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.

Index terms—

1 Introduction

he 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 Sceing's corpse, as he asked, swa he selfa baed [29]. 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]. 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 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.

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. ?? By glorious deeds in any tribe a man prospers [20-24]. At the opening of the poem the poet asks the audience to heed exploits of bygone princes. The glory of the kings, "?eodcyninga ?rim," is the performance of princes, "lu ?a æ?elingas ellen fremedon” [2-3]. Such concern

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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. 5 From
the very beginning of the epic we see that the king, Scyld Scyfing, 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 maganimity 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 tested by courage in battle. The phrase which Swa scal ge(ong) guma gode
gewycean, fromun feolhgifturn on faeder (bea)rme, ?aet hine on ydle eft gewunigen wilgesi?as, ?onne wig cume,
leode gelaesten; leodaedum sceal in maeg?a gehwaere man gebeon. [20-24a] introduces the six lines quoted above
is “Swa scal ge(ong) guma,” a formula recurring with slight variation: 1172b -when Queen Wealthow 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 bebits 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 Xeinos 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 6 Lord draws a number of parallels between The Song of Roland, the Illiad, and
Beowulf. He compares Aesclere 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-Straus 161.

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, nafne him his white 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.” After asking the
coastguard whether report of the crisis is true, the immediate responsibility for the decision to grant

safe passage to the troop of sailors rests with the coastguard.
The burden on the sentinel is heavy. He responds with an aphorism: The phrase words 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 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 jaba; 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 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." ??4 The hero’s response to the insult relates the etiology for disorder at Heorot directly to the envious Unferth.

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, ?eah ?u ?inum bro?rum weorode, sefa swa searogrim, swa ?u self talast; [591-594] 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 ??4 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.

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 into a curse. Hrothgar’s noble thane fails to discern a balance between true words and actual deeds. Beowulf proceeds to identify Unferth as killer of his own brother, ?eah ?u ?inum bro?rum weorode, sefa swa searogrim, swa ?u self talast; [591-594] 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 ??4 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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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, mo?orbealo maga [1079], a most serious inevitability 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, mo?orbealo maga [1079], a most serious
4 Da hie getruwedon on twa healfa faeste frio?uwaere. Fin
Hengeste elne unftite a?um benemde;

?aet he ?a wealafe weotena dome arum heolde, ?aet ?aer aenig mon wordum ne worcum waere ne braece, ne ?urh
inwitsearo aedre gemaenden, ?aeh he hira beaggyfan banan folgedon ?oedenealle, ?a him swa ge?earfod waes;
gyf ?onne Frynsa hwyld freecnan spraece ?aes mo?orhetes mynngiend waere, ?onne hit swordes ecg sy?an sceede.
[1095-1106] Both sides are bound to the peace compact, frio?uwaere. 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 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 selfi ne triowan wille, do ?aet 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 Finn, with a dwindled host, swears by oath, a?um beneme, 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 [1095-1095a]. 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 syllne 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, anything that to him is hateful," hold and getriwe? and nafere willes ne gewealde, wordes
ne weorces owliht ?on ?aes him la?re bi?." 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,
etende [159b]. Fulk 125, 370, 415. Combined with freecnan 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 ?urfe we us spillan gif ge speda? to ?am; we willa? wi? ?am golde gri? faestnian. Gif ?u ?aet geraedest, ?e
her ricost eart, ?aet ?u ?ine leode liesan wille, sellan sae-mannum on hira selfra dom feoh wi? freode and niman
fri? 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 willa? 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: 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 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.1

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 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" [669b-661].

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. 25 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.

Before the actual encounter Beowulf proclaims in defiance that he shall fight Grendel without weapons, since
the monster scorrs 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. 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 Wealthoe 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 proper remembrance
of past favors meet the challenge of an unknown destiny. ??8 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 wreacks havoc at Heorot. The ravages include the loss of Aescere, 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]. ??9 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 Hrethrich, Hrothgar’s son and heir.” Wright 120.

