as including their three corresponding adverse counterparts, challenge, curse, and betrayal. The most basic oscillation between the positive and the negative meaning for each thematic role may shift, depending on the speech situation. For instance, a boast at the mead hall remains a boast, but when formulated at a scene of confrontation with an antagonist, the boast becomes a challenge. Likewise, a hero's prayer for victory is a curse for his opponent. Finally, formulating an oath of alliance opens the possibility for breach of trust, or cruel betrayal. In the military context of the oral epic, we perceive that double possibilities within each role expand plot motivation and character development. We refer to the serpentine movement between positive and negative social, religious, and political behavior along the plot of *Beowulf* as the heroic code.

The conditional statement with the *gif* adversative conjunction is found in the hero's first recognition scene. Beowulf, having heard of Grendel's deeds, leaves the fold to secure future alliance for his king. When the coastguard of the Scyldings asks the Geats for identification, in order to grant right of passage, he recognizes the hero as outstanding, unless his countenance belies him, *naefne him his wlite leoge* [250]. The hero, in turn, asks the warrior to judge his knowledge of affairs: "you know if it is, as we truly hear say."[9] The *gif* clause [272b] introduces ravages perpetrated by the "mysterious persecutor," *deogol daedhata* [275]. The actual remedy proffered follows suit:

I may offer Hrothgar,
through boundless spirit, good advice,
how he, old and good, may overcome his enemy,
if reversal should ever come to him,
remedy from evil trouble.

Ic þaes Hroðgar maeg
þurh rumne sefan raed gelaeran,
hu he frod ond god feond overswyðeb –
gyf him edwenden aefre scolde
bealuwa bisigu bot eft cuman – [277b-281]

After asking the coastguard whether report of the crisis is true, the hero alleges that he can advise Hrothgar how change may be brought about if relief is to come. Since Beowulf and his men are strangers, the statement is crucial and daring enough when considered as means for armed men without password, *leafnesword* [245b], to gain safe passage. The noun *edwenden*, reversal, is in apposition to *bot*, remedy; the reversal implied, to be acknowledged as remedy, is the very relief to be attained through projected success of the mission led by Beowulf. Should help be refused, chances are Hrothgar may suffer sad necessity as long as Heorot stands. Although the hero's boast allows for failure, since he does not say that he will surely succeed, the immediate responsibility for the decision to grant safe passage to the troop of sailors rests with the coastguard.

[6] Lord draws a number of parallels between *The Song of Roland*, the *Illiad*, and *Beowulf*. He compares Aeschere to Patroclus, "the friend who is killed before the encounter of the hero with the enemy." Lord 201. About Marsile and Grendel, Lord states that they both suffer similar wounds, the loss of an arm; and "they both seek solace from a female, Grendel from his dam, Marsile from his wife." Lord 206-207. In general form, Lord also compares *Beowulf* to Homer in regards to "repeated assemblies with speeches, repetition of journeying from one place to another, and on the larger canvas the repeated multiform scenes of the slaying of monsters." Lord 198-199.

[7] Lloyd-Jones 5.

[8] Lévi-Strauss 161.

[9] *Þu wast, gif hit is / swa we soþlice secgan hyrdon,* [272b-273]

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The burden on the sentinel is heavy. He responds with an aphorism:

> Each of us both shall
> know a sharp shield bearer,
> from his words and deeds, he who thinks well.
>
> *Aeghwaeþres sceal*
> *scearp scyldwiga gescad witan,*
> *worda ond worca, se þe wel þenceð*. [287b-289]

The phrase *worda ond worca* is a universalizing doublet. This combination of two dissimilar terms which complement each other becomes a metaphor for the decision to maintain the spoken word as a man's intention to perform accordingly. We agree with Stanley B. Greenfield that the maxim discriminates between words and deeds, and does not combine both in the province of heroic prowess, since Beowulf has not yet performed.[10] A coastguard should know the difference between someone who lies, and one who speaks truthfully. Words have strong significance in human action when spoken by a man who keeps them.[11] As an inclusive metaphor with general significance in the poem the principal symbolism of the doublet becomes entwined in context with the development of a boast to vow progression; the latter is heroic consequence of the former. The tendency to insure that words are kept draws in the poem a relation between axiom and experience; provisions must be made for the elements of risk. In his monumental grammar Otto Jespersen defines a conditional statement as "the preparation for a possible contingency."[12] Beowulf's original boast was knowledge of dreadful events and belief that he could remedy the situation at Heorot. Diplomatic tact is the norm when the hero speaks his name to a nobleman, *Beowulf is min nama* [343]. He will help the king if Hrothgar allows the heroes to enter his court: "if he will grant us/that we may greet his kind self."[13] The boast is toned down in order to further his mission inland and reach the crown.

Disorder in the realm remains pervasive even among the ruling class. Unferth, a counselor at Hrothgar's court suggests in a notorious digression that, since Beowulf had lost once a swim match to Breca, he may lose if he seeks an encounter with Grendel:

> I expect from you a worse settlement,
> although you have availed yourself everywhere in battle,
> hard struggle, if you dare wait
> for Grendel close-by all night long.
>
> *Ðonne wene ic to þe wyrsan geþingea,*
> *ðeah þu heaðoraesa gehwaer dohte,*
> *grimre guðe, gif þu Grendles dearst*
> *nihtlongne fyrst nean bidan*. [525-528]

Unferth's challenge suggests that the "attempted settlement with Grendel will be worse than what was dealt to Beowulf in that foolish episode with Breca."[14] The hero justifies his loss to Breca in the swim match by revealing his strife with water monsters along the way. To answer fully the impudent challenge, Beowulf must unveil the root of decadence in the governing body. The hero then proceeds to identify Unferth as killer of his own brother, *þeah ðu þinum brodrum to banan wurde,* [587]; and adds that Grendel would not attack Heorot if the nobleman's military stamina would match his words:

> Never had Grendel caused so much slaughter,
> fiendish monster, to your lord,
> humiliation at Heorot, if your mind were,
> your spirit in battle, as fierce as you suppose.
>
> *þaet naefre Gre[n]del swa fela gryra gefremede,*
> *atol aeglaeca ealdre þinum,*
> *hynðo on Heorote, gif þin hige waere,*
> *sefa swa searogrim, swa þu self talast;* [591-594]

The hero's response to the insult relates the etiology for disorder at Heorot directly to the envious Unferth. [15] In his *Cain and Beowulf* David Williams remarks that: "the prediction of the Fall of Heorot through parricide and the stories, for instance, of Heremod and Unferth extend the image of a socially ever present Cain to the past and future of the Danes, yoking time and space in the universalization of the theme."[16] Grendel as allegorical figure, descendent of Cain, is a projection of a deep rooted social evil which apparently afflicts the royal court. Slaying of a brother is an over-looming symbol for high treason. Beowulf's reproach to Unferth suggests that through decadence at the royal court a counselor's advice may degenerate

[10] Greenfield, "Of Words and Deeds," 49-50.

[11] Beowulf insists that his state of mind is loyal, *holdne hige* [267a]. Discussing meaning of the term, John M. Hill cites D.H. Green, who "has pointed out the reciprocal and even legal nature of the word *hold* as an ethical term within the *comitatus* and as a term for oaths and contracts, where the *huldi* (protection) of the lord is involved as a guarantee for truth of the statement." Hill 71. Safe passage is granted because the troop can be considered a loyal group, *hold weorod*. [290b]

[12] Jespersen 367. Since we have mentioned kennings with the verb *gifan*, and propose to analyze phrases introduced by the *gif* conjunction, a philological note is in order. The adversative adverbial conjunction comes from Old Gothic *jabai*; whereas the verb *gifan* stems from the Indo-European root *ghab*, which gave Latin *capio* and *habere*. Barney 20, 62. There is no morphological connection between *gif* and *gifan;* the "y" is used interchangeably with "i" in the textual script of both terms with no apparent distinction in sense or voicing. Fulk 385, 389.

[13] *gif he us geunnan wile/ þaet we hine swa godne gretan moton*. [346b-347]

[14] Hill 78.

[15] "Envy was seen as pre-eminent in Cain's motive for murder, as it had been in Satan's temptation of Eve, and the hatred borne by Cain for Abel was seen as the envious hatred by the evil of the good simply because they are good." Williams 23. Through borrowed Old Testament symbolism archetypal enemies sprang from Cain. [107-108; 1261-1263]

[16] Williams 41.

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into a curse. Hrothgar's noble thane fails to discern a balance between true words and actual deeds.

We are now in a position to account for the Finn Lay's relevance in the plot of the epic. The story tells how Queen Hildeburh loses her brother, Hnaef, when Frisians battle Danes; Finn himself, the lady's husband, is later inevitably slayed. She was of Danish stock and her spouse was Frisian. Hengest, after taking over command, is persuaded to abide by a treaty whereby Finn's men cannot mention to the Danes their equivocal position. The crisis the treaty purports to solve is the bitter slaughter of kinfolk, *moþorbealo maga* [1079], a most serious offense. The Frisians swear to uphold the peace, *geþingo budon* [1085b]; provided that there is no grudge on either side. Both tribes should receive an equal share of the treasures, *feohgyftum* [1089]. Spanning prohibition, the treaty includes a penalty clause:

> They confirmed by treaty on both sides
> a firm peace, Fin declared to Hengest
> undisputed zeal by oaths,
> that the survivors, by decision of the wise,
> held fast with honor, so that any man
> who would break the truce by word or deed,
> or through enmity ever complain,
> though now they follow their ring giver's murderer,
> deprived of chief, what to them was imposed,
> that if any Frisian by audacious speech
> were to bring remembrance of the murder-hatred,
> then the edge of the sword should settle it.
>
> *Ða hie getruwedon on twa healfa*
> *faeste friođuwaere. Fin Hengeste*
> *elne unflitme ađum benemde;*
> *þaet he þa wealafe weotena dome*
> *arum heolde, þaet đaer aenig mon*
> *wordum ne worcum waere ne braece,*
> *ne þurh inwitsearo aefre gemaenden,*
> *đeah hie hira beaggyfan banan folgedon*
> *đeodenlease, þa him swa geþearfod waes;*
> *gyf þonne Frysna hwylc frecnan spraece*
> *đaes moþorhetes myndgiend waere,*
> *þonne hit swordes ecg syđđan scede.* [1095-1106]

Both sides are bound to the peace compact, *friođuwaere*. Discussing the meaning of *getruwian* in Old English, D.H.Green explains that "the verb can be employed, as in *Beowulf*, to denote the formal conclusion of a treaty between two tribes, or, in strictly legal literature, in the sense of proving one's innocence and clearing oneself from a legal charge."[17] Finn, with a dwindled host, swears by oath, *ađum benemde*, to hold in honor the Danes and kill any man on either side who would break the truce by word or deed, *wordum ne worcum* [1100].[18] But the Danes resent their equivocal position as thanes loyal to the slayer of their leader; and, eventually, Finn, who never reaches a suitable bargaining position, is killed; then Hildeburh, Finn's widow and Hnaef's sister, is taken to Denmark [1057-1059a]. The penalty clause included in the edict does not ameliorate Finn's downfall, rather, it is a sign that disturbance will recur. As Fabienne Michelet notes: "Of course, these fragile arrangements fail."[19] The negative elements of the boast-vow progression, a challenge which, through curse, ends in betrayal, prevail over the penalty clause.[20] In the context of the *Beowulf* epic, the Finn Lay exemplifies the case of an oath which fails to secure permanent loyalty. The slaying of a brother in law is a metaphor for high treason and reminds us of the crisis without peaceful remedy wrought in Heorot by the descendant of Cain, Grendel.[21]

[17] Green 251. The philologist quotes from the compilation of Anglo Saxon laws collected by Felix Liebermann: "If he (a person accused of plotting against his lord) wishes to make himself trustworthy, let him offer the king's *wergild*, payment for his life." Liebermann 50. See also Bosworth: *Gif he hine selfne triowan wille, do đaet be cyninges wergelde*. Bosworth 1014. Green cites a variant for the same characteristic conditional statement, found in legal texts, mentioning that *treowsian* can have a meaning identical to *triowan*: *Gyf he hine sylfne treowsian wille*. Liebermann 51. Evidently, to pledge guarantee is assumed to establish loyalty and attain enduring trust.

[18] The formula *worda ne worca* shows Anglo Saxon legal usage. The phrase appears in the characteristic Colyton oath. The swearer vows to be "loyal and true… and never of one's own will or power, in words or deeds, do anything that to him is hateful," *hold and getriwe… and naefre willes ne gewealdes, wordes ne weorces owiht đom þaes him laþre biþ.*" Hill 71. Liebermann cites the oath as prevalent between 920 and 1050 A.D. Liebermann 396. The use in *Beowulf* reveals that the universalizing doublet existed centuries before in oral culture.

[19] Michelet comments on lines 1099b-1103, the universalizing doublet proves to no avail. We should also note that the present participle, *myndgiend* [1105], "reminding," used with the verb "to be," has a ponderously lasting effect. Frederick Klaeber compares the use here to the effect of Grendel's act of constantly lying in wait, *ehtende* [159b]. Fulk 125, 370, 415. Combined with *frecnan spraece*, the prohibitory clause has a foreboding tone.

[20] The opportunity for ransom in *The Battle of Maldon* is equally insulting. The invaders frame their request for ransom in two *gif* clauses:

> It is not necessary that we destroy each other.
> If you are good for the proper amount,
> we will confirm peace with the gold,
> if you decide who here is most powerful,
> so that you will ransom your people,
> pay seafarers, according to their choice,
> money for peace, and take a truce from us.
>
> *Ne þurfe we us spillan gif ge spedaþ to þam;*
> *we willaþ wiþ þam golde griþ faestnian.*
> *Gif þu þaet geraedest, þe her ricost eart,*
> *þaet þu þine leode liesan wille,*
> *sellan sae-mannum on hira selfra dom*
> *feoh wiþ freode and niman friþ aet us.* [34-39]

Byrthnoth interprets the proposal as a challenge, and addresses the men with the famous line: "they will give to you spears as tribute," *Hie willaþ eow to gafole garas sellan*. [46] Pope 17.

[21] Andrew Barton reminds us that the characters themselves are not aware of Grendel's connection to Cain [1355]. In a poem that provides detailed lineage for its characters, Hrothgar's and Beowulf's ignorance about Grendel's descent makes the fiend appear even more incomprehensibly hideous. Barton 14.

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In contrast, Beowulf exhibits loyalty, courage, and strength. He is so strong that he can afford courtesy. When Beowulf announces his mission to Hrothgar our hero wishes to display, along with valor, the discretion that will endear him to his lord back home, Hygelac. The boast is tempered by caution when he weights the grim balance of war before facing Grendel:

> I expect he will, if he may reach control
> in the wine hall, eat unafraid
> the Geat people, as he oft did
> the glorious host. Never need you
> bury my head, for he will devour
> my slaughtered corpse, if death takes me;
> nor bear away the slain he likes to savor;
> solitary, he eats without mourning,
> stains his moor retreat; never you need
> to sorrow much over my corpse.
> Send to Hygelac, if battle takes me,
> the best of mail shirts which guards my breast.

> *Wen' ic þaet he wille, gif he wealdan mot,*
> *in þaem gudsele Geatena leode*
> *etan unforhte, swa he oft dyde,*
> *maegenhreð manna. Na þu mine þearft*
> *hafalan hydan, ac he me habban wile*
> *d[r]eore fahne, gif mec deað nimeð;*
> *byreð blodig wael, byrgean þenceð,*
> *eteð angenga unmurnlice,*
> *mearcað morhopu; no ðu ymb mines ne þearft*
> *lices feorme leng sorgian.*
> *Onsend Higelace, gif mec hild nime,*
> *beaduscruda betst, þaet mine breost wereð,* [442-453]

The repetition of *gif* clauses stresses the stern pessimism of three potential consequences ensuing from Beowulf's hypothetical defeat: a) the monster will continue feeding at Heorot, b) the beast's cannibalism obviates the need for burial, and c) the hero's byrnie should go to Hygelac as Hrothgar's last respects to a dead champion. This triple *gif* clause speech exposes the negative side of the encounter's outcome. The antagonist presents a boast expressing deep regret. Grendel has eaten Danes before; precedent dictates that he may eat Geats too, if he prevails in the encounter. Denial of burial represents the tragic curse of a cruel fate, if death takes the hero. Beowulf then closes the initial boast with the sad final request to honor the alliance between Geats and Danes: his armor should go back to Hygelac if the hero dies in battle. [22] The request includes the hope that the feud against Grendel does not break the Geat-Dane alliance. Submission to an uncontrollable fate funnels choices into a personal decision. Courage is mastered by a subdued but mature will since the speech opens and closes with acceptance of the ineffability of destiny "he shall trust/ the judgment of God, he who death takes" [440b-441b];[23] and then follows the aphorism: "fate always goes as it shall" [455b].[24] The tone of the speech is to let the audience ponder over whether a boast could approximate a prayer by observing the possibility for failure.

In the plot, Hrothgar, rising to the occasion, promises by oath to his guest that if he survives he will lack nothing: "There will be no lack of reward for you/if you survive this courageous deed with life" [660b-661].[25] Before the actual encounter Beowulf proclaims in defiance that he shall fight Grendel without weapons, since the monster scorns them, a boast tempered by honor:

> but we both in the night shall
> forsake swords, if he dares to seek
> war without weapon; and then let wise God
> to whichever side grant the glory,
> as is deemed proper.

> *ac wit on niht sculon*
> *secge ofersittan, gif he gesecean dear*
> *wig ofer waepen, ond siþðan witig God*
> *on swa hwaeþere hond halig dryhten*
> *maerðo deme, swa him gemet þince.* [683-687]

We may consider a positive meaning for the hypothesis of unarmed struggle: if the fiend dares to seek battle without weapon they will fight, and the balance of an even match shall be tilted by God alone, a boast well within the prayer framework. [26]

Hope in the wake of a harsh fate is expressed by Wealtheow during celebrations after Grendel's defeat. In a double *gif* clause speech the queen tells Hrothgar that, if the king should die before his own son comes of age, then his younger brother's son, Hrothulf, shall rule the young men with honor [1182b]. The king's nephew should repay prince Hrethric with kindness if he remembers all graces bestowed on him while growing up at court [1185a]. [27] Wealtheow caps her view of fate with the hope that loyalty may keep the kingdom together. Again we sense in the use of the hypothetical phrase a desire to provide hope that a personal decision projected into the future may alter the fatal outcome of an uncontrollable fate. A sincere intention and the

[22] Ursula Schaefer cites lines 452-453a, as an example of a clause that splits "with verb and direct object," reading: "Send to Hygelac (if battle takes me) the best of mail shirts." Schaefer 112. To take the *gif* clause as strictly parenthetical seems to detract from the rhetorical impact, although the syntactical notion Schaefer remarks certainly applies.

[23] *ðaer gelyfan sceal / dryhtnes dome se þe hine deað nimeð*. [440b-441b]

[24] *Gaeð a wyrd swa hio scel!* [455b]

[25] *Ne bið þe wilna gad / gif þu þaet ellenweorc aldre gedigest*. [660b-661]

[26] As it turns out, the hero tears off Grendel's arm and the fatally wounded fiend runs in anguish to his lair [815b-822]. So the subdued challenge to an apparent wrestling match becomes the terrible curse of a slow death for the enemy.

[27] *Ic mine can/ glaedne Hroþulf, þaet he þa geogoðe wile/ arum healdan, gyf þu aer þonne he,/ wine Scildinga, worold oflaetest;/ wene ic þaet he mid gode gyldan wille/ uncran eaferan, gif he þaet eal gemon,/ umborwesendum aer arna gefremedon.* [1180b-1187]

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proper remembrance of past favors meet the challenge of an unknown destiny. [28]

As the plot unravels the Grendel adventure brings temporary success. Although the hero is confident to have restored order in Heorot, nevertheless, Grendel's dam attacks to avenge her son. She wreaks havoc at Heorot. The ravages include the loss of Aeschere, Hrothgar's dear counselor. Vile turmoil at Heorot affects the high echelons of society at the royal court. Subsequently, the *scop* quotes Beowulf in indirect discourse to outline the hero's trusting incredulity of a crisis he believed ended. We are told the hero asks Hrothar, in a presumptuous boast, "if the night had been/agreeable according to his desire" [1319b-1320].[29] The negative response shows Beowulf that, sadly, the relief obtained by heroic prowess does not endure. Hrothgar henceforth exposes on the revenge of Grendel's mother and ends his speech with a request for Beowulf:

seek if you dare!
I shall reward you for this battle with riches,
with ancient treasures as I did before,
twisted gold, if you come back.

sec gif þu dyrre!
Ic þe þa faehðe feo leanige,
ealdgestreonum, swa ic aer dyde,
wundnam golde, gyf þu on weg cymest. [1379b-1382]

The king pleads with the hero, as he did before [660b-661], to risk his life if he dares, and gifts will follow, if he returns alive. Hrothgar's vow again shows the promise of reward for specific performance. Beowulf answers with an equivalent set of double *gif* clauses. The hero repeats his previous request to Hrothgar in parallel contractual fashion:

if I at your service should
lose my life, you be to me,
when dead, in the position of a father.
Be you protector to my young retainers,
close companions, if battle takes me.

gif ic aet þearfe þinre scolde
aldre linnan þaet ðu me a waere
forðgewitenum on faeder staele.
Wes þu mundbora minum magoþegnum,
hondgesellum, gif mec hild nime. [1477-1481]

Half-line 1481b is identical to 452b.[30] The text expresses the recurring echo of a deal struck anew. Starting with the coastguard scene, and on to the scene of departure from Horthgar's court, closure for speeches negotiating promises is provided by a characteristic *gif* clause.

After the successful encounter with Grendel's mother, involving submersion and subsequent rebirth from deep waters, Beowulf prepares to sail. In the hero's farewell speech to Hothgar the non-truth conditional clause solidifies into a semantic framework for an oath of contractual alliance:

If I may earn in any way
on earth your affection further,
Lord of men, than I have yet
with war prowess, I am prepared immediately.
If I hear over the expanse of the waves
that a nearby terror threatens you
as these enemies formerly did,
I shall bring a thousand thanes,
warriors as help. I know from Hygelac,
lord of the Geats, though he be a young
guardian of the people, that he will further me
in words and deeds, since I praise you well,
and I should bear the spear shaft as help for you,
military support, when you need men.
If thence Hrethric to the court of the Geats
should betake himself, as child of princes, he may there
find many friends, distant lands
are better sought by he who is strong himself.

Gif ic þonne on eorþan owihte maeg
þinre modlufan maran tilian,
gumena dryhten, ðonne ic gyt dyde,
guðgeweorca, ic beo gearo sona.
Gif ic þaet gefricge ofer floda begang,
þaet þec ymbsittend egesan þywað,
swa þec hetende hwilum dydon,
ic ðe þusenda þegna bringe,
haeleþa to helpe. Ic on Higelace wat,
Geata dryhten, þeah ðe he geong sy,
folces hyrde, þaet he mec fremman wile
wordum ond worcum þaet ic þe wel herige
ond þe to geoce garholt bere,
maegenes fultum, þaer ðe bið manna þearf.
Gif him þonne Hreþric to hofum Geata
geþinged þeodnes bearn, he maeg þaer fela
freonda findan; feorcyþðe beoð
selran gesohte þaem þe him selfa deah. [1822-1839]

In this leave-taking *gif* clauses head three lines outlining a sealed pact. The first *gif* clause is the hero's pledge of future service, *guðgeweorca* [1825], if he hears about trouble from abroad while at home. The second clause outlines the promise of additional reinforcements from overseas in case of need, the

[28] In a poem with allegorical creatures and mythical heroes we do not expect correspondence to historical truth. However, we note the curious fact that: "From Scandinavian sources it is known that after Hrothgar's death Hrothulf usurped the Danish throne, and killed Hrethric, Hrothgar's son and heir." Wright 120. The Queen's optimistic expectations are betrayed in real time by a cruel fate.

[29] *fraegn gif him waere / aefter neodlaðum niht getaese* [1319b-1320]. This is one of only two occasions in which the *scop* uses the *gif* clause himself in the text of the epic; we consider this instance akin to the character's protracted dialogue since it is a direct reference to Beowulf's thought, not an extrinsic description, as occurs in 2841a. In the second instance the *scop* intrudes on the narrative by assigning to the hero a measure of *hybris* (cf. infra, footnote # 41). Even in the first instance here, there is an implied criticism of excessive naiveté. In retrospect, the *scop's* use of his own unique *gif* clauses contain both times reproaches to Beowulf in indirect statement.

[30] Fulk 17, 51.

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hero's own reliance on his king; Hygelac proffers aid according to his usual pledge by words and deeds, *wordum ond worcum* [1833]. The doublet conferring desert of safe-passage for the troop through conviction of good faith, used in the coastguard scene [289a], expresses reliance on a promise; its use here again represents firm trust on human intention. Beowulf closes the speech with an oath of future alliance and a concern for posterity in the form of an invitation extended to Hrethric to visit Hygelac's court and find support as suppliant in adversity.

Appearing regularly in speeches framing contractual relations, the conditional statements introduced by the *gif* particle represent a character's commitment to the development of events in the plot. Beowulf is a character prominent enough to include a sequence of three consecutive *gif* clauses in two of his speeches [cf. 442b, 447b, 452b & cf. 1822a, 1826a, 1836a]. A notable difference between these two triple "*gif* clause" speeches is that in the first instance all three apodoses precede the protases, outlining a twinge of fatalism which could be interpreted as humility on the part of the hero. Stanley B. Greenfield finds tripartite subsequent responses by Hrothgar to both Grendel adventures:

> "… reward for such favors rendered is obviously implicit in the heroic ethos, and Hrothgar makes it explicit when he finally accepts Beowulf's offer [660-661]. When Beowulf performs as promised, Hrothgar not only wishes to adopt him as a son, but again states that he will give him treasure [946b-950]; and at the banquet that evening he does so, the poet describing the gifts in detail [1020-1049]. The same pattern holds in the Grendel mother's episode: promise before action in 1730-1732, promise after action in 1706b-1707a, and 1783b-1784, and actual giving in 1866-1867."[31]

In plot development, the king answers the boast-vow progression in kind. But, whereas Beowulf's speech preceding the Grendel encounter contains, with ascending pessimism, provisions for valiant death, the later farewell speech strikes a more hopeful note: in the wake of need, Beowulf will come with one thousand men as aid; and Hrethic will find friends at Hygelac's court, if he decides to go, *geþinceð*. [1837]

Hrothgar replies with recognition of the hero's unrivaled integrity. There is no wiser young warrior [1842b-1845a]. Beowulf can bargain with words, *þingian*. The recognition of the hero has progressed considerably. Now he is the mature speaker who can settle disputes. Decorous rhetoric is vital to tribes engaged in constant warfare since an alliance is maintained through the promise of support. Hrothgar seals the Danish farewell to Beowulf acknowledging that an uncontrollable fate should be dealt with through the strong commitment of a personal decision. The King recognizes that the hero's maturity is essential for the Geats:

> I consider the fact
> that, if it happens that the spear take,
> in fierce battle, the son of Hrethel,
> your lord, or either illness or steel,
> guardian of the people, and you are still alive,
> the Seafaring Geats do not have
> any better king to choose, to be
> guardian of treasure for heroes, if you would rule
> the kingdom for kinsmen.
>
> *Wen ic talige,*
> *gif þaet geganged þaet ðe gar nymeð,*
> *hild heorugrimme Hreþles eaferan,*
> *adl oþðe iren ealdor ðinne,*
> *folces hyrde, ond þu þin feorh hafast,*
> *þaet þe Sae-Geatas selran naebben*
> *to geceosenne cyning aenigne,*
> *hordweard haeleþa, gyf þu healdan wylt*
> *maga rice.* [1845b-1853a]

The double *gif* clause speech discloses tension between an unpredictable destiny splayed broadly in future time and an indomitable human will: a) if your king should be killed and you still live, I expect the Geats will choose you king; that is, b) if you decide to rule your people as guardian of wealth for heroes. The first *protasis* postulates the death of Hygelac. Beowulf should be the next king upon death of the monarch. The Geats would certainly choose an appropriate giver of treasure, if Beowulf should undertake the task to rule over their dominion. The second *apodosis* is subdued; the term "king," *cyning* [1851], is in apposition to "guardian of the treasure for heroes," *hordweard haeleþa* [1852]. We may heighten the strength of this suggested *apodosis* with the verb "to be" by viewing *haleþa* as an objective, rather than as a partitive, genitive; since clearly, grammatically, it may be both. Beowulf as king is a guardian for the heroes' wealth, not just a keeper of treasure. Hrothgar presents a hopeful prayer, and seals the course of destiny with the possibility of a pact to assure the hero's future. A cruel fate can be dealt with through a bright prospect. The prowess of Beowulf as hero, and the uncompromising gratitude of Hrothgar as ruler, bring the Geats and Danes to remain reconciled in brotherhood. [1855-1857]

The contractual nature of the conditional statements, oscillating from boast through prayer and on to oath in the speeches of characters, indicates a keen appreciation for human intentions on the part of the poet. However, upon return to Hygelac's court, absence of dramatic dialogue accounts for scant *gif* clauses. Historical narrative in indirect discourse predominates in the last part of the epic. Beowulf's relationship with his king is perfect and needs no further development in confrontational dialogue. A conditional statement, after all, is a pre-empted provision for the future dependent on behavioral contingencies unfulfilled

[31] Gifstol 109.

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in the present. Nevertheless, there is dramatic tension in plot development because in the poem "nothing can stand except in negation," as J. D. Niles says:

> The dominant mood created by this recurrent play of joy against sorrow, creation against dissolution, may strike some readers as fatalistic, and it may well be; but, if so, the poem's fatalism stems from a realistic under-standing of the limits that bound earthly success. The *Beowulf* poet seems to have lived enough of life to appreciate the awful ease with which time and an indifferent fate blot out even the most glorious of human achievements.[32]

We do not know how Beowulf, who reigns for two lines, has trouble after fifty years [2207-2211].[33] The unpredictable quality of human life engulfs Beowulf as an absolute contingency.

Although, as he approaches his last adventure, Beowulf is guiltless, the aged king ransacks his soul to find cause for the dragon crisis: "the wise man believed that he had angered bitterly the eternal creator God, over an old law" [2329-2331a].[34] He, nevertheless, relies on the experience of past exploits to confront the new evil. Yet the hero is now an old man and his boast has weakened. The *scop* tells how the hero speaks boasting words for the last time: *beotwordum spraec / niehstan siðe* [2510b-2511a]. *Beot*, a word often translated as boast, also means promise.[35] Beowulf wishes to draw the dragon from his lair:

> I waged many
> battles in youth, yet I,
> old folk guard, shall seek a fight,
> perform a glorious deed, if this evil ravager
> out of his earth hall attacks me.

> *'Ic genðde fela*
> *guða on geogoðe; gyt ic wille,*
> *frod folces weard faehðe secan,*
> *maerðu fremman, gif mec se mansceaða*
> *of eorðsele ut geseceð.'* [2511b-2515]

Apparently, old age is not an acceptable justification for inaction; he must perform as before; but there is a melancholic tone in the challenge. We sense that the hero expects that the antagonist may not leave his abode. If the dragon comes out, he shall engage him. The present general condition presents a lamentable probability. The tone of regret deepens as the hero gives up his emblematic grip;

> I would not bear a sword,
> a weapon for a serpent, if I knew how
> to contend with might against this dragon,
> to grapple bravely, as I did formerly with Grendel.

> *'Nolde ic sweord beran,*
> *waepen to wyrme, gif ic wiste hu*
> *wið ðam aglaecean elles meahte*
> *gylpe wiðgripan, swa ic gio wið Grendle dyde;* [2518b-2521]

In this mixed condition the *apodosis* prominently precedes the *protasis*. Curiously enough, Beowulf is sure that he does not know how to grapple boastfully, *gylpe wiðgripan* [2521a]. The result clause is in the optative mood.[36] The statement here seems to be a future less vivid condition which may be interpreted as present contrary to fact: "I would forsake weapons if I knew how to grapple with the monster according to my boast." He does not know how to grapple, so he will not forsake weapons. The great leader is wavering: "I am courageous, so I shall forego boasting against this war flyer" [2527b-2528].[37] By skipping the boast altogether Beowulf trusts destiny. This encounter is his last adventure. The hero commands his warriors to stand back as he claims to be alone the dragon's antagonist. He tells the men in his troop:

> This is not your venture,
> not set for any man, except for me alone
> against this monster, to undertake with strength,
> perform as nobleman.

> *Nis þaet eower sið,*
> *ne gemet mannes, nefn(e) min anes,*
> *þaet he wið aglaecean eofoðo daele,*
> *eorlscype efne*. [2532b-2535a]

The exception outlined by the conjunction, *nefne* [2533b], is crucial, for courage is the trademark of Beowulf as warrior king, his uniqueness. Having attained old age in an unforgiving world is a fact which confirms

[32] Niles 932.

[33] Division of the poem is a complex issue. According to the XIXth century view of multiple lays, championed by Karl Müllenhoff, there are four sections: the Grendel adventure (1-836), the Grendel dam encounter (837-1628), Beowulf's homecoming (1629-2199), and the final Dragon episode (2200-3182). Shippey 155. Thomas A. Shippy winds his way through several issues by quoting the views of J.R.R. Tolkien, Adrien Bonjour, and Arthur Brodeur. Tolkien divides the poem into two parts: A (1-2199), the voyage, and B (2200-3182), the return. Both textual critics, Müllenhoff and Tolkien, break the text as Beowulf assumes kingship. Bonjour supports the poem's unity by asserting that the episodes and digressions are signs of a poet working by irony and contrast. Brodeur points out that, if the poet had concentrated on historical heroes over mythical monsters, "we should have gained a kind of English *chanson de geste*, and lost the world's noblest *Heldenleben*." Shippey 163. James Earl suggests that the shift from *hero* to *king* might have been perceived by an audience of "warrior-aristocrats" as a shift from ego to superego, a projection of inner inadequacy. Shippey 173. Regarding the issue of various segments, Lord states: "the fact that these parts *might* or *could* be sung separately would not mitigate against *Beowulf* as a single song." Lord 200. We should consider that a peaceful reign that lasts two lines, with a drastic and sudden political turnover after fifty years, shows the desperate efforts of a *scop* trying to provide closure for an oral story spanning over several centuries.

[34] *wende se wisa, þaet he wealdende / ofer ealde riht ecean dryhtne / bitre gebulge,* [2330-2331]

[35] Klaeber 306.

[36] Klaeber 425. Alain Renoir states that: "The clause *gif ic wiste* gives the utterance an unmistakable tone of hesitancy, and there is a suggestion of nostalgia in the reference to the fight with Grendel." Renoir 247.

[37] *Ic eom on mode from, / þaet ic wið þone guðlogan gylp ofersitte*. [2527b-2528]

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the tested strength of his courageous nature, although his stamina may now be deficient. Despite the presumptuous absence of a boast, the sensitive reader may consider the hero's stance boastful enough; we should remark, that, since the confrontation is close at hand, and the dragon is near, the boast is direct enough to be a challenge.

The hero pays dearly for his daring. At the time of most need only one warrior is torn with sorrow. As kinsman, Wiglaf means well, *Þam ðe wel Þenceð* [2601b]. This phrase recalls the coastguard's aphoristic reply, *se Þe wel Þynceð* [289b]. Good intention is the trait of the dependable warrior. The noble retainer reminds the other warriors of the oath sworn:

> I remember the time when we partook of mead,
> when we promised our lord,
> in the great hall, who gave us these rings,
> that we would repay him for this war gear,
> if to him such need arose,
>
> for helmets and hand swords.
> *Ic ðaet mael geman, Þaer we medu Þegun,*
> *Þonne we geheton ussum hlaforde*
> *in biorsele, ðe us ðas beagas geaf,*
> *Þaet we him ða guðgetawa gyldan woldon,*
> *gif him Þyslicu Þearf gelumpe,*
> *helmas ond heard sweord*. [2633-2637]

The optative mood of *gelumpe* and *gyldan woldon* signals a contrary to fact condition: "We swore to help if there were need." [38] The condition precedent to the warriors' promise for performance is no longer hypothetical. The impending circumstances press for the ostensible response – i.e. there is need, so we must help. Since the hero is struck down, aid from his retainers is demanded by the situation, regardless of his previous command for them to stand back [2529]. Wiglaf tries to persuade the men that following specific orders to the letter could become an excuse for disobedience. There is need of courage to face danger by undertaking fulfillment of the promise to act. Although Beowulf thought to do it alone [2643], he needs friends, *maegenes behofað* [2647b]. Circumstances have changed. The issue of desertion becomes semantic when the loyal warrior reminds the others of their duty to perform in case of need. He who gave treasure considered the men worthy of decision-making. The order to remain at bay is not inflexible; nor is it an excuse to ratify cowardice.

Wiglaf stands apart as the exceptional, dutiful thane. The death of the dragon itself is a joint venture between Beowulf and Wiglaf [2706-2708a]. Wiglaf's difference from the deserters is that he answers with courage the call of loyalty at a time of need. He is the proverbial thane at hand in time of need, *Þegn aet ðearfe* [2709a]. Twice he remarks that he would rather die with his gold-giver than live with shame.[39] The deserters' failure to keep their oath of allegiance by performance at a time of need makes them liars as well as cowards, paradigms of treason, "the ten weak traitors together" *tydre treowlogan tyne aetsomne* [2847]. The pronounced alliteration strikes a note of profound chastisement and sticks to the reader's ear and memory. Consequently, a tragic drama develops in the course of the last adventure. After the monster's fatal attack, the dying hero's stance before the dragon's hoard is prefaced by the line, "the old man contemplates in grief the gold" [2793].[40] The *scop*, who has restrained in general from using *gif* clauses himself directly in the narration, presents a delayed *parainesis*:

> Indeed, I have heard said
> that on land there is hardly a man,
> among heroes who are victorious,
> although he were daring in action,
> such as to be able to rush a poison breather,
> or stir with his hands a hoard,
> if he found the guard awake,
> dwelling in the barrow.
>
> *Huru Þaet on land lyt manna ðah*
> *maegenagendra mine gefraege,*
> *Þeah ðe he daeda gehwaes dystig waere,*
> *Þaet he wiþ attorsceaðan oreðe geraesde,*
> *oððe hringsele hondum styrede,*
> *gif he waeccende weard onfunde*
> *buon on beorge.* [2836-2842a]

There is an implication of *hybris* or *démesure* on the part of the hero since he approached the gigantic worm when the creature was awake, whereas the fugitive slave who caused the crisis succeeded in plundering the hoard while the monster was sleeping [2290]. The *scop* uses his own conditional statement for censure. Beowulf's defiant attitude seems reckless.

In a world of uncertainty, the persistent use of conditional statements reflects the belief that judgment should be tailored to different situations with altered consequences. There was need for the coastguard to be persuaded that orders are not binding in all cases, so as to grant Beowulf's troop the right to have safe passage [280]; and this same claim is Wiglaf's implied reproach to the deserters [2637]. We should uphold the spirit and not just the letter of the law. Beowulf had to insist that the seafaring Geats must penetrate Danish territory; Wiglaf had to insist that the troop of men not hang back despite the leader's orders. The former is a subdued boast, the latter scolds the warriors for shameful cowardice. Both poles of attempts at persuasion, the noble boast and the stern rebuke for

[38] Klaeber 369, 425.

[39] Wiglaf says: "It is much better for me that fire/engulf my body along with my gold-giver." *Þaet me is micle leofre, Þaet mine lichaman/ mid minne goldgyfan gled faeðmie* [2651-2652]; and again, later: "Death is better/for every warrior than a shameful life." *Deað bið sella/eorla gehwylcum Þonne edwitlif!* [2890a-2891]

[40] *gomel on giohðe, gold sceawode*. [2793]

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treason, are, respectively, the first and last passages where the prominent *gif* clause is employed by the characters themselves. Use of the hypothetical statement starts in the epic with a positive boast and winds its way through challenge, prayer, curse, and oath to end in a reprimand for deplorable betrayal. Subsequently, we perceive that the *scop's* second use of the conditional clause in the complete course of the actual narrative suggests that the hero is rash in his old age.[41] Expressed in non-truth conditional semantics, the heroic code allows the sensitive reader to view the complete epic plot of *Beowulf*.

We endeavor to conclude. The conceptual notion of balance and exchange, seen already as part of the semantic structure in the first three quarters of the epic poem, becomes in the last part pervaded with bitter irony. The dragon's hoard, buried by the last living member of an extinct clan, is a legacy to the earth men could not enjoy [2247-2266]. The despairing elegiac tone of the ending broadcasts the theme of waste after generations of splendor, the betrayal of time. Consequently, a monstrous creature guards the hoard which will profit him in no way, *ne byđ him wihte đy sel* [2277b]. The futility of riches is brought into focus because the gold transferred from the dragon's hoard into Beowulf's barrow at his burial will be as useless to others as it was before, *eldum swa unnyt, swa hyt (aero)r waes* [3168]. Yet, poignantly, the hero thanks god before death for the treasure he sought to acquire for his people [2797-2798]. Beowulf had boasted earlier that Hygelac needed to buy, *gecypan* [2496], no better warrior than him to ride point on the war trail. Beowulf paid in war what Hygelac granted him; as he says: *geald aet guđe, swa me gifeđe waes* [2491]. The quest for glorious victory brings anecdotal defeat. The dragon made plunder of the hoard no easy bargain, *yđe ceap* [2415], for anyone. The word *ceap* hardly alters in meaning as used in Beowulf's autobiographical speech [2426-2509].[42] In this context we find that Haethcyn, after his accidental killing of Herebeald, his older brother, ascended to the throne and waged war against neighboring tribes.[43] Haethcyn himself paid for a raid against Swedes with his own life, a high price, *heardan ceap* [2482a]. Mercantile language acquires lugubrious overtones in the text of *Beowulf.* Although wealth is a symbol for honor, the messenger at the end explains in his elegy how all the grimly purchased hoard, *grimme geceapod* [3012b], shall burn and be buried along with Beowulf. The hoard was dearly bought, *deađe forgolden* [2843b], and grimly begotten, as granted by a harsh destiny, *grimme gegongen; waes Þaet gifeđe to swiđ* [3085]. Expressions for trade and commerce define wasteful prowess in the last part of the epic.

The hero takes up his last stand as ultimate liability for lordship over his dominions. His open challenge to the gigantic worm ends any possibility to sue for peace *freode to friclan* [2556]. On the other hand, the uncondemned slave, *unfaege* [2291], plunders under the auspice of fate, not the heroic code. Fleeing a whipping for wrong doing, in need of shelter, the slave steals a cup. The pernicious theft ends Beowulf's reign of fifty years as well as the dragon's rest of three centuries [2278-2279]. Both unforeseen contingencies are introduced by an *ođđaet* clause [cf. 2210b & 2280b]. Beowulf rules "until a monster plunders in the night."[44] The death shadow guards the hoard "until an intruder enraged him."[45] Thus, the chain of causation consists of a dragon usurping the peace after Beowulf's fifty year reign because a fugitive slave steals a cup to give as peace offering to his lord. The irony is sullen and acute. The stolen cup becomes legal restitution, or peace offering, *friođowaere* [2282], which the slave's master accepts as trade for a granted pardon, *bene getiđad* [2284b]. Hence the issue of a private bargain for redemption leads to an accursed end. Neither Beowulf nor the plundering slave can be considered blameworthy. The Grendel episodes epitomize the betrayal of kinsmen which engenders endless feuds; the dragon encounter symbolizes the progress by destruction of a society advanced enough to work metal with fire. Wiglaf explains how Beowulf could not be persuaded to hold back from the fiery dragon by any counsel [3079-3081]. He met fire with steel.[46] Little fault can be found in the hero except adherence to a rigid heroic code even in old age.

Beowulf's sacrifice leads him to attain a new sacred dimension. Wiglaf is the one who reprimands the deserters. We sense that Beowulf's heroic stature does not allow him to descend to the level necessary to address deserters. Fred C. Robinson remarks: "At his death, Beowulf never condemns the cowardly retainers who deserted him in his hour of need; his thoughts are always and exclusively on the survival of his people."[47]

[41] The only other use of the *gif* clause by the *scop* quotes in indirect statement Beowulf's incredulous inquiry after the visit of Grendel's dam [1319b-1320] (cf. supra, footnote # 29).

[42] Fulk 360.

[43] Both, Herebeald and Haethcyn, are sons of Hrethel, Beowulf's maternal grandfather. Stefan Jarisinski argues that *feohleas* [2441], in reference to the accidental slaying of the heir to the throne, "does not mean *without remedy*, but *remedied only by death*." Jarisinski 115. The unintentional nature of the hunting accident draws sympathy from the modern reader. In Late Antiquity, the epic poem's contemporary audience probably felt intense grief at recollection of an event which must have stirred tragic catharsis in a cultural milieu that had "no fully developed legal vocabulary for negligence." Jarisinski 117. Furthermore, in Germanic belief, Odin may insist on avenging slain kin. Jarisinski 144. Therefore, Beowulf's eventual ascension to the throne, after his uncle Haethcyn's death in battle, may have been viewed by the *scop's* audience as residing under cloudy augurs.

[44] *ođđaet an ongan / deorcum nihtum draca ricsian*. [2210b-2211b]

[45] *ođđaet hyne an abealch / mon on mode.*[2280b-2281a]

[46] Beowulf ordered an iron shield made for him, because linden wood could not withstand the dragon's fire. [2337-2341]

[47] *Tomb* 65.

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Robinson insists that Beowulf's nobility goes beyond what is normally assigned to mortals. The textual critic from Yale indicates that the cremation of the dead hero, along with the burial of lavish obsequies alongside his ashes [3137-3148], together with the procession of princes chanting dirges around his gravemound [3169-3182], hint at deification.[48] Robinson mentions further that fallen pagan heroes were often venerated at a *heroön*, a shrine located at the tomb.[49] The funeral of Scyld Scefing at the opening of the poem is not followed by horsemen circling a barrow. Beowulf's funeral rites are more extensive; the monument built around the burial site seems redundant, something like a second funeral [3155-3160].[50] The landmark should serve as a beacon for seafarers sailing the seas, as the hero himself requests at death [2802-2808].[51] Beowulf's burial represents the last rites earned by a dutiful monarch.

The detailed progression of language as a means to reflect proper exchange, seen through the rhetorical use of conditional statements in the first part of the poem, falls away into paradox and adulation in the last part. The ensuing bafflement results in a dramatic tension which must have thrilled the poet's audience. Yet the hero of innate good intentions remains true to his word to the very end; [52] then he meets his judgment day, *domes daeg* [3069]. The language for exchange reveals in its development from logic to ironic paradox hopes which are betrayed eventually by time. The heroic code seeks to overcome social evils by providing expectation of rights for duties among noble thanes. Unfortunately, even when there is great strength of character, an uncertain fate overcomes the exceptional hero. The insistent use of language to express vows for projected heroic action, which drive the leader to a sacrificial death, sounds the plaint of a pagan civilization at the brink of Christianity. The death of Beowulf is the end of an age. We can recapture lost ideals through interpretative analysis of a poem which contains a conceptual transition in the notion of exchange that evolves from a rudimentary social contract on to the promise of specific performance within the sworn word, regardless of the outcome. The *Beowulf* poet strives to conform the vows for display of heroic action to a balance of rights for duties; yet the progress from boast to oath is strained by the equivalence of an analogous opposing binary tension from challenge, through curse, to betrayal because, in the Anglo Saxon society of the *Beowulf* epic, positivist thought is tempered by a fatalistic view of temporal reality.

[48] *Tomb* 11.
[49] *Tomb* 7.
[50] *Tomb* 17.
[51] Robinson suggests that the high monument built as beacon to guide distant sailors discloses a clear connection with Christ: "The noun *becn* [3160] means 'sign, portent, idol,' and it is used in Christian times to refer to the Cross and to Christ's miracles." *Tomb* 17-18.
[52] Beowulf states proudly in his last words that he did not swear falsely, "I did not swear many oaths wrongfully," *ne me swor fela/aða on unrihte* [2738b-2739a]. S.O. Andrews remarks how "*not many* is a frequent litotes for *not at all*." Andrews 95.

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