The Queen’s optimistic expectations are betrayed in real time by a cruel fate. ??9 fraegn gif him waere / aefter
neodla?um 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 naivété. In retrospect, the scop’s use of his own
unique gif clauses contain both times reproaches to Beowulf in indirect statement. Half-line 1481b is identical to
452b. ??7 In this leave-taking gif clauses head three lines outlining a sealed pact. The first gift clause is the hero’s
pledge of future service, gu?geweorca [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 The text expresses the
recurring echo of a deal struck anew. Starting with the coastguard scene, and on to the scene of departure from
Hrothgar’s court, closure for speeches negotiating promises is provided by a characteristic gif clause.ac

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 Hrothar 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. 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.

7 Gif ic ?onne on eor?an owihle maeg

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. ?? Hrothgar replies with recognition of the hero's unrivaled integrity.
There is no wiser young warrior [1842b-1845a]; Beowulf can bargain with words, ?ingian. 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 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, ge?ince?. [1837] 31 Gifstol 109.
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. 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 haele?a [1852]. We may heighten the strength of this suggested apodosis with the verb "to be" by
viewing hale?a 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 promise 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 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:

8 Wen ic talige, gif

The unpredictable quality of human life engulfs Beowulf as an absolute contingency. ??4 He, nevertheless, relies
on the experience of past exploits to 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: bestwordum spraec / niehstan si?e [2510b-
2511a]. Beet, a word often translated as boast, also means promise. 35 ??2 Niles 902. ??1 Hrethic recognizes that
the poet 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. Shippey 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 "warrioraristocrats" 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. ?? Beowulf wishes to claim 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.

‘Ye gen’de fea gnu’a on geogol’e; gyt ic wille, frod folces weard faeh’e secan, maer’u freman, gif mee se
mancea’a of eor’e:sele ut gesceo?.’ [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. He shall engage him. The
general present 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 swerd beran, waepen to wyrmun, gif ic wiste hu wi? ?am aglaecan elles meahte gyple wi?gripaun, swa
ic gio wi? 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, gyple wi?gripaun [2521a].
The result clause is in the optative mood. ??6 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]. ??7
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 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 ?aet eower s??, ne gemet mannes, nefne?ne min ames, ?aet he wi? aglaecan efo?o daele, eorlscepe efo?
[2532b-2535a] 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
be a challenge.

The The optative mood of gelumpe and gyldan woldon signals a contrary to fact condition: "We swore to
help if there were need." ??8 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, ?egn aet ?earfe [2709a]. Twice he remarks that he would rather The condition precedent to the warriors’
promise for performance is no longer hypothetical. The impending circumstances press for the ostensibly 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 behofa? [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. die with his gold-giver than live with shame.

Huru ?aet on land lyt manna ?ah maegenagendra mine gefraege, ?eah ?e he daeda gehwaes dystig waere, ?aet
he wi? ?attorsca?an ore?e geraesdec, o?e?e hringsel hondum styrede, gif he waecende 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, 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. ?? 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 [2247-2466]. 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 by? him white ?y 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)waes [3168]. Yet, poignantly, the hero thanks god before death for the treasure he sought to acquire for his people [2707-2798] Expressed in non-truth conditional semantics, the heroic code allows the sensitive reader to view the complete epic plot of Beowulf. ?? 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 ?? 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). ?? Fulk 360. ?? F 3 Both, Herebeald and Haethcyn, are sons of Hrethel, Beowulf’s maternal grandfather. Stefan Jarisinski argues that feohleas [244], 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.

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, grimm geceapod [3012b], shall burn and be buried along with Beowulf. The hoard was dearly bought, dea?e forgoden [2843b], and grimly begotten, as granted by a harsh destiny, grimm gegongen; waes ?aat gif e’o to swi? [3085]. Expressions for trade and commerce define wasteful prowess in the last part of the epic.

The ?? 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 sudden and acute. The stolen cup becomes legal restitution, or peace offering, fri?o?waere [2282], which the slave’s master accepts as trade for a granted pardon, bene geti ?ad [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. ?? 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.”

Little fault can be found in the hero except adherence to a rigid heroic code even in old age. 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. ?? Robinson mentions further that fallen pagan heroes were often venerated at a heroön, a shrine located at the tomb. ??9 The funeral of Scyld Seacing 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]. ??0 The landmark should serve as a beacon for seafarers sailing the seas, as the hero himself requests at death [2802-2808]. ??1 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; Beowulf’s burial represents the last rites earned by a dutiful monarch. 52 48 Tomb 11. 49 Tomb 7. 50 Tomb 17. ??1 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. ?? Beowulf states proudly in his last words that he did not swear falsely, “I did not swear many oaths wrongfully,” ne me swor fela/a?a on unrihte [2738b-2739a]. S.O. Andrews remarks how “not many is a frequent litotes for not at all.” Andrews 95. 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.

9 Works Cited

Aeghwae?res sceal
scearp scyldwiga gescad witan,
worda ond worca, se ?e wel ?ence?. [287b-289]

Figure 1:

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.
Donne wene ic to ?e wyrstan ge?ingea, ?eah ?u hea?oraesa gehwaer dohte, grimre gu?e, gif ?u Grendles dea?r
nihtlongne fyrst nean bidan. [525-528]
The boast is toned down in order to further his mission inland and reach the crown.
[346b-347]

Figure 2:
Wen’ ic ?aet he wille, gif he wealdan mot,
in ?aem gudsele Geatena leode
etan unforhete, swa he oft dyde,
maegenhre? manna. Na ?u mine ?earft
hafalan hydan, ac he me habban wile
d[r]eore fahn, gif mec dea? nime?;
byrgean ?ence?,
ete? angenga unmurnlice,
mearca? morhopu; no ?u ymb mines ne ?earft
lices feorme leng sorgian.
Onsend Higelace, gif mec hild nime,
beaduscru? betst, ?aet mine breost were?, [442-453]

Figure 3:

Figure 4:

1M.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.. Andy Orchard states that estimates for the poem’s origin range actually from the seventh to the eleventh century. We may consolidate all these remarks by allowing for the existence of an oral tradition.5 Translations from the original text are mine.

2Klaeber 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, / ?aet ic wi ? ?one gu?logan gylp ofersitte .[2527b-2528]

3Klaeber 369, 425.

Figure 5:
Wes ?u mundbora minum mago?egnum, hondgesellum, gif mec hild nime. [1477-1481]
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 ?u dyrre!
Ic ?e ?a faeh?e feo leanige, ealdgestreonum, swa ic aer dyde, wundnam golde, gyf ?u 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 ?earfe ?inre scolde aldre linnan ?aet ?u me a waere for?gewitenum on faeder staele.

Figure 6:

?inre modlufan maran tilian, gumena dryhten, ?onne ic gyt dyde, gu?geweorca, ic beo gearo sona. Gif ic ?aet gefricge ofer floda begang, ?aet ?ec ymbsittend egesan ?yw?, swa ?ec hetende hwilum dydon, ic ?e ?usenda ?egna bringe, haele?a to helpe. Ic on Higelace wat, Geata dryhten, Gif him ?onne Hre?ric to hofum Geata ge?inge? ?eodnes bearn, he maeg ?aer fela freonda findan: feorcy??e beo? selran gesohte ?aem ?e him selfa deah. [1822-1839]

Figure 7:
?æt ?e Sæ-Geatas selran næbben
to geceosenne cyning aenigne,
hordweard haele?a, gyf ?u healdan wylt
maga rice. [1845b-1853a]

Figure 8:

Figure 9:

Figure 10:

Figure 11:

Figure 12:
