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This thesis reaches a conclusion in part because I was made to look into the eyes of my grandmother, Dymphna Clark, and promise I would finish the task. It was close to the last conversation she and I had. I dedicate it both to her memory and to the memory of my father, *manna mildust ond monðwærust*, Axel Clark. No mean *Beowulf* student himself in his time, he would doubtless have suggested many corrections!

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Glossary of terms

Several terms in this thesis are used in technical senses that are quite specific. Many of these are the terms used to categorise different groups of the ironic epithets in *Beowulf*. Those are set out as sub-headings and are explicitly defined in Chapter 7. Others are crucial to the theoretical framework of this thesis. Most of this second group are explained in detail during Chapter 5, however they are mentioned one or more times prior to that, and so are defined here for ease of reference.

Amplification: a concept that is mentioned or proposed at one stage in the text may subsequently be developed, tested, or simply reiterated. Thus a certain quality may be attributed (see below) to a character and be critically developed through the subsequent narrative. In *Beowulf*, this can be complicated by the non-linear progression of much of the narrative, meaning amplifications may actually take place prior to the concepts they amplify. Amplification need not be restricted to a narrative process. A poem may also amplify a concept through its phraseology, prosody, and other aspects of the poetic context for that concept. Amplification is discussed at length in Chapter 5.

Attribution: any narrative involves ascribing a wide range of qualities (including material and moral values, thoughts or emotions, aesthetic features, and socioeconomic status) to characters and objects. Each quality so ascribed is an attribute; the process by which it is ascribed is a process of attribution. One frequent way attribution is achieved in *Beowulf* is through the use of the epithet (see below). Attribution is discussed at length in Chapter 5.

Epithet: in this thesis, an epithet means specifically a phrase that simultaneously identifies and characterises a character, an object, or a group of characters and/or objects. It also involves the poetic context or contexts for that phrase. The epithetic phrase itself constitutes a moment of 'attribution' (see above), while the poetic context is the locus for its 'amplification' (see above). This definition and the relationship to amplification and attribution are set out at length in Chapter 5.

Formulaic: the definition of the poetic formula as initially developed by Parry is 'a group of words which is regularly employed under the same metrical conditions to express a given essential idea.'[1] In *Beowulf*, especially read in the context of Old English and Old Saxon poetry more broadly, much of the diction fits that definition very well. In addition, much has the appearance of fitting that definition, except that there is no evidence of a certain apparently formulaic phrase or clause being used elsewhere. Doubtless this problem is largely due to the flukey nature of textual transmission from Old English poet to New English reader, meaning much evidence is lost. Transmission cannot explain all of that problem, however. As Foley points out, much of *Beowulf* that is formulaic in style is more quasi-formula than formula as such, a set he seeks to explain by reference to the (necessarily somewhat loosely defined) 'traditional rules' of poetic diction.[2] Some of *Beowulf*'s ostensible formulae must be pseudo-formulae: formulaic-style phrases not repeated elsewhere. The concept of 'formulaic' diction developed in this thesis involves both the strictly defined formula and those more loosely defined related forms. Formulaic diction, whatever its cause, presents as an aesthetic feature of the poem. This issue is discussed at length in Chapter 5.

Offset: to offset a concept is to juxtapose a contrasting concept. Used substantively, an offset is one element of a text that stands in contrast to another element. This term is particularly used to describe the relationship between one phrase in *Beowulf* and another phrase, or between a phrase and its context. It is a key term in Chapters 5 and 7.

Purport: Chapter 2 describes how *Beowulf*'s focus on the distinction between words and deeds reveals an ironic dichotomy in the poem. That dichotomy would contrast all that is intended, proposed, or pretended on the one hand against all that actually transpires on the other; that is, a dichotomy between what is is purported and the corresponding actuality. Used substantively, 'purport' is the generic term for an intention, proposition, or pretence.

1 Quoted in John Miles Foley, *Traditional Oral Epic* – The Odyssey, Beowulf, *and the Serbo-Croatian Return Song*, University of California Press, Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London, 1986, p. 2.

2 *Ibid.*, pp. 201-239.

Note on quotations and translations

For reasons that I hope become plain in the course of reading this thesis, there has been a conscious effort to use minimal punctuation in quoting Old English poetry here. Except for full stops, no editorially inserted punctuation marks have been incorporated into quotations from Old English verse. Quotations from *Beowulf* (and from *The Fight at Finnsburg*) are taken from Klaeber's edition,[1] minus most of the punctuation, except where this thesis notes otherwise. Quotations from other poems each come from one source, which is acknowledged in a footnote to the first mention of that poem. Translations into modern English are my own except where this thesis notes otherwise.

1 Fr. Klaeber (ed.), *Beowulf and The Fight at Finnsburg*, 3rd ed., D.C. Heath, Lexington (Massachusetts), 1950.

Introduction

> A man inherited a field in which was an accumulation of old stone, part of an older hall. Of the old stone some had already been used in building the house in which he actually lived, not far from the house of his fathers. Of the rest, he took some and built a tower. But his friends coming perceived at once (without troubling to climb the steps) that these stones had formerly belonged to a more ancient building. So they pushed the tower over, with no little labour, in order to look for hidden carvings and inscriptions, or to discover whence the man's distant forefathers had obtained their building material. Some suspecting a deposit of coal under the soil began to dig for it, and even forgot the stones. They all said: 'This tower is most interesting.' But they also said (after pushing it over): 'What a muddle it is in!' And even the man's own descendants, who might have been expected to consider what he had been about, were heard to murmur: 'He is such an odd fellow! Imagine his using these old stones just to build a nonsensical tower! Why did he not restore the old house? He had no sense of proportion.' But from the top of that tower the man had been able to look out upon the sea.[1]

This may be the intention of everyone who attempts to present an understanding of the poem *Beowulf*, or indeed of any difficult work: to 'make possible' a particular view of the thing, the object of study. Something similar clearly motivated Kierkegaard to write his own doctoral dissertation on irony and Socrates.[2] This thesis springs from a belief that early Germanic poetry, particularly Old English poetry, especially *Beowulf*, is funnier, more playful, and more sophisticated – more cool even, more nonchalant in its sophistication – than has generally been acknowledged. Within that set of qualities, which are notoriously mercurial, one is relatively straightforward to define, to identify, to demonstrate. I mean irony. The principal aim of this thesis is to impart a clear sense of the presence of irony in *Beowulf*: to define it,

1 J.R.R. Tolkien, '*Beowulf*: The Monsters and the Critics,' in Lewis E. Nicholson (ed.), *An Anthology of* Beowulf *Criticism*, University of Notre Dame Press, Notre Dame and London, 1976, pp. 54-55.

2 Søren Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Irony with Continual Reference to Socrates, together with Notes of Schelling's Berlin Lectures*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1992.

identify it, and demonstrate it as a fundamental component of the poem. A secondary aim of this thesis is to offer concrete evidence to those who will pursue questions of humour and play in *Beowulf* or related texts. For that reason, the core of the following discussion is more taxonomic than analytic. It is an effort to show that we can be systematic in discussing the many light-hearted aspects of the poem. This may seem bloody-minded: a boring approach to irony certainly has an ironic ring to it. However, one thing it is not is arbitrary. While a shortage of studies in the lighter side of *Beowulf* may not last – while several recent publications suggest that the scholarship around Old English poetry is taking an increasing interest in its levity – there is an overwhelming weight of scholarship that posits an overwhelmingly solemn or reverential text. Such studies as Magennis, Tripp, and the Wilcox anthology[3] are recent turning points, but prior scholarship has given us an extremely developed system, if you will, of received wisdom about the poem. In Wilcox's words, 'a critical stranglehold has evolved as to what the poem means and how it works.'[4] It is a system that has not really processed the matter of levity, therefore it is a system that marginalises it. As a consequence, it is important to be systematic in establishing the presence of irony.

1. Towards a context-specific definition of irony

Before turning to apply a conception of irony to *Beowulf*, it is important to define it. The approach in this section is to cite a common use sense of 'irony,' then examine two scholarly accounts of irony that are informed by classical rhetoric. These descriptive accounts are considered in light of Kierkegaard's analytic approach to 'the concept of irony,' before we turn to the very difficult question of how irony was

3 Hugh Magennis, *Images of Community in Old English Poetry*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1996; Raymond P. Tripp Jr, *Literary Essays on Language and Meaning in the Poem Called 'Beowulf' – Beowulfiana Literaria*, E. Mellen Press, Lewiston (New York), 1992; Jonathan Wilcox (ed.), *Humour in Anglo-Saxon Literature*, D.S. Brewer, Cambridge, 2000.

4 Wilcox (ed.), *Humour in Anglo-Saxon Literature*, Introduction, p. 7.

viewed in Anglo-Saxon England. As we see, what little evidence that period has provided to us is contradictory, not conclusive. In the course of these discussions, this section notes that greater attention has been paid to the nature of irony in other textual traditions than in Old English poetry, particularly Old Norse and Middle English poetries. An effort to align Old English views of irony with modern views is aided by consideration of the 'transformation' theory of the joke (after Freud), the 'alienation' theory of comedy (after Bergson), and the 'superiority' theory of laughter (which resonates with attitudes expressed in *Beowulf* itself).

The *Oxford English Dictionary* gives three key meanings of the word 'irony:'[5]

> A figure of speech in which the intended meaning is the opposite of that expressed by the words used; usually taking the form of sarcasm or ridicule in which laudatory expressions are used to imply condemnation or contempt [...]
>
> (Figuratively) A condition of affairs or events of a character opposite to what was, or might naturally be, expected; a contradictory outcome of events as if in mockery of the promise and fitness of things [...]
>
> In etymological sense: Dissimulation, pretence, especially in reference to the dissimulation of ignorance practised by Socrates as a means of confuting an adversary [...]

Lanham defines irony as one of two things:[6]

- Implying a meaning opposite to the literal meaning.
- Speaking in derision or mockery.

Muecke's definition, also dualised, is more technical: irony is either a wordplay ('verbal irony'), where somebody says one thing and means the opposite, or else it is a function of situation ('situational irony'), where something happens to reveal a situation that is quite different from

5 T.J. Benbow, J.A. Simpson, E.S.C. Weiner, *et al.*, *The Compact Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd ed., Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1991, p. 878 (87). The following three definitions are direct quotations.

6 Richard A. Lanham, *A Handlist of Rhetorical Terms*, 2nd ed., University of California Press, Berkely, Los Angeles, and London, 1991, p. 92. The following two definitions are paraphrased.

someone's understanding of it.[7] There is no necessary contradiction between these approaches, nor are they exhaustive.

Many commentators have pointed to evidence of the ironic and related figures throughout *Beowulf*, as well as the broader corpus of Old English poetry, although they have drawn differing conclusions from this material. This thesis seeks to examine:

- What is referred to by 'irony' in discussion of *Beowulf*.
- What evidence exists to support an ironical reading of the poem, along with the limits to such supporting evidence.
- Whether such a reading is thoroughgoing, premised in an attitude of the narrator running throughout the poem, or *ad hoc*, premised in more or less sporadic incidents of irony and related rhetorical figures.

Lanham characterises irony as essentially the product of 'an allegorical habit [...], a habit that will juxtapose surface and real meanings.'[8] His characterisation is of interest to studies of humour and paronomasia in *Beowulf*, particularly because of the connection he draws with punning.[9] Lanham's rhetorical background is classical and scholarly, meaning that his concepts are fundamentally quite similar to those with which the *Beowulf* poet could have been familiar, given sufficient book learning. This is an important question, to which we shall return shortly: how familiar were the *Beowulf* poet and audience with any particular concept of *ironia*?

For Kierkegaard, irony is not only a habit and its affective manifestations; it is also a disposition, a governing attitude. Note especially his following theses:[10]

7 D.C. Muecke, *Irony*, Methuen (Critical Idiom Series: general editor John D. Jump), London, 1970, 'Introduction,' pp. 1-12.

8 *Op. cit.*, pp. 92-93.

9 *Ibid.*, pp. 126-128. His discussion of the pun is well worth reading as a case study of processes and motives in a rhetorical device.

10 O*p. cit.*, p. 6. The following six theses are direct quotations from the Hong and Hong translation.

VI. Socrates not only used irony but was so dedicated to irony that he himself succumbed to it.

VIII. Irony as infinite and absolute negativity is the lightest and weakest indication of subjectivity.

X. Socrates was the first to introduce irony.

XI. The more recent irony belongs essentially under ethics.

XIII. Irony is not so much apathy, devoid of the more tender emotions of the soul; instead, it must rather be regarded as vexation at the possession also by others of that which it desires for itself.

XV. Just as philosophy begins with doubt, so also a life that may be called human begins with irony.

This is typical Kierkegaard, we should acknowledge, didactic and categorical for all of its complexity. The claim that Socrates first introduced irony is vaguely absurd, although he presumably had his reasons for saying that. (Those reasons are not entirely clear to a reader of the dissertation, although Kierkegaard, perhaps wisely, always leaves plenty of scope for conjecture about what he is up to.) Nevertheless, Kierkegaard's is a view of irony pursued, in explicit terms, more rigorously than any other before or since: irony as human and negative, not ideal and positive.

For the purposes of this discussion, it is important to note two salient points about our key term. First, etymologically speaking, the word 'irony' derives from the Greek *eironía*, meaning 'dissimulation' or even 'ignorance purposely affected.'[11] It is a term derived from classical rhetorical studies, imported to England through the Roman church and its education system. Secondly, 'irony' is a word not used in Old English, although it was a term familiar to at least some educationally priviledged (ie. literate) persons in pre-Norman England — Bede describes it in his brief monograph *De Schematibus et Tropis sacræ Scripturæ*.[12] The strongest example of the word we have in Old English

11 *The Compact Oxford English Dictionary*, p. 878 (87).

12 Bede, 'De Schematibus et Tropis sacræ Scripturæ,' in *Patrologiae Cursus Completus*, Vol. 90, J.-P. Migne, Paris, 1862, 175-186.

is in a gloss to the Brussels M.S. version of Aldhelm's *De laude virginitatis*.[13] In line 5076 (after Goossens), *ironiam allegoriam* is glossed as *husp hux*, and *hironia* is glossed as *hux*. *Husp* (or *hosp* in its more common form) means 'reproach,' 'insult,' or 'blasphemy,'[14] while *hux* (or *husc*) means 'mockery,' 'derision,' 'scorn,' or 'insult.'[15] The existence of Old English glosses for *(h)ironia* seems highly significant. They prove some level of consciousness in Old English of this classic rhetorical term, and yet they suggest *ironia* was not peceived to be so important a critical term that it got adopted as an Old English word. That adoption is not evident in English texts written earlier than 1502.[16] *Hux* does not capture the full extent of *ironia* by any stretch, so while it may be an apposite gloss in context, it does not fully cover the range of meanings of the word, nor the etymological sense of it (numerous phrases existed in Old English to convey a sense of 'duplicity' or 'dishonesty'). So there is no direct translation for the term in Old English, nor, apparently, is there a sense that the language is missing it, since there is no evidence that it was adopted as a loan word. Although we can show that notions of irony existed in Anglo-Saxon England, and although this thesis can prove that different forms of irony in *Beowulf* show significant levels of contiguity, apparently this notion was not captured by any one phrase in Old English.

Bede, like Donatus some centuries before him,[17] characterises irony as an aspect of the allegorical mode:[18]

13 Louis Goossens (ed.), *The Old English Glosses of MS Brussels, Royal Library, 1650 (Aldhelm's De Laudibus Virginitatis)*, Paleis der Academiën, Brussels, 1974. A search of the online *Dictionary of Old English*, http://www.doe.utoronto.ca/ (accessed 23 September 2002), indicates 5 manuscripts in which *(h)ironia* is glossed in Old English. The MS Brussels version of Aldhelm's *De Laudibus Virginitatis* is representative of four. A fifth, attributed to Stryker, glosses *hironiam* as *þurh smicenesse & hiwunge*. J.R. Clark Hall, *A Concise Anglo-Saxon Dictionary*, 4th ed., University of Toronto Press, 1960, p. 184 and p. 311 cites the words *hiwung* and *smicernes* in T. Wright and R.P. Wülker (eds), *Old English Vocabularies*, London, 1884, p. 416. I have not had an opportunity to verify these last citations personally. They suggest a consciousness of the playful (at least of wordplay) in irony.

14 Clark Hall, *A Concise Anglo-Saxon Dictionary*, p. 191.

15 *Ibid.*, p. 197.

16 *The Compact Oxford English Dictionary*, p. 878 (87).

17 Gussie Hecht Tannenhaus, 'Bede's *De Schematibus et Tropis* – A Translation,' *The Quarterly Journal of Speech* 48 (1962), 237-238, shows that Bede's *exemplum* was

Allegoria est tropus quo aliud significatur quam dicitur, ut, Joan. iv: *Levate oculos vestros, et videte regiones, quia albæ sunt jam ad messem*. Hoc est, *intelligite, quia populi sunt jam parati ad credendum*. Hujus species multæ sunt ex quibus eminent septem: Eironeia, antiphrasis, ænigma, charientismos, parœmia, sarkasmos, asteismos.

Allegory *is a trope in which a meaning other than the literal is indicated, for example:*

> *Lift up your eyes and look on the fields, that they are white already unto harvest.*

In other words, Understand that the people are now ready to believe. This trope has many varieties, of which seven are prominent: Irony, Antiphrasis, Enigma, Euphemism, Parœmia, Sarcasm, and Asteismos.[19]

Unlike for Muecke, *The Oxford English Dictionary*, or the *hux* gloss, then, irony for Bede is a device distinct from the hostile derision of sarcasm, the mild-and-harsh of charientismos (euphemism), the refinement of asteismos (urbanity). Bede compares irony and antiphrasis directly:

De eironeia. Eironeia est tropus per contrarium quod conatur ostendens, ut: Clamate voce majore, Deus est enim Baal, et forsitan loquitur, aut in diversorio est, aut in itinere, aut dormit, ut excitetur. Hanc enim nisi gravitas pronuntiationis adjuverit, confitteri videbitur quod negare contendit.

De antiphrasi. Antiphrasis est unius verbi ironia, ut, Matth. xxvi: Amice, ad quid venisti? Inter ironiam et antiphrasin hoc distat, quod ironia pronuntiatione sola indicat quod intelligi vult. Antiphrasis vero, non voce pronuntiantis significat contrarium, sed suis tantum verbis, quorum est origo contraria.[20]

Irony is a trope by means of which one thing is said while its exact opposite is intended, for instance:

> *Cry aloud, for he is a god; [sic] either he is musing, or he is gone aside [...] or he sleepeth and must be awakened.*

a work on rhetorical figures and tropes by Aelius Donatus. This article was reprinted in Joseph M. Miller, Michael H. Prosser, and Thomas W. Benson (eds), *Readings in Medieval Rhetoric*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington and London, 1973, pp. 96-122.

18 Bede, 'De Schematibus et Tropis,' 184.

19 Tannenhaus, *op. cit.*, 249-250. Tannenhaus notes that the quotation is from *John* 4:25 (he numbers it according to the King James version).

20 Bede, 'De Schematibus et Tropis', *op. cit.*, 184.

Without the aid here of impressive delivery, the speaker will seem to be admitting what he really intends to deny.

Antiphrasis is irony expressed in one word, as for example:

Friend, whereto art thou come?

Irony and Antiphrasis differ in the following respect: irony, from the manner of delivery alone, indicates what it wishes to be understood; antiphrasis does not express a contrary thought through the vocal intonation, but merely through words used with a meaning contrary to their true, original meaning.[21]

There is a clear discrepancy between Bede and the *hux* gloss. Bede says that hostile derision is sarcasm, distinct from irony, but *hux* is hostile derision. I sense a similarity, too, in that both interpretations seem aware of the importance of delivery or performance, whereas the modern accounts of Lanham, Muecke, and possibly also Kierkegaard seem much more firmly premised in a literary understanding of the phenomenon. At the same time, not surprisingly, there is a common ground between Bede and Lanham,[22] many centuries after him, in the view that irony is an aspect of allegory. The disagreement between the *hux* gloss and Bede suggests there were differing perceptions of the nature of irony in Anglo-Saxon England. It also suggests those differences in perception bear some relation to the differences in perception we can observe today. Although it seems an obvious point to make, irony was clearly a complex matter 'then,' just as it is 'now.' This thesis takes an inclusive view: on the one hand, that irony may indeed bear some fundamental relationship with allegory; on the other, that all Bede's types of allegory might also be regarded as forms of irony. Irony is more than simply 'to mock,' but simply to mock can be an ironic phenomenon.

There is also a discrepancy down the ages, between the phenomenology of Lanham's irony and that of Kierkegaard's. For Lanham, the presence of irony indicates the allegorical mode; for Kierkegaard, it indicates the negative mode. Lanham thus stresses the awareness of mimesis that underpins a comparison between X and Y. To achieve ironic tension is to manipulate that mimetic connection. This

21 Tannenhaus, *op. cit.*, 250. Tannenhaus notes that the two quotations here are from *1 Kings* 18:27 and *Matthew* 26:50 respectively (he numbers them according to the King James version).

22 Lanham, *op. cit.*, pp. 92-93.

naturally aligns his account with theories of play.[23] Kierkegaard, by contrast, stresses the transgressive and questioning role of irony. His negativity theory is closer to 'break' theories of humour such as Freud's[24] and Bergson's.[25] Both versions would have irony as a fundamental aspect of rhetorical disposition, although Kierkegaard might wish to stress that it goes deeper than rhetoric. ('Deeper than rhetoric' is theoretically impossible, in my view, but we get his point.) Again, there are good reasons for taking an inclusive approach here. Irony is both playful and transgressive. In both ways, it can be cathartic. Rather than explore whether allegory or negativity is more adequate for explaining what we observe in *Beowulf*, this thesis takes both in combination, as a starting point for finding a version of irony that is useful specifically to the poem.

Vendler posits 'mimetic accuracy' as 'the virtue, the fundamental ethics, of art.'[26] Her point reminds us of the tension that exists between allegory and accuracy. An irony is an accurate dissimulation, a pointed obfuscation. Rather than have out the discussion at that abstract level, however, where both data and theory are likely to be vague, this thesis investigates the matter through the examination of a case study: *Beowulf*, with particular reference to its epithets. There is plenty of evidence to look at in other poems, of course. Medieval Germanic poetry contains no shortage of alternative case studies. One of the initial reasons for my confidence that *Beowulf* is ironic was the observation of a rich vein of irony running through the (in some ways analogous) poetic corpus of Old Norse. As Martínez Pizarro has shown, the scorn incident – the *senna* or *mannjafnaðr* – is a significant generic feature of eddic poetry.[27]

23 See, e.g., Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: a study of the play element in culture*, translator unnamed, The Beacon Press, Boston, 1955.

24 Sigmund Freud, *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious*, trans. James Strachey, ed. Angela Richards, The Penguin Freud Library Vol. 6, Penguin, London, 1991.

25 Henri Bergson, *Laughter – An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic*, trans. Cloudesly Brereton and Fred Rothwell, Macmillan, London, 1911.

26 Helen Vendler, *The Breaking of Style: Hopkins, Heaney, Graham*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge (Massachusetts) and London, 1995, p. 40.

27 Joaquín Martínez Pizarro, *Studies on the Function and Context of the SENNA in Early Germanic Narrative*, unpublished PhD thesis, Harvard University, Cambridge (Massachusetts), June 1976.

The poem called *Locasenna*[28] is the most straightforward textual instance of that feature. Reading it, Risden finds that 'The immediate purpose of the exchange, I judge, is humor, as participants who need cooperative conversation to assuage an already strained situation instead break rules of manner and relation, attacking each other rather than directing themselves to the point.'[29] There are many other texts in the *Poetic Edda* containing the scorn incident as a generic feature. We can see many instances also in the Old Norse skaldic corpus. Surviving skaldic poems show many examples of ridicule, both subtle and overt, which frequently rely on irony for their effectiveness. In both these Old Norse poetic traditions, ridicule tends to involve one character challenging another's sexuality,[30] martial prowess, or wisdom. This can be overt or subtle. Martínez Pizarro argues that it bears apposite analogy to an Old English poetic *flyting* tradition, which is manifest in *Beowulf*, particularly through the Unferþ episode.[31]

There are other ironies besides ridicule. A blatant case in point is in *Hárbarðzlióð*,[32] stanza 10, when Óðinn, disguised, declares to Þórr: *hylc um nafn sialdan* ('I seldom conceal my name'). This apophasis creates a dramatic-ironic tension between the awareness of readers or listeners, that Óðinn is lying in the very moment when he claims to be an infrequent liar, and the ignorance of Þórr. The droll voice ascribed to characters in some poems of the *Poetic Edda* and in many of the sagas is another manifestation of the ironic mode, typically taking the form of litotes or understatement. From *Brennu-njáls saga*, the mortally wounded Þorgrímr gives us some extremely droll last words in answer to

28 Gustav Neckel (ed.), *Edda: Die Lieder des Codex Regius nebst verwandten Denkmälern*, rev. Hans Kuhn, Carl Winter Universitätsverlag, Heidelberg, 1983, pp. 96-110.

29 E.L. Risden, 'Heroic Humor in *Beowulf*,' in Wilcox (ed.), *op. cit.*, p. 72.

30 Margaret Clunies Ross, 'Hildr's ring: a problem in the Ragnarsdrápa, strophes 8-12,' in *Medieval Scandinavia*, 6, 1973, 75-92; Margaret Clunies Ross, 'Þórr's Honour', in Heiko Uecker (ed.), *Studien zum Altgermanischen: Festschrift für Heinrich Beck*, Walter de Gruyter, Berlin, 1994, pp. 48-76; Preben Meulengracht Sørensen, *The unmanly man: concepts of sexual defamation in early northern society*, trans. Joan Turville-Petre, Odense University Press, Odense, 1983; Carol Clover, 'The Germanic Context of the Unferþ Episode,' *Speculum*, 55 (1980), 444-468.

31 Martínez Pizarro, *op. cit.*, pp. 27-28 and pp. 58-64. See also Carol Clover, *op. cit.*

32 Neckel (ed.), *op. cit.*, pp. 78-87.

the question of whether Gunnarr is inside his house: '*Vitið þér þat, en hitt vissa ek, at atgeirr hans var heima.' Síðan fell hann niðr dauðr.* ('"You figure that out for yourselves, but I know that his halberd was at home." After that he fell down dead.')[33]

There is a particular interest in skaldic poetry here. Like *Beowulf*, such poetry is often sophisticated in its political insights. The circumstances of composition for many skaldic poems were highly politicised. So, for example, Þjóðólfr of Hvin's *Haustlöng*[34] is apparently a public encomium for a shield that had been given to Þjóðólfr by the lord in whose presence he almost certainly performed the poem. Þjóðólfr's *drápa* is quite deferential towards the gift, yet it still clearly treats as ironic the narrative episodes that are inspired by that shield. So, for example, stanza 13:

> Hófu skjótt, en skófu,
> sköpt, ginnregin, brinna,
> en sonr biðils sviðnar
> (sveipr varð í för) Greipar.
> Þat's of fátt á fjalla
> Finns ilja brú minni.
> Baugs þák bifum fáða
> bifkleif at Þórleifi.
>
> *Shafts quickly began to burn, since the great powers had shaved them, and the son*[35] *of Greip's wooer*[36] *gets seared — a sudden disturbance in his passage occurred. That is depicted on my bridge*[37] *of the mountain-Finn's*[38] *footsoles. I received the ring's moving cliff,*[39] *decorated with grotesqueries, from Þórleifr.*

There are at least three ironical turns in this passage. First is the reference to Loki as a giant's son when he is also described as using the shape of a hawk to fly (that is assumed knowledge as far as this stanza is

33 Einar Ól. Sveinsson (ed.), *Brennu-njáls saga*, Íslenzk Fornrit, Vol. 12, Hið íslenzka fornritafélag, Reykjavík, 1954, p. 187.

34 Finnur Jónsson (ed.), *Den norsk-islandske skjaldedigtning*, Vol. 1B ('Rettet tekst, 800-1200'), Villadsen and Christensen, Copenhagen, 1913 (reprinted Rosenkilde og Bagger, Copenhagen, 1973), pp. 14-18.

35 Loki.

36 Giant.

37 Shield.

38 Giant, here Hrungnir.

39 I.e. the shield.

concerned). The giant's son is also a bird (he is also a half god); thus his status is somewhat problematic. Second is the depiction of Loki as the wings of his hawk body sustain injury: *sveipr varð í för*. This is a euphemistic handling of Loki's escalating troubles; Þjóðólfr's light-hearted treatment is not commensurate with the seriousness of the situation Loki is in. Third is the reference to his gift shield as *fjalla Finns ilja brú minni* ('the bridge of the mountain-Finn's footsoles'). This refers to the occasion when the giant Hrungnir was duped into standing on his shield, believing that Þórr would attack him from underground.[40] Only this third ironical turn counts as ridicule: it laughs at Hrungnir's fear and stupidity. Moreover, it does so indirectly, through a shield kenning. The previous two are an irony of situation and a verbal irony.

More pointedly political is the irony of Egill Skallagrímsson's *Höfuðlausn* ('Head-ransom') *drápa*. The irony is more subtle at the same time. This poem was composed, supposedly in one night, as an offering from the poet Egill to King Eirikr Blóðøx in order to dissuade the king from pursuing his death. The situation thus requires a deferential poem. Egill's great trick is to compose a poem that seems to be an encomium, but which on closer inspection is actually lukewarm towards the ostensible object of praise. The concluding stanza summarises the approach:[41]

> Bark þengils lof
> á þagnar rof;
> kannk mála mjöt
> of manna sjöt;
> ór hlátra ham
> hróðr bark fyr gram;
> svá fór þat fram,
> at flestr of nam.

40 This vignette is treated ironically by a similar kenning in a comparable poem, Bragi Boddason's *Ragnarsdrápa*, also apparently composed in thanks for a gift of a shield. For an edition of this poem, see Jónsson, *Skjaldedigtning*, Vol. 1b, pp. 1-4.

41 Sigurður Nordal, *Egils saga Skalla-Grímssonar*, Íslenzk Fornrit Vol. II, Hið íslenzka fornritafélag, Reykjavík, 1933, p. 192.

> *I carried the king's praise until the breaking up of the audience. I know the measure of speech for men's company. From the shape of laughs*[42] *I bore praise before the king. It fared forth in such a way that most people understood it.*

The kenning, *hlátra ham* ('the shape of laughs') is the pointed phrase of this stanza. Egill collocates his ostensible praise utterances with laughter, the gesture of ridicule, by saying they are similarly formed. Thus he puts the ostensible praise utterances themselves into question: are they genuine? An innocent reading of this stanza has it saying, 'I, a poet, used my resources to praise the king while people were listening, so that they did not depart before they knew his worth.' A skeptical reading of the underlying message has, 'I, who know how to work with meanings, publicly ridiculed the king whilst pretending to praise him. I did it so effectively that, when the audience members went their separate ways, most were well aware of what I had achieved.' The dual semiosis of simultaneously innocuous and skeptical interpretations is plausible: such 'dog whistle'[43] communications are a heroic yet pragmatic response to the political situation in which Egill found himself. Irony here is integrity in deceit, fronting up to trouble whilst eluding it. For those willing to consider the proposition that *Beowulf* is an anti-Danish poem, the 'dog whistle' model of communications offers a possible way out of the assertion, after Whitelock, that the language of the poem is

42 This kenning is hard to decipher. It may mean 'breast,' 'mouth,' 'voice,' or even 'smile.'

43 This is a term borrowed from Australian political commentary. It refers to the doubling of messages practised by gifted orators: one innocuous message presents itself to civil society; a second message, unacceptable in civil society, presents itself at a pitch that only 'dogs' can pick up. Its origin was as an explanation of John Howard's approach to the growing popularity of Queensland politician Pauline Hanson during his second term as Prime Minister. Asked for his views on her political agenda, which was widely characterised as populist racism, he defended the principle of freedom of speech. Howard's literal meaning, presented for the benefit of his principal constituency in conservative middle class families, was so arbitrary with respect to the issue at hand that it was more or less innocuous; the meaning for supporters of Hanson (they are the 'dogs' in this original application of the metaphor), meanwhile, was that Howard was eager not to antagonise them. See Tony Martin, 'The Dog Whistler,' *The Age*, 8 April 2000, Section 3 ('Saturday Extra'), 1.

transparently sympathetic to the Danes.[44] If *Beowulf* were an ironical text, 'obvious sympathies' might be a smokescreen.

That there is irony in Middle English poetry is also well known. Chaucer is rightly famous for being a funny poet. His *House of Fame*,[45] for example, combines parody, farce, and a powerful '*ingénu* irony'[46] in narrating a ridiculous fable that illustrates his thoughts on many themes. Chaucer's irony is politically sophisticated, in the sense that it is not particularly pro- or anti- anything much. His poems are merciless, but not really partisan. The irony is universal, in the sense of being directed against all comers more or less equally. There are grounds to argue that something similar applies to *Beowulf*: if the evidence of this thesis is accepted, all characters and all nationalities mentioned in the poem are treated with a mix of fascination and irony. *Beowulf* may be no more anti-Danish than it is pro-Danish: it may be nonchalant on the question of sympathetic allegiance.

That said, the Chaucer corpus is a decidedly remote poetic analogue to *Beowulf*. His are romance style poems by a translator of romance language poems. While all cross cultural analogies are fraught, an alliterative poem with more self-consciously archaic concerns than Chaucer's, such as *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, might be more apposite.[47] For the aims of this thesis, however, there are few examples where an ironic situation is established, and none where it is truly developed over the course of the narrative. The poem undoubtedly conveys a playful aspect to the society it depicts – exchanges in the third section between Gawain and the lady of the castle, in particular, give a powerful sense of the *frisson* between two mutually independent yet attracted agents – and this playful aspect would naturally involve some ironic detachment between the participants. There is a highly ironic situation in the opening scene, where no Knight is willing to defend the

44 Dorothy Whitelock, *The Audience of Beowulf*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1951, p. 105.

45 Geoffrey Chaucer, 'The House of Fame,' in Helen Phillips and Nick Havely (eds.), *Chaucer's Dream Poetry*, Longman, London and New York, 1997, pp. 112-218.

46 D.C. Muecke, *Irony*, Methuen, London, 1970, pp. 57-58.

47 J.R.R. Tolkien and E.V. Gordon (eds) *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, rev. Norman Davis, 2nd ed., Oxford U.P., 1968.

reputation for courage of King Arthur's court against the challenge laid down by the green knight:[48]

> 'What, is þis Arþures hous,' quoþ þe haþel þenne,
> þat al þe rous rennes of þur ryalmes so mony?
> Where is now your sourquydrye and your conquestes,
> Your gryndellayk and your greme, and your grete wordes?
> Now is þe reuel and þe renoun of þe Round Table
> Ouerwalt wyth a word of on wy es speche,
> For al dares for drede withoute dynt schewed!' (lines 309-315)

> *'What! Is this Arthur's house,' said he thereupon,*
> *the rumour of which runs through realms unnumbered?*
> *Where is now your haughtiness, and your high conquests,*
> *your fierceness and fell mood, and your fine boasting?*
> *Now are the revels and the royalty of the Round Table*
> *overwhelmed by a word by one man spoken,*
> *for all blench now abashed ere a blow is offered!'*[49]

The irony is not developed past this initial paradox, however — rather, the paradox is resolved by the demonstrably courageous act of Gawain, taking up the challenge. In *Beowulf*, by contrast, we find a poem that generates many ironic situations, that explores them deeply, that aligns them to analogous ironic situations by means of juxtaposition and contrast, and that develops them extensively. That contrast suggests the search for analogies is best conducted as a search for culturally commensurate elements of ironic poetry across time and space, rather than by trawling the poetic corpus of a given time and space with a view to its irony. For the purposes of this thesis, *Beowulf* has (much, much) more in common with Sylvia Plath's 1957 ironic antiquarian poem, 'A Lesson in Vengeance,'[50] than with Cædmon's *Hymn*.[51]

48 As Margaret Clunies Ross has suggested to me, the following quotation shows an interesting variation on the topos of the unfulfilled *beot* ('pledge' or 'boast'). That topos is discussed in Chapter 2.

49 J.R.R. Tolkien (trans.), *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, Pearl, and Sir Orfeo*, ed. Christopher Tolkien, George Allen and Unwin, London and Sydney, 1985 p. 22.

50 Taken from Sylvia Plath, *Collected Poems*, ed. Ted Hughes, Faber and Faber, London, 1981, p. 80:

Evidence of irony in Old English poetry has received attention from contributors to the recently published Wilcox anthology of articles on *Humour in Anglo-Saxon Poetry*.[52] Two of its contributors, Magennis and Tripp, have also published books that investigate some ironic aspects of

A LESSON IN VENGEANCE

In the dour ages
Of drafty cells and draftier castles,
Of dragons breathing without the frame of fables,
Saint and king unfisted obstruction's knuckles
By no miracle or majestic means,

But by such abuses
As smack of spite and the overscrupulous
Twisting of thumbscrews: one soul tied in sinews,
One white horse drowned, and all the unconquered pinnacles
Of God's city and Babylon's

Must wait, while here Suso's
Hand hones his tacks and needles,
Scourging to sores his own red sluices
For the relish of heaven, relentless, dousing with prickles
Of horsehair and lice his horny loins;

While there irate Cyrus
Squanders a summer and the brawn of his heroes
To rebuke the horse-swallowing River Gyndes:
He split it into three hundred and sixty trickles
A girl could wade without wetting her shins.

Still, latter-day sages,
Smiling at this behaviour, subjugating their enemies
Neatly, nicely, by disbelief or bridges,
Never grip, as their grandsires did, that devil who chuckles
From grain of the marrow and the river-bed grains.

51 A.H. Smith (ed.), *Three Northumbrian Poems*, Methuen, London, 1968, pp. 38-41. Smith has the Northumbrian and West Saxon versions in parallel text. The Northumbrian version is quoted in full in Chapter 1.

52 *Op. cit.*

Old English poetry in detail.[53] Since a number of their findings relate specifically to *Beowulf*, they are discussed in detail during the course of this thesis. *Double entendre* is an integral component of the riddles that appear in the Exeter Book; Nina Rulon-Miller shows that sexual innuendo can be a salient element of that *double entendre*, with evident humorous intent. She investigates Riddle 12 from the Exeter Book:[54]

> Fotum ic fere foldan slite
> grene wongas þenden ic gæst bere.
> Gif mec feorh losað fæste binde
> swearte Wealas hwilum sellan men.
> Hwilum ic deorum drincan selle
> beorne of bosme hwilum mec bryd triedeð
> felawlonc fotum hwilum feorran broht
> wonfeax Wale wegeð ond þyð
> dol druncmennen deorcum nihtum
> wæteð in wætre wyrmeð hwilum
> fægre to fyre me on fæðme sticaþ
> hygegalan hond hwyrfeð geneahhe
> swifeð me geond sweartne. Saga hwæt ic hatte
> þe ic lifgende lond reafige
> ond æfter deaþe dryhtum þeowige.

The irony serves several purposes here. One is to entertain a readership by use of titillating allusion to a socially proscribed manifestation of female sexuality (masturbation). A second purpose is 'a liberating release … affirming the law through sanctioning humour.'[55] Those purposes in themselves suggest that there is an inherent tension between the sexually insurgent hinting of the riddle and the socially legitimate references that allowed it to be preserved in writing. That tension constitutes an ironic motive.

Other fairly obvious instances of irony are to be found across the Old English poetic corpus. *The Fates of Mortals*[56] goes into some detail

53 Hugh Magennis, *Images of Community in Old English Poetry*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1996; Raymond P. Tripp jr., *Literary Essays*.

54 Nina Rulon-Miller, 'Sexual Humor and Fettered Desire in Exeter Book Riddle 12,' in Wilcox (ed.), *op. cit.*, pp. 99-126.

55 *Ibid.*, pp. 107-108.

56 Bernard J. Muir (ed.), *The Exeter Anthology of Old English Poetry – An Edition of Exeter Dean and Chapter MS 3501*, Vol. I, 2nd ed., University of Exeter Press, Exeter, 2000, pp. 244-247. The stylistic relevance of this poem to the focus of this

describing the awful possibility that one might die by falling out of a tree. This, it tells us, is comparable to being a bird in certain respects, chiefly the flapping of limbs wildly, but without the key birdlike ability of winged flight:

> sum sceal on holte of hean beame
> fiþerleas feallan bið on flihte seþeah
> laceð on lyfte oþþæt lengre ne bið
> westem wudubeames þonne he on wyrtruman
> sigeð sworcenferð sawle bireafod
> fealleþ on foldan feorð biþ on siþe. (lines 21-26)

This is slapstick, which makes it more properly the stuff of comedy than of irony. Its echoes include the contemporary Warner Brothers cartoon character, Wile E. Coyote, whose greatest comic moments only really commence once he has stepped off the cliff or tripped the wire: they revolve around his efforts to stave off recognition of his calamitous situation, taking the form of transcendental whimsy. Freud argues that this transformative goal, a profoundly revolutionary purpose, is the principal function of joking.[57] The ability of the joke to realise each person's subjective need to have things quite other than they are is one of its distinguishing features. Freud's theory is not so different from Bergson's,[58] that comedy is the moment when alienation becomes apparent. Nor is it irreconcilable with theories that humour is the moment of superiority. While a survey of early Germanic literature is not likely to prove any definitive unifying view of humour that was shared by the authors and by their audiences and readers, it might infer a

thesis is most clearly demonstrated at lines 1762b-1768 in *Beowulf*, where Hroðgar raises similar concerns in his speech:

> eft sona bið
> þæt þec adl oððe ecg eafoþes getwæfeð
> oððe fyres feng oððe flodes wylm
> oððe gripe meces oððe gares fliht
> oððe atol yldo oððe eagena bearhtm
> forsiteð ond forsworceð semninga bið
> þæt ðec dryhtguma deað oferswyðeð.

57 *Op. cit.*
58 *Op. cit.*

tendency towards the superiority model from the frequency with which laughter is portrayed as an agonistic phenomenon.[59]

This thesis takes a synthesis of those three theories – transformation, alienation, and superiority – as one of its starting points: that a moment of comic revolution is an alienating moment for the butt of the joke and an empowering moment for the subjective consciousness that benefits from the joke. For that approach, irony is the technical centrepiece, since it is all components of the joke up to but not necessarily including the levity or entertainment component. That is to say, irony is the transformative element within a joke. Its revolution reveals alienation and drives superiority. Irony is not necessarily funny, then, but humour is necessarily transformative.

2. Approaching the problem of irony in *Beowulf*

This thesis takes a fairly pragmatic approach to its centrepiece, its case study, the poem called *Beowulf*. That poem is many things to many people. To me it is an ironic thing. To explain that entails certain premises:

59 To laugh in an early Germanic text is typically to laugh at something or at someone: Grendel's *mod ahlog* ('mind exulted' — line 730b) when he saw the sleeping occupants of Heorot, because he was confident of having his way with them. I should acknowledge my debt for this point to the late Bernard Martin, whose advice was helpful to this project at a stage when conceptual assistance was (greatly) required. The Bernie Martin test for proving humour is like proving a murder: one needs to demonstrate clearly the malefactor, the motive or beneficiary, and the method for the joke. Commentaries on laughter in Old English deal with *Beowulf* as a secondary concern: Hugh Magennis, 'Images of Laughter in Old English Poetry, with Particular Reference to the "Hleahtor Wera" of *The Seafarer*,' *English Studies* 73 (1992), 193-204; John D. Niles, 'Byrhtnoth's Laughter and the Poetics of Gesture,' Wilcox (ed.), *Humor in Anglo-Saxon Literature*, pp. 11-32; Susie I. Tucker, 'Laughter in Old English Literature,' *Neophilologus* 43 (1959), 222-226. I regret that I have not seen Laura Ruth McCord, 'A Study of the Meanings of *Hliehhan* and *Hleahtor* in Old English Literature,' cited in the Introduction to Wilcox (ed.), *Humor in Anglo-Saxon Literature*, p. 6.

- Questions of the provenance of the poem, including time, place, and method of composition, do not bear directly on this thesis – essentially an aesthetic project – and so are considered as incidental matters rather than as central concerns.
- Questions of the interpretation of the poem matter a great deal, but usually the importance for this thesis is to maintain the widest possible range of interpretations for any given crux: irony requires that there be more than one sense to a given expression. This more or less rules out an interest in unifying theories of the nature of the poem — such as the questions of whether it is epic or elegaic, whether it should be classed as Christian or secular, and so forth.

Just using the term 'irony' can be culturally arbitrary in relation to the text, depending especially on how well read we assume the *Beowulf* poet to have been. It is a term borrowed from the classical rhetorical tradition to describe the rhetoric of a poetry somewhat alien to that tradition for reasons of convenience: irony seems to cover what we are describing more adequately than any other term available. To discuss the irony of *Beowulf* satisfactorily, then, requires that we reconcile a definition of irony with the nature of the poem.

The first chapter shows that a contrastive habit of the poem is fundamental to its nature. This contrastive element *a priori* generates textual conditions that are conducive to the presence of irony. In doing so, Chapter 1 finds the contribution of Elisabeth Liggins[60] is apposite to the task of defining irony for the purposes of this thesis, — that irony, technically speaking, consists in those instances where the poem points to the contrastive tension between expectations or cultural paradigms, or especially between the notional value of those on the one hand and the real world flow of events on the other.

The second chapter is a case study, applying the notion of a fundamentally contrastive poetics to show a dichotomy that exists between the concepts of word and deed. These concepts are synecdoches, in a sense, for the more general dichotomy that exists between all that is intended and all that is actualised. Chapter 2 finds that *Beowulf* makes much use of the distinction between what is

60 Elisabeth Liggins, 'Irony and understatement in *Beowulf*', *Parergon* 29 (1981), 3-7.

purported and what is realised to generate a steady ironic critique of the behaviour of its characters. Where Chapter 1 shows how a contrastive element *a priori* generates textual conditions that are conducive to the presence of irony, Chapter 2 demonstrates that the poet must have been aware of that conduciveness, because she or he has clearly exploited it.

The third chapter takes four cases where characters of *Beowulf* are presented as analogous or in contrast to one another. It shows that the relationship between similarity and difference is frequently undermined by the poet, so that we as readers are encouraged to view the poem's moments of comparison as inherently problematic. The nature of this approach is found to rest heavily on a use of the negative discursive mode (after Kierkegaard), which is the tendency to posit questions rather than assertions. Chapter 3 adopts the position that a moment of comparison is *a priori* a moment that generates the potential presence of irony. It points to that potential presence as a reminder of it. It also adopts the position that all aspects of the contrastive as they manifest or reveal themselves in the poem must be regarded as critically significant. It finds there is much irony of various types to be found in reading the ways characters in *Beowulf* are compared with one another.

The fourth chapter investigates the negative mode along an avenue that it itself would seem to recommend: examining the verbal ironies of the many instances of litotes in *Beowulf*. This aspect of the poem has previously received some detailed critical consideration,[61] and Chapter 4 attempts to build on that detailed work by reconciling a taxonomic approach informed by the contributions of Bracher and particularly of Shuman and Hutchings with the overarching theory of a negative mode informed by Kierkegaard and Liggins. It notes that not every litotes is ironic, in one sense, while in another it finds that even an 'unironic' litotes may extend the irony of the poem. Every instance of litotes is an instance of *Beowulf*'s contrastive poetics, a reminder of the potential presence of irony.

While the first part establishes a working definition of irony in *Beowulf*, outlines a contrastive poetics as the textual environment enabling irony, and describes the link between irony and the negative discursive mode, the strongest categorical statement of Part I is to find

61 R. Baird Shuman and H. Charles Hutchings II, 'The *un-* prefix: A means of Germanic irony in *Beowulf*,' *Modern Philology*, 52 (1960), 217-222; F. Bracher, 'Understatement in Old English Literature,' *PMLA* 52 (1937), 915-934.

there are indicators of the potential presence of irony. The second part is an effort to demonstrate a way past that point. By working systematically through the epithets of the poem, Part II shows that we can be categorical about reading for irony (although it is a lengthy process). Proof of this is the finding that we may establish several categorical taxonomies for the analysis of epithets shown to be ironic. Examining moments where irony potentially has a presence, according to Part II, we can rule on that potential methodically. The fifth chapter establishes the methodology for such a task. Chapter 5 shows the epithet is a rhetorical trope with a two part structure, consisting of the attributive phrase and the amplification of that phrase through its poetic context (both its prosodic phonic context and its semantic narrative context). It finds this two-part structure makes an ideal exponent of *Beowulf*'s contrastive poetics. It shows the potential for ironic tension that exists within and especially between the dual components of the epithet. It finds that we may proceed to read for the irony of the poem's epithets by seeking such tensions.

The sixth chapter applies the method developed in Chapter 5 to produce a series of close readings of the 291 epithets in *Beowulf* identified as ironic (more precisely, it is 288 instrances of an epithetic phrase plus 3 alternative manuscript readings). Chapter 6 is the most substantial chapter of this thesis and the key to its empirical credibility. It attempts to show exhaustively the proliferation and the interdependence of ironic forms that manifest through this one of the poem's many rhetorical tropes. That aspiration to exhaustiveness leads me to believe that, if there is a significant failing in this thesis, it is most likely to occur in Chapter 6. In part, that is because I have not managed to read every interpretive comment about *Beowulf*, have not managed to note down all that I have read, and have not managed to recall all that I have noted down. Thus I suspect there are several readings of attributive phrases in *Beowulf* which, if I had only taken them into account, would have ensured that an extra epithet went into the taxonomy, or that a given reading of an epithet received finer calibration. An equally telling reason is the inevitable failing of any attempt to survey subtle phenomena: even with the clearest of criteria, one fails to identify significant data. That is clearly the case in examining the irony of a poem that is one thousand or more years old, composed we know not exactly why, how, where, when, or by whom. There are plenty of

subtleties in the ironies of *Beowulf*. Nevertheless, overall, Chapter 6 is assuredly methodical and detailed in its presentation of the evidence.

The seventh chapter investigates the detailed findings of Chapter 6, and shows that it is possible to arrange the data according to at least two taxonomic schemes. It finds several groupings of topics and tropes respectively suggest themselves as categories for two mutually independent such taxonomies. It also finds that a classical paradigm, such as the categories outlined by Muecke,[62] is not so informative an approach to the data at hand, although it may well yield a plausible taxonomy. Chapter 7 proves the systematic nature of Part II. It also refers to the contributions of others whose comments on those topics and tropes contribute to our understanding of them as ironic.

I apologise in advance for what I believe is the principal flaw in this account of *Beowulf*: excess. To adopt the readings I propose is assuredly to overemphasise a set of disputable attitudes towards the subject matter of the poem, often premised in secondary or marginal senses of expressions in the poem. That is an inevitable consequence of the project at hand. I trust readers will balance my programmatic bias against more conventional readings, which in any case are predominant among most scholarly commentaries on the poem.

62 *Op. cit.*, pp. 51-78.

PART I

IRONY AND THE CONTRASTIVE IN BEOWULF

‘Contrast has often been recognised as an important force in the poem, but primarily in conscious structural ways. The depth to which the roots of contrast sink into the soil of *Beowulf* has yet to be acknowledged.’[1]

1 Raymond P. Tripp Jr, ‘Digressive Revaluation(s),’ in Harold Bloom (ed.), *Modern Critical Interpretations* – Beowulf, Chelsea House, New York New Haven Philadelphia, 1987, p. 64.

Chapter 1. Contrastive poetics and the use of irony

In differing ways, leading readers of *Beowulf* have been struck by what may loosely be called its contrastive poetics. By 'contrastive poetics' is meant a tendency to compare and play off one element against another, whether that be at the level of plot, of rhythm, of image, of syntax, of intertextual reference, of characterisation, or any other level. Allowing that there is much dispute about core aspects of the poem, the notion that the poem exemplifies such a style is more or less a consensus across the critical literature. This chapter examines that notion, investigating how the notion of contrastive poetics applies to *Beowulf*. It investigates the contrastive poetics as a multilevel phenomenon, implying that a tendency to play off one element against another can be observed as much in the rhythm and phraseology of the poem as in its rhetorical schemes and narrative arrangement. It examines the proposition that contrastive poetics are an enabling feature for irony within the poem, which is critical to the discussions of subsequent chapters.

It would not be easy to isolate a particular origin of the consensus among scholars or critical approaches around contrastive poetics. It is not confined to readings of *Beowulf*; it extends to other early Germanic poetry as well (although there are reasons for suggesting it is especially evident in *Beowulf*). A strong sense of the contrastive pervades most metrical schemes for the alliterative Germanic verse form.[1] The very concept of 'variation' is a critical acknowledgement that Old English verse may be characterised by a type of contrastive rhetoric. The term was so deeply embedded in the critical vocabulary of the field by 1922 that Klaeber (most uncharacteristically) does not acknowledge a source for 'variation' in discussing the poem's use of the trope.[2] In his

1 The seminal publication in this field is Eduard Sievers, *Altgermanische Metrik*, Max Niemeyer, Halle, 1893. Sievers' system is essentially predicated on the arrangement of 'lifts' and 'dips' in syllable stress across each verse line, so that one might characterise it as fundamentally contrastive. Sievers' approach has been widely accepted as a starting point in the study of Germanic alliterative versification.

2 Klaeber (ed.), *Beowulf*, Introduction, especially pp. lxv-lxviii.

famously titled section, 'Lack of Steady Advance,' dealing with the poem's digressive narrative style, Klaeber acknowledges Schücking, but he could just as easily have mentioned Ker or numerous others.[3]

As the scholarship around *Beowulf* and early Germanic literature in general grew and deepened, the notion of contrast for this poem in particular did likewise. The once popular theory that lines 1-2199 and lines 2200-3182 were originally two discrete poems (subsequently combined) was superseded by the argument that they are two macro sections of the one poem, composed to stand in a mutually contrastive relationship. If it is too simplistic to say that J.R.R. Tolkien swept the field with this latter argument, it is important to acknowledge the significance of the way he used it: Tolkien spoke definitively of a 'balance, an opposition of ends and beginnings' that pervades the whole spirit of the poem, that infuses the poem's arrangement, its plot, its drama, its speaking voices (including the narratorial), its phrasing, and even its rhythm (as distinct from its 'metre').[4] In Harold Bloom's strong phrase, Tolkien's is a 'strong' reading. It argues that the contrastive poetics in *Beowulf*, which must to some extent be regarded as a received element of the cultural environment in which the poem was composed, do not simply affect the style of the poem; they typify the poem thoroughly. There is a contrastive consciousness embedded in the poetic values of the text at every level. It is difficult, probably foolish, to read subsequent treatments of *Beowulf* and its contrastive style without reference to Tolkien's 1936 essay. His contribution was a green light for critics to engage imaginatively with the nexus between the style and the content of this long and difficult poem. By numerous different approaches, critics since Tolkien have investigated the affective disposition of the poem as a function (rather than, say, as an inhibitor) of its effective argument.

Reading *Beowulf* as deeply contrastive received radical support from Nist, who, in 1959, investigated the arrangement and deployment of key aspects of the plot of the poem. Nist finds that *Beowulf* is 'a three part monodrama,' rather than a poem in two parts. He argues it is comparable in the principles of its arrangement to a form of music – the

3 *Ibid.*, pp. lvii f.

4 J.R.R. Tolkien, '*Beowulf*: The Monsters and the Critics', in Lewis E. Nicholson (ed.), *An Anthology of* Beowulf *Criticism*, University of Notre Dame Press, Notre Dame and London, 1976, pp. 51-103.

classical fugue – presenting a number of (narrative) themes in an interwoven fashion, rather than in any strict historical or logical sequence. It is most helpful to quote at length from Nist here:[5]

> A careful study of *Beowulf* yields the following basic intentions of the poet: (1) To recount the well-known adventures of the bear's-son hero — the battles with Grendel, Grendel's dam, and the dragon. (2) To portray the details of Beowulf's life in a *pointillist* manner — a manner in keeping with variation, allusion, and cyclic progression (e. g., 419-424, 506-518, 530-581, 2177-2189, 2207-2210, 2359-2379, 2389-2396, 2426-2434, 2490-2508, 2729-2743). (3) To satisfy the antiquarian interests of the audience by acting as the mirror of society (e. g., all genealogies, hall feasts, historical lays). (4) To point Christian morals to a people not far removed from pagan times and heathen customs (e. g., 178-188, 1057-1062, 2291-2293, 2855-2859). (5) To deliver courtesy-book examples (nobility, generosity, loyalty, valor) to the comitatus members (e. g., 20-25, 71-73, 874-915, 1700-1781, 1900-1903, 1931-1962, 2000-2031, 2163-2176, 2599-2601, 2633-2660, 2739-2743, 3169-3174). (6) To provide a kind of epic setting for the major plot of the poem (e. g., 874-915, 1071-1159, 1931-1962, 2029-2069, 2426-2573, 2913-3007). (7) To uphold the relationship between lord and comitatus members by showing that princeless people are defenseless (e. g., 14-16, 1011-1019, 1169-1187, 1216-1231, 2472-2478, 2884-2891, 2910-3007, 3150-3155). (8) To substantiate the pervadingly sombre mood of the poem by giving vent to the lyric expression that man's life is short and uncertain (e. g., 1002-1008, 1761-1768, 2247-2266, 2444-2471, 2586-2590, 2764-2766, 3020-3027).
>
> These eight basic intentions, in turn, produce ten major themes or motifs. These major themes are designated as follows:
>
> **A** — Heroic setting bearing contrapuntally on the main plot.
> **B** — Courtesy-book exempla.
> **C** — A leaderless nation is defenseless.
> **D** — Mirror-of-society descriptions.
> **E** — Grendel motifs.
> **F** — Christian morals.
> **G** — Details of Beowulf's life.
> **H** — Mortality lays.
> **I** — Grendel's dam motifs.
> **J** — Dragon motifs.
>
> To chart these ten major themes according to their appearances in the poem is to understand graphically the cyclic structure of *Beowulf*:

5 John A. Nist, *The Structure and Texture of* Beowulf, University of Sao Paulo Faculty of Philosophy Sciences and Letters, Sao Paulo, 1959, pp. 22-24. Three of Nist's original endnotes have not been recorded here.

THE STRUCTURE OF *BEOWULF*: CHART I

CYCLIC LINKAGE OF THE TEN MAJOR THEMES

ACT I (1-1250)

A B C D B A D A E D E E C E C D E D F E G D F D E F D D G A E D G G D D E B F E F E E A E E D A (J) D E F A E E D H C D A D F D A B A C D C A D I.

Act II (1251-2199)

I E I D I I A D I A I D B I I I I F I E I D I F B A F H E D B D B A F A B D B D A B D G E A B A E (J) D I I D B G G.

Act III (2200-3182)

A G J J H J J J F J G F J E (I) G A G B J G A H D A J E J J J D B A B J G J B D B F J D J D A J D F J C J C A H D J F J J D C D B.

From this study of *Beowulf* the following conclusions prevail: (1) The structure of *Beowulf* is cyclic; therefore, it should not be adversely criticized for not adhering to the principle of simple linear narration. (2) Themes are introduced not to stand alone, but to be developed and linked with others by fugal variation. (3) The principle of the association of ideas is the chief psychological method employed by the author for variation, development, and recapitulation. (4) Simple, Homeric repetition is avoided, since it conflicts with the principle of variation. (5) Slowly and carefully the historic background emerges, until at last it has become part of the sorrowful foreground; to dismiss allusions to this background as being episodic and digressive is to mutilate the structural unity of the poem and render the tragic ending nearly meaningless. (6) The principal methods and themes of the cyclic structure function throughout all three acts of *Beowulf*, thereby supporting a theory of single sophisticated authorship; the three acts, in turn, indicate that *Beowulf* is a heroic-elegiac monodrama and not an epic in the Homeric sense of the term.

Nist's scheme is of more than illustrative value, critical anachronisms notwithstanding. His schematic reading of the poem is unique. In showing how each moment in the poem needs to be read as though juxtaposed with every other moment, his is a radical contribution. His fugue simile is expressively apposite, if not 'proportionate,' to the poetical phenomenon he describes.

The implications of Nist's study resonate far beyond the thematic arrangement of the poem. Beowulf is rendered comparable to Sigemund by the dragon fight digression (lines 867b-897), which an unnamed poet

compares to Beowulf's fight with Grendel, and because Beowulf goes on to encounter a dragon himself. But he is also rendered comparable to Sigemund by virtue of phraseology: unlike any other human characters in the poem, Beowulf and Sigemund are both referenced by the epithet *aglæca* ('monster' — see Chapter 3 for a close reading of the comparison). This in turn renders them comparable to their adversaries, since Grendel and the dragons are also classed as *aglæcean*. Beowulf's handstrength of thirty men is an equivalent for Grendel's own powers, which enable him to eat thirty men in one assault. Scyld's humble beginnings as a foundling contrast pointedly (and ironically) with the glory of his funeral. Beowulf's career appears to have a comparable trajectory. The two are obviously similar figures, representing the beginning and ending points of the story that is told through this poem, but they also show how beginning points and ending points should be quite dissimilar. There are obvious similarities between the roles and situations of Hildeburh, Wealhþeow, and Freawaru, politically significant wives trying to keep the peace within their communities. The epithet that describes their stereotyped role, however, is attributed not to them but to a more bloodthirsty queen. Modþryðo[6] is called *freoðuwebbe* in line 1942a. That phrase, which ostensibly highlights similarity, actually draws attention to difference. That is very much of the nature of contrast, of course: it can point up either aspect — or both. This thesis tends to emphasise readings of difference in the poem more than those of similarity, readings of oddness more than of congruence, but contrastive poetics are equally predisposed to convey both aspects. There is so much material one might examine in this vein that Shippey felt obliged to warn of oversupply, as though worried that nobody would read the poem out of an excessive focus on its contrastive juxtapositions and 'interlaces':[7]

6 One should acknowledge the inconclusiveness of this character's name. The manuscript reading for line 1931b is *mod þryðo wæg*, which Klaeber (after Kemble) reads as *Modþryðo wæg*. An alternative reading has the character name as Þryð. That discrepancy does not have a substantial bearing on any question of irony in the poem, as far as I am aware: both names are equally transparent in their etymologies and appear equally pointed in their semantics.

7 The term 'interlace' may be misleading. It is probably important to distinguish between the simultaneous narrative sequence of much medieval literary interlacing (for example, the later Arthurian romances) and the contrapuntal analogic method that characterises the narrative arrangement of *Beowulf*.

> There are [...] two caveats to enter. One is that many more 'interlaces' can be discovered between passages which have not been discussed and even between those which have. Wealhtheow relates thematically with her daughter Freawaru, for instance, through their shared vulnerability, and is juxtaposed with a third 'unhappy lady', Hildeburh, not-quite-heroine of a story sung in Heorot (lines 1068-1159). The kernel of *that* story, furthermore, is one of the sword-presentation scenes [...] which run with evident comparability throughout the entire poem. At times one feels the 'interlaces' of *Beowulf* increase geometrically.
>
> The second caveat, though, is that in the hands of modern literary critics this admitted feature of the poem's structure is often drawn out with grotesque laboriousness, every incident being dwelt on till it renders up all individual life to a generalised background of 'significance' [...] Dark Age audiences have had great strain placed on their knowledge and sensitivity in all that has been said about the complicated histories of one royal house and another. Of course in those times people had to be cleverer to survive. Still, they also had to respond without study-aids. Subtlety in the pursuit of abstractions (especially dully moral ones) should not be pressed too far.[8]

It is hard not to admire such a trenchant critique, and Shippey's *reductio ad absurdum* of the 'significance' approach to *Beowulf*'s contrastive poetics presents valid 'caveats.' However, if it is an abstraction to note that we cannot read one instance of *aglæca* – in line 2592a – without being mindful of another – in line 893a – then the whole process of noticing how we read is an exercise in abstractions. Precisely what is, or is not, a proportionate degree of subtlety in the pursuit of abstractions comes down to a question of judgement. While this thesis is respectful of Shippey's judgement, it adopts a more abstract reading approach than he recommends. There must be limits to the extent of interlace, but these are limits imposed by the critical methodology; they cannot be the limits of our unknown poet's imagination.

The poetics of *Beowulf* also serve an agglutinative function, as Overing has explained.[9] She adapts the semiotics of Charles Peirce to describe a process that is observable across the course of the poem, whereby successive distinctive significances accrete to a given term as it is used in different ways and contexts. Her examples include the cup,[10] the ring,[11] and the sword,[12] terms whose meaning is subtly expanded over

8 T.A. Shippey, *Beowulf*, Edward Arnold, London, 1978, pp. 34-35.

9 Gillian R. Overing, *Language, Sign, and Gender in* Beowulf, Southern Illinois University Press, Carbondale and Edwardsville, 1990.

10 *Ibid.*, p. 50.

11 *Ibid.*, p. 53.

successive usages. Another salient example is the principal words for alcoholic beverage: *medu*, *win*, *ealu*, and *beor*. The first instance of these is in the second sentence of the poem: *meodosetla* (line 5b). Here it stands nominally for festivity, but principally it serves as a synechdoche for sovereignty (albeit sovereignty lost). Later Hroðgar uses the phrase *medoheal* (line 484a) to describe the post-festivity location of sorrow and bereavement, the location of evidence that heroes have not made good their pledges to defeat Grendel, but have died in the attempt. In this sense, the meadhall becomes a metaphor for the suffering that often follows from joyous or festive consumption of alcohol. Later again we see the phrase *meodowongas* (line 1643b) used to describe the fields around the meadhall. Here the environment itself is a suggestion of festive celebration to come. If the semantics of the first two instances are both rather depressive, there is a distinctly cheerful quality about the third. And yet the third clearly draws on concepts of home and sovereignty that are central to the first: home is where one's feasts are held. There are many more references to alcohol one might examine in this vein.[13] The three in this paragraph, however, show how one lexical item (*medu*) can receive expanded significance throughout a poem such as *Beowulf*, used in different contexts within the one text. The fact that, for an agglutinative poetics, distinctive significances may accrete to a given signifier does not obscure their distinctiveness, nor does it obscure their common features. The contrastive accretion of distinctive significances in this fashion may draw attention both to differences and to similarities between those significances.

Fred C. Robinson, writing some time before Overing, focuses on a particular aspect of this contrastive poetics: apposition. Robinson posits a model which takes the appositions of *Beowulf* and of comparable Old English poems as the nub of that poetic genre. He argues that 'variation' – the technique of apposing two or more non-identical elements within a given construction, be it phrase, clause, sentence, fitt, or other – is at once the main and the most remarkable device of semantic development and expansion available to such a text.

12 *Ibid.*, p. 54.

13 Two close readings of the alcohol motif in *Beowulf* are: Magennis, *Images of Community*; Paul Edwards, 'Art and Alcoholism in *Beowulf*,' *The Durham University Journal*, 72 (New Series 41 – 1980), 127-131.

> Apposition, by its very nature, conditions readers to read the poem in a certain way. It is a retarding device and thus forces us to read reflectively, pausing to consider an object or action from more than one perspective as the poet supplies alternate phrasings for the same general referent. It is paratactic and so implies relationships without expressing them, thereby adding to the elliptical quality which is importantly present in the narrative as a whole. Apposition is predominantly nominal and adjectival and thus contributes to that sense of stasis in the narrative whereby a state or situation seems to be dwelled on in preference to 'a straightforward account of action.'[14] Appositions also serve as transitional devices, enabling the poet to move swiftly and easily from one subject to another — even within the limits of a single sentence.[15] Beyond these effects, however, apposition functions in various ways to remind the poem's audience of the multiple levels of meaning present in the words that make up the traditional Old English diction as it was adapted by the poet of *Beowulf*.[16]

His argument is supported, both intentionally and otherwise, by the arguments of several other scholars. It is a thesis that sits quite comfortably alongside the semiotic model developed by Overing. One obvious constraint is that an instance of apposition relies upon a syntactical adjacency of its constituent terms. The concept of 'variation' is not so tightly regulated. That said, one danger of traditional variation theory – a reason counting in favour of Robinson's term 'apposition' – is its bias towards an unmitigatedly accumulative semantic model, suggesting that apposed elements inherently augment each other. The more 'variations' there are, according to that argument, the more meaningful the language of a poetic corpus becomes. It may be true enough for us, reading a dead language and attempting to compile dictionaries and concordances from the evidence, but it does not allow for the more complex and dynamic role such a technique must have performed within its original time and place, a living context in which it was a current poetic technique. Apposition, or variation, is not a monologic phenomenon. Like any cultural form, it allows room for play: line 3 may pull down what lines 1-2 have constructed, while an

14 Robinson is quoting Klaeber, *op. cit.*, p. lxvi.

15 [Robinson's note] See, e.g., the apposition 'se grimma gæst [...] mære mearcstapa' (102-3), which the poet uses to swing his focus from Grendel's malevolent character to his habitat (which then becomes the subject of the ensuing lines); or 'feorh [...] hæþene sawle' (851-52), which moves attention from where Grendel dies to the fate of his soul: 'Þær him hel onfeng.'

16 Fred Robinson, *Beowulf and the Appositive Style*, University of Tennessee Press, Knoxville, 1985, pp. 60-61.

apparently laudatory line 921b may be quite subversive if embedded in a certain appositional sequence.

There are reasons why one might not choose to take the poem *Beowulf* as an indicative example of the appositive style, however. Overing's model is strong on the point that semantic development within *Beowulf*'s poetics is not confined to strict *ap*position, but is a function of all its types of *juxta*position, both intratextual and intertextual.[17] In this respect, her model appears less attractive to an oral-formulaic theory of the transmission of *Beowulf*, which tends to privilege the trope of apposition by virtue of the adjacency it requires. Adjacency is obviously a mnemonically significant feature for an oral epic poet. But *Beowulf*, as Nist has shown, is an example of a poem not much constrained by the need for adjacency. It transcends those mnemonic limits quite freely. Its themes are spread across the whole poem, being revisited in differing sequences and with differing frequency for all of 3182 lines. The poem establishes a very clear comparison between Beowulf and Sigemund, returning to this indicative example, which can be described as an instance of 'appositive style' only if we broaden the meaning of the term 'apposition' to include rhetorical features not involving adjacency — hence rendering the term itself questionable. There is a difference of quality, not just quantity, between a 'suspended apposition' that completes itself in a 'symmetrical location' one or two lines later, on the one hand, and a juxtaposition completed across an expanse of almost seventeen hundred lines, on the other.

Robinson's formulation accounts more satisfactorily for the style of other Old English poems. For *Cædmon's Hymn*,[18] the oldest recorded poem in English, it is somewhat closer to the mark:

> Nu scylun hergan hefaenricaes uard
> metudæs maecti end his modgidanc
> uerc uuldurfadur sue he uundra gihuaes
> eci dryctin or astelidæ
> he erist scop aelda barnum
> heben til hrofe haleg scepen
> tha middungeard moncynnæs uard

17 *Op. cit.*

18 A.H. Smith (ed.), *Three Northumbrian Poems*, Methuen, London, 1968, pp. 38-41. Smith has the Northumbrian and West Saxon versions in parallel. I quote the Northumbrian version here.

eci dryctin æfter tiadæ
firum foldu frea allmectig.

It is possible to read the *Hymn* as a linear text, without taking line 9b as a syntactic parallel to line 1b. I read four clauses in the poem – lines 1-3a, 3b-4, 5-6, and 7-9 – all of which contain appositional sequences.[19] Those sequences do not close off reference to earlier and later clauses of the poem, and there are obvious syntactic relations between them, but their frames of reference are not demonstrably proleptic. Many examples may be found across the corpus of Old English poetry, North and South, early and late, where the argument may be read in a similarly linear fashion. To talk of linearity does not imply a lack of textual self-awareness: the Exeter Book elegies are essentially linear in their argumentation, but acknowledging such linearity is not a suggestion that intratextual reference is constrained, or that the end of the poem has not been envisaged in the beginning of the poem. The point is one of rhetorical form. *The Seafarer*, for example, progresses in stages from the journey of the body to the journey of the soul. *The Wife's Lament*, not the easiest poem to interpret, appears to move from the solitary suffering of a victim of conspiracy to a vicarious suffering on behalf of a far-off 'friend.' The linear development that underpins the argument of these poems is conditioned by appositive variation. As the dragon-slayer references prove, however, we cannot read *Beowulf* in such a way. Intratextual references, established by types of juxtaposition that are not apposition, are essential to the way the poem's basic meanings are fashioned. Quite aside from the question of textual self-awareness, the poem is simply not linear — it is 'more like masonry than music.'[20] There is an appositive style for Old English poetry, it is agreed, but *Beowulf* is no perfect example of it.

With that difference in mind, *Beowulf* is still an Old English poem — still immersed in tropes of variation, and reliant upon the grammar of apposition as it applies to Old English verse to carry much of its meaning. There is still a highly frequent use of apposition; hence we can infer the poem's apposition realises stylistic functions. However,

19 The first clause, moreover, can be broken down into two movements – lines 1-2a and 2b-3a – each of which contains an appositional sequence.

20 Tolkien, *op. cit.*, p. 83. In making his point, Tolkien seems not to have considered music forms where the main interest lies outside the melodic component.

apposition does not have a monopoly or even necessarily a predominance among techniques of juxtaposition. If it were appropriate to regard the poem in terms of the 'white space' of a page,[21] the spatial proximity of one element to another is not a necessary condition for the collocation of those elements. Collocation, or rather juxtaposition, may occur across infinite expanses of poetic space. In Part II, we see how this broad ranging collocative capacity is an extremely effective aspect of *Beowulf*'s narrative amplifications and contrastive offsets.

Apposition is not simply a technique of juxtaposition; it is also a marker for it. Instances of apposition denote that the elements apposed are to be read in certain ways. One way is as a variation, where the meaning of one term harmoniously amplifies the meaning of another. Another way is as a contrast, where the meaning of one term contrastively amplifies, or is at odds with, the meaning of others.[22] Frequently there is a mixture of both readings, where a contrastive amplification plays off a harmonious amplification in a given sequence. One example is in the following excerpt, taken from the funeral preparations of the final fitt:

> alegdon ða tomiddes mærne þeoden
> hæleð hiofende hlaford leofne. (lines 3141-3142)
>
> *They then placed in the middle the great king, the heroes lamenting, their beloved lord.*

There is an obvious amplification of *mærne þeoden* in the symmetrically[23] apposed *hlaford leofne*. The latter imports a new paradigm of significances to the former. In the standard appositional location, meanwhile, abutting those two collocated phrases, sits *hæleð hiofende*, agreeing with the verb phrase *alegdon þa tomiddes*[24] — also in

21 With apologies to the true colours of vellum.

22 This is not to argue that variation and contrast are necessarily different, or even necessarily distinct, phenomena. It is to distinguish between a style of variation which is conceived as 'developmental' and a use of contrast which is not always a form of variation.

23 The term 'symmetrical' is used here to describe the location of elements according to the criteria of poetic metre, and not of graphic layout.

24 I read *hlaford leofne* as a second object (by variation) of *alegdon þa tomiddes*, although it is also possible to read it as an object of the participle *hiofende*. Either

a symmetrical position. Now here, too, is a collocation. The syntax of line 3142a identifies it with line 3142b: in each case the qualifier follows the substantive. Likewise, their alliteration and other phonic resonances mean neither half line could be heard without an awareness of the other. If line 3142b is an apposition, suspended by half a line, that amplifies line 3141b, line 3142a is an apposed phrase offsetting that amplification. Occupying the standard location for an apposition,[25] hence driving the suspension of the process of collocating lines 3141b and 3142b, is a contrastive statement. It is the heroes lamenting, not the great and beloved king and lord.

We can read those half lines even more closely, finding more detailed appositional amplifications and contrasts within amplifications and contrasts. Whereas this thesis avoids marking punctuation in quotations from Old English poetry, other than of sentence-ends (precisely in order to facilitate this sort of discussion), it is conceivable, though extremely unlikely, that the above-quoted couplet might be punctuated as follows:

> alegdon ða, tomiddes, mærne, þeoden,
> hæleð, hiofende, hlaford, leofne. (lines 3141-3142)

It would be in keeping with the mood of the passage, which is both stirring and deliberate. It is rhythmically defensible. Importantly, it shows how, even within individual half lines, the collocative processes of comparison and contrast may be discerned: *þeoden* is an amplification of *mærne*; *leofne* is an amplification of *hlaford*; *hiofende* is in contrast to *hæleð*; and it is clear that *tomiddes* serves to amplify *alegdon þa*.[26] Significantly, the word *hæleð* conveys an amplification of those apposed elements towards which its half line, taken as a phrase, also serves as a

way, the two accusative case phrases are rendered similar by syntax, while *hæleð hiofende* is a syntactical contrast to both.

25 'Standard,' that is, in the sense that it is the syntactical location of a simple apposition. Any other location that is argued to house an apposition (such as the 'symmetrical apposition' or 'suspended apposition' discussed above) is a 'non-standard' apposition in the sense that it relies upon a somehow complicated form of the syntactical procedure for appositive collocation.

26 Such a reading involves ascribing a level of figuration to the use of verbs and verb phrases in *Beowulf*. Cf Christine Brooke-Rose, *A Grammar of Metaphor*, Mercury, London, 1965, pp. 1-2, describing the use of metaphor through Old English verbs.

contrastive offset: while half line 3142a is a contrastive offset to half lines 3141b and 3142b, the word *hæleð* is of a piece with the connotative values of those half lines. In a sense, then, it performs both functions simultaneously. There is a tension between the two functions that is played out most pointedly in this half line. That tension is difficult to characterise, because its essential quality is that a unit of speech that seems to be of a given type X is also type Y — or, if it seems to be type Y, it is also type X. In this respect, it is reminiscent of the ambiguity central to many of Wittgenstein's propositions on meaning.[27] It is hard to categorise grammatically because its different functions are played out at distinct syntactic levels, the phrase and the word. Rhetorical lexicon, however, provides us with a term to describe this tension between distinctive significances, this quality of being simultaneously the one and the other. The term is irony.

There are several ironies evident in the passage under discussion. It is ironic that those who honour Beowulf in death should be denominated by the epithet *hæleð*, since – Wiglaf aside – they have been inadequate comrades in his time of need.[28] Compounding this particular ironic point is that the unheroic behaviour contrasts so pointedly with the behaviour of the Geats by Grendel's mother's mere, and resonates so strongly with the behaviour of the Danes there. At the same time, that a warrior *hæleð* should *hiofan* in Old English is inevitably a moment of some ironic tension. As a third irony, well may the Geats bewail the passing of Beowulf, for with him goes their kingdom's capability to defend itself against eager foes.

In this chapter so far, we have seen how the poem *Beowulf* is thoroughly marked by contrastive poetics. We have seen how those contrastive poetics are not confined to, or predominantly reflected in, any particular aspect of the poem's style (such as its arrangement, its 'variations,' or its appositions); they are reflected through the poem at many levels. We have seen how those contrastive poetics are related to an ironical sensibility that the poem evinces. It is helpful to examine the suggestion that irony is a feature of the text which is somehow related to

27 Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G.E.M. Anscombe (parallel text), Basil Blackwell, Oxford, 1963, Part I, pp. 1-172e.

28 Wiglaf criticises this failing in lines 2864-2891. As I read it, the members of Beowulf's retinue who let him down during the dragon fight are assumed to be present for his funeral.

its contrastive poetics. That suggestion has been made most concertedly by Elizabeth Liggins, whose article on 'Irony and understatement in *Beowulf*'[29] is considered closely in this chapter.

At least for now, when we speak of the ironic, we are not necessarily speaking of the comic. This is an important distinction, for many of those who credit an ironic element in the poem are not prepared to concede that it is in whole or part comical.[30] An example already cited is Grendel's refusal to pay *wergild*, which Karhl calls 'ironic litotes but not a joke.'[31] Such a statement reflects a shared understanding of sorts around the notion of a figure that is technically ironic, without necessarily being comical or playful.[32] It is a problematic separation, but a useful distinction for the purposes of advancing this chapter.[33] If we turn to the example of Grendel's refusal to compensate Hroðgar, centred on line 156,[34] it is not far fetched to identify what Lanham calls a 'bistable illusion,'[35] which is volatile at its point of conjunction. One

29 *Op. cit*.

30 Against that view, a countervailing view seems to be that of Tripp, who, I infer, regards the ironic turns of *Beowulf* as generally comical: 'Humour, Wordplay, and Semantic Resonance in *Beowulf*,' Wilcox (ed.), *Humour in Anglo-Saxon Literature*, pp. 49-69; *Literary Essays*; *More about the fight with the Dragon:* Beowulf *2208b-3182: Commentary, Edition, and Translation*, University Press of America, Lanham, 1983. Others credit some level of comedy, but less than Tripp: for example E.L. Risden, 'Heroic Humor in *Beowulf*.

31 A. Leslie Harris, 'Litotes and Superlative in *Beowulf*,' *English Studies*, 69 (1988), 3.

32 I mean each of these terms, 'ironic,' 'comical,' and 'playful' in the same sense as they are used in the Introduction.

33 Of course, the existence of a pure 'technical irony' is technically impossible. Every rhetorical ploy, whether intended or not, has rhetorical consequences. Irony, a figure that serves partly to unpack conventional associations between the semantic elements of signs, cannot be employed without 'begging the question' of its subject matter. That is to say, the presence of irony is inevitably associated with an ironical attitude towards its subject matter. Its is a critically scrutinising rather than a phatically venerating approach. Although this chapter adopts the distilled notion of 'technical irony,' for the purpose of demonstrating that ironic figures are present in *Beowulf*, it can only be an interim measure. Once there is simple proof of irony's presence in the poem, a deeper interest will be in the significance of the fact.

34 See Chapter 4 for a close reading of several litotes, in lines 144-163, including this one.

35 *A Handlist of Rhetorical Terms*, p. 127. The quoted phrase is taken from Lanham's definition of the pun. The concept is strikingly similar to Wittgenstein's semantic

aspect of the illusion is the fact of murder, the other is Grendel's alegality. This would make the passage technically ironic if we took a bistable illusion which juxtaposes surface and real meanings as our criterion. Discussion of 'bistable illusions' is not wholly satisfying for the purposes of this thesis, however. It reads as the imposition of one culture's criteria on another culture's artefact. An alternate approach is that of Liggins, who gets around the cultural obstacle somewhat (that is to say, she works in the opposite direction) by commencing with the critical commonplace that there are 'contrasts' in the text and then making contrastive tensions a benchmark for irony.[36]

Liggins' method does not yield exactly the same version of irony as Lanham has outlined, as mutually compatible as their models may ultimately be. Hers is a focus more on processes of creating tension than the resulting allegorical contiguities:

> The poet rings numerous changes on his pattern of contrasts. Much has been written about contrasts between light and dark, good and evil, youth and age, joy and sorrow. He contrasts characters, both in the main story and in the episodes, he contrasts past with present, or present with future time. Above all, he is concerned with the difference between a man's thoughts, wishes or hopes and the way in which events actually turn out. The contrasts contribute towards the overall structure of the poem. I suggest that they also express a significant part of the poet's philosophy.[37]

Liggins and others have commented at length on various forms of irony in *Beowulf*. Liggins identifies two basic types: 'contrast' and 'understatement,' giving her own examples of each respectively.[38] Harris picks *litotes* and the superlative as the poem's main tropes, although he does not go closely into the question of irony.[39] Liggins does not ask in her article whether forms of understatement, such as *litotes*, constitute ironic figures, although I infer that she regards them as such. Certainly, there is much understatement to be found in the poem that points to tension between contrastive expectations or contrastive cultural paradigms.

ambiguities, *op. cit.*, as well as the 'dog-whistle' parallel meanings described in the Introduction to this thesis and in Martin, 'The Dog-Whistler.'

36 Liggins, *op. cit.*

37 *Ibid.*, 5.

38 *Ibid.* 3-7.

39 'Litotes and Superlative in *Beowulf*.'

Beowulf's prefatory fitt, dealing primarily with Scyld Scefing, is perfectly indicative of the sorts of 'contrasts' or tensions to which Liggins has referred. The first sentence of the poem may be ironically intended. Certainly lines 6b-11, 43-46, and 50b-52 evince a level of ironic sensibility. As discussed in Chapter 3, their fascination with origins and ends is profound. Similarly, there is much irony to be found in the many digressions of *Beowulf*. Those digressions frequently involve movements in time forwards or backwards from the main narrative. The proleptic digressions often play upon, and subvert expectations built up in, the narrative. One example is the pointed caveat of *witan* in consideration of Heorot's durability:

> Þæs ne wendon ær witan Scyldinga
> þæt hit a mid gemete manna ænig
> betlic ond banfag tobrecan meahte
> listum tolucan nymþe liges fæþm
> swulge on swaþule. (lines 778-782a)

To our twenty-first century eyes, allowing that they must be predisposed towards the text significantly differently from the ears of pre-twelfth century England, that example reads like a perfect 'dramatic irony.' The historical digressions, meanwhile, are often ironical in and of themselves, as well as bearing an ironical relation to the main text by way of their precedent status. A good example of self-standing irony is the story of Modþryðo (1931b-1962), especially in its use of *litotes*. As they are recalled into the main narrative, the histories clearly assume some status as *exempla* or precedents for the main narrative. In that, they seem to hold the allegorical quality Lanham has referred to. One rich but complex example is the Finnsburg story (1071-1159a). The irony of that passage is worth examining closely in its own right, as a vignette of interwoven ironies. Its oppositions and reciprocities, its hopes and deep anxieties, its narrative harmonies and agonies are fused in a sort of ironic lattice. Considering its place in the broader narrative, its ironies are, by allegorical relation, ironies of the situation of Hroðgar's Danes. In particular, Hildeburh's situation bears apposite comparison to the situation of Wealhþeow: the same statements of loyalty will be followed by the same breaches of faith, witnessed by an equally diligent and ultimately pathetic 'peaceweaver'. It is a *topos* of

futility, ironic by virtue of its inevitable recurrence: those who have learned the lessons of history know what disasters will befall them.

That last particular ironical posture, futility, strikes me as typical of the poem and of the cultural poetics in which it sits. Maybe I read too much of the Old Norse *Ragnarök* (where the best fighters in the history of the world are chosen to fight in the last battle, knowing they are bound to lose) into our hero Beowulf's attitude, but when he exclaims, *Gæð a wyrd swa hio scel!* (line 455b), just before bunking down for the night to await Grendel's coming, it seems to be informed by a deeply held ironical view of his own venture. The characters, then, appear also capable of ironical reflection. That is clearly the case in Wiglaf's berating of the Geat warriors after Beowulf's death (lines 2864-2891). Liggins reads an ironic motive in Hroðgar's recounting of the Danes' experiences at the hands of Grendel (lines 473-490, especially 480-488). In fact, I am not sure whether Hroðgar is subject or object in the realisation of this particular irony, although I suspect the latter.

Those ironies may constitute a naive feature, of course. Technical irony implies no necessary intent, while semantic pregnancy may be an unintended effect. To say that there appears to be an ironical intention would require the appearance, or at least the inference, of an ironical register and a poetic motive for irony. The proof is admittedly little better than inference — although, as this thesis shows, it is remarkably systematic. What is the poet getting at by calling Hroðgar *beahhorda weard* (line 921b), for example?[40] In addition to such epithets, there appear to be several ironically couched discussions of characters and actions. There are some instances of explicit deployment of irony in the exchange between Beowulf and Unferð (especially lines 587-601a). Other instances are subtler, such as Wealhþeow's attestations of universal loyalty (lines 1228-1231). Liggins addresses this problem of subtlety directly:

> Even in modern literature where we know something of the temperament and methods of an author, it is often difficult to be certain about the quality of irony in a work — or about its very presence. Indeed, this uncertainty is an intrinsic part of irony. The difficulty increases as we go back to the anonymous writers of a culture where so much can only be surmised. However, I believe that the frequency with which the *Beowulf*-poet presents situations in which human expectations are

40 See detailed discussion of this epithet in Chapter 6.

> thwarted by supernatural dispositions, and the frequency with which he offers epigrammatic comments upon such contrasts can hardly be due to mere chance. Nor are they to be ascribed solely to his (presumed) tragic design. The poet who commented on Thryth's savage slaughter of all those warriors who were rash enough to gaze at her that *Ne bið swylc cwenlic þeaw / idese to efnanne* (1940) was either extraordinarily naive or was possessed of a finely controlled sense of irony.[41]

Unsatisfactorily, it is this last argument that must be applied time and time again to justify reading so much of *Beowulf* as ironic. But we can, at least for now, separate the question of ironic-in-technique from the questions of ironic-in-intent and ironic-in-attitude. The latter questions require that the Old English poet was willing and able to construct irony, and presumably that the Old English audience could discern irony when they were presented with it. A definition founded on Liggins' approach would be that irony, technically speaking, consists in those instances where the poem points to the contrastive tension between expectations or cultural paradigms, or especially between the notional value of those on the one hand and the real world flow of events on the other.

41 Liggins, *op. cit.*, 3.

Chapter 2. Words and deeds: a case study in discerning irony

Taking up where the previous chapter left off, this chapter examines one case of the *Beowulf* poet's willingness and capacity for irony. By investigating a dichotomy central to the narrative arrangement of the poem, the distinction between words and deeds, we are able to observe how numerous permutations of that dichotomy have presented opportunities for the poet to pass ironical comment of various kinds, as well as to note that the poet has frequently exploited such opportunities. This chapter is an attempt to apply to the poem, at the most basic level, the technical sense of irony developed in Chapter 1, particularly the notion of contrastive poetics.

The case study begins with a quotation from Hroðgar's coastguard:

> Æghwæþres sceal
> scearp scyldwiga gescad witan
> worda ond worca se þe wel þenceð. (lines 287b-289)

Evident in this quotation is a notion of the difference between words and deeds. The poem constructs a dichotomy between words and deeds that is in fact comparable to other heroic poems in Old English and other early Germanic languages. It invests the carriage and an awareness of that irony in key characters, suggesting this 'words and deeds' topos is embedded deep in the cultural poetics of *Beowulf*. From it, as this chapter shows, we are able to extrapolate an ironical attitude running throughout the poem (as well as more broadly) that focuses on the difference between intended behaviour, purposes, or promises (purports) and actual behaviour or outcomes (actualities).

Hroðgar's coastguard does more than explain his own decision to admit Beowulf's party into the realm. In his address, he advises the visiting Geats on how to prosper in the sophisticated political domain of the Danish citadel: 'a sharp shield-warrior should know the difference between each of two things, between words and deeds, he who thinks well.' This also serves as helpful advice for the unwary reader or

listener, about to enter the imaginatively reconstructed Heorot. At its heart is one of the clearest ironical fault lines in *Beowulf*, as in several other Old English poems.[1]

The Old English analogues clearly establish the cultural importance that is attached to making good one's boasts, pledged from a position of relative security, once one is out on the field of deeds and confronting a moment of truth. Hence *The Battle of Maldon*:[2]

> Eac him wolde Eadric his ealdre gelæstan
> frean to gefeohte ongan þa forð beran
> gar to guþe. He hæfde god geþanc
> þa hwile þe he mid handum healdan mihte
> bord and brad swurd beot he gelæste
> þa he ætforan his frean feohtan sceolde. (lines 11-16)

Eadric's ethical obligation is to accomplish his *beot*, to be as bold as his boast. MacIntyre captures some of this in his musings on heroic society, arguing that the linchpin of the heroic social order is a highly defined and reliable system of obligations for one person to exercise bravery in support of another. There is an economy of such obligations, although they are not always reciprocal.[3] That there should be an economy suggests a society proficient in measuring the level of obligation against a level of service rendered in respect of it. Witness *The Fight at Finnsburg*:[4]

1 T.A. Shippey, 'The World of the Poem,' in Harold Bloom (ed.), *Modern Critical Interpretations* – Beowulf, pp. 33-49, includes a section titled 'Words and Meaning,' pp. 33-36, that presents a close reading of the same passage from *Beowulf*. Shippey's focus is on what the situation means to the coastguard, whereas this chapter focuses on its meaning for the hero, Beowulf. See also the discussion of this scene by Tripp, 'Humour, Wordplay, and Semantic Resonance in *Beowulf*,' p. 59.

2 D.G. Scragg (ed.), *The Battle of Maldon*, Manchester University Press, Manchester, 1981.

3 Alasdair C. MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, 2nd ed., University of Notre Dame Press, Notre Dame (Indiana), 1984; see especially chapter 10, 'The Virtues in Heroic Societies,' pp. 121-130.

4 Klaeber, *Beowulf*, pp. 231-253.

Ne gefrægn ic næfre wurþlicor æt wera hilde
sixtig sigebeorna sel gebæran
ne nefre swanas hwitne medo sel forgyldan
ðonne Hnæfe guldan his hægstealdas. (lines 37-40)

Here is actually a problem, since Hnæf has been killed. At least technically, this is an instance of irony. Yet it clearly reflects a cultural paradigm of the sort to which MacIntyre refers, wherein heroic behaviour is an exchangeable good and a measurable quantity. Irony notwithstanding, the thegns of Hnæf's troop act on the assumption that their battlefield efforts will be closely scrutinised and measured.

The criterion by which such scrutiny is carried out is expressed through the dichotomy of indoor assurances versus outdoor performances. A thegn in the hall may pledge any number of assistances to his peers, to his superiors, and to others in his community. These may be made for any number of reasons: gratitude for help received, debts of service, drunken boasting, *et cetera*. Whatever the pledge and for whatever reason it has been made, all who make pledges may be held to account for what they promise.

Hroðgar's coastguard, in the moment that he pronounces the criterion, is ostensibly placing Beowulf on notice that his boasts will be measured against his actions. This itself is evidence of an ironic perspective: it says that any promises will be weighed with a grain of salt. More than that, the declaration of the coastguard affirms a universal principle, a principle by which the words and deeds of all characters, however mighty, may be judged. Thus a Danish agent establishes a paradigm for the ethical appraisal of his own nation and the conduct of his compatriots, for the coastguard's utterance also presents a reminder to Beowulf (whether intentionally or not) that he himself should apply such scrutiny in coming social encounters — with the Danes. It is not the only time a Dane points to words and deeds so explicitly. *Hroþgares scop* notes the significance of both modes of behaviour in line 1100a, when recounting the fight between Danes and Frisians at Finnsburg:

Fin Hengeste
elne unflitme aðum benemde
þæt he þa wealafe weotena dome
arum heolde þæt ðær ænig mon
wordum ne worcum wære ne bræce
ne þurh inwitsearo æfre gemænden

ðeah hie hira beaggyfan banan folgedon
ðeodenlease þa him swa geþearfod wæs
gyf þonne Frysna hwylc frecnan spræce
ðæs morþorhetes myndgiend wære
þonne hit sweordes ecg seðan scolde. (lines 1096b-1106)

Normally, words lead to commensurate deeds, or so the theory goes. The passage quoted above is strongly suggestive of the (understandable) fear that sedition leads to uprising.

Pledges are particularly significant to the concept of words and deeds, as we see when Beowulf holds Hroðgar to account for his promises in lines 1474-1491. That said, a very revealing case of skepticism towards words, and towards purports more generally, is the animated exchange between Beowulf and Unferð. Unferð's allegation is essentially that Beowulf and Breca made competitive pledges in relation to a swimming match, that Breca lived up to his pledge, therefore Beowulf did not achieve his own pledge (*beot*), therefore Beowulf is no reliable hero:

Beot eal wið þe
sunu Beanstanes soðe gelæste.
Ðonne wene ic to þe wyrsan geþingea
ðeah þu heaðoræsa gehwær dohte
grimre guðe gif þu Grendles dearst
nihtlongne fyrst nean bidan. (lines 523b-528)

Beowulf, it seems, feels compelled to defend his record in the face of such an attack. This he does in two ways. First, he initiates a rhetorical onslaught against the integrity of Unferð, beginning by suggesting that he is drunk and concluding by painting him as an internecine murderer. Secondly, Beowulf shows how what transpired during his six days swimming in full war-gear was no failure to fulfil his pledge, beginning:

Wit þæt gecwædon cnihtwesende
ond gebeotedon wæron begen þa git
on geogoðfeore þæt wit on garsecg ut
aldrum neðdon ond þæt geæfndon swa. (lines 535-538)

Beowulf's response gives the proof, in case any were needed, that fulfilment of *beot* is a concern of the poem *Beowulf*. Unferð's own speech has gone rather further than this, however, into an exploration of

the attitude of those to whom pledges have been made. As a Danish agent, Unferð represents the naturally somewhat cynical attitude of his beleaguered nation towards one who offers salvation. Unferð's antagonistic intervention reinforces an ethical position, which is founded on the criterion for appraisal of behaviour discussed above: 'fine words, stranger, but we await the deeds.'

The poem affords plenty of further evidence for the importance of the differentiation between words and deeds. Wiglaf's berating of his fellows-at-arms after the death of Beowulf (lines 2864-2891) is a speech devoted not only to the theme that pledges and boasts made in the hall had not been met in the testing field, it is also much given to the perilous situation in which the nation now rests, and yet it notes that the fickle behaviour of the Geats constitutes cause for reproof. Wiglaf conflates the heroic inadequacy of the Geat troop with the likely doom of their kingdom through his untested suggestion – one which, by any understanding of the heroic code, should never go untested – that, had the Geat troop been more doughty for their king, the troubles that amass at their borders might not threaten so acutely. His speech also carries a keen sense of the abovementioned economy – or rather, in such cases, diseconomy – between obligations and heroic service:

> Wergendra to lyt
> þrong ymbe þeoden þa hyne sio þrag becwom. (lines 2882b-2883)

Earlier Wiglaf has urged his comrades to come to Beowulf's aid in more pointedly economic terms:

> Ic ðæt mæl geman þær we medu þegun
> þonne we geheton ussum hlaforde
> in biorsele ðe us ðas beagas geaf
> þæt we him ða guðgetawa gyldan woldon
> gif him þyslicu þearf gelumpe
> helmas ond heard sweord. (lines 2633-2638a)

The irony of purports is at its most salient in the prefatory fitt of the poem, in the career of Scyld Scefing. Originally a foundling, Scyld progressed to be King of Denmark and eponymous founder of a dynasty. His achievements are impressive, but they are won from a base of zero expectation. The poem explains briefly how he built up his political capacity by kind treatment of his fellows when a young man, so that,

when the time came, he had a solid retinue with whose aid he won great fame. His biography is a story of transformation. The ironic proof of this ironic career is its aftermath, Scyld's funeral: although Scyld returns to the same mysterious situation across the water as that from which he first came into the world, we know the situations are profoundly different from one another. The foundling is buried as a great king. The use of litotes in this section understates distances between the beginning and the ending, instead playing up their mutual comparability. A result is to draw attention to transformation as such, rather than to the details of this instance of transformation:

> Nalæs hi hine læssan lacum teodan
> þeodgestreonum þon þa dydon
> þe hine æt frumsceafte forð onsendon
> ænne ofer yðe umborwesende. (lines 43-46)

The inverse of Scyld's biography is that of Heremod. Born into royalty and gifted as a warrior, he was eventually betrayed to the Jutes by his own people, to whom his behaviour had become an intolerable burden. Heremod's origins are invested with the maximum of potential, but he achieves worse than nothing with that potentiality. Just as Scyld's career proves that great expectations are no necessary precondition for greatness, so Heremod's proves that greatness is no necessary consequence of potential:

> ne geweox he him to willan ac to wælfealle (line 1711)

Further ironic juxtaposition of words and deeds may be found, along with a large number of other ironies, in the Finnsburg episode (lines 1068-1159a) and in Wealhþeow's subsequent address to the feasters assembled in Heorot (lines 1169-1187). Thus the unlikely proposition that the Danes and Frisians could share a citadel in harmony (lines 1096b-1106 — quoted above) may be compared with Wealhþeow's pathetically optimistic assertion

> Ic minne can
> glædne Hroþulf þæt he þa geogoðe wile
> arum healdan gyf þu ær þonne he
> wine Scildinga worold oflætest
> wene ic þæt he mid gode gyldan wille
> uncran eaferan gif he þæt eal gemon

hwæt wit to willan ond to worðmyndum
umborwesendum ær arna gefremedon. (lines 1180b-1187)

The ominous undertones of the last five half-lines of Wealhþeow's speech draw our attention by apophasis to the possibility that Hroðulf will not remember his debt of allegiance to Hroðgar, to Wealhþeow, and to their polity. But the strong irony is in the ten preceding half-lines; the last five serve to point back to it. The strong irony is that Wealhþeow has only the power of words at her disposal, and not the power of deeds. Her assertion is unrealistic because she cannot ensure its actualisation.

Beowulf himself is quite the opposite. His legendary heroic status derives from the fact that he consistently makes good his boasts, including the most ambitious ones. (That is undoubtedly a lot easier to do when you have the strength of thirty men in your handgrip.) We recall that the child Beowulf, like Scyld, was not expected to achieve too much.

Hean wæs lange
swa hyne Geata bearn godne ne tealdon
ne hyne on medobence micles wyrðne
drihten Wedera gedon wolde
swyðe wendon þæt he sleac wære
æðeling unfrom. Edwenden cwom
tireadigum menn torna gehwylces. (lines 2183b-2189)

And yet in the action of the poem, with perhaps one exception, every *beot* Beowulf expresses is achieved: his pledge to the Geat *witan* before setting out for Denmark, his pledge against Breca, his pledges to Hroðgar and Wealhþeow in respect of both the monsters and Hroðgar's family, his pledge to Hygd for the safekeeping of the Geats, and his final pledge to kill the dragon. The possible exception to Beowulf's pattern of pledge and achievement concerns the dragon hoard, which he dedicates to the Geats in the course of his penultimate speech. He says:

Ic ðara frætwa Frean ealles ðanc
Wuldurcyninge wordum secge
ecum Dryhtne þe ic her on starie
þæs ðe ic moste minum leodum
ær swyltdage swylc gestrynan. (lines 2794-2798)

Beowulf's intention, fairly clearly, is that the Geats should enjoy the spoils of their dying ruler's success. And yet they bury it with him, for reasons that are not made explicit in the poem.[5] Do the Geats fear that such booty will make them an especially attractive target for invasion? Is there a sense of shame, in accordance with Wiglaf's rebuke of his comrades, that drives the Geats to deny themselves what their dead lord has provided them, reckoning that they have failed to earn it through heroic service? Is there an ironical point being made, that the dead do not live up to their promise? Each of those possible interpretations is a guess, an inference at best, and yet we have little better to go on: the matter of Beowulf's death has become a narrative crux.

If the hero is defined by deeds that live up to her or his words, it is not surprising that ambiguity – which is also the scope for inference, including inference of irony – should set in at the point where this pattern appears to break down. Beowulf is much more frequently the one passing ironical comment on others than a butt of it himself. Remembering *The Seafarer*,[6] we control our reputations through our deeds:

> For þon biþ eorla gehwam æftercweþendra
> lof lifgendra lastworda betst
> þæt he gewyrce ær he on weg scyle
> fremum on foldan wið feonda niþ
> deorum dædum deofle togeanes
> þæt hine ælda bearn æfter hergen
> ond his lof siþþan lifge mid englum
> awa to ealdre ecan lifes blæd
> dream mid dugeþum. (lines 72-80a)

In perishing, however, Beowulf loses control of his own reputation. In this breach of the words-to-deeds pattern, irrespective of whether ironical comment is being passed upon him directly, he has become a victim of an ironic situation: the outcome he has achieved does not match the outcome he had promised. The question of how to read such irony, especially of what to read into such irony, remains to be resolved.

5 Numerous commentators have tried to fill in this gap. Several commentators have adopted or adapted the reading, originally published by Tolkien, *op. cit.*, of an element of criticism in the Old English poem's description of a heroic age Geat warlord.

6 I.L. Gordon (ed.), *The Seafarer*, Methuen, London, 1969.

Analysing *Beowulf* a good thousand years or so after its composition involves a large measure of immersion in ambiguities such as the narrative crux just discussed. More than that, the poem itself seems to express a poet's delight in its ambiguity. Earl provides a lengthy and involved discussion of ambiguity in his *Thinking about* Beowulf,[7] where he argues against an earlier critical line that the poem's ambiguous style is a deficiency,[8] to argue that the ambiguous style is central to its poetic strength because ambiguity is one of its crucial aesthetic features.

Earl's counterclaim was well received by Roy Liuzza, who especially endorsed Earl's observation that, 'Like *Hamlet*, *Beowulf* supports with its silence whatever reading we most wish, and readers seem to wish many things of it.'[9] In the meantime, discussing words and deeds, it is important to note the place if not the purpose of ambiguity, to acknowledge the significant impact that the text's frequent absence of clarity has on the narrative. It strikes me as deeply resonant, in a mimetic sense, with the worlds of the poem, of the poet, and of its twenty-first century readers: that so much of its information is fraught with ambiguity; that people say other than what they mean, or mask their meanings; that many meanings and significances are lost in the mist of time — how familiar this is! The coastguard's injunction to Beowulf outlines one of the few devices available to sift good information from bad: namely, to be mindful at all times of the difference between words and deeds.

7 James W. Earl, *Thinking about* Beowulf, Stanford University Press, Stanford, 1994.

8 An obvious proponent of that line being Klaeber, *Beowulf*, in the Introduction to his edition. Klaeber is in good company, for it is a standard criticism of the poem in commentaries published at least up until 1936.

9 Roy M. Liuzza (et al.), 'The Year's Work in Old English Studies,' *Old English Newsletter* 29 (1996), 55-56. Liuzza quotes Earl, *Thinking about* Beowulf, p. 168.

Chapter 3. Alpha and Omega

Chapter 2 has explained how the discernment of words and deeds may be indicative for our reading of *Beowulf* as contrastive. There is more to discern in this regard than specific topical concerns, however. This chapter examines the contrastive poetics of *Beowulf* as evident in several of the poem's characterisations. Through character development, we are able to see how similarity is as important as difference in the establishment of a thoroughgoing contrastive ethos. Character development inherently reveals differences between the beginning and ending points of a given character, although similarities are essential to continuity of a character. Multiple character development, as we see in *Beowulf*, is able to complicate this observation by showing similarities and differences between several characters at several stages of their development, including:

- An ability to show equivalent and incongruent qualities of characters at specific moments.
- An ability to show parallel and inverse trajectories of development.

The first imaginatively engaging exploration of similarity and difference in *Beowulf* was Tolkien's essay on '*Beowulf*: The Monsters and the Critics.'[1] His expression of the findings is notable more for its metaphor than for its detail, perhaps, yet it affords remarkably specific insight into the poetics he has attempted to describe:

> The poem 'lacks steady advance:' so Klaeber heads a critical section in his edition. But the poem was not meant to advance, steadily or unsteadily. It is essentially a balance, an opposition of ends and beginnings. In its simplest terms, it is a contrasted description of two moments in a great life, rising and setting; an elaboration of the ancient and intensely moving contrast between youth and age, first achievement and final death.[2]

1 *Op. cit.*
2 *Ibid.*, p. 81.

Tolkien's version of the oppositional structure of *Beowulf* is simultaneously simple and complex. He argues that the poem is divided into two sections, but then posits three quite different axes along which the dissection might be conducted:

- After line 2199 — the 'fundamental'[3] division, following which the poem is devoted to Beowulf's career back home in Geatland.
- After line 1887 — a 'secondary but important division,'[4] at which all the previous events are condensed and recapitulated, so that one would know the essential story of the poem if one began reading at line 1888.
- After line 3136 — the 'elegiac' crux, so that 'in a sense all its first 3,136 lines are the prelude to a dirge.'[5]

Tolkien places an important caveat on his secondary division: 'Without the first half we should miss much incidental illustration; we should miss the dark background of the court of Heorot [...] we should lose the direct contrast of youth and age in the persons of Beowulf and Hroðgar.'[6]

That oppositional disposition in the narrative arrangement of the poem is complemented by its rhythm, according to Tolkien. Among other things, this is essentially a version of the critical commonplace that form and content must be in some kind of harmonious relationship (although Tolkien rather hastily discredits musical metaphor as he makes the point):

> The very nature of Old English metre is often misjudged. In it there is no single rhythmic pattern progressing from the beginning of a line to the end, and repeated with variation in other lines. The lines do not go according to a tune. They are founded on a balance; an opposition between two halves of roughly equivalent phonetic weight, and significant content, which are more often rhythmically contrasted than similar. They are more like masonry than music.[7]

His suggestion, one may extrapolate, is that there is an oppositional – or contrastive – ethos pervading the poem at several levels. That is ground

3 *Ibid.*, p. 83.
4 *Ibid.*
5 *Ibid.*, p. 85.
6 *Ibid.*, p. 83.
7 *Ibid.*

already covered in this thesis, although Tolkien seems not to have considered the possibility that an apparently greater emphasis on the poetics of difference than of similarity reflects his own agenda, rather than the poet's. This chapter investigates the extent to which the contrastive poetics of *Beowulf* reflect its narrative concerns. If the fundamental precept is correct, if form and content are complementary in underpinning an oppositional/contrastive ethos, then the contrastive disposition must be read as a thoroughly deliberate strategy of the poem. All aspects of the contrastive as they manifest or reveal themselves through the poem, including irony where we find it, must be critically significant aspects of the text. It is proposed here to investigate some examples of the 'opposition of ends and beginnings' through a close reading approach to four key character developments in *Beowulf*.

1. Aglæcean: Beowulf, Sigemund, Grendel, and the land dragons[8]

The relationship between Beowulf, Sigemund, Grendel, Grendel's mother, and the two land dragons of the poem has been discussed briefly in Chapter 1 . Only two human characters are denominated by the term *aglæca* ('monster')[9] in this poem. They are the two who slay land

8 I exclude from this set, for reasons of critical convenience more than of any solid evidence, the mentioned *wyrmcynnes fela // sellice sædracan* ('many serpent-kin, marvelous sea-dragons' — lines 1425b-1426a) and *wyrmas* ('serpents' — line 1430a) who occupy Grendel's mother's mere, one of whom is quite likely the creature shot by the bow of a Geat in line 1432b-1436. The point is that these water-dwelling dragons and related creatures are not developed into the story with anything like the elaboration that is devoted to the dragons slain by Sigemund (and Fitela) and Beowulf (and Wiglaf).

9 The exclusiveness of this translation is not broadly accepted. I take it as meaning 'monster' in a literal sense, and as something applied to humans in a figurative sense, just as we might figuratively apply the word 'monster' to an awesomely powerful person in modern English. A consensus among editions of *Beowulf* and dictionaries of Old English would gloss the term as carrying a literal sense of 'awesomely powerful person' in addition to the undisputed literal sense of 'monster.' Byrhtferth attributed to Bede the epithet *aglæca lareow* (Andy Orchard,

dragons. The term is also attributed frequently to Grendel, once to Sigemund's dragon, and frequently to Beowulf's dragon.

Clearly one of the principal functions served by the Sigemund digression is comparative. Beowulf has slain the *aglæca* Grendel just the night before. A poet tries to put this extraordinary feat into perspective by referring to Sigemund's successful fight against a dragon.

> Hwilum cyninges þegn
> guma gilphlæden gidda gemyndig
> se ðe ealfela ealdgesegena
> worn gemunde word oþer fand
> soðe gebunden secg eft ongan
> sið Beowulfes snyttrum styrian
> ond on sped wrecan spel gerade
> wordum wrixlan.[10] Welhwylc gecwæð
> þæt he fram Sigemundes secgan hyrde
> ellendædum uncuþes fela
> Wælsinges gewin wide siðas
> þara þe gumena bearn gearwe ne wiston
> fæhðe ond fyrena buton Fitela mid hine (lines 867b-879)

The poet's account is reported indirectly. This poetic voice compares Sigemund to Beowulf as a slayer of monsters, but it does so in a fashion that is remarkable for its inclusion of the monsters and for its attention both to difference and to similarity.

At first glance, Beowulf's feat appears more remarkable than Sigemund's, since he accomplishes it unaided — whereas the poet knows more than most when he recalls that Sigemund was assisted by

Pride and Prodigies: Studies in the Monsters of the Beowulf-*Manuscript*, D.S. Brewer, Cambridge, 1995, p. 33: citing Samuel J. Crawford (ed.), *Byrhtferth's Manual*, EETS OS 177, London, 1929, p. 74/15; also Alex Nichols, 'Bede "Awe-Inspiring" not "Monstrous": Some problems with Old English *aglæca*,' *Notes and Queries* 38 (1991), 147-148). Whether that sense of *aglæca* attributed to Beowulf and Sigemund should be understood as literal or figurative may be a moot point for most readers. For the purposes of translation and of rhetorical analysis, it poses an interesting problem, but does not fundamentally challenge our understanding of what the poet was trying to say. Either way, it is a single word that is applied to many monsters and to some remarkable people. It attributes a paradigm of qualities and a qualitative status to those characters it references.

10 Klaeber, *op. cit.*, does not end this sentence until the end of line 884b. However, the object of the report changes from Beowulf's exploits to Sigemund's at this point.

Fitela. This corresponds symmetrically to the assistance Wiglaf gives Beowulf in the later dragon fight. At the same time, Sigemund is initally compared by virtue of the shared epithet *aglæca* (line 893a) to Grendel and to the dragon he defeats; the terminological link to Beowulf is not established for another 1699 lines (Beowulf and his dragon are called *aglæcean* in line 2592a). So whereas the narrative presents this digression as a comparison between Beowulf and his legendary forerunner Sigemund, at first glance, the deployment of the term *aglæca* suggests it is principally a comparison between Grendel and Sigemund, with a secondary comparison to the dragon Sigemund slew. Still speaking of first glances, style and content do not appear mutually complementary here; they appear to be in tension. One rhetorical possibility is that we read a comparison between Sigemund and Grendel as a further amplification of the prowess of Beowulf, a suggestion that the legendary Sigemund was only as powerful as the monster Beowulf has slain.

But *Beowulf* cannot be read merely on first glances, despite Shippey's valid interjection that the poem's contemporary audience was not availed of 'study-aids.'[11] Nist's topical overview of the poem's narrative arrangement shows that topical juxtapositions drawn out over an expanse of poetic duration are an integral and natural component of the poetic style. Moreover, there is plenty of analogous material from Old English and other Old Germanic poems to suggest 'the medieval audience' (after Shippey)[12] was capable of a very sophisticated appreciation on points of fine and often esoteric detail. Old Norse skaldic verse, for example, may be said to revolve around the art of the abstruse, both through the referential periphrasis of its frequent kennings and through the semantic scrambling effect of its typically involuted syntax. I am extremely reluctant to attribute to a medieval listener any less depth of insight into a medieval poem such as *Beowulf* than I am prepared to claim for myself. Doubtless this is every bit as arbitrary a position as that which it countermands. On the other hand, taken seriously, it mandates reading beyond first glances.

In line 2592a, the poem refers to its principal hero, as well as his dragon, with the term *aglæcean*. The initial point of comparison, then, is

11 Shippey, *Beowulf*, *op. cit.*, p. 35. See Chapter 1 for a fuller quotation from this passage in his study.

12 *Ibid.*

between two antagonists: one human, one monstrous. That is as it has been for Sigemund and his dragon, although in that case the comparison with Grendel is near at hand. Beowulf and his dragon are of a common status. Their strength and ferocity are such that no others are able to match them. They are both referenced by the epithet *stearcheort* ('strong-heart' — Beowulf in line 2552a, his dragon in line 2282b). Both are armed with *hildeleoman*[13] ('battle-light' — line 2583a). Beowulf is the protector of settlements: he could easily have been given the epithet **burges weard* ('defender of the stronghold'). Meanwhile, his dragon is referenced by the epithet *beorges weard* ('defender of the outcrop [or] cave'). The two are so evenly matched that their encounter ends in a draw: they kill one another. That is not so of Sigemund, who kills, but is not killed by, his dragon. When Beowulf is assisted by Wiglaf, however, that is comparable with Sigemund, who was assisted by Fitela.[14] And so Beowulf is also compared retrospectively with Grendel through this term, *aglæca*. Grendel, who kills thirty men in one raid, is of the same order of protagonist as Beowulf, who had the strength of thirty men *in his mundgripe*. In line 770, both are described as *reþe renweardas*. Line 2592a retrospectively reaffirms the comparability of the poem's principal hero and its first monster.

If we examine the similarities and dissimilarities between the five individuals identified as *aglæcean*, not surprisingly, some aspects of the juxtaposition seem to compare while others contrast. The young adventurer Beowulf is not called *aglæca*; that is the old king Beowulf. If this is significant, then the younger Beowulf is being placed on an even higher pedestal.[15] The older Beowulf was in a class with Sigemund, Grendel, and the two dragons. The younger Beowulf was perhaps even mightier than that class of protagonist. The poem has traced the career of a warrior whose prowess has rapidly exploded at the onset and then gradually waned after his initial glory. Disregarding the significance of the physical environments of Beowulf's fights for a moment, each

13 For Beowulf this references a sword; for his dragon it references the flaming breath.

14 Fitela corresponds to the character Sinfjötli in Old Norse texts who, we learn in *Völsunga saga*, was the son of Sigemund and his sister.

15 Against the argument that it is significant is an argument that the younger Beowulf is indirectly rendered similar to Sigemund, the dragons, and the older Beowulf. He is after all rendered similar to Grendel, the poem's first *aglæca* (see above). The indirectness of this counterargument is its shortcoming, in my view.

successive one is more hard-pressed than the one before; so that he is rapidly victorious over Grendel, extremely hard pressed but victorious over Grendel's mother, and killed in his killing of the dragon.[16] Also, the element of optimism in Beowulf's demeanour grows weaker, the element of fatalism stronger, each time:

- Prior to his fight with Grendel, Beowulf willingly commits himself to use no weapons; although he wisely announces what arrangements should be made in the event of his death, Beowulf also expresses his confidence in the final outcome.
- Prior to his fight with Grendel's mother he is less confident, declaring *Gæð a wyrd swa hio scel!* ('Fate always goes the way it will!'); meanwhile, he approaches that fight with the sword Hrunting and wearing a mail shirt.
- For the last battle, Beowulf has a metal shield especially made to withstand the dragon's breath; in speeches he anticipates the likelihood of his death and explains why he needs a sword.

The older Beowulf is an *aglæca*, then, but conceivably the younger Beowulf has been something even greater. The repeated use of this term distinguishes younger from older within a character (Beowulf), as well as between characters, through its varying referents; it works simultaneously, retrospectively, and proleptically to draw out at least six similarities and differences that are pertinent to the comparisons:

1. It simultanously renders the older Beowulf and his dragon similar.
2. It omits simultaneously to render the younger Beowulf similar to Sigemund and his dragon.[17]
3. It retrospectively renders Grendel, Sigemund, and his dragon similar to the older Beowulf and his dragon.

16 See Bruce Mitchell and Fred C. Robinson, *Beowulf – An Edition*, Blackwell, Oxford and Malden (Massachusetts), 1998, p. 23.

17 The similarity between Grendel and Beowulf as antagonists is of course achieved by other means, such as the thirty men topos and the simultaneous description of both as *reþe renweardas* (line 770a). See above.

4. It omits retrospectively to render the younger Beowulf similar to the older Beowulf.
5. It omits retrospectively to render the encounter between the younger Beowulf and Grendel similar to the encounter between Sigemund and his dragon.
6. It proleptically renders the encounter between the older Beowulf and his dragon similar to the encounter between Sigemund and his dragon.

There are further functions served by the term *aglæca*, some of which are discussed in the close readings of epithets set out in Part II. For the purposes of those later discussions, it is worth appreciating the role played by this one attributive term, *aglæca*, in rendering the poem's narrative according to a certain interest. Attempting to characterise that interest, it strikes me as an interest in the decline and fall of a hero. That may be a tragic interest. It may be a biographical sympathy. It may suggest a certain fatalistic view about the nature of the ageing process. It certainly shows an interest in the starting and ending points of the career of a hero. Beowulf the younger, who dominates this poem, would be a brilliantly shining star indeed if in his old age he had declined to the status of *aglæca*. The 'opposition of ends and beginnings' in this narrative line is not exactly 'a balance' – it is a juxtaposition that thwarts equivalences between its opposed elements as much as it establishes them – but it is highly significant nevertheless.

2. *Beowulf Scyldinga*: a close reading of certain key potentialities invested in the poem's opening

Scyld being a foundling, his origin is every bit as mysterious as his final destination. It is, as Earl points out, much like that famous tale of the sparrow, crucial in the conversion of England to Christianity in Bede's *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, where the mysteriousness of origin and of destination is itself the point:[18]

> 'Your Majesty, when we compare the present life of man on earth with that time of which we have no knowledge, it seems to me like the swift flight of a single sparrow through the banqueting-hall where you are sitting at dinner on a winter's day with your thegns and counsellors. In the midst there is a comforting fire to warm the hall; outside, the storms of winter rain or snow are raging. This sparrow flies swiftly in through one door of the hall, and out through another. While he is inside, he is safe from the winter storms; but after a few moments of comfort, he vanishes from sight into the wintry world from which he came. Even so, man appears on earth for a little while; but of what went before this life or of what follows, we know nothing.'[19]

Beowulf, mentioned in line 18, can be read a number of ways.

> Beowulf wæs breme blæd wide sprang
> Scyldes eafora Scedelandum in. (lines 18-19)

The conventional reading has been that the character referred to in lines 18 and 19 equates to the Beaw or Beow referred to as a son of Scyld in several Old English genealogies,[20] also referred to in the Prologue to

18 James W. Earl, *Thinking about* Beowulf, Stanford University Press, Stanford, 1994, pp. 51-55.

19 Bede, *Ecclesiastical History of the English People with Bede's Letter to Egbert and Cuthbert's Letter on the Death of Bede*, trans. Leo Shirley-Price, rev. R.E. Latham, letters trans. D.H. Farmer, Penguin, London, 1990, pp. 129-130.

20 Klaeber, *op. cit.*, pp. 254-256. Klaeber preserves the manuscript version of the name. Seamus Heaney, *Beowulf – A New Translation*, Faber and Faber, London, 1999, p. 3, adopts the 'Beow' reading in line 18 of his version: 'Beow's name was known throughout the north.'

Snorri Sturluson's *Edda* as Biáf or Bjár son of Skjöld or Skjaldun.[21] That reading assumes that the poet and/or scribe got the wrong name in the right place. That right name, according to that reading, is further subverted by the mention of *Beowulf Scyldinga* in line 53b. According to it, the line 53b appellation is proof positive of a genealogically mistaken identity.

There are other possible readings of line 53b. One is that it may be a reflexively figured reference to Scyld himself, 'the Beowulf' (the bear, the hero, the guardian of his adoptive compatriots in a time of great national need) 'of the Scyldings' and the progenitor of Healfdene. Quite aside from its bearing on line 18a, such a reading is inherently plausible, given what we shall see is the poem's allegorical fascination with comparisons between Beowulf and Scyld, and its already discussed propensity for play on relationships between origins and ends. Meanwhile, the reference to 'Beowulf' in line 18a is not incontrovertibly a reference to some character other than our Geatish hero. That is an argument predicated on the possible meanings of *eafora*: according to Clark Hall, that poetical lexicon word may be taken to mean 'successor' or 'heir,' not just 'son' or 'child.'[22] Taking the word in the broader sense of 'a descendant,' then, *Scyldes eafora*, called Beowulf, may be the son of Ecgþeow. He may be *Scyldes eafora* either in the literal sense that Beowulf is descended from Scyld (for which proposition there is no direct evidence), or in the figurative[23] sense that he is inheritor of the mantle of Scyld (for which proposition the poem as a whole may conceivably be taken as evidence). It is also predicated on a fundamentally unconventional reading of lines 53-57a, so that Healfdene is taken to be descended from Scyld, but not from this Beowulf, and the Beowulf of line 53b is a periphrastic reference to Scyld:

21 Snorri Sturlason, *Edda: Prologue and Gylfaginning*, ed. Anthony Faulkes, Viking Society for Northern Research, London, 1988, p. 5.

22 J.R. Clark Hall, *A Concise Anglo-Saxon Dictionary*, 4th ed., University of Toronto Press, 1960.

23 The figure in question would be metaphor. It is a rhetorical device frequently used in *Beowulf*.

Đa wæs on burgum Beowulf Scyldinga
leof leodcyning longe þrage
folcum gefræge fædor ellor hwearf
aldor of earde oþ þæt him eft onwoc
heah Healfdene (lines 53-57a)

This reading has the poetic attractions of encouraging us to regard Beowulf son of Ecgþeow as a co-exemplar with Scyld, and of allowing us to compare those two characters in the one name: *Beowulf Scyldinga* thus juxtaposes the alpha and the omega of the narrative. Scyld, in this reading, is the Beowulf of the Scyldings. If Beowulf's name is a kenning,[24] then this may be *tvíkennt* (an extended kenning):[25] the 'bee-wolf of the Scyldings.' Although it has been the convention to regard the name Beowulf, appearing in lines 18 and 53, as an instance of the poet's and/or scribe's historiographic ineptitude, that reading is not much more thoroughly premised than its alternatives.

Regardless of how one reads *Beowulf* in line 18a and *Beowulf Scyldinga* in line 53b, there are clear lines along which one may identify the poem's concern with beginnings and endings in the relationship between Scyld and Beowulf. What the aforegoing demonstrates is the significance of names and naming in creating that relationship. The substantive content of the relationship may be characterised as follows:

- Scyld is an exemplar for successful kingship.
- The career of Beowulf, the poem's principal hero, is compared to that of Scyld.
- The starting point of this poem is Scyld; its ending point is Beowulf.

24 *Kenning* and *tvíkennt* are terms borrowed from Old Icelandic poetics, but are frequently used by modern scholars to describe the same phenomenon in English and other literatures. An object is referenced by means of a metaphor (the so-called base term) which is qualified by a genitive or compounded term (the so called determiner). See Thomas Gardner, 'The Old English Kenning: A Characteristic Feature of Germanic Poetical Diction?' in *Modern Philology* 67, 1969-1970, 109-117; also Thomas Gardner, 'The Application of the Term "Kenning,"' *Neophilologus*, 56, 1972, 464-468.

25 This detail is paticularly speculative. I know of no clear example for a *tvíkennt* kenning in Old English. But that does not make it impossible.

- The prefatory fitt is fascinated with the discrepancy between the destitute origin and the glorious conclusion of Scyld's career, and sets out objective measures of that transformation. The conclusion of the poem is fascinated with an *asigan* (*The Battle of Maldon*[26]), a falling away, of strength and glory.
- We may take as given the success of Scyld's career, since there is no suggestion that the poem is ironic when it calls him *god cyning* (line 11b); similarly, we can take at face value the success of Beowulf's career. Significantly (but also curiously), both characters die or are commemorated in the presence of a golden ensign.

As unorthodox as this angle of inquiry undoubtedly is, with such speculative reasoning around the phrase *Beowulf Scyldinga*, this is still a valuable consideration for an already-much-considered issue. It does throw good light on the problem at hand. Even if there were no historiographic problem, we would still be fascinated by the phrase *Beowulf Scyldinga*. It would still mean something significant and to some extent impossible to define. The potential for reading this name as a figurative phrase remains present however we decipher its reference. There is a 'Beowulf of the Scyldings,' one way or another. His principal function as the holder of that name is to have both names, to be a delegate for both characters. If we take a conventional reading, that lines 18a and 53b refer to the one character, here called 'Beowulf' (who is neither our hero Beowulf nor Scyld), the significance of the name would not be diminished. According to that reading, Beowulf the earlier is a namesake and to some extent a precursor for our hero, Beowulf the later. Meanwhile Scyld is a harbinger of Beowulf's potential and Beowulf is an amplification of Scyld's achievement. The poetics of *Beowulf Scyldinga* remain every bit as pointed. It is the *omega* and the *alpha* of this poem in one name. The name is thus heavily invested with the comparability of these two characters.

I read a certain irony into this comparability, since it is after all a juxtaposition of beginnings and endings. On the one hand, no two points in a narrative could be further apart. On the other, we find them employed as examples for one another (Scyld as harbinger, Beowulf as

26 E.V. Gordon, *op. cit.*

amplifier). The poem takes rhetorical pains to highlight an ostensible difference that is really a similarity.

3. *Freoðuwebban*: Wealhþeow, Freawaru, Hildeburh, and Modþryðo

By contrast with the irony underpinning *Beowulf Scyldinga*, in calling Modþryðo a *freoðuwebbe* the poem highlights an ostensible similarity that is really a difference. Again it is an ironically conceived comparison, but the irony works in a direction opposite to the previously discussed example.

Wealhþeow, her daughter Freawaru, and the precursor character Hildeburh are each depicted as trapped in a politically dysfunctional situation that it is their melancholy duties to attempt to reconcile — a futile attempt. The situation and conduct of Hildeburh are set up as a model for this at the start of the so-called Finnsburg intermezzo (lines 1063–1159a):

> Ne huru Hildeburh herian þorfte
> Eotena treowe unsynnum wearð
> beloren leofum æt þam lindplegan[27]
> bearnum ond broðrum hie on gebyrd hruron
> gare wunde þæt wæs geomuru ides.
> Nalles holinga Hoces dohtor
> meotodsceaft bemearn syþðan morgen com
> ða heo under swegle geseon meahte
> morþorbealo maga þær heo ær mæste heold
> worolde wynne. (lines 1071-1080a)

Hildeburh is ethnically Danish, but has been married to Finn of the Eotenas — it is reasonable to infer the marriage was intended as a diplomatic measure between the two peoples. All such diplomatic measures have failed when Hnæf is involved in a battle at his sister's marital home. Hnæf dies, along with most of Finn's followers (including a son to Hildeburh and Finn). When truce is declared it is a peace on

27 The manuscript reading for line 1073b is *æt þam hildplegan*.

extremely volatile terms. Finn is to preside over a combined court of Danish raiders and Jutes. One explicit term is that both sides are to be honoured equally in Finn's court. Another is that nobody on either side may spread seditious gossip, on pain of death by sword. Hildeburh's role is to help keep the peace, partly by bestowing her queenly favour equally upon retainers from both of her families. She must be equally encouraging towards the slayers of her brother on the one hand and of her son on the other. It is an awful situation and, as is proven by subsequent amplification through the stories of Wealhþeow and Freawaru, it is an inescapably hopeless situation. Hildeburh cannot keep this fraught peace, nor can anybody else. The Danes rise up again, they kill Finn and apparently abduct Hildeburh, then they make off home to Denmark with the loot they have won.

Wealhþeow is also in a bind. She is anxious to maintain peace between Hroðgar's sons Hreðric and Hroðmund on the one hand and his nephew Hroðulf on the other. This objective she pursues by diplomatic tactics, praising Hroðulf on the one hand and encouraging potential supporters of her sons on the other. It is in this vein that she presents several gifts and some politically pointed remarks to Beowulf:

> 'Bruc ðisses beages Beowulf leofa
> hyse mid hæle ond þisses hrægles neot
> þeodgestreona ond geþeoh tela
> cen þec mid cræfte ond þyssum cnyhtum wes
> lara liðe! Ic þe þæs lean geman.
> Hafast þu gefered þæt þe feor ond neah
> ealne wideferhþ weras ehtigað
> efne swa side swa sæ bebugeð
> windgeard weallas. Wes þenden þu lifige
> æþeling eadig! Ic þe an tela
> sincgestreona. Beo þu suna minum
> dædum gedefe dreamhealdende!
> Her is æghwylc eorl oþrum getrywe
> modes milde mandrihtne hold
> þegnas syndon geþwære þeod ealgearo
> druncne dryhtguman doð swa ic bidde.' (lines 1216-1231)

As the poem suggests, however, Hroðulf usurps the throne in time.[28] Wealhþeow's efforts do not meet with lasting success. To what extent can she perceive the pathos of her position? Hildeburh can presumably tell that the situation in Finnsburg is pretty grim. There the mutual enmity is acknowledged in the act of its suppression: in banning sedition, the parties acknowledge it as a problem. The example of Freawaru consolidates a suggestion that this mediatory diplomatic role for royal wives was typically futile, that anyone in such a situation could expect to fail.

Freawaru, daughter of Wealhþeow, is destined for a comparable situation, as Beowulf reports it to Higelac:

> 'Hwilum for duguðe dohtor Hroðgares
> eorlum on ende ealuwæge bær
> þa ic Freaware fletsittende
> nemna hyrde þær hio nægled sinc
> hæleðum sealde. Sio gehaten is
> geong goldhroden gladum suna Frodan
> hafað þæs geworden wine Scyldinga
> rices hyrde ond þæt ræd talað
> þæt he mid ðy wife wælfæhðe dæl
> sæcca gesette. Oft seldan hwær
> æfter leodhryre lytle hwile
> bongar bugeð þeah seo bryd duge!' (lines 2020-2031)

Beowulf anticipates that Freawaru's Danish escort will encounter animosity because he will be wearing ornaments and war gear won by the Danes in their encounters with the Heatho-Bards whose king (Ingeld) is to be married to Freawaru, that the Heatho-Bards will be stirred up by the memory of lives lost to the Danes and will kill this escort — whose death will then be cause for renewed hostility between the two peoples.

28 This reading must be balanced against the doubts cast on it by Gerald Morgan, 'The Treachery of Hrothulf,' *English Studies* 53 (1972), 23-39. Morgan argues against readings of lines 1018b-1019 (*nalles facenstafas // þeod-Scyldingas / þenden fremedon)* that infer dramatic irony. His argument does not consider the more radical 'dog-whistle' proposition: that these lines may be apophatic. A similar objection may be placed against his assumption that reference to *þa godan twegen* (line 1163b) is not ironically intended. Be that as it may, Morgan raises important doubts against this common interpretation (which I share of the role of Hroðulf. An alternative argument is that of Hugh Magennis, 'Treatments of Treachery and Betrayal in Anglo-Saxon Texts,' *English Studies* 76 (1995), 16-17.

Thus Freawaru's diplomatic mission will be foiled in its very commencement. Moreover, as Beowulf predicts in lines 2065b-2066, Ingeld's love of his wife will cool as his bloodlust swells, meaning the marriage is also stricken from the start. Ironically, all of the objectives such a marriage might facilitate will be thwarted by the nature of the bridal expedition itself; the effort to carry out the marriage is the ruin of the marriage. Beowulf seems to be saying that is typically the way with these diplomatic marriages: a wife usually cannot heal a rift that develops between the two groups of men to whom she is related by blood and by marriage. If that is typical, then it is probably forseeable to some extent for the parties involved, I mean particularly the wives.[29] Hildeburh cannot be optimistic about her chances of sealing a peace, nor apparently can Wealhþeow and Freawaru. It seems most likely that all three characters are conscious of the pathos of their situations. And yet they persist. It is an extraordinary doggedness from their perspectives and an extraordinary irony from ours as readers. That irony is established through a rendered similarity. Because all three women are in similar situations, because all three pursue similar roles, their situations and behaviours are not merely patterned. The outcomes to their situations are preordained, their roles fated. Why do they not contest that fate by adopting a different role? Why do they go gentle into these strifes of men? The poem does not suggest they have any choice about it. We might describe it as a heavy-hearted irony.

On closer scrutiny, the issues of similarity between these three royal wives are limited — at least they are limited in points of definition. There are significant components of their situations that do not apply to all three. Freawaru shares the 'exiled sister' topos with Hildeburh, but not with Wealhþeow her mother. Wealhþeow and Hildeburh share an obligation to mediate between factions that have sworn loyalty to their husbands, but Freawaru's husband commands no particular behaviour from the Danes. Freawaru and Wealhþeow are both concerned with the

29 It is not clear how closely this literary stereotype resembles a 'real world' attitude among men in Anglo-Saxon England. See Pauline Stafford, *Queens, Concubines, and Dowagers: The King's Wife in the Early Middle Ages*, University of Georgia, Athens, 1983. Stafford explicitly discusses *Beowulf* in the context of her discussions of: the importance of the queen (p. 28); the precarious situations of Freawaru and Hildeburh (pp. 44-45); the hospitality role of a leading lady (p. 101); and the dependency that was forced upon the widowed Hygd (p. 137).

particular struggle to keep the political tenure of Hroðgar's dynasty in Denmark, but not Hildeburh. The significant points of similarity appear reducible to just three positive statements.

1. All three are members of the Danish royalty.
2. All three are married.
3. All three are trapped in the stereotyped futile role of the diplomatic wife.

What similarity there is between those three Danish wives of kings is offset, or given light relief, by a subsequent irony. Whereas Hildeburh, Wealhþeow, and Freawaru are depicted as diplomatic wives, Modþryðo alone is referred to by the epithet 'peaceweaver:'

> Modþryðo wæg
> fremu folces cwen firen ondrysne
> nænig þæt dorste deor geneþan
> swæsra gesiða nefne sinfrea
> þæt hire an dæges eagum starede
> ac him wælbende weotode tealde
> handgewriþene hraþe seoþðan wæs
> æfter mundgripe mece geþinged
> þæt hit sceadenmæl scyran moste
> cwealmbealu cyðan. Ne bið swylc cwenlic þeaw
> idese to efnanne þeah ðe hio ænlicu sy
> þætte freoðuwebbe feores onsæce
> æfter ligetorne leofne mannan. (lines 1931b-1943)

The principal irony is that her reputation is not achieved as an agent of peace but of violence. Admittedly Modþryðo is said to have quietened down once she met her match in Offa, but this itself is a contrastive effect. The cessation of her violence serves principally to define the period of her violence. It is presented as a litotes centred on line 1946:

> Huru þæt onhohsnode Hemminges mæg
> ealodrincende oðer sædan
> þæt hio leodbealuwa læs gefremede
> inwitniða syððan ærest wearð
> gyfen goldhroden geongum cempan (lines 1944-1948)

Negatively speaking, then, it was publicly noted that the period of Modþryðo's violence had come to an end. In other words, the period of Modþryðo's violence was publicly noted. Returning to the former quotation, line 1942a states that a 'peaceweaver' does not behave in this way. Negatively, the unmarried Modþryðo in her famous period of violence is not a peaceweaver. In other words, a peaceweaver **is** something else. It is a phenomenon instantiated by Hildeburh, Wealhþeow, and Freawaru. As discussed, it is short on positive definition. More than that, just as Modþryðo herself is defined by negatives in two ways – the negative of her reputation and the negative of its definition by cessation – so is the 'peaceweaver' phenomenon:

1. It is not something Modþryðo instantiates.
2. It is something Modþryðo famously does not instantiate.

4. God cyning, betera ðonne ic: Scyld, Hroðgar, Heregar, and Beowulf

In the cases discussed, there has been a focus on similarity and difference across rather than through time. They are snapshots, not novelistic developments, of comparison. Beowulf the younger is distinguished from the elder. Scyld at the start of the story is rendered similar to Beowulf at its end. The peaceweavers are almost identical across time, while their 'false colleague,' Modþryðo, is very difficult to place in time. It would be hasty to conclude that *Beowulf* does not develop similarity and difference, but merely depicts it, however. Overing's Peircean account of the poem's semantics gives some insight into this aspect of development.[30] Overing's focus is not on the development of comparisons within the poem, however there is no reason why it cannot be extended to cover them — at least to the extent that comparison is a vehicle for signification.

A comparison is a sign for what? More precisely, an instance of comparison signifying what? The comparability that exists between

30 *Language, Sign, and Gender in* Beowulf.

Beowulf and Scyld has an aspect that is not developed in the relationship between those two characters, namely difference. There is ostensible difference, surface difference, between them as the alpha and the omega of the story, but that is a snapshot. What the poem develops (in the novelistic sense) is the similarity between them. This chapter has already characterised that development as an ironic feature of the narrative. Already, then, we have at least part of the answer to this paragraph's question: where a comparison finds tension between similarity and difference, it signifies irony. Since it is of the nature of comparison to investigate similarity and difference, the two variable elements in that proposition are tension and irony: the former is a necessary condition for the latter. Comparison and tension produce irony. We may deduce that comparison is a sign for the possible presence of irony; it alerts us as readers to look out for the tension that would make it ironic.

If the alpha and the omega are so similar, must all characters compared to them be similar also? Between the poles of beginning and ending, Scyld and Beowulf, we find comparisons with Hroðgar and with Heregar that highlight more difference than similarity. The result is a highly developmental poetics of comparison.

Scyld was a 'good king' (line 11b), principally because all of his neighbours feared and respected him. It is an indirect validation, rather than an innate quality,[31] but it is a positive statement rather than a litotes. *God cyning* is an epithet pre-emptively amplified by the narrative of the poem (lines 9-11a). The same epithet is attributed to Hroðgar:

> Ne hie huru winedrihten wiht ne logon
> glædne Hroðgar ac þæt wæs god cyning. (lines 862-863)

The rationale for the attribution is negative, a litotes (see Chapter 4). It is that 'they did not indeed find any fault with their friend-lord, the brilliant Hroðgar.' The negativity of this phrasing reminds us of the previous case study, where an epithet (*freoðuwebbe*) was defined in negative terms, being attributed to one character who did not amplify its

31 The poem does not explain what goodness is; it sets out examples of various versions of goodness and then problematises several of them. In that respect it is very close to the thoroughgoing negativity that Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Irony*, *op. cit.*, ascribes to Socrates.

qualities and not being attributed to any of the characters that did. Here the attribution is not amplified through any positive quality in the referent (Hroðgar) but rather through a lack of disparagement by his contemporaries. This litotes is hardly a ringing endorsement of the Danish king. It sets up a negative rationale for a positive assertion. The fact of the epithet, the term in common, also sets up a comparison with Scyld before and Beowulf afterwards. In such an environment, an environment wherein we are alert to the possible presence of irony, the tension between positive attribution and negative rationale is significant.

What is regal goodness in this poem? As well as avoiding the blame of one's contemporaries, its exposition includes positive features:

> weox under wolcnum weorðmyndum þah
> oð þæt him æghwylc ymbsittendra
> ofer hronrade hyran scolde
> gomban gyldan þæt wæs god cyning! (lines 8-11)

This is amplified through the discussion of 'the earlier Beowulf' (see discussion of *Beowulf Scyldinga* above):

> Swa sceal geong guma gode gewyrcean
> fromum feohgiftum on fæder bearme
> þæt hine on ylde eft gewunigen
> wilgesiþas þonne wig cume
> leode gelæsten lofdædum sceal
> in mægþa gehwære man geþeon. (lines 20-25)

It is hard to say whether there is a single good type, an ideal good king, whose role real kings may more or less closely instantiate, or whether it involves a less normative appraisal. What is clear is the poem's reliance upon examples to develop this textually crucial yet barely defined concept. Goodness in kings is something ascertained by comparing several kings. What seems at first a somewhat shallow attribution to Hroðgar seems potentially somewhat disingenuous when we assess his career against the careers of other kings in this poem, particularly Scyld and Beowulf. The ostensible rationale for the attribution – that no subject criticised him – is unsatisfactory as proof that Hroðgar was a good king. As the ostensible rationale, however, it serves as the catalyst for a comparison between Hroðgar and the other so-attributed kings. According to one possible reading of the poem, Hroðgar does not

emerge favourably from such a comparison, since he has failed to protect his nation militarily or to unite them politically, and he does not exhibit heroic behaviour. The poet has set up an argument that thwarts itself — which is an ironic trope. When Hroðgar fails the test of comparison, our attention is still on the ostensible rationale, that others did not criticise him. Now we confront the ironic dissimilarity between the ostensible histories of Hroðgar and his Danes on one hand and their true histories on the other. Against the surface or public narrative, that Hroðgar was a good king and that the Danes were a splendid nation, is a kind of 'inside story,' that Hroðgar was not up to the job of kingship and his subjects were treacherous.[32] The poem's ironic trope serves to point up the latter narrative in a sentence that ostensibly develops the former.

The above paragraph constitutes a fairly radical reading of the character of Hroðgar. It needs to be balanced by an appreciation of the many virtues that character displays throughout the poem, especially the virtues of love and of wisdom. Read in relation to his career as king, however, it is not clear that these virtues would redeem his rule. As the close readings of the poem's ironic epithets (see Chapter 6) show, it is not even clear that his personal virtues are beyond reproof. Balancing the above 'radical' reading, however, compels us to distinguish between an ironic problematising of Hroðgar's goodness and an out-and-out invective against his memory. The former is hard to prove; I believe the latter is impossible. The poem undercuts his reputation for goodness, but it does not substitute a reputation for badness.

However good a king Hroðgar may have been – now an open question – he asserts that his elder brother Heregar was better:

> ða ic furðum weold folce Deniga
> ond on geogoðe heold ginne rice
> hordburh hæleþa ða wæs Heregar dead
> min yldra mæg unlifigende
> bearn Healfdenes se wæs betera ðonne ic! (lines 465-469)

This may be a modesty topos on Hroðgar's part. The only rationale here appears to be preeminence by virtue of Heregar's greater age (line 468a).

32 A reading of treachery in *Beowulf* is set out by Magennis, *Images of Community*, pp. 75-81.

There is no other amplification of the comparison.[33] The only other mentions of the older brother are in line 61a and line 2158b. The former is simply an exposition of part of the family tree; the latter is to amplify the worth of a sword. As with the attribution of *god* to Hroðgar, in the context of a comparison, the lack of substantive rationale for the attribution presents a significant tension. The attribution is again premised in the tension between an assertion and its justification. The poem draws attention to the reputation of Heregar, but does not substantiate it. What then does *betera* mean? Is it simply phatic, a culturally bound statement of respect for one's elders that does not carry any semantic significance? While it is not hard to accept the possibility of culturally bound statements in the highly politicised world of this poem, there is no reason to accept that such statements are without analytic insight. The term sits on the table, like Overing's cup, waiting to be filled. Heregar's superiority is not substantiated. It is not self-evident. It is not defined. For a skeptical reading, it is another problematic. In Chapter 5 we consider that question of substantiation – more precisely, the question of narrative amplification – with particular reference to attributive epithets. For now, we have an empty cup. More than that, we have had our attentions drawn to an empty cup.

Against all three characters, and yet quite similar to Scyld, stands Beowulf. His goodness and superiority are declared several times throughout the poem. In his case, those attributions are amplified extensively: the poem overall may be taken as an amplification of all appraisals of Beowulf's merits as a character. Hroðgar's appraisal in lines 1700-1703a[34] fits this mold perfectly. Yet *god* and *betera* remain problematic to some extent. As king, Beowulf's is a *lofgeornost* type of goodness — whatever we take that ultimately to mean. Beowulf and Scyld stand out from those Danish kings who occupy the generations

33 Although there is a muted echo of it in Hroðgar's final appraisal of Beowulf. Hroðgar premises quality of character in the quality of a character's innate born capacities:

> Þæt la mæg secgan se þe soð ond riht
> fremeð on folce feor eal gemon
> eald eþelweard þæt ðes eorl wære
> geboren betera! (lines 1700-1703a)

34 Quoted above.

between them. That means significant difference. As with those kings, his goodness is barely considered directly. The similarity with Scyld is that Beowulf's virtues are depicted rather than defined (deeds ahead of words).

* * * *

The doubleness of meaning in *Beowulf* and other Old English poems is much remarked upon. Recently both Tripp and Risden have taken this angle in their approaches to the humour of the poem, as have others approaching humour in Old English poetry.[35] It is only Liggins, though, who suggests this is primarily a function of irony.[36] Discussion in this chapter has focused on salient aspects of the contrastive. If we accept that the contrastive is a systemic component of *Beowulf*, it means we have discussed one salient aspect of the poem as a poetic system, the poem as an example of its own style. That aspect is 'the opposition of ends and beginnings,' but it has presented itself as subordinate to a broader notion of the poem as fundamentally contrastive. From contrastiveness comes irony, as we have seen and shall see again. The next chapter looks in detail at another aspect, litotes, that also serves to carry the contrastive function.

35 See particularly two chapters in Jonathan Wilcox (ed.), *Humour in Anglo-Saxon Literature*: Raymond P. Tripp Jr, 'Humor, Wordplay, and Semantic Resonance in *Beowulf*,' pp. 49-69; E.L. Risden, 'Heroic Humor in *Beowulf*,' pp. 71-78.

36 'Irony and Understatement in *Beowulf*.'

Chapter 4. Litotes and the negative in *Beowulf*

According to Lanham's *Handlist of Rhetorical Terms*, litotes means 'denial of the contrary.'[1] It is an extremely frequent feature of *Beowulf*. The poem has two characteristic forms of litotes, clause negation and word negation. Word negation, particularly by means of the *un-* prefix, has received closer critical attention than clause negation across the scholarship related to this poem.[2] There are approximately 300 instances of negation throughout the poem, being more or less evenly divided between clause negation and word negation. Bracher claims that ninety-four of them constitute litotes.[3] Although it depends on how you count it, I believe the true figure is probably significantly higher than that, more like half to two thirds of the total negations.

This chapter examines both types of negation, giving no particular precedence to one or other.

1 *Op. cit.*, p. 95.

2 Shuman and Hutchings, 'The *un-* prefix;' Calvin B. Kendall, 'The prefix *un-* and the metrical grammar of *Beowulf*,' *Anglo-Saxon England*, 10 (1982), 39-52. There are no studies of the ironical use of *ne* as a clausal negative in *Beowulf*, although there are quite detailed examinations of its syntactic functions. See for example Mary Blockly, *Aspects of Old English Poetic Syntax – Where Clauses Begin*, University of Illinois Press, Urbana and Chicago, 2001, especially Chapter 6, 'Uncontracted Negation as a Cue to Sentence Structure in Old English,' pp. 173-194; Bruce Mitchell, *Old English Syntax*, Vol. I, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1985, 'Negation,' pp. 659-674. Mitchell argues strongly that the distinction between 'sentence' negation and 'word' negation is not appropriate in Old English, pp. 660-661.

3 F. Bracher, 'Understatement in Old English Literature,' *PMLA*, 52 (1937), 915, writes: 'The common type of understatement in Old English is achieved by the use of a negative: the denial of the opposite; and this type is easily recognisable.' He finds ninety-four instances of this type of understatement in *Beowulf*, 920-921.

Ne þæt se aglæca yldan þohte
ac he gefeng hraðe forman siðe
slæpendne rinc slat unwearnum
bat bonlocan blod edrum dranc
synsnædum swealh sona hæfde
unlyfigendes eal gefeormod
fet ond folma. (lines 739-745a)

Line 739 negates a clause with its first word, *ne*. That clause is amplified by six subsequent clauses, four of which comprise a string of half lines varying each other: lines 740-741a, line 741b, line 742a, line 742b, line 743a, and lines 743b-745a, two of which contain a negative word: *unwearnum* (line 741b) and *unlyfigendes* (line 744a). All three negations may be read as litotes, insofar as each may be read as a rhetorical figure standing for a 'straightforward' positive alternative expression:

- 'Did not intend to delay it' may stand for 'intended to hasten it;'
- 'Unresisted' may stand for 'easily;' *and*
- 'Unliving' may stand for 'dead.'

Through the previous chapters discussion of the negative discursive mode in *Beowulf* has been developing. In this chapter we address the question of negativity directly. What is it to say not what is but what is not? Shuman and Hutchings frame their answer as follows:

> Another shape of irony — that of Litotes or Understatement — has for us a more abundant, if somewhat cloistered life. 'Saying less than one thinks or means' is given, or rather used to be given, in some dictionaries as the ultimate etymological sense of irony.[4]

Litotes is principally a vehicle for understatement, in their view, and understatement is the distinctively 'Germanic [form of] irony.' The first part of that argument is compelling, if somewhat reductive. Litotes has functions additional to, or other than, understatement, and understatement can be carried through a positive mode also. In the

4 Shuman and Hutchings, 'The *un-* prefix,' 217, quoting G.G. Sedgewick, *Of Irony, Especially in Drama*, Toronto University Press, Toronto, 1935, p. 10.

following example, a residually negative and arguably understated term, *untydras*, is less understated than the final half line of the passage:

> Þanon untydras ealle onwocon
> eotenas ond ylfe ond orcneas
> swylce gigantas þa wið God wunnon
> longe þrage he him ðæs lean forgeald. (lines 111-114)

The second aspect of the Shuman and Hutchings view is broader in its implications. Certainly we are looking at an ironic trope here, but to verify the suggestion that litotes in *Beowulf* may share functions with its usages in other ancient Germanic literatures – as interesting a suggestion as it is – is a very involved proposition. It is not attempted here.

There is undoubtedly much understatement achieved through the litotes of *Beowulf*. Not all of it is demonstrably ironic, as the final example from the poem shows:

> Ongunnon þa on beorge bælfyra mæst
> wigend weccan wudurec astah
> sweart ofer swioðole swogende leg
> wope bewunden windblond gelæg
> oð þæt he ða banhus gebrocen hæfde
> hat on hreðre. Higum unrote
> modceare mændon mondryhtnes cwealm
> swylce giomorgyd sio geomeowle
> æfter Biowulfe bundenheorde
> song sorgcearig sæde geneahhe
> þæt hio hyre hearmdagas hearde ondrede
> wælfylle worn wigendes egesan
> hynðo ond hæftnyd. Heofon rece swealg. (lines 3143-3155)

As an adjective, *rot* is more or less synonymous with *glæd*: meanings vary between ‘bright’ and ‘cheerful.’ *Unrot* in line 3148b does not strictly mean ‘glum’, then, so much as ‘without cheer’. ‘Glum’ in such a line would be *geomor*, a word appearing in the compounded *giomorgyd* of line 3150a, there being no alliterative obligation to pick particular sounds for that position in line 3148b.[5] But the word chosen is more measured than *geomor*. The poem expresses the quite particular concept

5 There is still a metrical obligation to include a primary stress somewhere within the location of this word. By using *unrote*, the poet has crafted a different rhythm for line 3148b from that which the *geomore* alternative would have achieved.

that the Geats were bereft of joy. It is a concept distinct (if not necessarily different) from the concept of the Geats thrown into sorrow that is implied by *giomorgyd*: the latter is a positive statement while the former is a negative. Understatement must admit of interpretation; more than that, it invites it. Modern English 'unhappy' is usually a synonym for 'sad.' It is not the same word, however, and there are contexts in which the semantic distinctions between them, however subtly shaded those may be, are brought to the fore. 'I am unhappy with your interpretation of my argument' would leave you with a different sense of my complaint to 'I am saddened by your interpretation of my argument.' The latter reduces itself unmistakeably to an emotional state, whereas 'unhappy with' may be interpreted as 'disappointed by', 'dissatisfied with', or perhaps 'underwhelmed at' — which are emotionally contained statements. *Unrot* seems to be similarly more contained than *geomor*. It stresses an absence of joy rather than a presence of sorrow. In stressing absence rather than presence, it is typical of litotes.

Literary New English has a more logical place and purpose for the negative than did literary Old English. This can be observed most clearly in the differing uses of the double negative. From *The Fight at Finnsburg*:[6]

> 'Ne ðis ne dagað eastan ne her draca ne fleogeð
> ne her ðisse healle hornas ne byrnað [...]' (lines 3-4)

The translation must use single negatives where the Old English original uses doubles for emphasis, because a double negative in literary New English is not negative. That cultural distinction casts some doubt on our ability to read single negatives in literary Old English. Having cast that doubt on our interpretative capacity, I might leave it at that. We seem to be competent in handling the double negatives, if poetically disproportionate in translating them, and I have encountered no evidence to suggest we are reading the single negatives incorrectly.

There are many further examples of litotes without irony, or without obvious irony. From the first numbered fitt of *Beowulf*:

6 *Op. cit*.

He beot ne aleh beagas dælde
sinc æt symle. Sele hlifade
heah ond horngeap heaðowylma bad
laðan liges ne wæs hit lenge þa gen
þæt se ecghete aþumsweoran[7]
æfter wælniðe wæcnan scolde. (lines 80-85)

That passage contains two negations, each of them a litotes. The latter, *ne wæs hit lenge þa gen* ('nor was it long after then'), is an alternative phrasing for the common word *sona* ('shortly'). As an alternative phrasing it adds variety or vividness to the telling of the story. It does not carry any appreciable ironic tension, however. The former litotes, *He beot ne aleh* ('he did not belie his pledge'), is different. It is an alternative phrasing for a statement to the effect that Hroðgar 'made good his pledge,' an attestation of reliability. Generally speaking, Hroðgar does not prove himself especially reliable in the course of the poem. He cannot defend his hall against Grendel, nor can he defend his dynasty against Hroðulf. It is ironic that one of the few pledges he does make good, the building of Heorot, is an achievement that brings trouble and disrepute upon him and his nation. The anticipated strife underpinning that ironic tension is mentioned proleptically within the sentence. The litotes itself serves to point up the irony by suggesting the possibility of its alternative. That is, by referring negatively to the belying of a pledge, line 80a alerts us to the possibility of pledge-belying. It is subtly ironic: this sentence ostensibly describing Hroðgar's reliability is simultaneously drawing attention to a suggestion of the unreliability of the regime he has inherited and built up. By association, it is Hroðgar's reliability in question here. The subtlety is that Hroðgar's unreliability is not stated so much as hinted — or rather, made possible through a negatively constructed suggestion. As we see in relation to *undyrne cuð* (line 150b — see below), negative suggestion here has an almost syllogistic internal dynamic:

1. To be a reliable person, one should keep one's word all the time.
2. Hroðgar keeps his word on this occasion.
3. Is Hroðgar a reliable character?

7 The manuscript reading for line 84b is *aþumswerian*.

Still examining *ne wæs hit lenge þa gen*, there is a rhetorical complementarity to the negative expressions of lines 80-85. The latter litotes is a figure in harmony with the former, rendering one passage demonstrably figurative across two sentences. The latter litotes links the dark prolepsis of lines 81b-85 to the former litotes (lines 80-81a) by means of this figurative harmony.

Shuman and Hutchings imply that litotes is an essentially rhetoricalising feature. They thus categorise it as a technique that affords a rhetorically figured alternative to any given positive statement. That seems unobjectionable. Where that formulation limits the rhetorical achievement or function of litotes to simple understatement it needs reviewing, however. As with any rhetorical figure, it is easy to make the mistake of focussing on the sense of the expression substituted for while missing the sense of the figurative expression substituted. Figurative expressions are only properly understood through a simultaneous awareness of both.[8] Sometimes there is no 'one or other' at the heart of the figure, as with the famously litotic presentation of Grendel's outlawry in the second fitt of the poem:

> Swa rixode ond wið rihte wan
> ana wið eallum oð þæt idel stod
> husa selest. Wæs seo hwil micel
> twelf wintra tid torn geþolode
> wine Scyldinga weana gehwelcne
> sidra sorga forðam secgum wearð
> ylda bearnum undyrne cuð
> gyddum geomore þætte Grendel wan
> hwile wið Hroþgar heteniðas wæg
> fyrene ond fæhðe fela missera
> singale sæce sibbe ne wolde
> wið manna hwone mægenes Deniga
> feorhbealo feorran fea þingian
> ne þær nænig witena wenan þorfte
> beorhtre bote to banan folmum
> ac se æglæca ehtende wæs
> deorc deaþscua duguþe ond geogoþe
> seomade ond syrede sinnihte heold
> mistige moras men ne cunnon
> hwyder helrunan hwyrftum scriþað. (lines 144-163)

8 I am indebted to Alex Jones for this point so simply put.

That passage contains three simple clause negations in *ne*; one phrase negation in *undyrne cuð*; and four further oppositions expressed through *wið*. Of that last group, the first (*wið rihte*) may be read as a litotes of sorts, while the second (*wið eallum*) is an amplification of the first. The final negative (*men ne cunnon*) is straightforward, not litotes. Having discounted the two remaining instances of *wið*, that leaves five instances of litotes for the passage in question. Doubtless the most famous of these occupies lines 157-158, but all five instances are worth reading closely. In the context of eight markers for negation and opposition, we must read the effect of each of the five litotes as somewhat cumulative within the group. It is instructive to read each of the litotes in this passage fairly closely.

Wið rihte is semantically not dissimilar to the adverb *unrihte*. Although they are quite different syntactically, the *–e* suffix they share builds upon their functional comparability with an aesthetic similarity. Grendel 'strove against right' suggests that Grendel strove unrighteously. It is not the same formulation as a statement that Grendel strove for evil (*for synnum wan*), or that he strove evilly (*synlice wan*). The subsequent variant, *wið eallum*, distinguishes Grendel from every person without positively defining any party. Grendel is not among everyone; he is outside of and against everyone. In this, *wið eallum* shares the negative definitional quality of *wið rihte*. Grendel is a creature perceived through the filter of negation: he is defined by the categories that do not include him. Chief among those categories is the most inclusive category of all, *eall*, since even it excludes the monster.[9]

Undyrne cuð, 'unsecretly known,' seems close to oxymoron. But the opposite of known is not secret; the opposite of secret is not known. There are secret knowledges and there are unsecret knowledges. Some secrets are known and some are not. This phrase figures its significance by selecting one concept to negate and another not to. 'Secretly' is negated, *undyrne*. Known is not negated: the un-secret is not *uncuð*. The suggestion of this phrase is a knowledge that was revealed, broadly and openly known, not concealed, a public fact. The significance of it is augmented by the quandary posed by that public fact.[10] Hroðgar, king of

9 It also suggests a quite normative conception of right, since *rihte* is apposed to *eallum*. That is an issue for another study.

10 It has been argued that this quandary involved a feud obligation: Stanley J. Karhl, 'Feuds in *Beowulf*: A Tragic Necessity?' *Modern Philology*, 69 (1972), 189-198.

the ostensibly mighty Danes, was unable to defend his own hall from nightly attack by Grendel. While the knowledge remained concealed, Hroðgar's quandary might be contained. The negation of that concealment, reflecting the public availability of the knowledge, suggests disgrace. Note that it does not say disgrace. The poem at no stage asserts Hroðgar's humiliation, although it is suggested several times (including by Hroðgar himself). Instead it negates the possibility of concealment, which would be an alternative to Hroðgar's humiliation. This is not so much a case of negative definition as of negative suggestion. It is quite understated in effect, although the negative suggestion is still abrasive. As with line 80a, it prompts an almost syllogistic reasoning:

1. There is a problematic fact.
2. The problematic fact is publicly known, not concealed.
3. Is there consequently a disgrace?

Without knowing of an existing term for this phenomenon, I call it a 'negative syllogism.' Its defining characteristic is that it concludes in a question, not an answer.

Sibbe ne wolde, 'he did not want peace,' is an alternative to saying that Grendel wanted hostility, or that he wanted the continuation of hostility. By defining his desire in the negative, the poem focuses on Grendel's rejection, a rejection of peace, amplifying the subsequent assertion that *se æglæca ehtende wæs*. The alternative would be to focus on his pursuit of conflict, but it is not certain that conflict was Grendel's aim. It is not clear what his aim was, although it is clear that he had no particular desire for peace. In this case the litotes serves to amplify his alien monstrosity. It is less a case of understatement, then, and more one of negative definition. The litotes serves more to define the monster than to modulate or understate the depiction of him.

Ne þær nænig witena / wenan þorfte // beorhtre bote / to banan folmum, 'none of the wise men there needed to expect valuable compensation at the killer's hands,' appears a striking example of the litotes-as-understatement trope. But is it? What is the straight version, the un-litotes alternative to this formulation? The very concept of Grendel paying 'bright compensation' is ridiculous — has any monster ever paid compensation to anyone? One version would be that the wise

men there *did* need to expect that they would *not* receive bright compensation at the killer's hands, but that is hardly different. The point of this clause remains one of absence: the absence of *wergild*. The only real alternative worthy of mention would be if Grendel *did* pay up, or if the wise men somehow expected him to. In the absence of such unprecedented civility, the outstanding feature is the absence. Reading as a sober critic, I note that Grendel is again being distinguished from the human *eall* by means of a quality they have and he lacks, namely the quality of legal accountability. This example is closer to the previous one than first glances suggest: distinction, more than understatement, is the effect of its negative formulation. Reading with a view to its irony, however, I find the earlier point more salient and more interesting: how else might Grendel be expected to behave? The potential for reading this litotes as understatement is an ironic potential, since there is no more straightforward formulation that is plausible than the one given by the poet. It is ironic simply to mention the question of compensation in relation to Grendel — other than the implausible case in which the poem makes a positive statement, declaring that Grendel paid reparations. Those who describe this passage of the poem as 'ironic litotes but not a joke'[11] surely miss the narrative gratuitousness of its negatively formulated remark. There is no 'one or other' for Grendel: to talk as though he could be any other way is either redundant or it is ironic. It is not that the trope distinguishes Grendel so much as that it takes his distinctiveness as a given.

The close reading just presented suggests that litotes in *Beowulf* conveys irony by overstatement (or hyperbole) as well as by understatement. Where there is a straightforward alternative to the litotes, it seems to modulate the signification. Where there is no straightforward alternative, the signification becomes absurd or gratuitous. Somewhere between the two ironic functions lies the negatively defining function, which takes four forms. One or more of these forms may be read into every litotes of the poem to some extent:

11 *Ibid.*, 192. Karhl's point is lent critical support by A. Leslie Harris, 'Litotes and Superlative in *Beowulf*,' *English Studies* 69 (1988), 3.

1. Distinguishing an individual from a group.
2. Defining or evaluating a character or object (or groups of characters or objects) by what it lacks (or they lack).
3. Describing or evaluating action, belief, or behaviour generally by what is not done or believed,
4. Describing or defining an emotion by negating a contrary emotion.

Earlier in this chapter a distinction was drawn between negative definition and negative suggestion. Negative suggestion in that case was a feature of litotic understatement, but it can be a feature of litotic overstatement as well. The father of a hanged young man knows this instinctively when he misses the 'harp's tune:'

Swa bið geomorlic gomelum ceorle
to gebidanne þæt his byre ride
giong on galgan þonne he gyd wrece
sarigne sang þonne his sunu hangað
hrefne to hroðre ond he him helpe ne mæg
eald ond infrod ænige gefremman.
Symble bið gemyndgad morna gehwylce
eaforan ellorsið oðres ne gymeð
to gebidanne burgum in innan
yrfeweardas þonne se an hafað
þurh deaðes nyd dæda gefondad.
Gesyhð sorhcearig on his suna bure
winsele westne windge reste
reote berofene ridend swefað
hæleð in hoðman nis þær hearpan sweg
gomen in geardum swylce ðær iu wæron. (lines 2444-2459)

'There is no harp's tune there, delight in the yards, such as there had formerly been there.' Instead, the 'sorry song' suggests (line 2447a), a more mournful tune was to be heard. The litotes is not understated. It is not modulating or lessening an emotional crisis by referring to opposites. Its primary function is contrastive. The misery of the old father is different from emotions he had previously enjoyed. For the purposes of a study of irony, it is important to note that the contrastive function is a constant aspect of litotes. That is an inherent consequence of the 'straightforward version' against which litotes stands as an alternate,

rhetoricalised version: the trope is distinguishable as a rhetorical figure by virtue of that contrastive fundamental. The particular power of this particular litotes is its suggestion of commensurability between the before and the after, an equivalence between negatives and positives. In that sense it is comparable to the litotic comment on Scyld's funeral:

> Nalæs hi hine læssan lacum teodan
> þeodgestreonum þon þa dydon
> þe hine æt frumsceafte forð onsendon
> ænne ofer yðe umborwesende. (lines 43-46)

In both examples the poem compares states of having and deprivation. Of course in Scyld's case the deprivation comes before, the having afterwards, whereas the father of the hanged man experiences those states in the reverse order. Nevertheless the comparison is explicitly there in both cases, pointed up by litotes. For the father of the hanged man, this equivalence is a duplicative suggestion of emotional intensity. His sorrow after is as intense as his love before. Certainly that is the way it is amplified. Even though that sorrow is defined both in negative terms – in forms of litotes – and in positive, the negative terms are strongly suggestive: lines 2448b-2449, 'he may not perform any help for him, old and very wise;' line 2451b, 'he does not care for the other one;' line 2457a, 'bereft of joy;' lines 2458b-2459, 'there is no harp's tune there, delight in the yards, such as there had formerly been there.' Meanwhile, the positive terms are equally suggestive: lines 2444-2445a, 'so it goes miserably for the old man to endure;' line 2447a, 'a sorry song;' line 2448a, 'a comfort to ravens;' lines 2455-2456, 'he looks with sorrow-care at his son's chamber, a deserted wine-hall, a windy rest.' The following sentence intensifies this elegaic mood still further:

> Gewiteð þonne on sealman sorhleoð gæleð
> an æfter anum þuhte him eall to rum
> wongas ond wicstede. (lines 2460-2462a)

Comparisons here can be drawn with the amplificatory techniques used in other Old English poems. *Judith*,[12] also drawn from the *Beowulf* manuscript, provides poetically less ornate examples such as:

12 Mark Griffith (ed.), *Judith*, University of Exeter Press, Exeter, 1997.

Ne wolde þæt wuldres dema
geðafian þrymmes hyrde ac he him þæs ðinges gestyrde
dryhten dugeða waldend. (lines 59b-61a)

An unacceptable state of affairs is thus negated by a divine interruption — a positively phrased agency.

Poetic ornateness, having and loss, in the amplification of litotes are easily found in the Old English elegies. *The Wanderer*[13] utilises the technique so brilliantly that it seems surely to be self-conscious, amplifying the negated absence of emotional sustenance through a positive statement of what is imaginatively sought, with the moment of transition between modes marked by that interpretatively open term, *forðon*:

Ne mæg werig mod wyrde wiðstondan
ne se hreo hyge helpe gefremman
forðon domgeorne dreorigne oft
in hyra breostcofan bindað fæste
swa ic modsefan minne sceolde
oft earmcearig eðle bidæled
freomægum feor feterum sælan
siþþan geara iu goldwine minne
hrusan heolstre biwrah ond ic hean þonan
wod wintercearig ofer waþema gebind
sohte seledreorig sinces bryttan
hwær ic feor oþþe neah findan meahte
þone þe in meoduhealle minne myne wisse
oþþe mec freondleasne frefran wolde
wenian mid wynnum. (lines 15-29)

This is only one out of many analogous examples that could be drawn from the Old English elegies.[14] The 'hanged man's father' passage quoted earlier has three pointedly ironic turns:

13 T.P. Dunning and A.J. Bliss (eds), *The Wanderer*, Methuen, London, 1969.

14 This may remind readers of Tolkien's view, *op. cit.*, p. 85, that *Beowulf* 'is an heroic-elegiac poem.'

1. *Hrefne to hroðre*, where a notion of ‘comfort’ is offset by discomforting connotations of ‘ravens,’ who feed on carrion. The ravens, symbols of death and desolation, have what the father wishes he had — the comfort of his son.

2. *Winsele westne*, where the poetically conflated concepts of ‘wine-hall’ and ‘joy-hall’[15] are offset by the concept of ‘laid waste.’ This (bitter) irony of a joyful abode made desolate is mimetically proportionate to the experiences of the father, whose source of joy (his son) has been defiled and destroyed. Indeed, it is being employed as an external symbol for his internal state.

3. *Hæleð in hoðman*, where the agency-rich concept of ‘hero’ (or ‘warrior’) is pointedly problematised by the qualifier ‘in the earth.’ The dead hero is to heroics as the dead son is to familial love: not the phenomenon itself but a memory of the phenomenon.

All three cases are ironic to some extent intrinsically, noun phrases that are somewhat paradoxical; moreover they are ironic in their contexts insofar as they serve to amplify related phrases or they are amplified by related phrases. In all three cases, the irony turns on a contrast wherein one of the principal concepts is desolation and/or death. These (technically) ‘positive’ statements serve to amplify the negatives. They provide positive detail, adding definition to suggestions negatively made through the litotes. As the amplifications of litotic statements, which are themselves contrastive, these are amplifications of one side of a contrastive pair. The litotic negative statements are thus lynchpins of the contrasts.

* * * *

15 The strongest argument for this conflation throughout *Beowulf* being Magennis, *Images of Community*, pp. 60-81. A possibility also mentioned in Chapter 6 of this thesis is that long voweled *win* (‘wine’) may, by dint of resonance, have some collocation with short voweled words *wynn* (‘happiness’) and *wine* (‘friend’).

I would like to conclude with two propositions about litotes and irony in *Beowulf*. First, this chapter has found that some of the litotes in *Beowulf* is not especially ironic, and clearly some of it is. Taken at face value, that means we cannot take litotes as a test for irony. Contrary to (what I take to be) the understanding of Shuman and Hutchings, the link is not automatic. However, the ironic quality of the trope is not degraded by this failure to be consistent and automatic in generating irony — in fact, quite the opposite, since an automatic irony would be self-defeating (not to mention dull). The trope of litotes is not a generator of irony, then, so much as an enabler of it.

Secondly, this chapter has argued that litotes invariably includes a contrastive aspect. Therefore in the context of *Beowulf* it is of a piece with the poem's contrastive poetics in general. As with all forms of comparison, litotes makes irony possible: all comparison alerts us to the possible presence of irony. One consequence of this proposition is a likelihood that we cannot apply any rigid test to discern irony in a given form. Irony is not a function of form. At the same time, we have seen how an ironic thread may weave its way in and out of the negative mode, how a positive statement may carry irony in common with a negative statement. Irony is not a function of mode either. In the absence of a hard and fast checklist, to paraphrase Kierkegaard, an ironist is reduced to reading with a view to irony. Rhetorical techniques such as litotes are reminders of the possibility of irony. We may view 'ironical figures' like litotes as the ore in which deposits of irony are likely, but not certain, to be found.

PART II

THE IRONICAL EPITHETS IN *BEOWULF*

‘Poetry, therefore, is a more philosophical and higher thing than history: for poetry tends to express the universal, history the particular. By the universal, I mean how a person of a certain type will on occasion speak or act, according to the law of probability or necessity; and it is this universality at which poetry aims in the names she attaches to personages.’[1]

‘Most people in *Beowulf* are not like Beowulf.’[2]

1 Aristotle, *Poetics*, in S.H. Butcher (ed. and trans.), *Aristotle’s Theory of Poetry and Fine Art*, Dover Publications, New York, 1951, p. 35.
2 Magennis, *Images of Community*, p. 77.

Chapter 5. A methodology for reading irony in the epithets of *Beowulf*

The difficulty of reading irony in a complex text such as *Beowulf* is not so much ambiguity about whether there is irony: clearly there is. Nor is it the problem of where we may infer that irony was or was not intended: for many likely instances, perhaps to be read as ironic, we may never have a satisfactory resolution, nor need we. The most urgent problem is a lack of practical methodology: how to proceed in reading for irony is unclear, and we lack dedicated guides to inform us. The Wilcox anthology of articles on *Humour in Anglo-Saxon Poetry* contains some brilliant readings of texts, and groups of texts, including *Beowulf*. Its contributors do not elaborate upon methods for distinguishing the humorous from the anodyne, however.[1] The same holds for philosophical discussions of humour or levity such as Bergson,[2] Freud,[3] and Huizinga:[4] they are necessarily at a level that gives the reader of *Beowulf* few practical clues. Kierkegaard[5] and Liggins[6] approach the problem. From the work of Liggins in particular we have derived a definition that may be used as a key to examination of this area: that irony consists in those instances where the poem points to the contrastive tension between expectations or cultural paradigms, or especially between the notional value of those on the one hand, and the real world flow of events on the other. From Kierkegaard we derive a sense of the importance of negative modality to creating a textual atmosphere that is conducive to irony: to posit questions is more ironical than to posit assertions. Yet we have still to address the practical question of how a component of the text may be read and analysed with a view to its irony. Otherwise we are left feeling our way in the dark, bumping into self-

1 *Op. cit.* This is not to suggest they should have done so, or that the anthology is any the weaker for taking the approaches that it does.
2 *Laughter – An Essay on the Comic.*
3 *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious.*
4 *Homo Ludens.*
5 *The Concept of Irony.*
6 'Irony and Understatement in *Beowulf*.'

evident ironies from time to time, without any satisfying take on this troubling but relatively uncharted aspect of this troubling and much charted poem. To address that 'practical question' of discernment requires the construction of a methodology out of what scraps those other authorities have thrown us.

Initially, in commencing research for this thesis, I had hoped that commentaries on the litotes of *Beowulf* and other Old Germanic poetries might lend themselves to marking up for a study of the irony of *Beowulf*.[7] While they address the question of irony, they do not address the methodology of reading for it. The same is true of commentaries about scorn (I refer here especially to the Old English *flyting*, after Martínez Pizarro, and the Old Norse *senna*):[8] they acknowledge the presence of irony in some instances, even discussing it closely in a few cases, but it is not their principal concern, and so they do not closely address the question of how to identify it. Magennis, writing on 'Hall and feasting in *Beowulf*,' gives several detailed readings of ironical aspects, and goes to some lengths to address the problematic cultures of the Danes and Geats as they have been depicted through the poem.[9] Again, however, the principal focus for the study is not the poem's irony, and so Magennis' findings do not extend to a coherently ironical attitude behind the poem (although they lend much support to this line of investigation). Unsurprisingly, then, Magennis does not give suggestions as to how one might test for such an attitude. The Old English corpus itself, as previously discussed (see Introduction), is not at all helpful on the question of methodology: the best suggestion we get is the MS Brussels version of Aldhelm's *De laude virginitatis*, line 5076, where *ironiam allegoriam* is glossed *husp hux* and *hironia* is glossed *hux*.[10] Often there are several steps of inference to be gone through before one can deduce that a given moment in a text is mocking.

All those sources are interested in solving other problems. Consequently, this thesis starts from scratch, in a sense. It investigates

7 See especially Shuman and Hutchings, 'The *Un-* Prefix;' Bracher, 'Understatement in Old English Literature.'

8 See especially Martínez Pizarro, *Studies on the Function and Context of the SENNA*; Clover, 'The Germanic Context of the Unferþ Episode.'

9 Magennis, *Images of Community*, Chapter 3, pp. 60-81.

10 Goossens, *op. cit.* See section 1 of the Introduction to this thesis.

the epithets of the poem, which to date have been an aspect of *Beowulf* not systematically addressed.

1. What an epithet is

a. Semantically speaking

An epithet is a term 'added' to another term. This can take many typical forms.[11] One typical form is an expression added to a name as a characterising description, such as 'Alfred the Great.' A typical form in some traditions of poetry is the regular use of a phrase combining a descriptive adjective and a denominative noun, such as *glæd Hroðulf*. A third form is a word or phrase that substitutes for another, where the substitute term is typically more illustrative than the term substituted, such as the substantive *hringedstefna* ('ring-prowed') in place of the simpler noun *ceol* ('boat'). A well-known form is the abusive, derogatory, or sarcastic phrase, such as *hæþenra hyht*. Often an adjective, participle, or other descriptive term alone may be read as an epithet, if it attributes certain qualities to a given referent, such as the first word from *The Battle of Maldon*,[12] apparently a predicate, *brocen*. It is beyond the scope of this thesis to set out a comprehensive survey of forms of the epithet in Old English poetry. In this section and the next (1.b), it is intended to refine and make useful the definition of the epithet for the purposes of investigating irony in *Beowulf*.

By 'epithet,' this thesis means an identification that is also a characterisation, a denotation that carries connotative and/or descriptive meaning. We are not looking just at a descriptive term, then, or looking just at 'the adjective' that 'frequently or habitually accompanies a certain noun.'[13] We are looking at all words or phrases in which certain qualities are attributed to identified referents through a combined process of

11 Although this paragraph contains points that are far from original, I am indebted to the assistance of Margaret Clunies Ross in collating and clarifying this sense of the 'forms' of the epithet.

12 *Op. cit.*, p. 41.

13 Lanham, *A Handlist of Rhetorical Terms*, p. 70.

naming and depicting. Thus the first epithet in *Beowulf* is *Gardena* in line 1a. This example typifies the way an epithetic phrase attributes qualities during the process of identifying its referent. The 'Spear-Danes' of line 1a are a nation of spear-carrying men, which is to say warriors. That identification evokes an image of men using spears. Taken in its broader sense, men using spears can be quite a broad-ranging depiction, so the epithet implies a number of related forms and functions associated with spears. That is, 'Spear-' should be read as a synecdoche for a paradigm of related phenomena (including *inter alia* other weapons, armour, and the uses of such things) that are referenced implicitly through the epithet. Part of the paradigm is an associated set of values, behaviours, and expectations about behaviours. Those are also components of the depiction. They are attributed to the characters named and depicted by the epithet. As Bede put it, *ex accidentibus, videlicet, propriam significat personam; quae tribus fit modis: ab animo, a corpore, extrinsecus.*[14] ('One can clearly identify a particular person by means of his distinguishing traits. This is effected by means of: (a) his qualities of character; (b) his physical attributes; (c) external circumstances.')[15] To be a 'Spear-Dane,' then, implies being warlike in behaviour, being expected to participate in war, and subscribing to a culturally specific version of the warrior code. These three dimensions constitute a semantic functionality for this epithet.

One way of describing an epithet in its semantic functionality might be to examine the balance between its naming aspects and its describing aspects. Taken in context, an epithet such as *Gardena* seems quite strong on both sides. The next two epithets (*þeodcyninga* in line 2a and *æþelingas* in line 3a) are more marked by their descriptive than by their naming aspects. The fourth epithet, the name *Scyld Scefing*, is the opposite. We could read our way through the entire poem characterising the epithets in such a fashion, but the exercise might tell us nothing we do not already know. We know an epithet works as a semantic force because it attributes significance to an entity, through either or both of the act of describing and the act of naming. We know, then, on two counts, that *Scyld Scefing* is an epithet, just as *Gardena* is.

14 'De Schematibus et Tropis,' 181.

15 Tannenhaus, 'Bede's *De Schematibus et Tropis*,' 246.

The first count is that, even though it is principally a name, this phrase brings in narrative significance through its constituent terms. The most obvious of these is the biographical summary indicated by the second element *Scefing*. The 'descendant of a sheaf' is much more vivid a denomination than would be, say, the 'descendant of a Clark.'[16] As we shall discuss below, the word *Scefing* provides more than just a vivid depiction; it also announces a reputation, a clue to the subjective identity of the character. An ordinary name, by contrast, may be said to remain at the level of an objective identification. To a lesser extent, the same is true of the first name, *Scyld*. 'Shield' is a more vivid denomination than would be, say, 'Tom.' It gives an image to associate with the persona.[17] This is a quality of semantically transparent names: they tend to be more vivid than the semantically opaque alternatives that most English speakers live by today. As well, the name attributes to the character qualities associated with the image — for a 'Shield' character, they are war-like qualities. This, too, is a development of the named character's subjective identity, a development out of the objective identification that is the result of a simple naming.

The second count is not limited to semantically transparent names. Every name carries some measure of connotative meaning. As well as providing objective identification, a name suggests an existence and the consequences of that existence. That is a consequence of the concrete relationship that exists between a name and the character it refers to. Thus it follows that, by introducing a name, one introduces significance. Once, in line 343b, the young warrior from Geatland has announced that *Beowulf is min nama*, we see how the moment of naming triggers a process of alignment between his objective identity and its narrative significance. Hroðgar adumbrates the contextual relatedness and the reputation as follows:

> Ic hine cuðe cnihtwesende
> wæs his ealdfæder Ecþeo haten
> ðæm to ham forgeaf Hreþel Geata

16 This point is not helped much by the etymological transparency in my surname. On the other hand, it is helped by that surname's etymological meaning.

17 The word *scyld* is used to mean 'shield' (not referring to the character) six times in the course of the poem (in lines 325b, 333b, 437b, 2570b, 2675b, and 2850b). I do not detect any narrative significance in the fact that this occurs consistently in b-verses.

angan dohtor is his eafora nu
heard her cumen sohte holdne wine.
Ðonne sægdon þæt sæliþende
þa ðe gifsceattas Geata fyredon
þyder to þance þæt he þritiges
manna mægencræft on his mundgripe
heaþorof hæbbe. (lines 372-381a)

To be Beowulf, to be Scyld Scefing, to be a 'Spear-Dane,' or to have any name, is to have both contextual relatedness and reputation. Regardless of the lexical content of the name, then, the act of naming is an attribution. Every name describes to some extent.

Are all names epithets? Yes and no. If we distinguish between epithet and non-epithet according to the properties of an epithet alone then, according to the previous paragraph, yes: all names are epithets. However, if our definition is predicated on the functional purposes of an epithet then the group is more exclusive. Functionally, an epithet is intended to serve a dual purpose: to identify and to characterise. A more exclusive definition of the epithet, therefore, has it as a term that not only identifies and characterises, but which also is intended simultaneously to identify and characterise. For the purposes of analysing *Beowulf*'s epithets as vehicles for irony, it is pragmatically important to adopt the more exclusive definition. The alternative would be impossible to contain within the scope of this thesis. A consequence of the choice just made is a presumption of artistic control: an assumption, which ultimately cannot be proven, that the poet has intended to identify and to characterise through some phrases that we discern as 'epithets.' Against this approach, one might note that it is an idealistic position. But every approach entails presumptions. Here is a choice of one presumption, artistic control, ahead of an alternative presumption, that artistic intention is inconsequential and that every denominative moment of the poem is configured to describe and/or connote. If this thesis had different aims, it might adopt the alternative approach.

A proposition follows from the two counts above. If, by definition, every epithet is at least somewhat nominal; if we accept that every name is at least somewhat illustrative; then the semantics of epithets are a study in the simultaneous operation of both aspects. To study epithets requires an awareness of the byplays between naming and depicting, the tensions and harmonies between them to which every epithet gives rise.

This is not an idealistic position. Every epithet is an economy of identification and characterisation.

b. Prosodically speaking

An epithet is more than a semantic phenomenon. As numerous studies in oral-formulaic and oral-traditional poetics have shown, the epithet in poetry is also a mnemonic phenomenon, a prosodic phenomenon, and a phonic phenomenon.[18] Thus dawns tend to be rosy-fingered and Nestor tends to be brave. A fair adaptation of oral-traditional argument for the purposes of this chapter, I believe, would have epithets as a prolific vehicle for the poetic 'formula' — that is, the formula that underpinned traditional techniques of poetic composition and is reflected clearly in traditional poetic styles. While this study has only indirect interest in the historical question of composition, the stylistic question of traditional poetic formula is crucial. Whether one argues that *Beowulf* is a 'traditional' poem in some sense comparable to Homer's *Odyssey*, as Foley does, or a self-consciously archaising literary composition as Kiernan implies,[19] comparable in that respect to the Middle High German *Nibelungenlied*, it is impossible to overlook the evidence of its formulaic style. Under certain metrical conditions, Hroðgar tends to be the *wine Scyldinga* ('friend of the Scyldings'), under certain others he is their *helm*. Under certain metrical conditions, Beowulf tends to be the *bearn Ecgþeowes*, under certain others he is the *Weder-Geata leod*. Under certain conditions wealth tends to be the *hordmaþðum hæleða*, under certain others it is *sincgestreon*. The definition of poetic formula as initially developed by Parry is 'a group of words which is regularly employed under the same metrical conditions to express a given essential idea.'[20] That description fits much of the language of *Beowulf*, where many phrases (especially noticeable are those of one verse – half a line – in length) are repeated in numerous contexts. Sometimes the contexts for these phrases are semantically similar; sometimes they are dissimilar. Prosodically, of course, they tend to be similar. This thesis does not pass

18 Foley, *Traditional Oral Epic*, pp. 201-239, addresses the 'formulaic character' of 'traditional patterning.'

19 Kiernan, Beowulf *and the* Beowulf *Manuscript.*

20 Quoted in Foley, *Traditional Oral Epic*, p. 2.

judgement on the question of orality in composition: I am not convinced that the question can be resolved — or even that it needs to be. That question is quite distinct from the questions of stylistic traditionality and of formulaic poetics.

There are numerous studies of the 'metrical grammar' of *Beowulf*,[21] but none that focus on grammar in a fashion comparable to the work done by commentators in the 'oral-traditional' school.[22] Whereas the metrical approach takes syllabic contours as its starting point, oral-traditional analysis treats prosodic, phraseological, and thematic dynamics synthetically. That is a significant departure because it promotes a more organic and integrated conception of the relationship between prosody, syntax, and narrative, which in turn promotes a less simply stratified conception of their constituent levels. A phrase may range in length from one syllable upwards. It may constitute most, even all, of a syntactic clause. It may constitute part of a metric verse, a whole verse, or more than that. The formulaist approach takes account of constructions smaller and larger than the phrase and theme, but its two great strengths are formulae at the level of the phrase (*hwæt*, *in geardagum*, *monegum mægþum*, *weox under wolcnum*, and so on) and of the narrative theme (hero on the beach, the sea voyage, and so on). This chapter focuses on phrases and their amplifications through context, not on themes or 'type-scenes.'[23]

A formulaic phrase is simultaneously a semantic and a prosodic phenomenon: a phrase that is a feature of lexis and is governed by prosody. More than governed, a formulaic phrase owes its existence to the verse contours that permit it, complement it, suggest it, and ultimately are themselves defined by it. As Foley has noted, phrasing is the predilection of the Old English alliterative verse style:

21 A somewhat representative example is Calvin B. Kendall, *The Metrical Grammar of* Beowulf, Cambridge Studies in Anglo-Saxon England 5, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1991.

22 See especially Foley, *Traditional Oral Epic*.

23 For an account of the narrative thematic approach to traditional poetic style, see Alain Renoir, *A Key to Old Poems: The Oral-Formulaic Approach to the Interpretation of West-Germanic Verse*, Pennsylvania State University Press, University Park and London, 1988. There is a critical application of the concept in Foley, *op. cit.*, Chapter 9, 'Thematic Structure in *Beowulf* and Old English Poetry,' pp. 329-358.

> Given the idiosyncratic prosody of *Beowulf* and other Anglo-Saxon poetry, what kind of diction is possible and likely? [...]
>
> Instead of the encapsulated phrase that can vary only in strictly defined ways under the constraints of syllable count, colon configuration, and other features inherited from the symbiosis of Indo-European meter and phraseology, we encounter in Old English poetry a phrase that in its very inscrutability reflects the prosody that supports it.[24]

Approximately half a century earlier, C.S. Lewis made a similar point, if more romantically:

> Whereas syllabic poetry primarily uses the evocative qualities of words (and only secondarily those of phrases), alliterative poetry reverses the procedure. The phrase, coinciding with the half-line, is the poetic unit. In any English country tap-room the student may hear from the lips of labourers speech-groups which have a certain race and resonance in isolation. These are the elements of our native metre.[25]

The starting point for a prosodological discussion of epithets is the phrase. An epithet may invariably be treated as a phrase for all syntactic purposes. Its semantic functions make it a particular subset of the phrase category, but that distinction is of little value to the present discussion of prosody.

Prosody, as Walter Ong argues, serves to make memorable.[26] The verse tale is more memorable than the prose tale. Psychology and poetics theorist Nicolas Abraham goes further, describing versification as a synthesis of retained (or remembered) past and 'pretained' future in a rhythmic present, the moment of the poem.[27] For Ong, and for other commentators on oral-traditional poetics, the formula is a mnemonic constant in the process of composing poetry. For Abraham, a verse pattern involves both reiteration (backward-looking) and prolepsis (forward-looking). Although a 'formula' can only be demonstrated in

24 *Traditional Oral Epic*, pp. 201-202.

25 C.S. Lewis, *Rehabilitations and other Essays*, Oxford University Press, London, New York, Toronto, 1939, p. 127 (taken from Essay VI, 'The Alliterative Metre', pp. 117-132).

26 Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy – The Technologizing of the Word*, Methuen, London and New York, 1982, pp. 33-36.

27 Nicolas Abraham, *Rhythms: On the Work, Translation, and Psychoanalysis*, trans. Benjamin Thigpen and Nicholas T. Rand, Stanford University Press, California, 1995.

retrospect, by gathering examples from a poem or group of poems and showing how they contain the same content under similar prosodic conditions, there is an aspect of formulae which is prospective; this 'formulaic' quality is the propensity for a poem to evince formulae. It is distinct from the 'formula' because it is an aesthetic predisposition for a poem rather than an identifiable moment from it. Foley arrives at a similar point by distinguishing between the 'formula' or 'formulaic system' on the one hand and 'traditional rules' on the other.[28] He notes that a significant minority portion of the phraseology of *Beowulf* cannot be described in terms of any known formulae or of any known formula-generating systems, but that none of the poem cannot be described as a product of 'traditional' stylistics. Foley's argument is compelling. Its distinction between a formula and a tradition is a useful illustration of the difficulty of categorical deliberations in this field. One should be wary of reifying Foley's suggested distinctions as categorical in themselves, however. The boundary between a formula or system and a tradition is nothing more than notional. Traditionality of style is simply a looser conception of formulaic style. A 'traditional poem' is in some way related to a 'formulaic poem.' The relationship, as Foley suggests, is at the level of aesthetics. A traditional poem, such as *Beowulf*, is read or heard in expectation of (some measure of) traditional style: a reader or listener familiar with the tradition is alert to the likely presence of traditional forms — of formulae. It is not necessary to demonstrate that a phrase is repeated under similar prosodic conditions in order to know that it is formulaic. Every phrase in *Beowulf* is like a formula waiting for the repeat. With every new phrase, the poem coins a new formula. The 'formulaic style' means repetition is a feature of a formula which, though it is theoretically necessary, in practice may be suspended indefinitely.

For phrases, the 'formulaic style' principle holds four significant consequences. One is methodological: although it is not always easy to prove that phrases in *Beowulf* are formulae in the strict sense of Parry's definition, since many are one-off occurrences, the 'formulaic style' principle makes that a redundant problem. Every phrase is either a

28 *Traditional Oral Epic*, pp. 201-239. Compare the approach of Anita Riedinger, 'The Old English Formula in Context', *Speculum* 60 (1985), 294-317, who posits the concept of a formulaic 'set' as a phenomenon somewhat looser than the 'system,' but more specific than the 'traditional rules' adduced by Foley.

demonstrable or else a potential instance of formula. A second consequence is mnemonic: since each phrase of the poem, as a potentially 'formulaic' moment, is a reminder of the possibility of repetition under similar prosodic conditions, an epithet is a suggestion that readers or listeners look out for repetition, both by recalling other instances of the same phrase in this poem and in others, and by remembering the same phrase in anticipation that it is likely to be repeated in this poem and in others. A third consequence is prosodic: each phrase in *Beowulf* is necessarily a product and generator of its prosodic context. All the semantics of a given epithet must be read as heavily circumstantial. The danger of this caveat is that it may be reduced *ad absurdum*: perhaps no attribution we read into the poem is actually intended, but is instead an accident of its circumstances, its context. Against that regression, I propose the following axiom: to assume any lack of prerogative in the semantics of the poem's epithets does a dishonour to the text. The fourth consequence is rhetorical: it is stating the obvious here to note that, if an epithet is a consequence and a cause of its poetic circumstances, an epithet must be a cause and a consequence of the rhetoric of the poem. A phrase is of a piece with the rhetorical contours of the poem, the figurative rises and falls. In conjunction with the 'third consequence' above, this is a recommendation that we as readers or listeners attend closely to all the rhetorical aspects of the epithets of *Beowulf*, taken in the context of the poem in which they are located.

More than following the rhetorical contours of the poem, the epithets of *Beowulf* follow its broadly conceived poetical contours. Being of a piece with the versification of the poem, each phrase maps out the lifts and dips of the verses and lines. A phrase is integrated within a poetic context as much by its prosody as by any formulaic quality. Prosody, then, is a crucial contributor to the sense of any poetic phrase. Phrases and particular readings of phrases are both promoted and played down through their prosodic contexts. For example, after the death of Grendel and subsequent awed attention to his severed arm, in lines 991-994a we see emphasis placed on *folmum* ('with [or 'by'] hands'), playfully leading our imaginations to an absurd reading — that Hroðgar had ordered the Danes to stick hands to the interior walls of Heorot as adornments, and similar emphasis on the numbers of men and women who volunteered their decorating limbs:

foran æghwylc wæs
stiðra nægla gehwylc styla gelicost
hæþenes handsporu hilderinces
eglu unheoru æghwylc gecwæð
þæt him heardra nan hrinan wolde
iren ærgod þæt ðæs ahlæcan
blodge beadufolme onberan wolde.
  Ða wæs haten hreþe Heort innanweard
folmum gefrætwod fela þæra wæs
wera ond wifa þe þæt winreced
gestsele gyredon. (lines 984b-994a)

While much of the mischief here is a result of narrative collocation, the alliteration scheme of line 992 serves to emphasise particular components of the second sentence, including the vital phrase *folmum gefrætwod* and the suggestive *fela*. *Folmum getfrætwod* can be read as an epithetic complement to the name *Heorot*: 'Heorot, by hands adorned.' It is then amplified through the *fela [...] wera ond wifa* of lines 992b-994a. Chapter 6 returns to this passage of the poem. For now, it suffices to note a phrase that is an epithet, integrated into its poetic context, amplifying playful meanings through the particulars of its prosody, most notably its alliterative situation.

2. How an epithet works semantically

a. The attribution

An epithet functions partly as a condensed predicate: in announcing X as Y – say, in depicting Beowulf's boat as a *hringedstefna* – it proposes that X is Y – that Beowulf's boat is a *hringedstefna*. Like any predicate, it attributes to X the qualities of Y. The condensation is that, instead of proposing 'X equals Y,' an epithet posits '(X)Y.'[29]

29 Cf. Fred Robinson, Beowulf *and the Appositive Style*, University of Tennessee Press, Knoxville, 1985, p. 60, quoted in Chapter 1 of this thesis, where Robinson argues comparably that apposition 'is paratactic and so implies relationships without expressing them.'

The poetics of the formula may often be in harmony with the poetics of attribution. A prosodic environment for a given phrase may prefer a certain term, just as the narrative environment may prefer a certain term. Where there is harmony between those elements of context, prosodic situation and narrative situation, it is as though the formula is working at two levels. An epithet may thus seem doubly inevitable or doubly likely within its context. The example of *hringedstefna* cited above suggests that epithetic attribution is a one-way process, where a phrase attributes qualities to a referent. Frequently, however, a referent has more to say about an epithetic phrase than vice versa.

> Đam wife þa word wel licodon
> gilpcwide Geates eode goldhroden
> freolicu folccwen to hire frean sittan. (lines 639-641)

Wealhþeow in this example is a 'noble queen of the people' for political reasons. That is a highly formulaic way of describing the queen of the powerful and eminent Danish court.[30] The attribution is of qualities chosen more for their political acceptability (within the context of Hroðgar's Danish court, at least) than for the information they add to our understanding of the character of the queen. Thus it is a highly reflexive attribution. This epithet is more a phrase governed by its subject matter than it is a phrase illuminating its referent. Consequently, it attributes little new information to its established referent.

Wealhþeow is also a *freolicu folccwen* for obvious prosodic reasons. The alliterative pattern of the line achieves its power from placing stress on three syllables whose onset-sound is *f-*: without a *freolicu folccwen*, the ear would yearn for an epithet prosodically equivalent to this character who goes and sits by *hire frean*. Thus the attribution is doubly preordained by its context, or at least doubly recommended. This is another manifestation of the critical commonplace that form and content both contribute to any given poetic moment.

As an attributive device, the epithet seems to differ from previously discussed devices, especially the figure of litotes, in that its semantic processes are intrinsically positive. Attributing is a way of positing; epithets achieve their semantic effect by attributing. This allows strings

30 Compare line 615a, *þa freolic wif*; also the (ironic) reference to Modþryðo in line 1932a, *fremu folces cwen*.

of epithets to develop, resulting in semantic accumulation (a process observed by Overing in relation to substantives).[31] In that vein, there is a string of five epithets just prior to Beowulf's first meeting with Hroðgar, when Wulfgar elaborates a system of attributions to his king:

> 'Ic þæs wine Deniga
> frean Scyldinga frinan wille
> beaga bryttan swa þu bena eart
> þeoden mærne ymb þinne sið
> ond þe þa andsware adre gecyðan
> ðe me se goda agifan þenceð.' (lines 350b-355)

Of course, some epithets are simultaneously litotes. Thus *unlyfigend-* is an attributive term that occurs five times in *Beowulf*.[32] Most epithetic attributions are not clearly negative, however. Take for example three epithets that feature prominently in Chapter 3: *aglæca*, *freoðuwebbe*, and *god cyning*. Any negativity read into such phrases must be subtle in some sense. How might it manifest itself? Here it is helpful to turn to Kierkegaard, who goes to great lengths to explain how Socrates epitomised the negative voice: 'He is like a dash in world history,' argues Kierkegaard.[33] An epithet is usually a positive, like praise (which

31 *Language, Sign, and Gender*, pp. 50, 53, and 54. Overing's reading of accumulative semantics is discussed in Chapter 1.

32 Lines 468b, 744a, 1308b, 1389a, and 2908b.

33 *The Concept of Irony*, p. 198. This is really an abbreviation of a more detailed (as well as droll) version of the point, which it is worth quoting here, from Kierkegaard's Introduction, *ibid.*, pp. 11-12 (10 editors' footnotes omitted):

> It is common knowledge, of course, that tradition has linked the word 'irony' to the existence of Socrates, but it by no means follows that everyone knows what irony is. Moreover, if through an intimate acquaintance with Socrates' life and way of living someone gained a notion of his singularity, he still would not have a total concept of what irony is. In saying this, we are by no means nourishing the distrust of historical existence that would identify becoming [*Vordelsen*] with a falling away from the idea, since it is much more the unfolding of the idea. This, to repeat, is far from our intention, but on the other hand neither can one assume that a specific element of existence as such would be absolutely adequate to the idea. In other words, just as it has been correctly pointed out that nature is unable to adhere to the concept — partly because each particular phenomenon contains but one element, and partly because the whole sum of existence is still always an imperfect medium that engenders longing [*Forlængsel*] rather than gratification — so also something similar can

often comes in the form of an epithet). But within that positive shell there may be a cavity. If an epithet posits an insubstantial attribution, it is in some sense hollow.[34] Thus we have the 'hollow epithet,' which is comparable to hollow praise. It is an attribution that raises questions about itself. If the negative mode is marked by its tendency to posit questions rather than assertions, hollow epithets bear the mark of the

> legitimately be said about history, inasmuch as every single fact does indeed evolve, but only as an element, and the whole sum of historical existence is still not the completely adequate medium of the idea, since it is the idea's temporality and fragmentariness (just as nature is its spatiality) that long for the backward-looking repulse emanating, face to and against face, from the consciousness.
>
> This must be enough on the difficulty inherent in any philosophical conception of history and the care that therefore ought to be taken. Special situations, however, may be attended with new difficulties, which is especially the case in the present inquiry. For example, what Socrates himself prized so highly, namely, standing still and contemplating — in other words, silence — this is his whole life in terms of world history. He has left nothing by which a later age can judge him; indeed, even if I were to imagine myself his contemporary, he would still always be difficult to comprehend. In other words, he belonged to the breed of persons with whom the outer as such is not the stopping point. The outer continually pointed to something other and opposite. He was not like a philosopher delivering his opinions in such a way that just the lecture itself is the presence of the idea, but what Socrates said meant something different. The outer was not at all in harmony with the inner but was rather its opposite, and only under this angle of refraction is he to be comprehended. Therefore, the question of a view in regard to Socrates is quite different from what it is in regard to most other people. Because of this, Socrates can of necessity be comprehended only through a combined reckoning. But since we are now separated from him by centuries, and even his own age could not comprehend him in his immediacy, it is easy to see that it becomes doubly difficult for us to reconstruct his existence, inasmuch as we must strive to comprehend an already complicated view by means of a new combined reckoning. If we now say that irony constituted the substance of his existence (this is, to be sure, a contradiction, but it is supposed to be that), and if we further postulate that irony is a negative concept, it is easy to see how difficult it becomes to fix the picture of him — indeed, it seems impossible, or at least as difficult as to picture a nisse with the cap that makes him invisible.

34 An insubstantial attribution, in the sense discussed here, is one that is not substantiated or one that is problematically substantiated by its amplification through context, as discussed in section 1.b (see below).

negative mode. An outstanding example is in line 530b, where Beowulf caustically addresses *wine min Unferð* ('my friend Unferð').

If there are narrative-dictated formulae and prosody-dictated formulae around a given epithetic phrase, any hollowness is potentially subversive with respect to the attribution. A hollow attribution contains an embedded negative, questioning the attribution itself and often also the poetic system that is predisposed towards the phrase making the attribution. This may manifest itself as an ironic attitude towards generic features of the poem or towards the social values depicted in the poem. A hollow epithet is an epithet that attributes qualities falsely in some sense. It may occasionally be discerned by dint of an internal contradiction of some sort; more often it is recognisable only in a contradiction between what is attributed and what is the poetic context for the epithet. This 'poetic context for the epithet' is its amplification, as discussed below. Not strictly hollow, but still relevant, are those epithets that attribute qualities at odds with those prescribed by the 'narrative formula,' such as epithets invested with sexual innuendo. One rule is as follows: a phrase that complements the poetic (prosodic and/or narrative) predisposition of its context with a hollow attribution is a subversion of formal constraints. Because such an epithet promotes a split significance, a negative attribution embedded in the concept of a positive attribution, it is not only reflexive (as a function of environmental predisposition) but also inherently contrastive. It is an ideal site for irony.

b. The amplification

While an epithet attributes, its attribution is only truly meaningful when read in context. The amplification of an epithet is the process of playing out its attributive significance through its narrative and poetic context. It is one thing to call the Danes 'Spear-Danes,' but how does this play out in the poem? One part of the answer to this question is analogous to the 'words and deeds' dichotomy discussed in Chapter 2. An epithet is comparable to the *beot* in that it stakes a claim for a character or object or group of characters or objects. An epithet purports to attribute. Where an attribution is justifiable, it will be borne out in context. So, for example, the first mention of Grendel is epithetic: *se ellengæst* (line

86a). It is vindicated by Grendel's subsequent behaviour. Where an epithet is hollow, that is shown up through disparities between the attributive phrase and its context. For example, there is a problematic relationship between the *weard Scildinga* (line 229b) and the narrative context for that attribution. As formidable as the guard may be on the coast, he has not effectively guarded the Danish kingdom against its main adversary, Grendel.[35] Amplification is as much a part of the epithet as the attributive phrase is. It is the testing ground for epithets. In effect, they are both parts of the one device: an epithet consists of an attributing phrase and the contextual amplification of that phrase. Two parts of one device implies a cleavage, and where there is disparity between the parts, where the attribution stands in contrast to its amplification, the cleavage becomes a break, frequently an irony.

An epithet need not be ironic, but if irony is not amenable to any formal test, as Chapter 4 has found, how may we ascertain its presence? Equipped with our Liggins-inspired definition (that irony consists in those instances where the poem points to the contrastive tension between expectations or cultural paradigms, or especially between the notional value of those on the one hand, and the real world flow of events on the other), we still require a method for applying this principle of discernment. Here the concept of negativity is clearly useful, but we need something extra.

To convey an ironic point – to focus the ironic tension of a situation in a manifest presence – requires that there be a moment at which the tension erupts.[36] For the *hæleð hiofende* of line 3142a,[37] that moment lasts half a line. It is a half line of attribution, in the sense that the phrase *hæleð hiofende* is essentially an epithet used to complement the verb phrase of line 3141a. But its reach into the surrounding narrative

35 This comment on effectiveness is principally a comment on the relevance of the guard, rather than on his performance of the duties assigned to him. To have so effective a guard posted on the frontier (coast), when the real threat is internal, is an irony of roles. See also the entry for this epithet in Chapter 6.

36 This concept is a commonplace in theoretical approaches to irony and humour. For Kierkegaard it is only in a moment of crisis, later to be named the 'explosive either/or,' that irony is revealed. For Freud, humour requires an eruptive moment to become properly humorous. For Bergson, discussing humour in a way that explains irony incisively, there must be a moment of realisation so that an audience or reader may appreciate the alienation of individuals from their environments.

37 Also discussed in detail in Chapter 1.

extends much further. It draws on the biography of Beowulf and his major encounters. It amplifies the uniqueness and the solitude of his persona. It draws attention to the plight of those he leaves behind in *seo læne gesceaft*. All this it does through a contrastive offsetting — more specifically, through a half line that stands out among a sequence of appositions: Beowulf / Geats / Beowulf. The word *hæleð* carries that 'formulaic' aesthetic quality, discussed earlier, of the poem's epithetic phrases (whether ironic or not). That formulaic quality extends to its relation to the referent. To describe the warrior retainers of a heroic leader in a heroic poem as 'heroes' is a conventional attribution, to say the least. Variation is a poetic process that amplifies a phrase by pointing up certain of its semantic properties. Taking *hæleð* as a variant for the *Geata leode* of line 3137b, we have a word which points up a property of the antecedent that is already well in the foreground: we already know that Beowulf's thegns have martial duties before it is pointed out in this way. We learn more about *hæleð* from its collocation with *Geata leode* than we learn about the antecedent through the collocated variant. The ostensible antecedent term does more to amplify the variant than vice versa. The reasons for this are simple: certain epithets are so frequently collocated to certain types of antecedent in the corpus of Old English poetry generally, and in *Beowulf* particularly, that a listener or reader is automatically conscious of the potential for those epithets to be employed as variants for those antecedents (the use of *hæleð* for a warrior being a perfect example). The automatic quality of such recognition is what renders such variants stock phrases or 'formulaic' in effect. Frequently they are employed in a straightforward fashion (for example, line 27a: *felahror*), in which case the amplification is somewhat redundant, serving to reiterate an aspect of the antecedent for emphasis. A concomitant effect or function of emphatic-formulaic amplification is ideological boosting: epithets can serve to amplify aspects of the cultural systems (including ethical systems, rhetorical systems, and grammatical systems, among others) within which they occur. In the case of *hæleð*, however, the amplificatory dynamics of the formulaic epithet are employed to ironic effect. In such a formulaic relationship, the antecedent amplifies the variant more than vice versa. Thus it is an irony of this term that Beowulf's negligent retainers are described as 'heroes.'

Offsetting need not obviously involve a term that makes the contrast plain. Often in the poem *Beowulf*, the contrastive aspect of the trope is only apparent on closer reading, as in the following passage:

> Men ne cunnon
> secgan to soðe selerædende
> hæleð under heofenum hwa þæm hlæste onfeng. (lines 50b-52)

Two somewhat formulaic epithets, phrasal variations on the subject of the sentence, *men*, offset the mysterious tone of the narrative here. I refer to *selerædende* and to *hæleð under heofenum*. Alternately, they must be quite purely emphatic in function, semantically quite redundant. Taken simply as amplifications of *men*, the two phrases are peculiarly chosen in light of the theme of the sentence. What business is it of the hall-counsellors or of the heroes under the heavens to be confounded, impotent even? It is an ironic business. The not-knowing is a state of mystery, a state of theological fog. When that not-knowing is carried by the wise and the doughty, however, it becomes pointed. It is ironic because the functions of those people include knowing and discovering little-known or obscure things. That does not transform the meaning of the sentence in a radical sense. The variations do not fail to develop the meaning of their antecedent. Rather, they serve to realise an irony immanent in the basic sentence: *Men ne cunnon secgan to soðe hwa þæm hlæste onfeng*. Taken in its context, *men* is a set that includes and is represented by *selerædende* and *hæleð under heofenum*. It is ironic that such people should not have known something so worthy of knowledge. It is ironic that those who purport to know, to discover, and (above all) to lead have little comprehension of a subject the Christians listening to the poem would know intimately. That reading is consonant with the poem's attitude towards the religious beliefs and practices of the inhabitants of Beowulf's world.[38] It is an attitude that drives the poem to highlight points of ignorance in order to depict a culture of spiritual shortcoming. The poem employs irony to bring attention to the spiritual shortcomings of the Danes. That irony is realised, in this instance, through the epithets that amplify the subject of the sentence. To be precise, that irony is realised by offsetting the qualities connoted within

38 That the poem is critical of and ironic towards the intellectual presumption of the Danes is made explicit in lines 175-188.

those epithets, qualities that are attributed to the sentence subject, developing the sense of the sentence subject so it is at least as much a matter of those attributed qualities as of anything connoted in the antecedent word itself. More salient than the point that men do not truly know who received Scyld after his funeral are the points that:

- Counsellors of the hall do not know it.
- Heroes under the heavens do not know it.

Each epithet is a moment at which the tension erupts, that 'tension' being immanent in the sentence but drawn out and pointed up by the attributive epithets. A harmony of verse and grammar has the phrases occupying exactly half a line each. Thus they are given equal weight, equal poetic prominence.

3. Some practical considerations when reading an epithet in *Beowulf*

a. Examples of other complex epithets, especially compound terms

The word *selerædende* is significant for several reasons, two of which should be noted here. One is that it consists of two words that have been compounded. Compounding in *Beowulf* serves several functions, one of which is to create a syntactic relationship between two terms without the encumbrance of oblique inflection or any additional words; that is, compounding serves as pithy syntax. Here, the word means the 'counsellors to (the people who occupy) the hall,' which we may interpret to mean a chief's council. In its pithiness it takes on an iconic quality, becoming more like a name or appellation for, and less like a description of, the phenomenon. The use of a compound word thus makes this term more pointedly epithetic than any syntactically expounded alternative phrase. As a second reason for the significance of *selerædende*, it is worth noting that the manuscript records the term as *sele rædenne*. As well as having a different final syllable, the phrase is not compounded in the original. In making their emendation, Klaeber

and other editors have taken the analogous form of line 1346a *selerædende* as proof. This is a judgement call. In cases where there is no simple analogue, editors depend on a sense of the general style of the poem. An example of this is in line 2710a, *siðast sigehwile* ('last victory-time'), where the manuscript reads *siðas sige hwile* (perhaps this would translate as 'occasions/ventures for the victory in time'). This is a tricky issue for compounding, since it is essential to all readings of *Beowulf* that certain phrases are compound words, even though the majority of such compounds are presented with spacing between their roots. There is no dispute among editors over the majority of these. There are further significances that are less important to the discussion here, such as the prosodic features of line 51 and the topical significance of the word's constituent elements (this has been discussed in the previous section).

Syntactical condensation, or 'pithy' phrasing, tends to reduce the specific qualities of the relationship between constituent terms of a given phrase. A compound word tends to establish that there is a relationship between its constituent terms, but the nuances of that relationship are often unclear, or only clear in context. Thus a *sigehwile* is potentially a time of a victory; alternately it may be a moment for a victory; alternately it might be a duration of a victorious struggle: the context makes clear that the 'duration of struggle' reading is not the intended sense; however, either of the other senses could equally well apply. When syntax does not clarify the nature of relations between terms, the process of clarification becomes more seamlessly intertwined with other functions, notably lexical functions. Again with the example of epithets in lines 50b-52, as was the case in analysing lines 3141-3142, a process of bisecting the phrases reveals semantic tensions between their constituent units. There are tensions as well as harmonies between *sele* and *rædende*, just as there are between *hæleð* and *under heofenum*. One major harmony is a thematic link between the advisors and the hall of their masters. Reiterating their location emphasises the position from which they act, and which is central to their social worth (and presumed authority). The tensions are a sort of by-play between the attributive connotations, or resonances, of the constituent units in the phrase. Thus *sele* constrains the scope of *rædende*, the former element suggesting there are spatial limits to the latter element's agency. In pointing to a limitation, the phrase reveals an ironic perspective on the intellectual

aspirations of the poem's characters: the best minds in the Danish kingdom lacked the knowledge necessary to solve the mystery at hand. In other words, a process that we have observed in the relationship between some atributive phrases and their contexts, the offsetting of amplification, is also present in the relationship between the constituent terms of some atributive phrases that are compound words. Moreover, we have seen that the offsetting process may enable irony at this level also. For the contrastive poetic style of *Beowulf*, a moment at which ironic tension erupts is not necessarily or not only created by the insertion of a contrastive offset to the flow of a sentence. It can also be created by contrast within the constituent units of a sentence, within the words and phrases.

b. Examples of epithets whose interpretation depends heavily on context

Poetic diction pushes aesthetics into the foreground. *Beowulf* reveals an artistic sensibility that is highly self-conscious and reflexive. That reflexiveness dictates listening and reading practices, so that, when we read a poetic epithet such as *selerædende*, we not only experience the progress of the story into the conceptual domain of a new term;[39] at the same time we reflect on how this latest semantic attribution reflects on what has come before it in the poem, as well as in the language known to the poet and audience, or what may come after or from it. Each epithet thus affords a certain critical take on the narrative. Where Klaeber famously laments the digressive poetics of *Beowulf* in a section of his Introduction, worth quoting here, he is also lamenting a critical-reflexive ethos that pushes the attributive phrase and its amplification to front of stage:

> LACK OF STEADY ADVANCE
>
> The reader of the poem very soon perceives that the progress of the narrative is frequently impeded. Looseness is, in fact, one of its marked peculiarities. Digressions and episodes, general reflections in the form of speeches, an abundance of moralising passages interrupt the story. The author does not hesitate to wander

39 New, that is, in the sense that the poem has not used that word previously.

from the subject. When he is reminded of a feature in some way related to the matter at hand, he thinks it perfectly proper to speak of it. Hence references to the past are intruded in unexpected places. The manner of Scyld's wonderful arrival as a child is brought out incidentally by the way of comparison with the splendor of his obsequies (43 ff.). Beowulf's renown at the height of his career calls to mind the days of his youth when he was held in disrespect (2183 ff.). No less fond is the poet of looking forward to something that will happen in the near or distant future. The mention of the harmony apparently reigning at the court of Hroðgar gives an opportunity to hint at subsequent treachery (1018 f., 1164 f., 1180 ff.). The building of the hall Heorot calls up the picture of its destruction by fire (82 ff.). It is not a little remarkable that in the account of the three great fights of the hero, care has been taken to state the outcome of the struggle in advance (696 ff., 706 f., 734 ff., 805 ff.; 1553 ff.; 2341 ff., 2420 ff., 2573 ff., cp. 2310 f.). Evidently disregard of the element of suspense was not considered a defect in story telling.

Sometimes the result of a certain action is stated first, and the action itself mentioned afterwards (or entirely passed over). E.g., *þa wæs frod cyning [...] on hreon mode,/ syðþan he aldorþegn unlyfigendne [...] wisse* 1306 f. In this way a fine abruptness is attained: *hra wide sprong,/ syþðan he æfter deaðe drepe þrowade* 1588. Thus it also happens that a fact of first importance is strangely subordinated (as in 1556).

There occur obvious gaps in the narrative. That Wealhþeow left the hall in the course of the first day's festival, or that Beowulf brought the sword Hrunting back with him from the Grendel cave, is nowhere mentioned, but both facts are taken for granted at a later point of the story (664 f., 1807 ff.).

Furthermore, different parts of a story are sometimes told in different places, or substantially the same incident is related several times from different points of view. A complete, connected account of the history of the dragon's hoard is obtained only by a comparison of the passages, 3049 ff., 2233 ff. The brief notice of Grendel's first visit in Heorot (122 f.) is supplemented by a later allusion containing additional detail (1580 ff.). The repeated references to the various Swedish wars, the frequent allusions to Hygelac's Frankish foray, the two versions of the Heremod legend, the review of Beowulf's great fights by means of his report to Hygelac (and to Hroðgar) and through Wiglaf's announcement to his companions (2874 ff.; cp. also 2904 ff.) are well-known cases in point.

Typical examples of the rambling, dilatory method — the forward, backward, and sideward movements — are afforded by the introduction of Grendel (see [Klaeber's] note on 86-114), by the Grendel fight (see [Klaeber's] note on 710 ff.), Grendel's going to Heorot (702 ff.), and the odd sequel of the fight with Grendel's mother (1570-1590). The remarkable insertion of a long speech by Wiglaf, together with comment on his family, right at a critical moment of the dragon fight (2602-2660) can hardly be called felicitous. But still more trying is the circuitous

route by which events leading up to that combat are brought before the reader (see [Klaeber's] note on 2200 ff.: Second Part).[40]

'When he is reminded of a feature in some way related to the matter at hand, he thinks it perfectly proper to speak of it.' Klaeber is of course primarily speaking of features perceived at a schematic and narrative level, or what he calls 'the argument of the poem,' but the same ethos prevails at more detailed levels, in the tropes and phrases of the poem.

Frequently an epithet creates a digressive line of relevance that the poem explores and amplifies. As an example, Eormenric is a cruel Germanic king, obviously comparable to Heremod, but among the characters of the poem he is compared principally to Beowulf, this through the tale of the *Brosinga men*. The tale of that piece – the strife it inspires – amplifies the splendour of the neckring given to Beowulf by Hroðgar, *hordmaðum hæleþa* ('hoard-treasure of heroes' — line 1198a). Why does Eormenric amplify this phrase, instead of being placed somehow as a comparison to Heremod or some other character depicted as ferocious? It is because the attributes of Beowulf's neckring are the principal concern at this moment in *Beowulf*. The poem amplifies those attributes, using a narrative digression to amplify the attributive phrase. There are other examples, but the point here is to establish an amplificatory relationship between attributive phrase and narrative context that can be important enough to take precedence over some other narrative considerations, such as the concern for contiguity expressed by Klaeber. The Eormenric digression shows there is one. Amplification achieves several effects. In the case of attributive phrases, one of those effects is to test the attribution. Eormenric's ruthlessness shows up the attractiveness of the *Brosinga men*, hence it indirectly validates the epithet *hordmaðum hæleþa*.

The use of epithets drives an attributive and reflexive semantics that dominate the artistic sensibility of the poem, and which are also manifested in the schematic peculiarities noted by Klaeber. The first three lines of *Beowulf* may be said to contain three epithets, *Gardena*, *þeodcyninga*, and *æþelingas*. As it happens, most commentators read all three as part of an appositive-variational sequence. In the next sentence are six epithets, *Scyld Scefing*, *sceaþena þreatum*, *meodosetla*, *eorlas*, *ofer hronrade*, and *god cyning*:

40 *Op. cit.*, pp. lvii-lviii. Klaeber's own footnotes have been omitted here.

Oft Scyld Scefing sceaþena þreatum
monegum mægþum meodosetla ofteah
egsode eorlas[41] syððan ærest wearð
feasceaft funden he þæs frofre gebad
weox under wolcnum weorðmyndum þah
oð þæt him æghwylc ymbsittendra
ofer hronrade hyran scolde
gomban gyldan þæt wæs god cyning! (lines 4-11)

Taking *Scyld Scefing* as an example, it is not in any appositional sequence, at least with respect to the sentence in question. The value of the phrase is developed further in the sentence, but this is by a narrative amplification, not by the apposition or juxtaposition of variant epithets. *Scefing* carries as its value the destitution of Scyld's origins, the baby in a sheaf, *feasceaft funden*.[42] As we know, *he þæs frofre gebad*: this amplification makes his name ironic. The poem does not only report Scyld's reputation for greatness, but directly describes that greatness throughout lines 1-52 (and arguably throughout the poem, in the comparable character of Beowulf, also). The epithet stands alone in a sense, then (insofar as it is an unapposed epithet), but is thoroughly taken up in the subsequent narrative. Although the irony remains essentially a property of the epithetic name of the character himself – 'Shield the Sheaf's descendant' – it is an irony made manifest through the context of that name, the biographical iteration of his history, the narrative amplification of the epithet.

An epithet is a 'set piece,' a vignette of poetry that allows us to observe the irony most clearly. An epithet is a name that is also a descriptor. It carries connotative as well as denonative significance. It attributes and refers. An epithet may convey many semantic burdens, perhaps chief among these is its ability to convey (a summary of) a reputation: historically, this has been demonstrated by such famous epithets as Ælfred the Great and Bloody Mary. Of a similar class must be Scyld the 'Sheaf's descendant.' If an epithet may be amplified and developed through narrative context, then a reputation may be amplified and developed through narrative context. Thus the poem *Beowulf*

41 The manuscript reading for line 6a is *egsode eorl*. It makes a tiny difference, at most, to the matter at hand.

42 The adjective *feasceaft* is descriptive but is not denominative, hence its non-inclusion as an epithet.

develops the transformative biography that is implied by Scyld's complete name to the point where the name itself has become the vivid centrepiece of our knowledge of the character. Conversely, it follows that, if an epithet may be undercut or contrastively offset, then so may a reputation. There is no justification for assuming that a positive epithet or reputation is unequivocally reported in the poem, without assuring ourselves that any positive quality is clearly intended. Because the attributions of an epithet are characteristically pithy, it is relatively straightforward to discern occasions where they are offset by their contexts.

4. Ironic tension

If the criterion for irony is whether there is contrastive tension between expectations or cultural paradigms, or especially between the notional value of those on the one hand, and the real world flow of events on the other; and if the definition of irony requires that there be some 'breach' moment where the tension erupts; an epithet allows us to observe the irony at work rather closely. The two-part structure of the epithet – attribution and amplification – gives plenty of scope for tension, while either part of the structure may provide the breach moment. If that suggests that an ironic epithet requires there to be some tension between the phrase and its amplification, I should stress two extra possibilities. First, as already discussed, there is irony in *Beowulf* that may be read within given epithetic phrases themselves, irony that is perfectly apparent without necessary reference to the context of the phrase. Secondly, some epithets are ironic simply by virtue of the stance they adopt. There is no need for particularly close reading of contrastive passages in the text. The clearest examples of this second possibility are those instances where the Danes are criticised, whether it be for heathen practices, for internecine crimes, for disloyalty, *et cetera*. That is because the poem has set itself up as a narrative framework for appraising the behaviour of the 'Spear-Danes:' *hu ða æþelingas / ellen fremedon*. Every shortcoming in the Danes is an ironic take on the stated focus of the poem. I suspect we can throw the behaviour of all other

nationalities into the same basket: the Geats, the Swedes, the Eotenas, the Frisians, the Heatho-Bards, the Langobards, the Wulfings, the Wægmundings, the Wendlas: all those nations provide *æþelingas* whose *ellen* is up for appraisal in the poem. Every criticism endorsed by this poem, for whatever reason, of every heroic figure compounds the irony of that opening sentence.

a. Within an epithetic phrase

Irony within an epithet relies on tension between the constituent terms or between variant competing readings of one or more constituent terms. Typical of the former is line 1259a, *ides aglæcwif*. Although this phrase ('lady monster-woman,' or perhaps 'lady monster-wife') is an apposed epithet attributed to Grendel's mother, positioned in a passage rich in contextual information to amplify the attribution, its ironic tension is essentially internal: there is a massive disjuncture between the semantic fields of term 2 (*aglæc*) and those of terms 1 and 3 (*ides* and *wif*). The first term in particular, *ides*, is semantically unreconcilable with the second. There may be a compounding irony of apophasis if we read *wif* as 'wife' rather than 'woman,'[43] in that Grendel's fatherhood is unkown and his mother did not have any companions besides her son.[44] Clearly that irony must be read as amplificatory, not just contained within the epithetic phrase. Significantly, however, the more blatant irony *can* be read as contained within the epithetic phrase. There are not too many examples from *Beowulf* where this is clearly the case. *Selerædende* and *hæleð under heofenum*, both examined closely earlier in this chapter, are instances where ironic tension within the epithetic phrase is overshadowed by a more blatant ironic tension between the phrase and its amplificatory context. That is the more common finding.

Typical of the latter type is paronomasia, or punning, such as line 992a, *folmum gefrætwod*, or line 921b, *beahhorda weard*. *Folmum gefrætwod* ('decorated by hands' or 'decorated with hands') is an absurd wordplay, drawing our imaginations light-heartedly back to the severing of arms. *Beahhorda weard* ('the guard of hoards of rings') is a form of

43 Since each translation represents a possible reading, I am inclined to accept both as simultaneously valid readings.

44 Lines 1345-1357a set this out plainly.

innuendo, drawing our attentions playfully to the dual hoards of Hroðgar — his material goods and his sexual consort or consorts. Both these epithets are examined more closely in Chapter 6 . It is worth noting that, in this latter type, the distinction between what is ironic tension 'within an epithetic phrase' and what is ironic tension 'between an epithetic phrase and its amplificatory context' is much harder to sustain. The subtle and playful nature of this sort of irony militates strongly against demarcation. While *beahhorda weard* is ironic by virtue of tension between meanings conveyed within the phrase, readers would be likely to miss the irony if the phrase were lifted out of its context. Its amplification in the surrounding passage is part of a cumulative depiction of Hroðgar's fondness for the comfort of the *mægþa hos* ('troop of maidens' — line 924b). More pointedly, since it is of the nature of irony to militate against demarcation, we are reminded of the dangers of treating these categories too categorically. Many epithetic phrases in *Beowulf* manifest both internal and contextual ironic tension.

b. Within an amplificatory context

It is conceivable that there may be phrases without contexts. It is not conceivable that there be the amplification of a phrase without the phrase. Nevertheless, there are amplificatory contexts for a small number of epithetic phrases where the irony of the epithet seems to be predominantly at the level of amplification, not of the attribution. One such is the *æðelingas* of line 3a. This epithet serves as a frame for our appraisal of all the Danes at least, and more likely all the characters, outlined in the course of *Beowulf*. It is echoed down the many lines and verses of the poem through numerous epithetic phrases whose significances are similar: every *hæleð*, *rinc*, *wiga*, *þegn*, *kyning*, and even *ides* is a reflection on this attribution of *æþelu* (which means something like 'nobility') made in the first sentence of the poem. Where the phrase holds up in amplification, as it often does, there is no ironic tension generated. Where it does not, where ironic tension exists, it is important to note this is something beyond a mere relationship between one phrase and its amplification through context. Its attribution is incorporated into the sense and perspective of the poem overall. Its moments of amplification, therefore, are beyond being tied to any

specific intratextual antecedent. So the heathen practices of the Danes in lines 175-188 receive a treatment one may not find funny, but the irony is manifest. It is an amplification of line 3a, *æðelingas*, to some extent, but it is more a manifestation of the ironic attitude of the poem towards all the pretensions and all the shortcomings of pre-Christian Germanic heroic culture.

The final verse of the poem admits of a comparable reading. In line 3182b, *lofgeornost* ('most eager for renown') is also an instance of irony at the level of amplification. On one level, it is established as a frame for our appraisal of the behaviour of Beowulf throughout the poem. To that extent, every action of Beowulf has been an amplification of the attribution — that each is positioned in advance of the attribution does not detract from the fact. At the same time, it is embedded in the value-frame, the disposition, of the poem. Thus we have the rather obvious proposition that every action of Beowulf is a moment of the poem *Beowulf* overall, in addition to its relationship with this specific phrase. Throughout the poem, Beowulf's behaviour is amplifying *lofgeornost*, like a complement content to wait as long as it takes for its transitive verb to arrive. His eagerness for renown drives the plot right up to the moment when it is announced, in the last word of the poem. It elevates him to fame and then burns him in the destruction of his kingdom. His shortcomings are ironies integral to the disposition of the poem overall.

c. Between an epithetic phrase and its amplificatory context

So regular, so grammatical, is the relationship between phrase and context, attribution and amplification, that the sections 2 and 3 of this chapter have been able to show how:

- An epithet may defer or take for granted one or the other of its constituent parts;
- An amplification may be ironic without reference to its phrase antecedent; *and*
- Within a phrase, we find the possibilities of paronomasia to generate ironic tension are not infrequently exploited.

That said, the vast bulk of epithets conform to a norm: where they are ironic, they establish their irony in a tension between the attribution and its amplification. A *god cyning* (Hroðgar) is one who does not achieve much. A *leoflic iren* (Hrunting) is one that breaks when put to the test. A family (the Scyldings) is one that turns to internecine violence when faced with a power vacuum. This is ethically of a piece with the tension between words and deeds or between one entity and another comparable entity.

Frequently a moment of attribution – an epithetic phrase – serves to amplify some other attribution. Where the amplification involves a process of offsetting, the irony may appear as a tension between two attributive phrases, although it is more neatly represented for this methodology as two or more distinct tensions between two or more attributions and their respective amplifications. For example:

> Denum eallum wearð
> ceasterbuendum cenra gehwylcum
> eorlum ealuscerwen. (lines 767b-769a)

Leaving *ealuscerwen* aside for a moment (see Chapter 6 for a close reading of that word), we can see that, as an elaboration and amplification, *cenra* is to *gehwylcum* as *ceasterbuendum* is to *Denum eallum*. This puts *cenra* and *ceasterbuendum* on something of a level. Read in their context, however, they offset one another in a subtle but significant sense. The Danes here have for the first time ever vacated their hall, leaving it to the Geats for the night. (See the close reading of *ceasterbuendum* in Chapter 6.) This is an irony established between one attributive phrase and its context, which happens to be another attributive phrase.

That still leaves an overriding question unanswered: how do we distinguish between mention and endorsement, between the moment of attribution and the moment when that attribution is or is not vindicated? On the evidence before us, it seems that the answer is quite simple, at least in theory. Endorsement is an attitude that may be inferred from contextual information. It is a quality to be discerned in the amplification of repute: positive amplification endorses repute, while negative amplification undercuts repute; the absence of any amplification equates to 'mere mention' — or else it suggests that we readers have missed the amplification. The first order distinction, then,

is between a discernible attitude and no discernible attitude, since any inference of positive or negative attitude must be based on contextual information – whether this is intratextual or intertextual – which serves to amplify the attribution in question. 'Mere mention' is an absence of evidence of amplification.

But how do we tell for sure whether it is a positive or negative treatment in any given case — or a neutral treatment, for that matter? In a sense, we cannot. To infer negativity is, after all, an inference. What we as readers can do is take each moment of the poem – whether it be a word, a half line, a sentence, a fitt, or whatever – then determine what, if any, contextual material is collocated to it – whether that collocation be by apposition, by juxtaposition, by intertextual reference, or whatever – and ask whether such a collocation serves as a harmonious development or a contrastive offset. If it is an offset, that does not necessarily prove censure or reproof, although it may suggest a negative attribution of some description. It proves the existence of tension between the reported word and the reporting voice. In the investigation of amplification at all levels, or in all aspects, of *Beowulf*,[45] we often can prove nothing more than this tension. And yet it is significant, for what we prove in such an investigation is whether a given moment of the poem fulfils the criteria for irony. The task of mounting that proof is of course the primary burden of this thesis. Now we have found an angle to investigate explicit contrasts between 'surface and real meanings' systematically. We are now in a position to find subtle manifestations of that tension, where the nature of amplification reflects ironically on what is amplified. We are in a position to read irony into attributive moments of the poem which are not clearly or explicitly ironic with some confidence.

45 'Amplification at all levels, or in all aspects, of *Beowulf*' is an intentionally broad phrase. The point being made can accommodate the breadth of categories under each one of a number of analytical frameworks. It may mean the semantic and the narrative levels, or the tropic and the schematic, according to traditional and structuralist analysis. It may mean the ideational, the intertextual, and the interpersonal levels, according to sociolinguistic analysis. The poem is remarkable, *inter alia*, for the 'broad spectrum' of its amplification: for the diversity of concerns which are amplified, the range of techniques by which they are amplified, and the subtlety by which amplificatory concerns and techniques produce various affective outcomes.

* * * *

A summary of this chapter's findings might be the following four points:

1. An epithet is an attributive figure comprising two elements: (i) a phrase and (ii) the amplification of the sense of that phrase through its narrative and poetic contexts.
2. In its bipartite structure, divided between phrase and amplification, an epithet is a perfect exponent of the 'contrastive poetics' of *Beowulf*.
3. An epithetic phrase is both a semantic and a prosodic phenomenon, meaning it must be reconciled with its context along both axes.
4. Irony in an epithet is noticed in the form of a break or paradox, either within one of the constituent elements of an epithet (ie the attributive phrase or its contextual amplification), or more characteristically between the two elements.

Because of the contrastive structure of an epithet, which complements the discussions of earlier chapters, the epithets of *Beowulf* make an ideal starting point for systematic close readings of the ironical content of the poem. Where Chapter 4 spoke of 'ironic ore' in *Beowulf*, epithets are the richest of such ores: they are extremely common, and in 302 cases are demonstrably ironic. Using the methodology developed in this chapter, Chapters 6 and 7 show it is possible to establish a robust and extensive, albeit not a truly exhaustive, taxonomy of epithetic irony in *Beowulf*.

Chapter 6. Annotated list of the ironic epithets in *Beowulf*

Following is a list of the ironic epithets in *Beowulf*, a set determined by applying the methodology developed in Chapter 5. The accompanying annotations are intended to explicate the nature of the ironic tension as it manifests in each epithet. Perseverant readers will notice the frequency with which many motifs recur. Many of those patterns are closely examined in Chapter 7, where all the epithets of this chapter are grouped according to two different levels of common concern (the similarities of trope and topic between them). Patterns that are specific to a small number of epithets, or that cut across the taxonomic catgeories of Chapter 7, are mentioned during Chapter 6 instead.

In collating the entries that make up this chapter, I have explored a number of possibilities for cutting out redundant information. These have included bringing strings of related and sequential epithets under one heading, presenting repeated instances of an identical phrase form under the one heading, presenting variant readings of a manuscript crux under the one heading, and presenting the epithets in the order of taxonomic groupings, rather than according to their locations in *Beowulf*. After several efforts, I have not found it possible to implement the first three options in a consistent fashion without vitiating the taxonomic categories of Chapter 7 somewhat. The fourth option seems bound to increase redundancy rather than reduce it. Only proper names are sufficiently robust as attributive phrases that their irony may be assumed to remain more or less constant across a range of contexts (even this point is debatable). Consequently, each proper name that is listed as an ironic epithet appears only once, no matter how many times it is mentioned in the poem.

That said, it has generally been easy to cross-refer between fundamentally similar entries within the list. Where an epithet is identical in its irony to an identical or almost identical form earlier in the list, the comparison is offered in place of an explanation.

* * * *

3a ðа æþelingas

Referring to the aristocratic circle of Danes whose kingdom is the focus of much of the poem, this phrase is ironic, being at once both technically true and morally untrue. It is technically true in the sense that the Danes described in the poem are assuredly members of the *æþele* class. It is thus ostensibly a formulaic and encomiastic epithet. It is morally untrue in the sense that it entails a euphemism with respect to the ethics of nobility. It is thus somewhat hollow. In a sense, the poem *Beowulf* is an amplification[1] of its first sentence. It develops from the basic proposition that 'we have heard how those [Danish] nobles performed deeds of courage.' The epithet itself is contrastively offset as amplified through the poem, so that the Danes are not developed into proper exponents of *æþele* ethics.[2] Instead, the Geatish hero Beowulf conducts himself in a manner befitting a proper and noble hero. He shows outstanding courage and loyalty where the Danes' outstanding attributes are power and wealth. In doing so within the realm of the Danish kingdom, he shows up a nation whose reputation had been much vaunted through received Germanic histories.[3] For this motif of elucidating a known

1 See Chapter 5 for a discussion of harmonious development and contrastive offset as modes of poetic amplification. See also discussion of other epithets referring to the Danes (below).

2 See Chapter 3 for a discussion of the heroic code.

3 Whether they be poetic analogues, many of which are cited throughout this thesis, or prose history analogues such as Cornelius Tacitus, *Germany and its Tribes*, in Moses Hadas (ed. and trans.), The *Complete Works of Tacitus*, Random House, Toronto, 1942; also Jordanes, *The Gothic History*, ed. and trans. Charles Christopher Mierow, 2nd ed., Princeton University Press, 1915, photographically reproduced by Cambridge University Press, Cambridge (U.K.), 1966; also Saxo Grammaticus, *The History of the Danes*, trans. Peter Fisher, ed. Hilda Ellis Davidson, Brewer, Cambridge, 1979 (Vol. I) and 1980 (Vol. II); also Bede, *Ecclesiastical History of the English People with Bede's Letter to Egbert and Cuthbert's Letter on the Death of Bede*, trans. Leo Shirley-Price, rev. R.E. Latham, letters trans. D.H. Farmer, Penguin, London, 1990. This is not to suggest that the

history and making an established reputation more accountable to that history, compare the Danish court poet's relating of the tale of Sigemund's dragon encounter, where he reports *uncuþes fela* (line 876b) about the establishment of Sigemund's reputation.

4b sceaþena þreatum

This phrase is ironically at odds with its complement, the *meodosetla* of line 5b (see below). The troops of Scyld's enemies are not depicted being defeated in their struggles so much as being deprived of their joys. The irony may be compounded by an inference, drawn from this distinction, that such enemies were soft opponents, keener on drinking than fighting. In that case it would diminish the splendour of Scyld's victories.

5b meodosetla

This phrase refers to to the mead-seats owned by Scyld's neighbouring rivals (the *eorlas* of line 6a). It is condensed attribution for their subjects' enjoyment of hall-comforts, hence of the quality of life to be had under their respective rules. As a synecdoche for sovereignty, the connotations of mead-seats are rather ambivalent. The action described, *meodosetla ofteah*, is amplified in the following half line by the phrase *egsode eorlas* ('terrified noblemen;' see line 6a, *eorlas* — below), a collocation that suggests it was deprivation of mead-seats more than defeat in battle that terrified unnamed enemies.

6a eorlas[4]

That the *eorlas* could be terrified by Scyld is rendered ironic by the narrative, which turns to depicting his 'transformative biography' (see the second section, '*Beowulf Scyldinga*,' in Chapter 3) over the remnant of the clause: it is ironic that *eorlas* should be terrified by a foundling. This epithet undercuts a significant implied aspect of the term, the power

Beowulf poet would have been familiar with those versions (in the case of Saxo, for example, that is chronologically impossible). The point is that these texts are indications of the sorts of Germanic histories the poet and audience of *Beowulf* may have known.

4 The manuscript reading for line 6a has it in the singular: *egsode eorl*.

of noblemen. There is also an element of embarassment in their treatment at Scyld's hands.

51b selerædende[5]

This epithet is closely connected to that which follows in the next half line (*hæleð under heofenum* — see below), although its basic sense is quite independent. The two are ostensibly formulaic co-variants of the word *men* (line 50b). The ironic tensions of this compound word are both internal and external. Internally, it shows a tension between the intellectual ambition of the heroic age counsellor, whose role it is to know a range of things about the world, and the finite scope of the hall, with the inherent limits it suggests prevailing over the breadth of knowledge. This may have theological resonance: as with the sparrow flying through the feast in Bede's account of the conversion of England,[6] that which is outside the hall is the particular mystery that Christianity offers to enlighten. Externally, it shows a tension between the purported function of a royal counsellor (that is, to know) and the lack of knowledge such counsellors have about the matter at hand (that is, about who receives Scyld after his funeral). In that sense, it is a somewhat hollow attribution of wisdom.

52a hæleð under heofenum[7]

This epithet is closely connected to that of the previous half line (*selerædende* — see above), although its basic sense is quite independent. The two are ostensibly formulaic co-variants of the word *men* (line 50b). Internally, the juxtaposition of agent (*hæleð*) and location (*under heofenum*) serves to align the heroic age conception of the potential of heroes with the Christian perspective on it. As with *selerædende*, then, this epithet reads as somewhat hollow.

5 See section 3.a in Chapter 5 for a detailed discussion of the poetics of this epithet. The manuscript has line 51b read *selerædenne*, but that changed form would not significantly alter this reading of the epithet.

6 See James W. Earl, *Thinking about* Beowulf, Stanford University Press, Stanford, 1994, pp. 51-55.

7 See section 3.a in Chapter 5 for a detailed discussion of the poetics of this epithet.

63b healsgebedda

As a variant to the previous line, line 63, culminating in this epithet, apparently plays down the royalty and plays up the sexuality of the match between this queen of no retrievable name and her husband (with part of his name lost). There is a tension between the high minded historical topos of the royal genealogy which has prevailed in the sentence up until line 63 and the lewd inference line 63 draws. Both focus on roles: the public role of a queen as part of a system of sovereignty, which includes the function of giving birth to future royalty, is paradoxically quite alien to her role as a bed-fellow (as intimately linked to the birth of future royalty as that role may be). It is ostensibly a formulaic and encomiastic attribution, a guise that masks its innuendo and ensures its irony. It is hard to prove this reading by analogy, since *healsgebedda* appears in no other text. The critical factor here is the contrast between the semantics of the phrase and its immediate context.

129b mære þeoden

This epithet is closely linked to the appositional variant of the following half line (*æþeling ærgod* — see below). Its ironic tension is between the agent and the circumstances: *Hroðgar* may be a great king in reputation, but he could not protect his people from Grendel's depredations. That irony may in turn reflect back on the epithet itself: how can *Hroðgar* be a great king if he cannot protect his people from Grendel's depredations? That paradox then raises the possibility that the praise may be hollow, the attribution offset.

130a æþeling ærgod

This epithet is closely linked to the appositional variant of the previous half line (*mære þeoden* — see above). Its ironic tension is between the agent and the circumstances: *Hroðgar* may be an illustrious leader, but he could not protect his people from Grendel's depredations. That irony may in turn reflect back on the epithet itself: how can *Hroðgar* be an illustrious leader if he cannot protect his people from Grendel's depredations? It is worth noting that every instance of the adjective *ærgod* in *Beowulf* is associated with fatality or failure. The two other cases where a human is referenced are Æschere, described as *ærgod* the morning after Grendel's mother has killed him (line 1329a), and

Beowulf, when it is said that the dragon shall kill him (line 2342a). Both cases where swords are referenced they are failures: it is said that *iren ærgod* could not harm Grendel (line 989a); then that his sword, also an *iren ærgod*, gave way in the dragon fight (line 2586a).

142a healðegnes

Healðegnes hete is a peculiar phrase occupying line 142a. It is comparable to at least one other phrase in the poem (line 770a *reþe renweardas*), consisting of an epithet that ostensibly references human members of a king's retinue alongside a reference to hostility. Here is conceptual disjuncture[8] in the sense that the 'hall-thegn' in question appears to be Grendel. It is the first clear instance[9] of a kind of attributive metathesis which is common in the poem. See, for example, *rinc* (line 720b — below). Taking the whole sentence as context, the mentioned disjuncture appears to be ironically intended (rather than flippant or simply mistaken). Of Hroðgar it is said that 'he sought his resting place somewhere else more roomy, a bed among the bowers.'[10] Grendel is more a hall-thegn than is the lord of Heorot, insofar as Hroðgar does not co-inhabit his hall with his retinue overnight (unlike Grendel, who is only too happy to share it with them – for example, line 166b, *Heorot eardode* – for the purposes of eating them).

157a witena

This epithet is ironic in the context of the sentence in which it is placed (lines 146b-163), a *litotes* discussed several times elsewhere in this thesis. The irony is one of roles: as Beowulf himself goes on to prove, it is not 'wise men,' but rather one warrior alone, who could hope to retrieve any recompense from Grendel. Grendel is beyond considerations of law and morality, meaning that the only way to redress his behaviour is by force: mentioning the sources of social wisdom in the context of the issue of redress is gratuitous. A point of similarity with *selerædende* (line 51b, see above) is the amplification of this epithet as a state of unknowing. Lines 162b-163: *Men ne cunnon // hwyder helrunan*

8 I am grateful to Alex Jones for bringing this aspect of the phrase to my attention.

9 Discounting *Beowulf Scyldinga* — see the section 2 in Chapter 3.

10 Historically, this appears a well grounded inclusion in the poem, but the cultural normality of Hroðgar's sleeping arrangements does not negate the irony of them.

/ hwyrftum scriþað. Although the relationship of the word *men* to the epithet referencing wisdom is somewhat reversed here (the epithet is amplified by the clause containing the generic noun, rather than vice versa), it is still significant that a wisdom reference is contrastively offset by evidence of not knowing, making it a rather hollow epithet. Other ironic tensions are evident in the sentence – see Chapter 4 for a closer examination of the sentence as a whole – especially those arising from the suggestion that Grendel might be expected to pay *wergild* in compensation for his misdeeds. Their relationship to the epithet *witena* is less direct, however.

182a *heofena Helm*

This epithet, attributed to God, is ostensibly formulaic in style. There is an obvious paradox in the amplification of the phrase. Whereas God is here described as the (protective) 'helmet of the heavens,' the Danes have been seeking protection from alternate divinities — divinities that the poem assures us are false and worthless. This paradox is pointed at line 179a, *hæþenra hyht*.

199b *guðcyning*

This epithet is closely linked to the variant epithet, *mærne þeoden*, occurring in line 201a. There is ironic tension between the agent and his circumstances when the epithet is amplified. Hroðgar is purportedly a 'war-king', but Grendel's depredations have left him unable to live up to the title: *þa him wæs manna þearf*. Waging war requires personnel, but Hroðgar has run low on staff since Grendel started eating them. It also reveals a certain irony about the nature of Grendel's depredations: which are war in a sense, but also not war. Hroðgar is poorly equipped to handle the particular conflict he has on his hands with Grendel. These ironies may reflect back on the epithet itself, since a successful *guðcyning* should not usually find that he is running out of troops, or that he is unable to cope with the peculiarities of a given conflict.

201a *mærne þeoden*

In its three inflections, *mære þeoden* is a common epithet in the poem, particularly to reference Hroðgar.[11] There is ironic tension between the agent and his circumstances when the epithet is amplified. Hroðgar is purportedly a 'great king', but Grendel's depredations have left him unable to live up to the title: *þa him wæs manna þearf.* Compare its variant epithet (line 199b, *guðcyning* — see above).

229b *weard Scildinga*

This epithet appears straightforward on one level: line 230 states that the coastguard of the Scyldings is *se þe holmclifu / healdan scolde*, and there is no suggestion that he fails in this task. And yet the real threat to the Scyldings is Grendel, who has been attacking Heorot nightly for twelve years, not an enemy from across the sea. As the poem develops it, Beowulf, coming from across the sea, is the one who will protect the Danes from Grendel. There is ironic tension in the juxtaposition of the literal *weard Scildinga* – the official coastguard – and the true *weard Scildinga* – Beowulf: not so much that it is a hollow epithet as that it could be better attributed to Beowulf instead. Compounding that irony, in the moment of meeting we find that the literal *weard Scildinga* guards against the true one.

246a *guðfremmendra*

The epithet is used in the genitive plural to denote the Danish leadership. The Danes, however, have not been warring so much as simply dying. If the coastguard is right in his claims (lines 240b-243), they have had very little military action in recent times. By contrast, Beowulf is very much a 'war-enacter.' He has come to Denmark with the express purpose of having a fight. On line 299a, moreover, the Geats are described as *godfremmend* ('enacters of good'). To refer to the Danes as 'war enacters' in the presence of Beowulf, who is more truly a 'war-enacter' than they are,[12] creates ironic tension around that term. That is

11 R. Bessinger Jr and Philip H. Smith Jr, *A Concordance to* Beowulf, Cornell University Press, Ithaca (New York), 1969, p. 311.

12 Beowulf's fights in the poem mostly do not strictly constitute 'war' in the modern sense, so this reading assumes a certain interchangeability of similar terms for

compounded by the context: when the coastguard asserts that Beowulf does not have the *leafnesword // guðfremmendra* to proceed, he means Beowulf lacks the 'leave-word of the war-enacters' to go and enact a combat they have failed to prosecute effectively.

269a leodgebyrgean

This epithet appears to be attributed to Hroðgar. If so, it has a flaw. Hroðgar has failed to protect the Danes from Grendel, who has been attacking Heorot nightly for twelve years. As the poem develops it, Beowulf is the one who will afford that protection. It is a somewhat hollow epithet. Compounding that irony, drawing out the hollowness of the epithet, Hroðgar is described as *leodgebyrgea* by Beowulf himself, who is developed as the true *leodgebyrgea* for the Danes in the poem. This juxtaposition is strengthened by the form in which the word appears on line 269a: *leodgebyrgean* — which could be taken as a nominative plural (referring to the Geats) rather than as an accusative singular (referring to Hroðgar). The potential to read each party as a *leodgebyrgea* simultaneously plays up a distinction between the contrastive formulaic-encomiastic meaning and the interpretatively true meaning of this term.

426a ðing

This epithet is both a fairly straightforward euphemism – employed as a deliberate understatement by the speaking voice (that is, by Beowulf) – and a rather whimsical wordplay. To attribute to a single combat the qualities of a business or legal meeting is clearly figurative rhetoric. In the former sense, the euphemism is an ironic metaphor in that it plays off appropriate connotations of the word (most saliently, that two parties will be working towards an outcome which, in the nature of business and legal settlements, will be significant and lasting) against inappropriate connotations (most saliently, that the outcome of the encounter will not be reached by means of negotiation or through rational argument). The latter sense, the wordplay, is if anything an even more ironic metonym.

fighting, such as g*u*ð, *gefeoht*, and *wig*. There is no reason to believe that these terms were indistinguishable to an Old English reader or audience. At the same time, there is much evidence to suggest these terms were readily available as substitutes for one another when poetic circumstances dictated.

If the encounter between Beowulf and Grendel may be described as a 'meeting,' its outcome or final settlement may be described as a handshake. Beowulf settles with Grendel by shaking his hand — off, as it were.[13] Compare line 709b, *beadwa geþinges* — see below; line 2137b, *hand gemæne* — see below; and line 2072a, *hondræs hæleða* — see below. There does not appear to be the same euphemism in the phrase *hondgemot* (lines 1526a and 2355a — see below), although the latter instance is a euphemistic litotes.

428a eodor Scyldinga

This epithet, meaning 'protector of the Scyldings,' is attributed to Hroðgar. *Eodor* is a formulaic substitute for 'prince' or 'ruler.' And yet Hroðgar has failed to protect the Scyldings from Grendel, who has been attacking Heorot nightly for twelve years. As the poem develops it, Beowulf is the one who will afford that protection. Compounding that

13 A comparably ironic and bleak play on the handshake topos is to be found in Snorri Sturluson, *Edda – Prologue and Gylfaginning*, ed. Anthony Faulkes, Viking Society for Northen Research, London, 1988. Snorri has the alias persona, High, explain how Tyr lost the ability to shake hands in the settlement of business — p. 25:

> Hár segir: Sá er enn Áss er Týr heitir. Hann er djarfastr ok bezt hugaðr ok hann ræðr mjök sigri í orrostum. Á hann er gott at heita hreystimönnum. Þat er orðtak at sá er "týrhaustr" er um fram er aðra menn ok ekki sésk fyrir. Hann var vitr svá at þat er mælt at sá er "týspakr" er vitr er. Þat er eitt mark um djarfleik hans, þá er Æsir lokkuðu Fenrisúlf til þess at leggja fjöturinn á hann, Gleipni, þá trúði hann þeim eigi at þeir mundu leysa hann fyrr en þeir lögðu honum at veði hönd Týrs í munn úlfsins. En þá er Æsir vildu eigi leysa hann þá beit hann höndina af þar er nú heitir úlfliðr, ok er hann einhendr ok ekki kallaðr sættir manna.
>
> *High says, 'There is one As who is called Tyr. He is the bravest and of the best mettle, and he greatly influences victory in battles. It is good for men of action to pray to him. It is a saying that he is "Tyr-valiant" who stands out from other men and who does not hold back. He was so wise that it is said that he is "Tyr-clever" who is wise. It is one mark of his bravery that, when the Æsir lured the Fenris-wolf in order to put the fetter on him, Gleipnir, then he would not trust them to release him until they put Tyr's hand in the wolf's mouth as a pledge to him. And when the Æsir would not release him, then he bit the hand off at the place now called wolf-joint, so he is one-handed and not called a reconciler of men.'*

irony, drawing out the hollowness of the epithet, Hroðgar is described as *eodor Scyldinga* by Beowulf himself, who is developed as the true *eodor Scyldinga* in the poem.

429b *wigendra hleo*

This epithet, meaning 'warriors' shelter,' is attributed to Hroðgar. This epithet is one of a common type. *Wigendra* or *eorla*, accompanied by *hleo*, is used to refer to a hero or king 10 times in the course of the poem. Four times the reference is to Beowulf (line 791a, *eorla hleo*; line 1967b, *eorla hleo*; line 1972b, *wigendra hleo*; 2337b, *wigendra hleo*); once it refers to Sigemund (line 899b, *wigendra hleo*); another instance refers to Hygelac (line 2190a, *eorla hleo*); the remaining instances reference Hroðgar, in each case ironically.[14] Hroðgar failed to 'shelter' the 'warriors' from Grendel, who had been attacking Heorot nightly for twelve years. As the poem develops it, Beowulf is the one who will afford that shelter. Compounding that irony, drawing out the hollowness of the epithet, in this case Hroðgar is described as *wigendra hleo* by Beowulf himself, who is developed as the true *wigendra hleo* in the poem.

464b *Ar-Scyldinga*

The Scyldings earn the attribute of 'honour,' 'favour,' or 'kindness,' as the ensuing passage shows, primarily by virtue of their massive wealth. The kindness that Hroðgar has shown to Ecgþeow (see lines 470-472) is munificence in buying off his feud with the Swedes. Munificence is a problematic type of generosity throughout the poem. The amplification of the quality of *ar* attributed to the Scyldings makes that quality seem less impressive, not more so. The epithet thus draws attention to the narrow basis of Hroðgar's eminence at the same time as it draws attention to the eminence itself. It points up the ironic tension between what is, at surface level, a strength and what is also, at a deeper level, a shortcoming.

14 According to the Dobbie edition (hence the Bessinger and Smith concordance), there is an eleventh use of *hleo* outside of this formulaic arrangement (line 3157a, *hl[eo]*). It may be significant that 4 of the 5 [genitive plural]-*hleo* references to Hroðgar and Hygelac all fall in a verses, while all 5 [genitive plural]-*hleo* references to Beowulf and Sigemund fall in b verses.

476b fletwerod

Ironically appropriate to the task at hand, Hroðgar's retinue is called a 'hall-force.' It is in the hall that real fighting needs to be done against Grendel, the one manifest enemy of the Danish kingdom. In a sense, the constitution of the word embarrasses what might be the conventional interpretation of it — as simply a reference to Hroðgar's military retinue. It draws attention away from the conventional and martial conception of a *duguð*, being a conception that culminates in a battlefield, towards the peculiar distress that confronts this *duguð* and the sovereign it serves, an interior distress. In the context of that distress, it is a phrase that offsets itself, in the sense that the ironic tension is reflected between the constituent terms of the compound word itself. It also offsets the apposed variant epithet, *wigheap*, of the following half line (line 477a, see below).

477a wigheap

Just as the epithetic compound word *fletwerod*, read in context, may be said to offset itself contrastively in the combination of its constituent elements, so may the half line 477a: *wigheap gewanod*. It is a clause verging on paradoxical, in that the attributive qualities of the epithet *wigheap* are directly countered by the core suggestion of the participle *gewanod*, namely of a numerical diminution. The 'warring multitude' is small in its numbers. This is obviously an ironical situation, and that irony is compounded as Hroðgar's speech – in the middle of which sit the epithet of this half line and *fletwerod* in the half line immediately preceding it – draws attention to the situation of Heorot and its inhabitants (lines 473-478a). The irony of a *wigheap gewanod* is the pathos of Heorot, of Hroðgar, and of the Danish kingdom.

480b beore druncne

Functioning in harmony with the *beorsele* of line 482a and the *medoheal* of line 484a, this epithet draws attention to the problematic role of alcohol in early Germanic heroic society. The three are not in a relationship of apposition (*beore druncne* in line 480b references Hroðgar's retinue, whereas the other two instances reference Heorot), but their attributive characteristics are identical in the context of the passage in which they are situated. We can read a classic before-and-

after narrative mode in this sentence, which describes how the warriors would pledge bravery once they had drunk themselves into a state of courage, then would die once they attempted to make good their pledges to confront Grendel. The alcoholic drink that marks the compounds of the 'before' scenario is replaced by the *dreor* and *blod* that mark compounds in the 'after' scenario (line 485a *drihtsele dreorfah*, line 486 *eal bencþelu / blode bestymed*, line 487a *heall heorudreore*).[15] This aesthetic continuation of the quality of liquidity – rather reminiscent of the poetics of the Old Norse skaldic poem, *Ragnarsdrápa*,[16] stanza 4 – renders the gore an effective amplifier of the liquor: liquid is the the thread which connects the heroes' ambitious hopes to their despair and slaughter. It is possible to read this passage as manifesting a thoroughly high-minded irony (that is, not playful or flippant in any sense). The ironic tension between hope and despair is a pretty grim one, after all. Bearing in mind that it is delivered in the voice of Hroðgar, it is hard to imagine that such an ironic tension would be conceived as humorous. It is arguable that the poem's attitude towards the irony of this situation is different from Hroðgar's, but there is no evidence that the poem elides

15 For a detailed discussion of this problem, see Paul Edwards, 'Art and Alcoholism in *Beowulf*,' *The Durham University Journal* 72 (New Series 41: 1980), 127-131; also Magennis, *Images of Community*, especially Chapters 3 and 6, pp. 60-81 and 122-143.

16 Jónsson, *Skjaldedigtning*, Vol. 1b, pp. 1-4. Stanza 4 of the *rettet tekst* reads as follows:

> Flaut of set, við sveita,
> sóknar alfs, í golfi
> hræva dögg, þars höggnar
> hendr sem fœtr of kendusk;
> fell í blóði blandinn
> brunn ölskála — runna
> þat's á Leifa landa
> laufi fátt — at höfði.
>
> *The corpse's dew [blood] of the elf of attack [Jörmunrekkr] flowed over the edge-dais up against the blood on the hearthside floor where hacked hand and foot were recognisable. He fell headlong into the blood mixed with the wellspring of ale-cups — that is painted on the leaf [shield] of the trees [ships] of Leifi's lands [the seas].*

those two attitudes, by thrusting a flippancy upon Hroðgar with respect to the distress he faces.

482a *beorsele*

See description of *beore druncne* (line 480b) above for a detailed discussion of the narrative topos in this passage of the poem. There is an even more acute similarity to the *medoheal* of line 484a (see below). The two are not in a relationship of apposition, but their attributive characteristics are identical in the context of the passage within which they are situated.

484a *medoheal*

See description of *beore druncne* (line 480b) above for a detailed discussion of the narrative topos in this passage of the poem. There is an even more acute similarity to the *beorsele* of line 482a (see above). The two are not in a relationship of apposition, but their attributive characteristics are identical in the context of the passage within which they are situated.

499a (etc.) *Unferð*[17]

Aside from the difficulties of reconciling the manuscript form with a conservative metrical tradition (see also line 499a, *Hunferð* — below), this name is at once etymologically transparent and yet an etymological *crux*. It is a name that attributes, apparently, but attributes what? Klaeber argues the word must be a metathesis: *Unfrið*, 'mar-peace.' He argues it can 'hardly' be read as '*Unfer(h)ð*, "nonsense."'[18] Like many proscriptions in the reading of *Beowulf*, this one lacks persuasive force. A more sympathetic translation of *Unfer(h)ð* would be 'mindless.' While it is reasonable to infer a *frið* > *ferð* interchange, after Bülbring, as Klaeber does, it is not unreasonable to read the name *Unferð* as an attribution of nonsense. Either way, there is a measure of fatalism in the semantics of this name: 'Mar-peace' conspires and has murdered his

17 The manuscript reading in each instance of this name is *hun ferð*. Klaeber and many other editors emend it to *Unferð*.

18 *Beowulf*, p. 148.

brothers; ‘Mindless’ does not seem to recognise what a fool his behaviour makes him.

499a (etc.) *Hunferð*[19]

If we take the manuscript reading as valid (despite a conspiracy of initial vowels in each instance throwing doubt on this reading: see *Unferð* — above), we still have a name that is at once etymologically transparent and yet an etymological *crux*. It is still a name that attributes, apparently, but attributes what? If we infer a *frið* > *ferð* metathesis, after Bülbring, as Klaeber does,[20] we have a reading of ‘high [or ‘noble’] peace.’ If the second element is read as *fer(h)ð*, we have ‘high [or ‘noble’] spirit.’ Either way, there is a measure of apophasis in the semantics of this name: ‘High peace’ conspires and has murdered his brothers; ‘High spirit,’ in addition to the previous indictment, does not fight in warring confrontations for the good of his people, but is happy to lend his sword to a butt of his ridicule, Beowulf, to do the desperate work on his behalf.

499b (etc.) *Ecglafes*

This epithet, the name of Unferð’s father, literally translates to something like ‘remnant of the blade,’ or ‘blade-heirloom.’ This character is not recorded in any other source. In the highly conspiratorial context of Danish politics under the Scyldings, this quality of survivorship may imply some measure of cunning and/or connivance — which appears to have been inherited by Unferð, if not by his brothers. It should be noted that a ‘blade-heirloom’ reading may have positive connotations. That raises the possibility of a doubled or ‘dog-whistle’ reading (see Introduction to this thesis), where one possible interpretation is in ironic tension with another: one laudatory, the other critical.

506a *se Beowulf*

Unferð employs irony by way of mockery. He asks whether our hero is ‘that Beowulf’ who engaged in a swimming contest with Breca and lost

19 The manuscript reading in each instance of this name is *hun ferð*.
20 *Beowulf*, p. 148.

it, thus failing to make good his boasts.[21] The name of Beowulf is being employed epithetically, insofar as Unferð alleges that it carries a stigmatic reputation: Unferð contends that there is an ironic tension between Beowulf's words and his deeds. That stigma is effectively refuted in Beowulf's response to Unferð. Beowulf proves that he did make good his boast (and that Breca did also, if less impressively than he): *ond þæt geæfndon swa* (line 538b). Thus there is a counter-irony in the epithet, an ironic tension between the alleged stigma it carries and its history as corrected, which is amplified through the narrative sequence of allegation and refutation.

530b *wine min Unferð*[22]

This epithet is diplomatic language, hence euphemistic. The degree of euphemism is swiftly manifested in Beowulf's speech as it develops (his response to Unferð's allegation of a blemished past — see above), starting with the contrastive offset of the following half line: line 531a, *beore druncen* (see below). There is obvious ironic tension between the description of Unferð as a personal friend and the mutually antagonistic behaviour of Unferð and Beowulf that characterises this part of the story. The irony is rendered somewhat more complex by Unferð's later deed, when he lends Beowulf his ancient sword, Hrunting, for the dive into Grendel's mother's mere (lines 1455-1464). That, too, must be regarded as an amplification of the friendship topos invoked self-consciously and ironically by Beowulf here. It amplifies what Unferð here refuses to acknowledge: that Beowulf is the greatest friend of the Scyldings through his intention and capacity to slay Grendel and subsequently Grendel's mother. The irony, at this second level, is that what appears to be a rather apophatic statement (namely, that Beowulf and Unferð are friends) may ultimately be true.

531a *beore druncen*

This epithet serves to call into question Unferð's judgement. This epithet is ironic in the context of suggestions of friendship between Beowulf and Unferð (line 530b — see above) and it is also ironic as an

21 For a detailed reading of the exchange between Unferð and Beowulf, see Martínez Pizarro, *op. cit.*, pp. 27-28 and pp. 58-64.

22 The manuscript reads *hun ferð* here in place of *Unferð*.

amplifier of the alcohol topos (lines 480b, 482a, and 484a — see above). The similarity to line 480b (*beore druncne*), in particular, must be seen to mark a continuity of reference to that same ironic tension alcohol brings to the relationship between intentions and outcomes. This epithet is premised in a pejorative formula, rather than an encomiastic one. The hollowness trope is consequently not a poetically viable possibility here.

564a *symbel*

This phrase is a relatively straightforward metonym substituting for the events of Beowulf's fight with the *niceras*. We see a similar usage in a retrospective description of Grendel's encounter with Beowulf: *swefeþ æfter symle* (line 1008a — see below). There is ironic tension between the ostensible festivity that the term attributes and the event thus referenced, namely the sea monsters' death. There appears to be some connection to the inverse irony drawn in the phrase *ealuscerwen* (line 769a — see above): the ironic use of festive terms as metonyms for slaughter.

583a *billa brogan*

This epithet, attributed to Unferð by Beowulf, is ostensibly formulaic in style. Read in the context of its sentence, however, it is clearly facetious. The only sense in which Unferð may be called a 'terror of blades' is as a murderer: there is no martial glory amplified through these words.

588a *heafodmægum*

There is an obvious irony as well as a subtler suggestive play attributed to the relationship between Unferð and his brothers through this epithet. On the one hand they are his 'near relative' (after Klaeber) kin; on the other, he is alleged to have killed them. At the same time, the particular choice of constituent elements for this compound noun connotes images of corporeal dislocation, disfigurement, or simply damage (in this case namely decapitation). There are several instances in the poem of comparable wordplay, where attention is drawn to bodily harm by mention of a specific body part in the context of harm, where there is a suggestion that the body part mentioned may be the site of harm. This suggestiveness brings the conflicting attributes – murder and kinship –

together within the word so that it contrastively offsets itself, thus intensifying the moment of irony.

594a *searogrim*

This epithet, attributed to Unferð, would usually constitute an element of poetic (formulaic) encomium around the topos of martial prowess.[23] In its immediate context, however, it is clearly sarcastically intended. Beowulf criticises Unferð for his fratricidal murder and apparently his more general scheming. Beowulf certainly does not praise Unferð as 'ferocious in battle;' he criticises his lack of martial courage, saying that Unferð should have defended his king against Grendel's depredations. This phrase, read in its context, is one of the clearest examples of an inverse epithet in the poem. It has consequences for the reading of many other epithets, but especially those relating to Unferð (particularly lines 1807ff — see below).

597b *Sige-Scyldinga*

This epithet is attributed to the Danes collectively, or at least to the inhabitants of Hroðgar's court. It appears formulaic, almost phatic, on one level. And yet it has a flaw. The Danes have been losing the fight against Grendel, who has been attacking Heorot nightly for twelve years, while there is not a fight they appear to have won in that time. As the poem develops it, Beowulf, supported by his Geats, shall secure that victory as well as the subsequent victory over Grendel's mother.[24] In the context of the specific passage in which it is located, Beowulf's rebuking of Unferð, it is expressly a reflection on the fact that the Danes have failed to combat Grendel with the requisite keenness and bravery, arguing that Unferð is one who has been party to that collective failure (this is most pointed in lines 590-601a). There is ironic tension in the attribution of this epithet to the Danes. It is a somewhat hollow epithet. Compounding that irony, drawing out the hollowness of the epithet, they

23 See entries under '-GRIM' in Bessinger and Smith, *op. cit.*, p. 96.

24 Remembering that the only active ally in Beowulf's fight with Grendel is a Geat, who serves to demonstrate Grendel's imperviousness to swords (lines 794b-805a). Likewise, the only character aside from Beowulf to contribute any martial assistance to the cleansing of Grendel's mother's mere is also a Geat (lines 1432b-1436).

are described as *Sige-Scyldingas* by Beowulf himself, speaking on behalf of the Geats, who are developed as true victors in the hostile encounters of the poem. That point is made clearly in the next sentence: *Ac ic him Geata sceal // eafoð ond ellen / ungeara nu // guþe gebeodan* (lines 601b-603a). There is another instance of this phrase, also used ironically, when Beowulf relates his adventures to Hygelac (line 2004a, *Sige-Scyldingum* — see below).

609a *brego Beorht-Dena*

This epithet is attributed simultaneously to Hroðgar (*brego*) and to his retinue and/or nation (*Beorht-Dena*), meaning 'leader of the Bright-Danes.' The context is revealing: Beowulf has just explained how the brightness is yet to come — how it will await the next dawn, which shall reveal the defeat of Grendel (lines 604b-606). There is thus an ironic tension implicit in the formula: it attributes qualities to Hroðgar and the Danes that Heorot is yet to see. An identical formulation, *brego Beorht-Dena* in line 427a, does not appear so pointed within its immediate context.

616b *eþelwearde*

This epithet, ostensibly a formulaic encomium, is attributed to Hroðgar. It is quite hollow. As the poem develops it, Beowulf himself is the divinely appointed *seleweard* (line 667a — see below). Hroðgar fails to defend the building at the centre of his kingdom. Not that Heorot is the extent of Hroðgar's kingdom, and if the coastguard is correct, there has been no external power game enough to attack Denmark across the sea in memory. So Hroðgar can claim to be a 'guard of the homeland' in a sense. However, this poem makes it clear that his guardianship does not stand up to the two attacks actually suffered by the kingdom, which are attacks on the most illustrious place in the kingdom: its court. The first is the twelve years of Grendel's depredations; the second is the civil strife that comes some time after Beowulf has left Denmark, apparently caused by Hroðulf.

619b *sigerof kyning*

At a first impression, this epithet attributed to Hroðgar is the epitome of what this thesis has called formulaic encomium. And yet the 'victory-

renowned king,' Hroðgar, has not won the fight against Grendel, who has been attacking Heorot nightly for twelve years. It is thus a somewhat hollow epithet, which is amplified in the next fitt by Hroðgar's familiar retreat to other chambers to spend the night (lines 662-665a). On this particular night, there is a contrast to Hroðgar's comfort seeking, namely Beowulf's courage.

644a *sigefolca*

This epithet is attributed to the Danes collectively, or at least to the inhabitants of Hroðgar's court. It takes the shape of formulaic encomium, and yet the Danes have been losing the fight against Grendel, who has been attacking Heorot nightly for twelve years — while there is not a fight that they appear to have won in that time. As the poem develops it, Beowulf, with the support of his Geats, secures that victory and the subsequent victory over Grendel's mother.

657a *ðryþærn Dena*

This epithet is attributed to Heorot. It appears formulaic, almost phatic, on one level. And yet, if the attribution is apposite, it is ironic. Grendel has been attacking Heorot nightly for twelve years, meaning that it is his might which is proven more than that of the hall or its owner — until Beowulf's arrival. Poetically, Heorot is invested with *ðryþ*, it is a 'house of might,' but not one that reflects positively on the Danes. Later, in the combat between Beowulf and Grendel, the poem suggests that the *ðryþærn* stands as testimony to the individual and collective mights of those two characters. The two *aglæcean* are also *reþe renweardas* (line 770a, see below). Clearly this situation reflects an ironic tension between the actual history of Heorot and the reasoning behind its construction, since that building was constructed in order to demonstrate the splendour and the power of Hroðgar and his Danish kingdom.

662b *hæleþa gedryht*

This epithet, reflecting on Hroðgar and more directly on his retinue, is offset by the verb *gewat* ('departed') before the attribution is even made. The amplification of the epithet is in the action of the sentence: a retreat from the hall-*cum*-battleground. Compounding that irony, it is the Geats

who prove to be the real *hæleþa gedryht* in this situation, from the heroically decisive moment when they stay in the hall for the night (and the Danes leave it).

663a *eodur Scyldinga*

This epithet is attributed to Hroðgar. Its ironic tension is in the fact that it reminds us of Hroðgar's leadership of the Danes in the same sentence as we are told of the lead Hroðgar provides: *ut of healle*. That – as with the apposed epithet *hæleða gedryht* (line 662b — see above), serving a parallel function – is the amplification of the irony of the sentence: a retreat from the battleground, choosing comfort ahead of the hard duty of heroes.[25] By comparison, Beowulf's lead is to stay in the hall — and his Geatish retinue follows that lead. The literal meaning of the epithet, 'protector of the Scyldings,' is somewhat hollow, given Hroðgar's inability over twelve years to protect his court from Grendel. That irony is also compounded by the upstaging presence of Beowulf, a true *eodur*.

664a *wigfruma*

This epithet, attributed to Hroðgar, is thoroughly ironic: the 'war-leader,' the 'leader of the Scyldings' (line 663a — see above), has set the example for his Danish retinue by seeking out the comfort of his marital bed, while Beowulf and the Geatish retinue carry out the Almighty's *eotonweard* (line 668b). Beowulf himself is the divinely appointed *seleweard* (line 667a — see below). While this epithet is hollow, its amplification also has undertones of sexual innuendo. A comparable use of quasi-phatic encomium and sexual suggestion is *beahhorda weard* (line 921b — see below).

667a *seleweard*

This epithet, attributed to Beowulf, draws out the ironic tension between, on the one hand, ostensible attributions of the function of defending Heorot to Hroðgar and the Danes, and, on the other hand, the actual performance of that function by Beowulf and the Geats. Beowulf thus is a contrastive character, his dramatic functioning upstages those around

25 Leading from behind the lines may seem like a very reasonable choice to make, but it is not heroic.

him, and serves to point up an ironical tension implicit in earlier epithets of the sentence, attributed to Hroðgar and the Danes: *hæleða gedryht* (line 662b — see above), *eodur Scyldinga* (line 663a — see above), and *wigfruma* (line 664a — see above). It offsets an epithet of the previous fitt: *eþelweard* (line 616b — see above). It is also complemented by a variant synonym in the following line: *eotenweard* (line 668b — see below).

668b *eotenweard*[26]

This epithet, attributed to Beowulf, draws out the ironic tension between, on the one hand, phatic and formulaic attributions of the function of defending Heorot to its owner Hroðgar and the Danes, and, on the other hand, the actual performance of that function by Beowulf and the Geats. It is a variant synonym to the previous line's: *seleweard* (line 667a — see above).

709b *beadwa geþinges*

This epithet is attributed to the outcome of the fight between Grendel and Beowulf. There is an obvious disjuncture between the semantic fields of its constituent terms: 'the settlement of battles.' The poem reiterates its running metaphor of the handshake, which is attributed to this fight on several occasions. This metaphor is essentially a droll euphemism. Compare line 426a, *ðing* — see above; line 1237b, *hand gemæne* — see below; line 2072a, *hondræs hæleða* — see below.

717 *Hroþgares ham*

To describe Heorot as 'Hroðgar's home' is ironic, since Hroðgar never sleeps in it — or he never sleeps in the main hall, at any rate. As we see elsewhere in the poem, he would rather share a bed with Wealhþeow, removed from the hall in a safe bower, than undergo perilous nights sleeping in the hall with his retinue. The epithet is doubly ironic here because, as Hroðgar himself has said (lines 655-661), on this occasion the hall is in the keeping of Beowulf and the Geats. Neither Hroðgar nor his servants control the building when it is visited by Grendel for the last

26 The manuscript reading here is *eotenwearde bead*, which Klaeber amends to *eotenweard' abead*.

time. A number of epithets in this part of the poem draw attention to the ironical tension between, on the one hand, Hroðgar's nominal role as an owner and protector, and, on the other hand, Beowulf's actual fulfilment of the performance requirements of that role. That is typically achieved by attributing to Hroðgar qualities that are not evident in the amplification of his character through the poem (for example, *eþelweard*, line 616b — see above). Occasionally it is achieved by attributing to Beowulf those aspects whose absence from Hroðgar's character is shown up by the hero's counter-example (for example, *seleweard*, line 667a — see above). Here, distinctively, it is shown up by the attribution to an object (the hall) those qualities of his rule that should be manifested through his relationship with that object.

718a aldordagum

There is ironic tension between the semantic content of this compound noun and the subsequent narrative that amplifies it. The phrase literally means 'days of a life,' but we soon find that this occasion is to become the day of Grendel's death. The irony is compounded by the following half line, *ær ne siþðan* (line 718b) — there is no *siþðan* for the days of Grendel's life. It is also closely linked to *heardran hæle* (line 719a — see below), and essentially the same ironic compound recurs later in the fitt: *ealderdagum* (line 757a — see below). This epithet and the following half line share two salient features. First, the ironic tension conveyed is identical. Secondly, they are both ostensibly formulaic in construction (as are so many of the ironic epithets in the poem). These features have three salient consequences. First, it may be said that the phrases are in an appositive and variational relationship with respect to one another — apposition and variation of terms that develop the one ironic concept. We may note that theirs is not a classically appositive or variational relationship, since they are placed in syntactic sequence rather than parallel. Secondly, this 'play off the one concept' is developed through the one stylistic trope, namely the ironic tension between an ostensibly formulaic phrase and its amplification. At the same time, the stylistic figures employed are quite different, in that one is an attributive compound noun while the other is an adverbial phrase. Thirdly, therefore, it seems that we can identify a grammatical-rhetorical quality here, which is driven by the ironic sensibility of the poem: it seems that an identical type of ironic tension between adjacent phrases is

itself a criterion by which one may identify variation, with all the stylistic and figurative possibilities that such a syntax permits.

719a *heardran hæle*

The construction of this epithet, attributed to Beowulf and the Geats, is internally ironic. *Hæl* is comparable in its meaning to *sped*, denoting something like ‘fair fortune’ or ‘safety’.[27] For Grendel to encounter ‘a harder fair fortune’ or ‘a more hostile safety’ than any other ‘in the days of [his] life, before [or] since’ (line 718 — see above) is obviously somewhat paradoxical. It amplifies and is amplified by the apposed variant *healðegnas* (line 719b — see below). Unlike that variant, however, it draws attention to a dramatic irony in Grendel’s situation. Grendel does not share the poem’s awareness that he is about to meet the end of his *aldordagas*.

719b *healðegnas*

This epithet, attributed to Beowulf and the Geats, amplifies and is amplified by the text of the preceding half line: *heardran hæle* (line 719a — see above). Whereas that variant draws attention to an irony of Grendel’s situation, this epithet references the poem’s by now well developed ironic juxtaposition between the Danes and the Geats. The Danes and their *eodur* have not been effective defenders of the king, and now they do not even occupy Heorot when Grendel approaches his doom, a *heardra hæl* than any he has previously experienced (read: when the Danes were present). The most recent previous referencing of that irony is earlier in the same sentence, *Hroþgares ham* (line 717 — see above).

720b *rinc*

This type of epithet, attributed to Grendel, was described earlier as ‘a kind of attributive metathesis’ (see line 142a, *healðegn* — above). There is an ironic tension between the meaning of the term and the character to whom it is attributed. The word itself is a poetical term meaning ‘man’ or ‘warrior.’ However Grendel is one of *Caines cyn*,

27 See Clark Hall, *op. cit.*, p. 315; also the glossary of Klaeber, *op. cit.*, p. 400.

which casts him among the ranks of monsters, hence outside the legal, military, and economic frameworks of civil society.

721a *dreamum bedæled*

This epithet is attributed to Grendel. Hanning reads an ironical play on the multiple meanings of *-dæl-* into this phrase and others containing the same element.[28] The poem *Beowulf*, according to Hanning, develops a double irony: 'Grendel, having contemplated the severing of others from life, has brought about the same end for himself.'[29] He notes this is 'a formulaic epithet which the poet uses here for ironic effect.'[30]

722a *fyrbendum fæst*

This epithet, attributed to the doors of Heorot, is rendered obviously ironic by its immediate amplification in the preceding and following half lines: the doors may have been secured with 'fire(-forged) bonds', but they soon gave way to Grendel's shove. It is thus a somewhat hollow epithet. A more pointed irony, however, is the referencing of fire at this architecturally significant point of the hall. The locks on the doors have been forged in fire, which is the eventual destroyer of Heorot. Flames neither help save Heorot, through the forging of sufficiently tough defensive iron, nor spare Heorot when war comes. There is thus a compound irony beneath the attributions of this phrase.

757a *ealderdagum*

There is ironical tension between the semantic content of this compound noun and the narrative which amplifies it. The phrase literally means 'days of a life', and is ostensibly formulaic (compare line 790, *on þæm dæge / þysses lifes*), but we soon find that this occasion is to become the day of Grendel's death. The irony is thus compounded by the following half line, *ær gemette* (line 757b) — reminding us of the *ær ne siþðan* that follows the comparable *aldordagum* earlier in the fitt (line 718 —

28 Robert W. Hanning, 'Sharing, Dividing, Depriving – The Verbal Ironies of Grendel's Last Visit to Heorot,' *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 15 (1973), 203-213.

29 *Ibid.*, 205.

30 *Ibid.*, 206.

see above). That earlier instance of the irony is more highly developed than is the case with this epithet, one of whose poetic functions is to refer back to it, reminding us of the preceding phrase's ironic richness.

766a *se hearmscaþa*

There is a degree of ironic tension in this epithet, attributed to Grendel, between his ostensible role as a 'harmful injurer' and his situation in the narrative as a victim of injurious harm, inflicted by Beowulf. Of course, on one level, such an ironic distinction is blurred greatly by Grendel's twelve-year history of doing exactly what the epithet suggests: harm and injury. At the same time, however, that history serves to heighten the tension between the purport of the epithet (which is a reflection of Grendel's expectation that he will succeed in another night of ravaging) and the outcome of the situation, which is his death. This epithet constructs a moment of truth, in which expectations can straightforwardly pass the test of reality or ironically fail it.

768a *ceasterbuendum*

This epithet, apposing *Denum eallum* (line 767b), references the ironic situation that this fitt has highlighted a number of times. The Danes are 'fortress-dwellers' in one sense — they are owners of Heorot, and would usually expect to occupy their hall. Significantly, they are not present on this occasion. It is thus a somewhat hollow epithet. That hollowness is ironically pointed up in further epithets in the sentence. First is the apposed hollow epithet of the following half line, *cenra gehwylcum* (line 768b — see below). Secondly, it is the Geats who bear witness to the violent encounter between Grendel and Beowulf. Thus, the Danes' experience of the great occasion in their hall is mediated (see line 769a, *ealuscerwen* — below).

768b *cenra gehwylcum*

This epithet, apposing *Denum eallum* (line 767b) and *ceasterbuendum* (line 768a — see above), references an irony well developed through the course of the poem so far. 'All the Danes' are 'each of the braves' in one sense — they are the troops of the kingdom, whose duty it is to defend Heorot. Significantly, however, they are not present to defend

the hall on this occasion. It is thus a somewhat hollow epithet. That hollowness is ironically pointed up by other phrases in the sentence.

769a ealuscerwen

This epithet has been the subject of much conjecture.[31] It is fair to say that few phrases in the poem are so difficult to grasp as this one — the more exasperatingly so because its two elements, *ealu-* and *-scerwen*, appear quite mundane: 'ale-dispensing.'[32] Perhaps the greatest source of difficulty is that the phrase attributes qualities to a perception rather than a concrete fact. To the Danes, who cannot see the combat between Beowulf and Grendel (they have vacated the hall for the night), there seems to be a great ale-dispensing happening. Scholars attempting to explain the term have turned to the poem of *Andreas*,[33] where we find the cognate phrase *meoduscerwen* (line 1526b). In that case, the epithet refers to God's flood, which drowns the Mermedonians. It takes the drink of mead as a liquidity metaphor (compare epithets from *Beowulf* lines 480-490: see above). The *Andreas* version is amplified by several juxtaposed epithets, including *biter beorþegu* (line 1533a). There seems to be no reason why the epithet of *Beowulf* or its analogue in *Andreas* should be read as attributing a specific and semantically constrained reference to joyless experiences. In each case, it seems more reasonable to assume that the epithet attributes qualities of festivity and possibly of festive excess, which are ironic references in light of the experiences being thus portrayed. For *Andreas*, it is plainly ironic that a mass drowning should be described as 'mead-dispensing after the feast-day' and 'bitter beer-taking.' For *Beowulf*, the ironic tension derives from the perspective of the Danes. They cannot see the events they perceive, and so hear sounds of festivity rather than perceiving the mortal struggle

31 The conjecture has been summarised by Bruce Mitchell and Fred C. Robinson (eds), *Beowulf – An edition with relevant shorter texts*, Blackwell, Oxford and Malden (Massachusetts), 1998, pp. 167-171.

32 Although Klaeber, *op. cit.*, p. 156 is rather categorical on the glossing of *scerwen*, his reading is not universal. Clark Hall, *Concise Anglo-Saxon Dictionary*, p. 95, is among those who interprets *scerwen* as 'deprivation' rather than 'dispensing.'

33 Kenneth R. Brooks (ed.), *Andreas and The Fates of the Apostles*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1961.

going on.[34] It amplifies an irony that has already been pointed up several times in the fitt, including the epithetic phrase *ceasterbuendum* (line 768a) in the same sentence. That irony is the tension between the Danes' official role as defenders of Heorot, and their actual inability to defend Heorot effectively, compounded by: (a) the Geats' stepping in to perform this core function for them; and (b) the Danes' perception of the din emanating from the hall as somehow festive.

770a *reþe renweardas*

This type of epithet, attributed to both Grendel and Beowulf, displays what was described earlier as 'a kind of attributive metathesis' (see line 142a, *healðegn* — above). There is an ironic tension between the meaning of the term and at least one of the characters to whom it is attributed. The word *renweard* ('house-guard') is a poetic term not recorded elsewhere, apparently a formulaic reference to a 'man' or 'warrior.' However Grendel is one of *Caines cyn*, outside the ranks of civil society. Moreover, there is ironical tension between the meaning of the term and a group of characters to whom it is not attributed, namely Hroðgar and the Danes. Beowulf and Grendel are performing a function for which the epithet may be attributed to them: they are acquitting themselves militarily in the hall. The Danes are not performing that function because, although it is their duty to do so, twelve years of Grendel's depredations have proven that they are not up to the task. The irony of this epithet is replayed when Beowulf recounts his adventures to Hygelac, saying (line 2075) *þær we gesunde / sæl weardodon.*

778b *witan Scyldinga*

This epithet is attributed to a subset of Hroðgar's Danes: those whose function it is to know and to appraise. In this respect, its use is similar to the *selerædende* (line 51b — see above) of the prefatory fitt. Its irony is subtle but unmistakeable. On the one hand, the appraisal of the 'wise ones' is sound: Heorot indeed proves to be so strong that only fire can destroy it. On the other hand, their wisdom is not sufficient to ensure that Heorot avoids the danger they have anticipated. The hall burns

34 A different reading of the Danes' perspective is provided by Edward B. Irving Jr., '*Ealuscerwen*: Wild Party at Heorot,' *Tennessee Studies in Literature* 11 (1966), 161-168.

down in the end, despite their knowledge of its one weak point. This epithet points up the ironic tension between what is known and what is significant.

804a *sigewæpnum*

Another case of subtle but unmistakeable irony, this epithet is attributed to all of those weapons that cannot hurt Grendel because he has *forsworen* them, apparently magically. There is ironic tension between the attribution of a quality of success or victory to such weapons (in this ostensibly encomiastic phrase) and the actual ineffectiveness of those weapons in the situation of context.

828a *ellenmærþum*

This epithet attributes to the deeds of Beowulf and the Geats qualities that, the poem has told us, we should expect to see manifested in the behaviour of Hroðgar and the Danes, namely *ellen* and *mærþ*. The sentence containing it (lines 827b-828a), the sentence that precedes it (lines 825-827a), and the following sentence (lines 828b-833a) all draw attention to the fact that the Danes have been well served by the bravery of their Geat visitors. The first sentence of the poem, however, declares the poem's concern to be the *ellen* (line 3b) that the Danes demonstrate. Thus there is ironic tension between the stated agenda of the poem – an iteration of Danish *ellen* – and the 'argument' it presents – an iteration of Geatish *ellen*.

838b *guðrinc monig*

This epithet, attributed to those men who come to observe the evidence of Beowulf's victory, is somewhat hollow. Whereas Beowulf and the Geats have enacted *ellen*, confronting and defeating Grendel, the 'war-men' who come to examine the aftermath have not participated in the struggle, and are thus undeserving of this ostensibly formulaic epithet, hence the ironic tension. Such ironies are compounded by the contrast between the behaviour of Beowulf and the Geats, deserving such attributions as this epithet, and the behaviour of those to whom the epithet is attributed in this instance.

863b god cyning

This epithet, attributed to Hroðgar, is highly problematic. Its resonates with an identical attribution to Scyld Scefing in line 11b: *þæt wæs god cyning*. The narrative discrepancies between exemplar (Scyld) and reiterator (Hroðgar) are noticeable and significant. First, Hroðgar has not succeeded by virtue of his own bravery, nor that of his retinue; rather, he has been saved by an outsider. Secondly, more than to pay *gombe*, his Geatish neighbour Beowulf has come to him over the seas to win recognition as a martial hero in his own right. Thirdly, the loyalty of Hroðgar's followers is explicitly dubious (particularly through the references to Hroðulf's later usurpation of the throne). In this sentence of the poem, it is cast considerably more negatively than in the depiction of Scyld's life: *Ne hie huru winedrihten / wiht ne logon // glædne Hroðgar* (lines 862-863a). Here it is figured as litotes, suggesting a less than enthusiastic quality in the popular endorsement of Hroðgar's record. The epithet, in attributing to Hroðgar such an unequivocally positive value, where the narrative amplification in the poem does not support such an attribution, is rather hollow. More subtly, the contrast between the biographies of Hroðgar and Scyld draws attention towards the attribution itself — and towards the question of what good kingship comprises. Is it inputs or outputs; personal behaviour or objective (fortuitous) outcome? To what extent is Hroðgar actually a good king? Grendel has been disposed of and Heorot cleansed, all of this under Hroðgar's rule and guidance. That there is a degree of ironic tension in this epithet and its amplification is incontrovertible, but exactly how much tension and where it is pointed are questions — much like trying to identify precisely the ironies of lines 1-3 (see above) — of one's reading of the poem as a whole. See also section 4 in Chapter 3 for a discussion of the attribution *god cyning* as a feature of characterisation in *Beowulf*.

864a heaþorofe

This epithet, attributed to those (predominantly Danish) people who join in celebrating Beowulf's victory over Grendel, is somewhat hollow. There is ironic tension about the purport of those who did not share in the fighting but who now join in enjoying the victory, which is pointed up by both elements of the epithetic compound substantive: 'battle-

renowned.' The first element, *heaþo-*, points up the hollowness while the second, *-rof*, points up the irony of appropriation.

893a aglæca

This type of epithet, attributed to Sigemund, is an example of the kind of attributive metathesis we see in Grendel's depiction as a *rinc* (line 720b — see above). The term *aglæca* is often thought to have a secondary meaning of 'awesome hero,' although I suspect that it is attributed to heroic figures only in a figurative sense.[35] In any such figurative play there is an element of ironic tension, since the essence of the figure is a contrast between the literal meaning of the term and its actual referent, a tension between its surface and real meanings. In this poem it is also attributed to Beowulf: he and the dragon he confronts are depicted as *aglæcean* (line 2592a — see below).

906b aldorceare

This epithet, attributed to the Danes' experience of Heremod's kingship, contains a neat *double entendre* around the senses of the first element, *aldor-*. On the one hand it means 'life.' Heremod was such a brutal despot that he made the Danes have 'care for their lives.'[36] On the other hand it means 'lord.' The Danes did not have especial 'care for their lord' when they betrayed him to the Jutes — just 'care for their lives.' There is an ironic tension between the senses of the compound in its context.

919a swiðhicgende

This epithet, attributed to those (predominantly Danish) people who join in celebrating Beowulf's victory over Grendel, is somewhat hollow. There is ironic tension about the purport of those who did not share in the fighting but who now join in enjoying the victory. There is an ironic contrast within the phrase between the outcomes-focused first element, *swið-*, and the intentions-focused second element, *-hicgende*. An

35 See section 1 in Chapter 3 for a detailed discussion of this term.

36 Klæber, *op. cit.*, glosses the word as 'great sorrow'. This seems a rather indirect translation.

identical form in a highly similar context is line 1016a, *swiðhicgende* (see below).

921b *beahhorda weard*

This epithet, attributed to Hroðgar, is ostensibly another from the stock of formulaic praise motifs. The context through which it is amplified, however, suggests that it carries a measure of sexual innuendo. As Clunies Ross has demonstrated, in Old Norse poetry the 'ring' may connote an erogenous orifice.[37] The link to *Beowulf*'s poetics is not proven, although Tripp is confident of it.[38] Smith[39] and Rulon-Miller[40] show there is much sexual innuendo in certain Exeter Book riddles. In any case, the amplification of this particular epithet suggests that a similar idea is at play here. Hroðgar, 'the guardian of stockpiles of rings,' has already been shown up as an unimpressive contributor when the fighting comes. At that level, this is a somewhat hollow epithet. Now he returns to the scene of Beowulf's triumph *of brydbure*. He treads *tirfæst* with *getrume micle* – 'a great troop' (line 922b — see below) – of ladies – *mægþa hose* (line 924b — see below) – whose virtues are 'well known' – *cystum gecyþed* (line 923a — see below) – and who by implication comprise the 'ring-hoards' he guards. There is an ironic tension between his role as king, which is highlighted by the formulaic and honorific nature of this epithet, and Hroðgar's actual performance, which is an amplification of the smutty connotations of this epithet: Hroðgar clearly prefers to spend his nights in the comfort of ladies, rather than mix it with monsters in the meadhall. Once the fighting is over, once it is safe for the comfort seekers to return to Heorot, he enters in full splendour.

922b *getrume micle*

Part of the amplification of the innuendo *beahhorda weard* (line 921b — see above), this epithet is attributed to the companions with whom

37 Clunies Ross, 'Hildr's Ring,' *op. cit.* Although, as she points out, most Old Norse references are to male sexual intercourse, presumably sodomy.

38 *Literary Essays*, pp. 63-64.

39 D.K. Smith, 'Humour in Hiding: Laughter Between the Sheets in the Exeter Book Riddles,' in Wilcox (ed.), *Humour in Anglo-Saxon Literature*, pp. 79-98.

40 'Sexual Humor.'

Hroðgar enters Heorot the morning after Beowulf's successful encounter with Grendel. The 'great troop,' as we see in line 924b, is actually a gathering of the ladies of court (*mægþa hose* — see below). There is ironic tension between our expectations of what constitutes a *micel getrum* in heroic age Scandinavia or an Old English poem and the actual referent of this epithet.

923a *cystum gecyþed*

This epithet is apposed to *getrume micle* (line 922b — see above), which is itself part of a sequence amplifying the innuendo *beahhorda weard* (line 921b — see above). This epithet is attributed to the company in which Hroðgar enters Heorot after the completion of Beowulf's successful encounter with Grendel. Obviously, it draws attention to the 'virtues' for which that 'great troop' is 'renowned.' Since the troop in question is expressly a *mægþa hos*, these virtues are presumably ladylike virtues — or something rather cruder. Perhaps the suggestion is that Hroðgar is extremely polite in his bearing, but even that would seem rather ironic in this decidedly gory context. More plausible is an imputation that Hroðgar is quite effeminate, even more so when compared with the visiting hero Beowulf. There is ironic tension between Hroðgar's purported status as a famous warlord and his behaviour as a creature of luxury.

924b *mægþa hose*

Part of the amplification of the innuendo *beahhorda weard* (line 921b — see above), this epithet is attributed to the company in which Hroðgar enters Heorot the morning after Beowulf's successful encounter with Grendel. There is ironic tension between our expectations of what constitutes a *mægþa hos* and the actual referent of this epithet, which includes a purportedly heroic king in its number.

971a *lifwraðe*

Beowulf says that Grendel left his hand behind as a 'life-protection' while he retreated from Heorot, a concept whose absurdity is amplified through the sentence. This epithet is therefore an attribution not so much to a character as to the functionality of what has become an object — the disembodied arm of the monster. It is apposed to *last weardian* (line

971b — see below). There is ironic tension simply in attributing a functionality to such an object, since it has evidently become useless to Grendel. More specifically, there is irony in this epithet's attribution of 'life-protection,' since the arm's severance is the *syndolh sweotol* (line 817a) that causes Grendel's death. Since the epithet is delivered in the speech of Beowulf, we can infer a certain droll aspect to his accounting for the events of the previous night. There is a comparable register in Beowulf's account of his slaying of *niceras nigene* in his swimming contest with Breca (lines 549-575a).

971b last weardian

This phrase, like that of the previous half line (*lifwraþe* — see above), is attributed to the functionality of what has become an object — the disembodied arm of Grendel. For that reason it is appropriate to categorise this verb phrase as an epithet. It amplifies the absurdity of Beowulf's basic rhetorical proposition — namely that Grendel deliberately left his arm behind, like some skink jettisoning its still-writhing tail in the mouth of a bird, 'to guard the rear.' The main irony is simply in the absurdity of this notion. There is another irony in this epithet, which is the failure of the instrument to perform its function satisfactorily: the hand may satisfy Beowulf, keeping him from following in hot pursuit of the fleeing monster, but the damage has already been done. Grendel buys himself no survival time, as Beowulf states in the next clause: *no þær ænige swa þeah // feasceaft guma / frofre gebohte* (lines 972b-973).

981 gylpspræce guðgeweorca

The poem says that Unferð became 'a quieter man [...] in boasting speeches of war-deeds' once presented with the evidence of Beowulf's heroic success. This realises one ironic tension invested in the narrative when Unferð confronted Beowulf over the swimming contest with Breca: Unferð's suggestion had been that Beowulf would not be able to make good his boast, but this was now thoroughly rebuffed by the evidence (Grendel's hand). It redraws another ironic tension first established by Beowulf in his rebuking of Unferð, namely that the latter man is not nearly so heroic in his deeds as his words (lines 590-601a). The ironic moment is the acknowledgement by Unferð, realised through

his ‘quieter’ behaviour, that his ‘boasting speeches of war-deeds’ are no longer credible.

986b *hilderinces*

This epithet, attributed to Grendel, is another example of the ‘kind of attributive metathesis’ described earlier (see line 142a, *healðegn* — above). It is comparable to the epithet *rinc* (line 720b — see above), also attributed to Grendel. There is an ironic tension between the meaning of the term and the character to whom it is attributed. The word itself means ‘man’ or ‘warrior,’ although it is only recorded in poetic texts. However Grendel has been one of *Caines cyn*, outside the ranks of humankind.

992a *folmum gefrætwod*

This phrase, used to depict the interior decorations of Heorot in preparation for the feast to celebrate Beowulf’s victory, appears to be an instance of wordplay for its own sake. After a lengthy and rather gruesome discussion of Grendel’s hand, which Beowulf has kept to show the amassed Danes (lines 970b-990 — see above), we are told Hroðgar orders that the hall be ‘decorated by [*or* with] hands.’ Having developed a rather macabre focus on Grendel’s severed arm over the previous 21 lines, the poem now directs our attention to the assisting hands of the Danes and, by a common *f-* alliteration, to their numerousness (line 992b). The straightforward reading is that many hands get to work beautifying Heorot, but a simultaneously (if purely grammatically) valid reading is that many hands are affixed throughout Heorot’s interior by way of decoration. See section 1b in Chapter 5 for a close reading of this phrase in its poetic context, particularly its prosodic environment. There is ironic tension between the propriety of the one reading and the unwholesomeness of the other. This epithet relates at the gruesome level to a number of references to the fight between Grendel and Beowulf that suggest a meeting for the purposes of negotiation, whose outcome was settled by a handshake. In their euphemistic periphrasis, they typify what Shippey has called ‘grim wordplay.’[41]

41 T.A. Shippey, ‘“Grim Wordplay”: Folly and Wisdom in Anglo-Saxon Humour,’ Wilcox (ed), *Humor in Anglo-Saxon Literature*, pp. 33-48.

996 secga gehwylcum þara þe on swylc staraþ

This epithet is ostensibly generically attributed, however its reference is most closely directed towards Hroðgar's Danes. It points to a materialism that is frequently criticised throughout the course of the poem, and which is frequently attributed to Hroðgar and his kingdom throughout the first two thirds of the poem. The irony of the epithet is that the criticism is masked beneath ostensibly benign rhetoric. It is notable as one of those epithets occupying a whole line. Its amplitude is the product of a subordinate clause. Perhaps more interesting is the use of internal rhymes to maintain cohesiveness across this long phrase: the rhyme between *-hwylc-* and *swylc* to maintain cohesion across the two halves of the line; and the rhyme between *þara* and *staraþ* to maintain cohesiveness within the rather long b-verse.

1008a symle

This phrase is a relatively straightforward metonym substituting for the events of Grendel's fight with Beowulf. We see a similar usage in Beowulf's account of his fight with the sea monsters during his swimming match against Breca: *symbel ymbsæton* (line 564a — see above). There is ironic tension between the ostensible festivity that the term attributes and the event that is thus referenced, namely Grendel's death. Whereas previously Grendel's visits to Heorot may have been festive – we are told that he exulted upon entering the hall for his last time and seeing the warriors sleeping there (line 730b, *Þa his mod ahlog*) – this occasion could not be so described, at least not in retrospect. There appears to be some connection to the inverse irony drawn in the phrase *ealuscerwen* (line 769a — see above): the ironic use of festive references as metonymy for slaughter. If we compare *þing* (line 426a — see above), there may be a broader referential field for the metonymy of slaughter, namely assemblies of various types and purposes, wherein the crucial symbolic element is some form of interpersonal encounter. It also develops the connotative frame of reference for a subtle irony in the following sentence (line 1010, *wolde self cyning / symbel þicgan* — see below).

1010b symbel

In the previous sentence, it has been said that Grendel lay on his deathbed, asleep 'after the feast.' The feast referenced by that metonym (see above) is mortal combat. Thus, when Hroðgar *wolde self cyning / symbel þicgan* (line 1010), this connotes a desire that he had been present in the fighting personally, contrary to what actually transpired. It points once again to the ironic tension between Hroðgar's official role as a defender of his kingdom and his actual non-performance of that function.

1011b maran weorode

This epithet, attributed to the occupants of Heorot at the feast to celebrate Beowulf's victory over Grendel, bears quite a complex relation to its context. The sentence in which it occurs translates to, 'I have not heard in that nation of a greater force about their treasure-giver bearing themselves better.' The crucial trope of this sentence is litotes, which is a frequent vehicle for irony in the poem (see Chapter 4). This epithet and the other epithet in this sentence (line 1012a, *sincgyfan* — see below) ostensibly attribute qualities that harmoniously develop the 'surface' meaning of the sentence. At that level, it appears to be unmixed encomium, deeply formulaic in style. However both epithets are invested with irony. This epithet is amplified as hollow by the narrative of the poem, to the extent that it applies to any group in Heorot other than the Geatish visitors. The Danes and all who have come to visit Heorot since Beowulf's victory have shown no evidence of being a 'greater force' than any other 'in that nation.' Since the Geats are a possible referent, or a possible subset of the referent group, there is ironic tension between the appropriateness of that possible referent (that is, the non-hollowness of this epithet as attributed to the Geats) on the one hand, and the overwhelming inappropriateness of all other possible referents (that is, the hollowness of the epithet as attributed to a majority of its potential objects) on the other. With a similar tension being present in the following epithet (*sincgyfan*), the surface meaning of the sentence is thus thwarted by the amplificatory irony of key constituent terms. Upon closer reading, then, the ostensible litotes of this sentence becomes an ironic apophasis: the sentence draws attention to its own inappropriate referencing.

1012a sincgyfan

Performing a similar function to the earlier epithet of its sentence (line 1011b, *maran weorode* — see above), this epithet is attributed to Hroðgar. It is a formulaic phrase, referring to the conventional role of a king as the nation's 'treasure-giver.' Where *maran weorode* is hollow, this epithet is not. Its irony is the tension between the specific kingly function referenced, bequeathing material wealth, and those other kingly functions which are not referenced. As the narrative of the poem amplifies it, Hroðgar is an effective fulfiller of the treasure-giving function but not those other functions.[42] The underlying meaning of this sentence (lines 1011-1012) draws attention towards the importance Hroðgar and his followers place on their monetary relationship, while the hollow *maran weorode* draws attention to the deficient martial aspect of the nation. The moment of irony is the moment of the feast, whereupon the Danes cease displaying their martial deficiency and start demonstrating their capacities as revellers and gift-exchangers.

1013b blædagande

Attributed to the Danes, this epithet is amplified as hollow by the narrative of the poem. There is tension between the Danes as a referent for such an epithet on the one hand and the preferability of the visiting Geats as a referent (that is, the extent to which the epithet better fits the Geats). That the Danes and Geats are co-mingled in Heorot for the feast to celebrate Beowulf's victory over Grendel narratorially highlights this ironic tension invested in the epithet. A *blæd-* compound as epithet, also attributed to a Dane (although with different scansion and tropology) is line 1299a, *blædfæstne* (see below).

1016a swiðhicgende

This epithet, attributed to the Danes, points up three simultaneous ironies. First is an extension of the irony manifested earlier in the

42 This view appears to receive some support from Beowulf himself:

> Uþe ic swiþor
> þæt ðu hine selfne geseon moste
> feond on frætewum fylwerigne! (lines 960b-962)

sentence (line 1013b, *blædagande* — see above), namely the hollowness of the epithet. The Danes do not demonstrate mighty resolve in their deeds, although they revert to 'mighty minded' behaviour once mead cups are in their hands. It is an ironic tension between words and deeds, intentions and outcomes. Second is a dramatic irony. This epithet is an appositional variant of the two characters Hroðgar and Hroðulf (line 1017a). As the poem portrays it, those two shall come to be the heads of opposing factions within Heorot before Hroðulf's usurpation of the Scylding throne. This dramatic irony is reiterated in the following sentence (see line 1018a, *freondum* — below; also line 1019a, *Þeod-Scyldingas* — see below; also the ironic litotes of line 1018b, *nalles facenstafas*). Third is an ironic contrast within the phrase between the outcomes-focused first element, *swið-*, and the intentions-focused second element, *-hicgende*. Compare an identical form used to simpler ironic effect in line 919a, *swiðhicgende* (see above).

1018a freondum

This epithet, attributed to the Danes, is one of two in its sentence (see line 1019a, *Þeod-Scyldingas* — below) that emphasise the dramatic irony of politics in Heorot at the time of Beowulf's victory over Grendel. There is also an ironic litotes to the same end (line 1018b, *nalles facenstafas*). This sentence continues to point out the precarious situation of the Danes, as in the previous sentence (see line 1016a, *swiðhicgende* — above), whereby the Danish kingdom shall be overcome by internal strife, although at this stage the Danes do not anticipate it. Ironically, if somewhat understandably, the Danes are quite complacent about the health of their kingdom in the aftermath of Grendel's death. The epithet itself is somewhat hollow, since the ostensible friendship counts for nothing when Hroðulf overthrows Hroðgar's line.[43]

1019a Þeod-Scyldingas

This epithet is offset by the obviously ironic litotes of the clause: *nalles facenstafas // Þeod-Scyldingas / þenden fremedon*, lines 1018b-1019

43 Although important questions about this reading of Hroðulf's role are raised by Gerald Morgan, 'The Treachery of Hrothulf,' as discussed in Chapter 3 of this thesis.

(see also line 1018a, *freondum* — above). The epithet is ostensibly benign. It connotes a cohesiveness of the Danish people that is at odds with this clause and with the narrative more generally. By attributing political unity to the Danes, within the context of a sentence drawing attention to their impending civil strife, this epithet serves to draw further attention to the dramatic irony — the ironic tension between the Danes' misguided belief in their nation's political cohesion and the eventual demonstration of Denmark's political dividedness.

1026a *sceotendum*[44]

This epithet, attributed to the occupants of Heorot at the feast to celebrate Beowulf's victory over Grendel, appears a stock martial prowess attribution. As it is amplified by the narrative, however, the term 'shooters' is somewhat hollow when attributed to that predominantly Danish group. It is couched in a litotic clause that ostensibly delivers an appraisal of Beowulf's behaviour: *no he þære feohgyfte // for sceotendum / scamigan þorfte* (lines 1025b-1026). The hollowness of the epithet (amplified through the fact that the Danes do no shooting in the course of the poem, although a Geat does shoot one monster from the shores of Grendel's mother's mere) highlights an inverse sense of the litotes: whereas Beowulf is not 'shamed,' the Danes are.

1035a *eorla hleo*

This epithet is one of a type. See line 429b, *wigendra hleo* (above).

1039 *hildesetl heahcyninges*

This epithet, attributed to the horse that Hroðgar gives to Beowulf in recognition of his exploits, alludes to Hroðgar's reputation for martial prowess. As it is amplified through the sentence, it was the 'war-seat of a high king when Healfdene's son wanted to perform the play of swords.' As the poem develops it, however, Hroðgar never initiates combat. There is ironic tension between this narrative fact about Hroðgar and the formulaic encomium ostensibly attributed by the

44 Line 1026b of the manuscript reads *scotenum*, whose meaning appears essentially similar to the emended version, *sceotendum*.

epithet. That irony is reiterated in the next clause (see line 1042a, *widcuþes wig* — below).

1042a *widcuþes wig*

This epithet, attributed to an otherwise unnamed (probably a generalised) battle in which Hroðgar participated, is ostensibly a rather phatic reference to the king's martial role, but on closer reading appears to be quite apophatic. As developed in the poem, there is no war in which Hroðgar participates, unless it be the war involving the destruction of Heorot. When the clause in which this epithet is located states of Hroðgar, *næfre on ore læg // widcuþes wig / ðonne walu feollon* (lines 1041b-1042), it is a form of litotes. It does not say Hroðgar had ever succeeded *on ore*. He had not been tested, hence the validity of the claim that he had never failed. It is reiterating an irony also evident in another epithet of this sentence, *hildesetl heahcyning* (line 1039 — see above). The ambiguity of reference in this epithet renders it hollow to some extent.

1044a *eodor Ingwina*

This epithet, attributed to Hroðgar, is a poetically ornate form of the rather formulaic encomium upon which the poem builds much of its irony. To describe Hroðgar as 'the protector of the friends of Ing' is almost a kenning. It is so poetically figured that it draws attention to the figurative expression, to the precise choice and collocations of the words. We can hardly avoid noticing the hollowness of the epithet, therefore, which is established by the foregoing and subsequent narrative: Hroðgar demonstrably fails to be an effective 'protector' of his court (whereas his guest, Beowulf, succeeds in this function). It echoes the irony of a similarly constructed and referenced epithet, *eodur Scyldinga* (line 663a — see above).

1046b *mære þeoden*

This epithet, attributed to Hroðgar, is located in an extraordinarily ironic sentence: *Swa manlice / mære þeoden // hordweard hæleþa / heaþoræsas geald // mearum ond madmum / swa he næfre man lyhð // se þe secgan wile / soð æfter rihte* (lines 1046-1049). The apparently bland epithet takes on a certain pointedness in this context, amplified by the

ironically loaded materialism critique in which it sits. 'A man never faults' the payment of 'great treasure' as a 'reward' for enduring 'battle-storms,' the narrator says. On the basis of this litotes it is argued that Hroðgar's gift-giving was an extremely 'manly' act – a remarkable suggestion, when we consider that the truly 'manly' behaviour was that of the gift receiver, not the giver – and that such a manliness amplifies the greatness of Hroðgar's kingship. The test of manliness, surely, is actual participation in *heaþorœsas*, not the vicarious participation that is ratified by a payment. We thus have a kind of hollow praise: it is not for the gift giving that 'a man' might fault Hroðgar, but for the fact that he did not himself have the courage to confront Grendel, so the suggestion that one does not fault him for the former act is transparently superfluous. There is thus an ironic tension between the ostensible truth of the proposition that Hroðgar is not faulted for the deed in question and the demonstrable falseness of the proposition that his behaviour is 'manly.' Consequently the epithet *mære þeoden* is also hollow, contrastively offset by this same irony of the amplification.

1047a *hordweard hæleþa*

This epithet, attributed to Hroðgar, is ostensibly formulaic encomium. It is located in a highly ironic sentence (see line 1046b, *mære þeoden* — above), drawing attention back to the materialism of the Danes. The materialism critique is compounded by the second term of the phrase, *hæleþa*, which is a hollow epithet to the extent that it is attributed to Hroðgar's Danes and a dramatic upstaging to the extent that it is attributed to Beowulf. The Danish king is not amplified as a heroic character through the narrative of the poem. That term's applicability to Beowulf is an embarrassment to the character of Hroðgar. The epithet *hordweard* is once attributed to Beowulf (an identical formulation: line 1852a, *hordweard hæleþa* — see below) and four times to the dragon in this poem.

1064 *Healfdenes hildewisan*

This epithet, attributed to Hroðgar, is another instance of ostensibly formulaic encomium around the topic of martial prowess. Read literally, it indicates either that Hroðgar was a troop leader under Healfdene's rule or that he was a troop leader in the family of Healfdene. Both are

probably valid readings. In attributing to Hroðgar the qualities of a 'battle leader' it is somewhat hollow: the visiting Beowulf is the one who directs the combats of this poem, not his host Hroðgar. At the same time, the collocation with Healfdene connotes ineffective leadership, politically at least. The reference to ancestry, on close reading, is hardly accidental. This sentence marks the introduction to the lengthy 'Finnsburg intermezzo,' wherein the *scop* recounts Hnæf's fateful raid *in Freswæle* (lines 1063-1159a). The ensuing historical digression is explicitly linked to Hroðgar's family line on line 1069: *hæleð Healf-Dena / Hnæf Scyldinga* (see below). The following passage, an extremely rich gathering of various ironic tensions, amplifies this epithet, insofar as it develops the dynastic heritage of Hroðgar as a *hildewisa*. Just as the situation of Hildeburh (see below for the suggestion that her name is itself an ironic epithet) is used to amplify the situation of Wealhþeow, so the situation of Finnsburg is a parallel for the situation of Heorot. Hnæf makes a problematic example for a Scylding warlord. He dies in the raid, which ultimately delivers a Pyrrhic victory to the Danes as it becomes highly destructive on both sides. In this respect, Hroðgar's personal inability to defeat Grendel, combined with his inability to avoid the anticipated internecine strife of coming years, is thus given precedent.

1069a hæleð Healf-Dena

This epithet, attributed to Hnæf, is located pointedly with regard to the previous ironic epithet of its sentence, *Healfdenes / hildewisan* (line 1064 — see above). The reiteration – its grammatical characteristics slightly altered – of the key term *healf(-)den-*, pointedly collocates the respective referents of this epithet and its forerunner, Hnæf and Hroðgar. The two characters are thus rendered as mutual comparators. Hnæf's fate is a narrative amplification of Hroðgar's conduct, just as Hroðgar's shortcomings amplify the historical precedent set by Hnæf. There is ironic tension between the values attributed through the word *hæleð* and the actual outcome of Hnæf's raid. There is a further irony created by the explicit link between Hnæf and Hroðgar (and Healfdene, for that matter): when the poem refers to a 'hero of the Half-Danes,' what it really means is something of a dud.

1071a (etc.) Hildeburh

This is actually a character's name, meaning that its denomination as an epithet is inherently problematic on historiographic lines. On the other hand, the name *Hildeburh* is etymologically transparent, conveying semantics ironically relevant to the situation described.[45] Her name meaning 'battle-fort,' the wife of Finn and a Dane by birth, this character has a name that is the epitome of her situation. She is at the epicentre of a conflict that she strenuously but hopelessly attempts to avert. The irony is the tension between her role as a peacemaker[46] and her name, which encapsulates the futility of her efforts.

1082b meðelstede

This epithet, apparently attributed to Finn's hall, is formulaic in style and yet it connotes behaviour at odds with the situation described. Instead of *meðel*, the hall has been filled with *gefeoht*. It is thus a somewhat apophatic epithet. At the same time, this irony is compounded by its amplification through the outcome of the martial attrition. It is said that Finn no longer had sufficient personnel to carry the fight to Hengest. Thus, ironically, the battleground is compelled to become a 'place for a meeting,' as the two tribes agree to share Finnsburg in peace. A third irony, also by narrative amplification, offsets this aspect of the word again, when we find that the parley of the *meðelstede* is as doomed to end as was the initial fighting. The tension between those literal and apophatic senses of the epithet thus mimetically resembles the fluctuating tensions of the situation depicted. Finally, there is the apophatic sense in which 'meeting' stands as a metonym for 'combat' several times during the poem (see especially line 426a, *ðing* — above). Compare also uses of feasting imagery to a similar end (for example, line 564a, *symbel* — see above).

45 Think, for example, of the number of news reports one encounters where the name of a character connotes qualities 'ironically appropriate' to the story at hand. The argument here is that, immediately we make such an appraisal of a name, it becomes an epithet in effect. Hence its 'ironically appropriate' qualities would make apposite material for a study of ironical attribution, such as the present chapter.

46 Compare the reference to Modþryðo as a *freoðowebbe* (line 1942a — see below).

1142b *weorodrædende*[47]

There is ironic tension between the ostensible power of command that is attributed to Finn through this phrase and the strife that ensues in the story after the sentence in which it is located. Whereas this sentence asserts an acceptance of Finn's role as 'troop-leader,' what follows it is the Danes' reversion to non-acceptance of Finn's sovereignty — and their resumption of hostilities against the Jutes. Its hollowness is thus a dramatic irony.

1142b *worold rædenne*[48]

This epithet, attributed to the situation in which Hengest finds himself, is unusual in style. Situated within a litotes clause, whose focus is the Danes' (shortlived) acceptance of certain elements of Finn's rule, it draws attention to the apophatic quality of the sentence. There is ironic tension between Finn's formal power of command that is attributed through the epithet and the strife that ensues in the story after this sentence. Whereas this sentence asserts an acceptance of Finn's role as sovereign, what follows is the Danes' reversion to non-acceptance of Finn's sovereignty — and their resumption of hostilities against the Jutes. It is precisely the 'world-condition' – the prevailing situation – that Hengest ultimately *forwyrnde* ('rejected') in the following sentence.

1170a *sinces brytta*

This epithet is an ostensibly formulaic encomium around the topic of Hroðgar's munificent generosity. It is quite subtle in its ironies. Through it, Wealhþeow attributes to her husband the function of 'distributor of treasure' in the moment that she presents a cup (apparently filled with wine) to him. Thus she presents him with an object that is rightfully his. At the same time, there is a resonance with the materialistic focus of other epithets. All such instances where the poem emphasises Hroðgar's munificence carry an ironic tension realised in the narrative: throughout the poem Hroðgar effects the particular

47 The manuscript would have line 1142b read *worold rædenne*, however most editors emend it to read *weorodrædende*. The alternative version would also attribute ironic qualities (see below). Both versions are explicated here.

48 See line 1142b, *weorodrædende* (above).

kingly duty of munificence, but not the more heroic duty of providing a genuine martial leadership for the Danes he rules, or directly performing *ellen*. It is reiterated in the following sentence of Wealhþeow's speech, where she advises Hroðgar, *Þu on sælum wes // goldwine gumena* (lines 1170b-1171a — see below), and again in the next sentence, *Beo wið Geatas glæd / geofena gemyndig* (line 1173).

1171a goldwine gumena

This epithet reiterates the materialistic pointing of *sinces brytta* in the previous sentence (line 1170a — see above). Here Wealhþeow advises her husband to be a 'gold-friend of men.' Identical forms, also attributed to Hroðgar, are to be found in line 1476a (see below) and line 1602a (see below). As king, Beowulf is twice described as *goldwine Geata*: in line 2419a and in line 2584a.

1177a beahsele beorhta

This epithet, attributed by Wealhþeow in the wake of Grendel's mortal defeat, is ostensibly a formulaic encomium for Heorot. Taken in its context, it resonates with several ironic critiques of the Danish regime that have been established through the poem so far. To refer to Hroðgar's seat of power as the 'bright ring-hall' reiterates a connotation of the materialism that has been problematised in the preceding sentences of Wealhþeow's speech (line 1170a, *sinces brytta* — see above; line 1171a, *goldwine gumena* — see above; line 1173b, *geofena gemyndig*). The particular reference to *beagas* ('rings') also resonates with the sexually problematic aspect of Hroðgar's rule, which has been hinted previously in the poem (see especially line 921b, *beahhorda weard* — above).

1180b-1181a minne [...] glædne Hroþulf

This epithet is self-consciously diplomatic in style. It barely conceals queen Wealhþeow's anxiety about the loyalties of her nephew Hroðulf. There is thus ironic tension between her apparent suspicion of his intentions and the trust she attributes to him through the words chosen. That irony is compounded by the dramatic irony, which is made clear in the poem, of Hroðulf's ultimate usurpation of the Scylding dynasty. Preventing such an event is precisely the intention of her speech, and her

inability to do so is cast as ironically parallel to Hildeburh's futile efforts to keep her two families from mutual conflict.

1189b hæleþa bearn

This epithet, attributed to the *giogoð* of Hroðgar's retinue, is ostensibly a formulaic encomium. In describing the youth of Heorot as 'children of heroes,' the poem points up an ironic tension between the ostensible function of thegns – to perform *ellen*, a function established in the first line of the poem – and the actual performance of the Danes throughout this poem, which has been less than heroic. It is the Geats and not the Danes who have behaved heroically in the poem so far, a pattern maintained in the coming encounter with Grendel's mother. Compounding the critique of heroism, this epithet is located within a sentence pointing to the factional conspiracy that will eventually overturn Hroðgar's regime. This epithet is thus somewhat hollow. It resonates with numerous other hollow epithets in the poem pointing to the same political irony.

1198a hordmaðum hæleða

This epithet, attributed to the gifts granted to Beowulf in recognition of his victory over Grendel, is ostensibly formulaic in style. To refer to gifts from Hroðgar as the 'hoard-treasure' reiterates a connotation of the materialism that has been problematised several times throughout the poem, most recently in Wealhþeow's speech to Hroðgar (line 1170a, *sinces brytta* — see above; line 1171a, *goldwine gumena* — see above; line 1173b, *geofena gemyndig*; line 1177a, *beahsele beorhta* — see above). Without precisely being hollow in its attribution, this epithet carries a similar rhetorical function. At the same time, describing that 'hoard-treasure' as originally the property 'of heroes' draws attention to a lack of heroism surrounding the giver, Hroðgar (compare line 1047a, *hordweard hæleþa* — see above).

1201b ecne ræd

This appears to be a metonym, for the flight and/or death of Hama, used by way of understatement. Hama incurred the violent enmity of Eormanric by stealing a fantastic treasure, the necklace of the Brosings. It is said that he fled revenge (line 1200b-1201a, *searoniðas fleah //*

Eormenrices). Whether it is attributed to the flight or to a subsequent death, this epithet carries a measure of irony. If it references flight, there is ironic tension between the highly theological connotations of the phrase (compare line 1760a, *ece rædas*) and its use to suggest a strategy for surviving the consequences of a robbery. If it references death, then the ironic tension is between the theologically legitimate suggestion that Hama's life moved into its eternal phase and the literal reference to the termination of his life as we know it. Either way, the phrase shows a droll affectation.

1209a *rice þeoden*

This epithet, attributed to Hygelac, literally means something like 'great king.' Within its context, its amplification draws attention to Hygelac's lack of judgement, especially his wanton handling of wealth. Hygelac takes his precious jewels, won by Beowulf in Denmark, into Frisia to confront the Francs *for wlenco* (line 1206a). The poem adds that the encounter 'was asking for trouble' (line 1206b, *wean ahsode*). It was a disastrous raid, and it is said that the precious neck ring was lost along with the life of the Geat king. Meanwhile, back several years and in Heorot, Beowulf was honoured by the gift of this neck ring comparable to the *Brosinga men* in value — a proleptic analogy for those treasures also lost to the Geats after Beowulf's death in the dragon fight. There is ironic tension between the investment of wealth in Hygelac that is reiterated by this epithet and his wasting of the wealth during a misguided campaign abroad.

1212a *wyrsan wigfrecan*

This epithet, attributed to the Franks who plunder Hygelac's property after his death in Frisia, is at once true and untrue — that being its ironic tension. Hygelac is apparently a superior fighter to each of the people who kill him, but he is slain by them nevertheless. The somewhat poignant irony is that those 'inferior warriors' win the battle and Hygelac loses it.

1227b *dreamhealdende*

This epithet, attributed to Beowulf, carries a certain measure of situational irony. Wealhþeow asks that Beowulf be a loyal protector to

her sons, Hreðric and Hroðmund, that he be 'kind in deeds' towards them, their 'holder of joys,' as a bulwark against the (unstated but hinted) intriguing of their cousin Hroðulf. Although Beowulf remains the greatest of heroes whilst he lives, the joy of his adoptive brothers is not preserved once he returns to Geatland. The strategy employed by Wealhþeow – that of seeking protective alliances for her family – is ineffective in the upshot.

1231a druncne dryhtguman

This epithet, attributed to the thegns of Hroðgar's retinue, is not the most flattering characterisation Wealhþeow could have given them, and can comfort her little. The full clause translates, 'The drunk men of the retinue do what I ask.' Mindful of the internecine strife that subsequently descends upon the Danes, this attribution serves to point up their fickle allegiances, a fickle quality that is compounded by their alcoholism. Compare earlier references to alcohol, such as those where thegns have pledged to overcome Grendel when drunk, only to fail when put to the actual test (line 480b, *beore druncne* — see above). The reference to alcohol serves to problematise the purport of the characters in question. It automatically introduces the question of ironic tension to any accompanying mention of a *beot* or of the expediting of duty.

1240b beorscealca sum

This epithet, although with a singular reference, is generically attributed to all the thegns occupying Heorot at the dinner in celebration of Beowulf's victory over Grendel. The reference to alcohol, a synecdoche for the mentioned feast, has a certain formulaic quality (hence Klaeber glosses the compound noun as 'beer-feaster'). It also serves to implicate the preceding feast and accompanying alcohol in the forthcoming episode – the avenging raid of Grendel's mother – in a way that parallels an inebriation-slaughter pattern established earlier in the poem (for example, line 480b, *beore druncen* — see above). That parallel itself reveals a form of irony, just as the parallels between Hildeburh and Wealhþeow reveal ironic tension: the recurrence of the inebriation-slaughter pattern is a version of the futility topos, affirming the notion that fatal behaviours are inescapable. As with the other examples of this particular pattern, there is an ironic tension between the optimism of the

drunk thegn and his desolation, which the following morning shall reveal. The play upon formula is not so much a hollow epithet as a criticism of the cultural paradigm for alcohol.

1250b tilu

This epithet, attributed to the occupants of Heorot at the feast celebrating Beowulf's victory over Grendel, is formulaic in style. However, its ostensible encomium, as explicated in the preceding sentence, is rather hollow when amplified through the ensuing episode (the avenging attack of Grendel's mother). The rationale for the attribution is that (lines 1246b-1250a) 'It was their custom that they were often ready for war, whether at home or at battle, or on any of those occasions when the need arose for their man-lord.' Hence, 'The people was a good one.' That is ironically at odds with the ensuing developments: Grendel's mother is able to attack the hall and kill Æschere without meeting resistance; there is no evidence of war-readiness among *seo þeod* at the moment when it counts. That resonates with two related ironies, which occur so frequently in the poem that we must regard them as more or less thematic. First is the regular discrepancy between intentions and outcomes in Heorot. Second is the related ironic tension between the Danish emphasis on affectations of heroism – for example, the reverence for elaborate war gear – and the ineffectiveness of the same Danes as performers of heroism when it counts.

1251b sare

This word is only marginally an epithet, at best, being primarily an adverb qualifying a process. And yet its irony by connotation is sufficiently pointed that it permits reading as somewhat denominative: the word *sare* actually characterises the process whereby a generalised thegn in Heorot 'fell then into sleep.' It connotes not only the fear, informed by what has gone before, that the thegns experience when they go to sleep in Heorot, but also darkly points to the pain to come when Grendel's mother launches her avenging raid later that night. It is an ironic wordplay comparable in the connotative nature of its semantic pointing to others in the poem (for example, line 992a, *folmum gefrætwod* — see above).

1253a goldsele

This epithet, attributed to Heorot, is ostensibly a formulaic encomium for a splendid hall. It is ironic in two ways. First is an irony of functional irrelevance. Grendel has an obvious interest in the life to be found within Heorot: he enjoys eating people (line 730b, *Þa his mod ahlog*); and it appears that Grendel has a hatred of Heorot deriving from a hatred of human merriment (lines 86-90a). This epithet points towards the wealth of Heorot, its *gold-*. Recalling the legal and economic alienness of Grendel as expressed in lines 157-158,[49] 'gold-hall' attributes an aspect of Heorot's functionality that was of no use or desirability to Grendel. Second is an irony frequently pointed up throughout the poem, the critique of Danish materialism. Because it is materialistic in nature, the splendour ostensibly connoted by the *gold-* element is superficial. This is a somewhat hollow epithet. For both ironies, compare line 2083a, *goldsele*.

1259a ides aglæcwif

This epithet, attributed to Grendel's mother, is obviously paradoxical. The idea of a 'lady monster-woman' is disjunctive to us now, and appears to have been equally disjunctive to an Old English sensibility. The word *ides*, originally signifying 'virgin,'[50] is always used with a connotation of civility and/or propriety. The ironic tension between notions of civilised ladyship and the monstrous behaviour of Grendel's mother is obvious.

1263a fæderenmæge

This epithet, attributed to Cain and Abel, draws on a basic irony of their story, namely their relationship. As the poem relates, lines 1261b-1262, *Cain wearð // to ecgbanan / angan breþer*. There is ironic tension between the fact of murder and the fact that they are 'kin of the one father' (that is, blood brothers).

49 See Chapter 4 for a close reading of lines 144-163.

50 Clark Hall, *op. cit.*, p. 202.

1279b *Hring-Dene*

This epithet, attributed to the Danes sleeping in Heorot during the avenging raid by Grendel's mother, is ostensibly formulaic in style. In drawing attention to the wealth of the Danes, however, it draws attention back to what the poem has constructed as an excessive materialism. The ironical critique of Danish materialism is a feature of the first two thirds of the poem. The most recent example is line 1253a, *goldsele* (see above).

1299a *blædfæstne beorn*

This epithet is attributed to the recently slain Æschere, a 'warrior secure in his renown.' The ostensible encomium is obvious enough, as is the formulaic style that underpins it. There is a certain droll irony, perhaps sympathetically intended, in the tension between the death Æschere has met and the connotations of *fæst* ('secure'). He has been seized and slain whilst sleeping — sleeping in the mistaken belief that his situation was secure. There is another, less sympathetic irony around the notions of *blæd-* and *beorn*, being a more general irony about the gap between the reputation of the Danes and their actual performance through the poem. Compare line 1013a, *blædagende* (see above).

1307a *har hilderinc*

This epithet is ostensibly a formulaic encomium for Hroðgar's age and martial prowess. In its narrative context, however, the martial element of the phrase is somewhat hollow. Hroðgar has just failed to defend his court from Grendel's mother (after twelve years of depredation by the son) and recently has lost the life of his favourite thegn in the process. Importantly, he personally has played no part in the defence of Heorot, and does not participate in any fighting during the course of the poem. Old and 'hoary' he may be, then, but the appellation 'battle-fighter' is at odds with his actual performance. This reading assumes the phrase is not simply a synonym for 'old [*ie* 'former'] warrior.' Compare line 1678a, *harum hildfruman* (see below).

1308a aldorþegn

This epithet is attributed to Hroðgar's recently deceased favourite thegn, Æschere. There is an element of word-play in the use of *aldorþegn* to describe Æschere as a 'lord-thegn.' The word *aldor* can of course mean 'life' as well as 'lord,' and it is the former sense that is contrastively offset by the apposed reminder in the following half-line, *unlyfigendne* ('unliving', or 'being dead'). There is ironic tension between the 'life-thegn' connoted by this epithet and the 'unliving lord-thegn' referenced by it. That somewhat playful irony is made poignant by the fact that Hroðgar's love has been for a living thegn, one whom he must now regard as a dead lord.

1311a sigoreadig secg

This epithet is attributed to Beowulf. It carries a subtle irony, revealed in a tension between the ostensible validity of the epithet (as an attribution of the hero's victoriousness) and its immediate context. Beowulf's victory to date has not been total — it has certainly not been sufficient to protect the life of Æschere, who has been killed by Grendel's mother. At the same time, Beowulf is the one demonstrably victorious presence in Heorot. The failure of the Danes to protect themselves is itself an ironically pointed blight on the military pretensions of that kingdom.

1321b helm Scyldinga

This epithet is an ostensibly formulaic encomium for Hroðgar, praising his role as defender of the Danes. As it is amplified through it narrative context, it is somewhat hollow. Hroðgar has failed to act as a protecting 'helmet' for his people, first by failing to rid them of the scourge of Grendel for twelve years and now by failing to ensure their protection against Grendel's mother. There is ironic tension between the protective function attributed quasi-formulaically to kingship and the actual performance of this particular king. Beowulf, of course, shows up this deficiency by acting as a true *helm* to both his people and Hroðgar's (compare line 1623b, *lidmanna helm* — see below).

1326a eaxlgestealla

This epithet is attributed to Hroðgar's dead thegn Æschere. Taken at face value, it suggests a comrade or companion who stood shoulder-to-shoulder with Hroðgar in war and/or politics. At the same time, the particular choice of a body-part as a constituent element for this compound noun connotes images of corporeal dislocation, disfigurement, or simply damage. That wordplay is ironically apposite to the fate that has just befallen Æschere. Moreover, the irony is compounded by the resonance with Grendel's death (an arm torn from his shoulder by Beowulf) — since Æschere's death comes by way of revenge for the monster's slaying. Perhaps we may speculate that Æschere's arm has undergone comparable cruelty. A more likely (but still speculative) possibility is that Hroðgar's right arm has figuratively been torn off in the killing of his 'right hand man,' Æschere.[51] There are several instances in the poem of comparable wordplay, where attention is drawn to bodily harm by mention of a specific body part in the context of harm, where there is a suggestion that the body part mentioned may be the site of harm. Comparable examples include the references to *heafodmæg* in line 588a (see above) and *eaxlgesteallan* in line 1714a (see below).

1372a heoru stow

This epithet is given in the negative during a description of Grendel's (mother's) mere: *nis þæt heoru stow* ('that is not a pleasant place'). Some scholars have seen parallels between this passage and certain homiletic evocations of hell.[52] Additionally, Magennis reads Hroðgar's description of the mere and its surrounds as 'an inverted *locus amoenus*' – ironical play on a classical trope that was familiar to Old English authorities.[53] The ironical point of the epithet, then, is in the negation as much as in the phrase itself. The phrase would set out the classic trope, only it has been negated. Compare another litotes form in line 1416a, *wynleasne wudu* — see below.

51 My thanks to Alex Jones for this suggestion.

52 The connection between *Beowulf* lines 1357ff. and the 17th *Blickling Homily* (itself based on a *Visio Pauli*) is noted by Klaeber, *op. cit.*, pp. 182-183.

53 Hugh Magennis, *Images of Community in Old English Poetry*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1996, pp. 138-143.

1384a snotor guma

Beowulf attributes this epithet to Hroðgar. Hroðgar's wisdom has not been sufficient to rid Denmark of the scourge of Grendel, nor does he have any strategy for dealing with Grendel's mother aside from Beowulf's offer of supplementary assistance. Moreover, as Beowulf has reminded us in the foregoing sentences of his speech, Hroðgar's understandable sorrow for the death of his favourite thegn is verging on counterproductive behaviour. Further to that theme, Beowulf cautions the king against excessive sorrow: *Ne sorga, snotor guma! / Selre bið æghwæm // þæt he his freond wrece / þonne he fela murne. // Ure æghwylc sceal / ende gebidan // worolde lifes / wyrce se þe mote // domes ær deaþe / þæt bið drihtguman // unlifgendum / æfter selest* (lines 1384-1389).

1390a rices weard

This epithet is attributed to Hroðgar by Beowulf, a living demonstration of its hollowness. Hroðgar has failed to act as a 'guard' ensuring the wellbeing of the Danish kingdom. It is Beowulf who has rid Denmark of the scourge of Grendel after twelve years' depredations. See also line 1384a, *snotor guma* (above).

1398a mihtigan Drihtne

Drihten is a standard Old English poetic epithet, used formulaically to reference lords and (as in this case) the Judeo-Christian God. There is a sophisticated irony in this instance, whose essential tension is the contrast between Almighty God and King Hroðgar, the subject of the sentence. Whereas there is no question about the appropriateness of referencing God as 'mighty lord,' it would be a hollow epithet if applied to Hroðgar — who, as a king, would be a potential referent for such phrases. This suggests another, higher irony: a theological contrast between worldly lords and the One True Lord, God, as it were.

1400b wisa fengel

This epithet, attributed to Hroðgar, is an ostensibly formulaic encomium for the king's role as a national strategist. Amplified through the narrative of the poem, it is somewhat hollow. Hroðgar's leadership is

not sufficiently wise to solve the Grendel problem without Beowulf's unsolicited assistance, nor is the kingdom he leads sufficiently wise to avoid internecine conflict in the years after Beowulf's return to Geatland.

1416a *wynleasne wudu*

This epithet is attributed to the immediate surrounds of Grendel's (mother's) mere: 'a joyless wood.' It is essentially a very similar epithet to another litotes form in line 1372a, *(nis þæt) heoru stow* (see above).

1424a *fuslic fyrdleoð*

This epithet, attributed to the tune 'sung' on the horns of the Danes as they overlook Grendel's mother's mere, is contrastively offset by the ensuing half line. There is ironic tension, then, between the attributed functionality of the tune (namely to stir warriors into an eagerness for combat) and the narrative outcome of the tune — the narrative amplification of the epithet. It suggests at least one of two possibilities. First is the possibility that the epithet is somewhat hollow, meaning the tune is not really an 'eager war-lay' at all. Second is the possibility that an 'eager war-lay' is not sufficient to incite the purportedly heroic Danes to perform *ellen*. Neither possibility is flattering to the military reputation of the Danes.

1424b *feþa*

This epithet, attributed to the footsoldiers travelling to Grendel's mother's mere with Hroðgar, constitutes something of an ironic counterpoint to the action of the sentence. In response to the 'eager war-lay,' *Feþa eal gesæt* (line 1424b — see below). While this may literally mean they took up their positions, its connotations are hardly warlike! It compounds the ironic tension between the (lethargic) action of this sentence and the pretensions of martial prowess to which the previous sentence alludes (line 1424a, *fuslic fyrdleoð* — see above). Perhaps we should read this as an ironic transference of the semantic focus from feet (active and martial) to buttocks (sedentary and civilian).

1465b mago Ecglafes

This epithet, attributed to Unferð, is ostensibly formulaic in its functioning. Located within a rather scornful sentence (lines 1465-1472), however, it resonates subtly with the ironical amnesia of the ðyle Hroðgares. The sentence expressly draws out the ironic tension between Unferð's drunken bragging in Heorot and his behaviour beside Grendel's mother's mere. It is a clear example of the 'words and deeds' topos, and of its 'drunken beot' sub-type. The vehicle for the contrast is Unferð's forgetting of his earlier words in the moment he commits a less-than-heroic deed (lending his sword to Beowulf instead of braving Grendel's mother himself — which, the poem tells us, would have been the more praiseworthy action). But just as he forgets his earlier boasting, so he has already proven forgetful of the bonds of kinship. As Beowulf tells us (lines 587-589 — see above), Unferð slew his brothers. The forgetfulness of 'Ecglaf's kinsman' in this sentence is complemented by Unferð's history of forgetting the very fact of his kinship. The epithet in its context thus constitutes an instance of ironical amplification that is harmonic rather than contrastive. There is a further possibility for reading the name Ecglaf as itself an ironic epithet (see line 499b (etc.), *Ecglaf* — above).

1474 se mæra maga Healfdenes

This epithet is attributed to Hroðgar. It is ostensibly quite a straightforward encomium in a situation where respect or deference towards the king's status is normal. Amplified through the narrative of the poem, however, its semantics are somewhat hollow and complex. Hroðgar has not shown evidence of greatness in this poem. The character who has shown such evidence, Beowulf, is the one pronouncing the epithet. Thus the epithet carries an ironic tension between the addresser and the addressee. Moreover, it is not certain that the lineage invoked by the epithet suggests unequivocal praise. Healfdene's reputation is a problematic feature of the poem. Compare an almost identical form in Beowulf's report of his Danish adventures to Hygelac (line 2011, *se mæra mago Healfdenes* — see below); also compare a similar construction, attributing wisdom to Hroðgar (line 1698b-1699a, *se wisa [...] sunu Healfdenes* — see below). There is a different irony at work in line 2143b, *maga Healfdenes* (see below).

1476a goldwine gumena

This epithet, attributed to Hroðgar, is ostensibly a formulaic encomium around the theme of generosity. By referencing Hroðgar's munificence, however, it reiterates the poem's ongoing critique of the materialism underpinning his regime. It is a somewhat hollow epithet. Identical forms, also attributed to Hroðgar, are to be found in line 1171a (see above) and line 1602a (see below). Uttered by Beowulf, the greatest individual beneficiary of Hroðgar's splendid gifts, the ironic critique is sharpened.

1487a beaga bryttan

This epithet is essentially similar to line 1476a, *goldwine gumena* (see above). The irony of the epithet is compounded by its context may include some measure of sexual innuendo (a reminiscence of line 921b, *beahhorda weard* — see above). That attributive specificity is at odds with the highly generalised attribution proposed outside the epithet: that Beowulf has found him *gumcystum godne* (line 1486). As an afterthought, the hero adds that he has made the most of his host's largesse whilst able: *breac þonne moste* (line 1487b).

1489b widcuðne man

This epithet, attributed to Unferð by Beowulf, is an ostensibly formulaic encomium. Taken out of context, it appears to bestow a certain respectability upon that character, and yet Beowulf has previously informed us that the nature of Unferð's reputation is less than praiseworthy, since he has committed fratricide (lines 587-589, see above). There is thus ironic tension between the encomiastic function that might be served by such a phrase and the actual reference it carries.

1522b gist

This epithet, attributed to Beowulf in Grendel's mother's home, can mean either 'stranger' or 'visitor.' Whereas Beowulf is a stranger to this environment and to its occupants, to suggest that he is a visitor is somewhat farcical. Beowulf has violent intentions towards the residents of the hall, and was hardly invited to visit. There is a kind of *double entendre*, then, simultaneously reasonable and unreasonable readings of

the word in its context, which creates ironic tension. See line 1545a, *selegyst* (below).

1545a selegyst

Even if there is no sexual innuendo in this sentence — if Grendel's mother does not actually 'sit on' Beowulf, this epithet remains ironic. Attributed to Beowulf, there is obvious ironic tension between the attributed meaning of the term, 'hall-guest' or 'hall-stranger' and the disposition of the character to whom it is attributed. See line 1522b, *gist* (above).

1576a hilderince

This epithet, attributed to Beowulf, is ostensibly a stock reference to his martial prowess. It has a certain hollowness in its context. Whereas Beowulf can often be described as a 'battle-fellow,' here that quality is attributed to him in the act of beheading Grendel — who is already dead. The martial worth of the act is somewhat problematic, then, hence the amplification of the epithet renders it somewhat questionable in its context. In fact, the sentence in which this epithet sits is rather playful overall. The suggestion that Beowulf beheaded Grendel as a punishment for *guðræsa fela* he had previously committed against the Danes is as problematic as the suggestion that Beowulf's act is a warring deed. It draws attention to the exuberance, not to mention the gratuitousness, of the hero's deed.

1580b heorðgeneatas

This epithet, attributed to Hroðgar's Danish retinue, refers indirectly to one of the shortcomings of Hroðgar's rule: he was not present in the hall with his 'hearth-companions' at the times when it counted, namely when Grendel attacked. It is thus a somewhat hollow epithet, in that the thegns were effectively 'hearth-companions' of one another, but not of Hroðgar.

1586a guðwerigne

This epithet, attributed to Grendel, is remarkable primarily for its euphemistic playfulness. Literally meaning 'exhausted by war,' it

signifies ‘dead.’ Grendel is lying on a bed, ‘weary.’ In its context, the use of *guð-* also draws further attention to the perversion of martial combat that this scene represents. The *guð* between Beowulf and Grendel is not here and now; it has already happened elsewhere. Grendel is tired of that *guð*. Compare line 1576a, *hilderince* (see above). See also line 1590a, *heorosweng heardne* (below).

1587a *aldorleasne*

This epithet is attributed to Grendel after his death. Literally, it means ‘lifeless.’ By dint of homophony, it may also signify ‘lordless.’ The homophony appears pointed at the monster’s *wið Gode* life. It may also remind us apophatically of the mastery that Beowulf has achieved over Grendel. In either case (or both), the ironic tension lies in the simultaneous viability of two divergent readings of this one term. A similar play on an almost identical form is line 3003a, *ealdorleasne* (see below). Compare also line 1308a, *aldorþegn* (see above).

1590 *heorosweng heardne*

This epithet, attributed to that sword-stroke by which Beowulf beheads the already dead Grendel, is an ostensibly formulaic reference to Beowulf’s strength in combat. As amplified by its context, however, it reads as somewhat problematic. In employing the martial term *heoro-* as a constituent element, the epithet reiterates a problem evident on line 1576a, *hilderince* (see above), and line 1586a, *guðwerigne* (see above), namely the question of whether Beowulf’s action may be classed as an act of war. There is ironic tension between his purported ‘hard battle-swing’ and the fact that his adversary is long dead, the combat is over.

1591b *snottre ceorlas*

This epithet, attributed to Hroðgar’s retinue assembled above Grendel’s mother’s mere (line 1592, *þa þe mid Hroðgare / on holm wliton*), is ostensibly a formulaic encomium for the collective wisdom of the Danes. It comes up rather hollow in its amplification, however: the Danish *ceorlas* thus referenced go on to show poor discernment, deducing falsely that Beowulf must be dead on account of all the gore. This deduction leads them to decide on abandoning the mere, leaving the hero to his fate.

1601a hwate Scyldingas

This epithet, attributed to the Danes assembled above Grendel's mother's mere (line 1592, *þa þe mid Hroðgare / on holm wliton*), is ostensibly a formulaic encomium for the courage of the Danes. It is rather hollow in context, however: the *Scyldingas* demonstrate their military keenness by abandoning the mere, leaving Beowulf to his fate. That it is a result of erroneous judgement about how the hero is faring below the brim (line 1591b, *snottre ceorlas* — see above) does not diminish the fault: leaving Beowulf for dead is hardly a loyal way to treat their hero and saviour, let alone the adoptive son of the king. By contrast, the Geatish warriors remain by the water's edge *moodes seoce / ond on mere staredon // wiston ond ne wendon / þæt hie heora winedrihten selfne gesawon* (lines 1603-1605a).

1602a goldwine gumena

This epithet, attributed to Hroðgar, is quite formulaic in style. It conveys complex irony, however. First, amplified through its narrative context, this epithet re-emphasises the Danish disloyalty pointed up in the previous line (1601a, *hwate Scyldingas* — see above). Hroðgar does not prove himself a true 'friend' of anyone by deserting Grendel's mother's mere once it seems that Beowulf may have perished. In that sense, it is a somewhat hollow epithet. The loyalty critique is compounded by what is also a reiteration of the materialism critique. Identical forms of this epithet, also attributed to Hroðgar, are to be found in line 1171a (see above) and line 1476a (see above). There is thus a collocation, even a conflation, of the qualities of inconstancy and materialism. Hroðgar effects the particular kingly duty of munificence, but not the more noble and heroic duty of providing a loyal friendship to his champion and adoptive son. We may infer an unstated collocation of the positive values: a spiritually healthy protagonist would display loyalty toward his friends.

1623b lidmanna helm

This epithet, attributed to Beowulf, amplifies truly — that is, it does not amplify as hollow. At the same time, through its use of the constituent element *helm*, it draws comparison with the performance of the other character to whom that word is very frequently applied in this poem,

Hroðgar. Here Beowulf demonstrates a *helm*-like quality that Hroðgar lacks. Beowulf shows up Hroðgar according to this criterion of heroism. Because Hroðgar's status is implicated in the epithet, his performance is implicated also: this is an ironically hollow epithet in its inferred application to Hroðgar, but not in its explicit application to Beowulf. A very similar rhetorical technique is employed in line 1634b, *cyningbalde men* (see below).

1634b *cyningbalde men*

This epithet, attributed to Beowulf's Geatish retinue, amplifies truly in respect of the Geats — that is, it does not amplify as hollow. At the same time, through its use of the constituent element *cyning-*, it draws comparison with the performance of the actual *cyning*, Hroðgar. Here the Geats are demonstrating a *-balde* quality that Hroðgar lacks. They show him up according to this criterion of heroism. Because his status is implicated in the epithet, his performance is implicated also: this is an ironically hollow epithet in its inferred application to Hroðgar, but not in its explicit application to the Geats. Compare line 1623b, *lidmanna helm* (see above).

1643b *meodowongas*

This epithet, attributed to the lands surrounding Heorot, is curiously constructed. Literally meaning 'mead-plains,' Klaeber glosses it as 'plain[s] near the mead-hall.'[54] Although this is a reasonable unpacking of a semantically dense phrase, it does not account satisfactorily for the poetic pointing of the epithet: while 'mead' is mentioned, 'hall' is not. Poetically, these home fields are identified by, and collocated with, alcohol in the first instance; not alcohol in the second instance, in its function as a by-product of the hall in which mead is consumed. The two-edged role of alcohol is a common theme in this poem: alcohol is both a source of merry joy and a harbinger of distress. Perhaps in this case the mead-fields surrounding Heorot refer obliquely both to the feast that will attend Beowulf's return and to the great strife that will befall the Danes after his departure homeward to Scedeland. That possibility notwithstanding, the mere attribution of alcohol to the landscape must

54 *Beowulf*, p. 373.

invest it somewhat with the problematics of drink: Denmark is a land of contrastive highs and lows.

1646a *hæle hildedeor*

This epithet, attributed to Beowulf, is ostensibly a formulaic encomium for his martial prowess. In its poetical context, it is somewhat pointed. Alliterating twice on *h-*, it is linked to the *Hroðgar* of the following half line. The 'hero battle-brave,' Beowulf, is thus compared with the king who has not been so heroic, Hroðgar. This epithet is poetically constructed so as to draw attention to the relationship between those two characters. It points to Hroðgar with an epithet that is not attributed to him, and which attributes qualities he has not exhibited. Here the irony is most pointed at the phonic level: the '*h-*' character cannot fulfil the qualities of a doubly '*h-*' epithet — and is shown up in this by the '*b-*' character, who can. Its rhetoric is almost identically repeated in line 1816a, *hæle hildedeor* (see below).

1678a *harum hildfruman*

This epithet, attributed to Hroðgar, is ostensibly formulaic in style. Taken in the context of the narrative, its second term is somewhat hollow, however. Hroðgar may be 'hoary' (read 'old'), but he has not demonstrated the qualities of a 'war-chief' at any stage during the poem. Compare line 1307a, *har hilderinc* (see above). That irony is compounded by the fact that, in this instance, it is Beowulf presenting him with a gift. Beowulf is young, but clearly a genuine *hildfruma*. Hence he shows up Hroðgar by fulfilling this functionally significant element of an epithet ostensibly attributed to the king. It is further compounded by the poetic pointing of the epithet, which alliterates on *h-*. Consequently, the poetic logic suggests it should be an epithet for Hroðgar. Compare line 1646a, *hæle hildedeor* (see above), for a clearer example of this.

1684b, ff. *woroldcyninga se selesta be sæm tweonum ðara þe on Scedenigge sceattas dælde*

This epithet is apparently attributed to Hroðgar. It is ostensibly encomiastic, reporting the Danish king's reputation for ruling well. Taken in the context of the events of the poem, however, it amplifies as a

hollow epithet. By comparison with Beowulf, Hroðgar's rule is unimpressive. He is not politically effective (he cannot prevent civil war) nor is he a martial hero. Beowulf, not Hroðgar, might rightfully be described as 'the best of worldly kings between the two seas, of those who have dealt out treasures in Scedeland.' This epithet is somewhat difficult to read ironically, perhaps, due to the apparent lack of subversive rhetoric contained within its constituent terms. Unlike many instances of hollow praise of Hroðgar that might more appropriately be bestowed upon Beowulf, this epithet does not appear pointed at any particular weakness of Hroðgar (just his general weakness), nor does it appear pointed at any particular strength of Beowulf (just his general strength). It is the narrative frame of the entire poem that provides the context for the ironic subversiveness of this epithet.

1698b, f. *se wisa [...] sunu Healfdenes*

This epithet, attributed to Hroðgar, is ostensibly formulaic in its (encomiastic) style. Amplified through the narrative of the poem, however, it reads as hollow. Hroðgar's wisdom, to the extent that it is demonstrable, is a wisdom shown after the event. It is a wisdom arguably manifested through the ensuing speech (lines 1700-1784), Hroðgar's longest in the poem.[55] And yet 'the wise son of Healfdene' has not managed to conjure up any strategy that would save his kingdom from monstrous depredation (accomplishing this falls to Beowulf, an outsider), nor one that would save his kingdom from the brewing political strife between his own sons and Hroðulf (which is simply not accomplished). Hroðgar's speech may described as long on generalities, but short on specifics. Hroðgar's wisdom, much like his martial prowess and indeed his rule overall, is more noteworthy for its form than for its substance. That ironical hollowness is compounded by the pointed reference to Hroðgar's genealogy. This element is amplified early in the ensuing speech (lines 1709b-1723a). Compare line 1474, *se mæra maga Healfdenes* (see above); line 2011, *se mæra mago Healfdenes* (see below); and line 2143b, *maga Healfdenes* (see below).

55 Tolkien, *op. cit.*, is one who argues that the speech shortly following this epithet is an exemplary depiction of pre-Christian wisdom.

1714a eaxlgesteallan

There is an obvious irony as well as a subtler suggestive play attributed to the relationship between Heremod and his thegns through this epithet. On the one hand they are his 'shoulder [*or* 'close'] companions,' on the other, he kills them. At the same time, the particular choice of constituent elements for this compound noun connotes images of the body's dislocation, disfigurement, or simply damage. This suggestiveness brings the conflicting attributes – murder and comradeship – together within the word so that it contradicts itself to some extent, thus intensifying the moment of irony.

1719a breosthord blodreow

This epithet, attributed to Heremod's apparently psychotic frame of mind in the latter stage of his career (as extended as that stage may have been), shows noteworthy psychological insight. It uses the metaphor of the 'hoard' to illustrate a psychological burden of some kind. In this, it is comparable to the phrase *wordhord* (line 259b), used to discuss the reservoir of creativity at the disposal of an unnamed poet in Hroðgar's court. By contrast, the 'hoard' in this case is a reservoir of destructive, not creative, mentality. Whereas a 'hoard' generally signifies a source of wealth and prosperity, this 'bloodthirsty breast-hoard' is a source of destruction and violence. In that respect, this epithet is inherently ironic; its constituent elements contrastively offset each other.

1741b se weard

This epithet, attributed by Hroðgar to (something like) the conscience of Everyman, reflects ironically on the speaker himself. The homiletic narrative here is allegorically relevant to the situation of Hroðgar's court, and to the king's failure to protect those souls in his care (lines 1739b-1746). The mentions of sleep are strongly suggestive of the story of Grendel's depredations, as well as his mother's attack, and they remind us of Hroðgar's role in those encounters (including sleeping away from his retainers). The reference to a 'helm' of the soul is a reiteration of an epithetic constituent (*helm*) that is frequently applied to Hroðgar, and that is almost always applied in a formulaic style to the kings of the poem. This epithet, then, is an elaborate version of the

hollowness trope. It passes allegorical comment on the character who utters it.

1787b ellenrofum

This epithet, attributed to the Danes gathered in Heorot when Beowulf brings back Grendel's head, is ostensibly a formulaic encomium. It reiterates the reputation for martial splendour of Hroðgar and his Danes: 'famed for courage.' As it is amplified through the narrative of this poem, this epithet is somewhat hollow. That is, there is an ironic tension between the reputation of the Danes, which this epithet attributes, and the Danes' actual performance, which lies behind that reputation. The Danes have been humiliated for twelve years by Grendel, a situation that is resolved only by an outsider. Moreover, we know that the Danes will soon be enveloped by internecine strife, the sort of infamy for which at least one of them (Unferð) has already aquired a name. The irony is also brought out through the relationship between this epithet and the apposed *fletsittendum* of the following half line (see below). Each contrastively offsets the other. The irony of this epithet is brought into still sharper relief through the presence in Heorot of Beowulf and his Geats, who are much truer exponents of *ellen* than are the Danes in this poem.

1788a fletsittendum

This epithet, attributed to the Danes gathered in Heorot when Beowulf brings back Grendel's head, draws its ironic tension from the relationship with the epithetic *ellenrofum* in the previous half line (see above). As a variant, hence an equivalent, phrase apposed to 'famed for bravery,' 'sitting on the hallfloor' points to the irony latent in the antecedent phrase. The Danes are famed for bravery within the context of their feasting halls, splendid in their cups, but do not evince this in actual performance. The *flet* is a location for words, and there are plenty in Heorot, but the Danes do not perform deeds to back them up. Sitting is also the contrastive offset to *feþa* (line 1424b — see above).

1804a æþelingas

This epithet, attributed to Beowulf and his Geatish retinue, is ostensibly a formulaic encomium. Through it the Danes are indirectly criticised.

The use of this term reiterates a criticism established in the first sentence of the poem (line 3a, *æþelingas* — see above). It is a criticism of the Danes' established heroic reputation. That first sentence draws our attention to *hu þa æþelingas / ellen fremedon* (line 3). By now, at the end of the Geats' journey to Heorot, we have seen that it has been those lesser known Geatish *æþelingas* referenced in this epithet who have performed the *ellen* of the poem's primary narrative (and a fair bit of the *ellen* in the digressive epsiodes as well). The Geats show up the Danes by presenting as more fitting referents for this epithetic phrase than their hosts are.

1806a cuma collenferhð

This epithet, attributed to Beowulf, complements the subversive comparison between the Geats and the Danes established earlier in the sentence (line 1804a, *æþelingas* — see above). It epitomises the trope of dramatic upstaging by pointing to qualities the leader of the Geats possesses — and which the leader of the Danes has not evinced in the course of the poem. Beowulf is indeed a 'brave hearted visitor', and Hroðgar ought to be a brave-hearted host.

1807a se hearda

This epithet, attributed to Unferð, is ostensibly a formulaic encomium for his martial prowess. As amplified through the narrative of the poem, however, Unferð is no battle-hard hero, especially not in the view of Beowulf (see line 594a, *searogrim* — above). This epithet is the first in a sequence of four or (perhaps) five that present hollow praise of Unferð (compare line 1810a, *guðwine* — see below; line 1810b, *godne* — see below; line 1811a, *wigcræftigne* — see below; also perhaps line 1812b, *modig secg* — see below). That extraordinary sequence of hollow attributions suggests the authorial comment, *nales wordum log* (line 1811b), should be read as an apophasis. The poet is reporting a speech by Beowulf that fits the form of a gratitude speech – politically appropriate in the context of so public a gift-giving – but which is delivered with the hero's tongue in his cheek. Beowulf thanks his defamer for a gift that has already failed him, and praises that person for heroic virtues he does not possess. There are also two epithets that

reflect ironically upon Hrunting contained in the same sentence (line 1809a, *leoflic iren* — see below; line 1812a, *meces ecge* — see below).

1809a leoflic iren

This epithet, attributed to the sword Hrunting, is ostensibly a formulaic encomium for its quality. As amplified through the narrative of the poem, it is somewhat hollow. Hrunting has been of no avail to Beowulf in his encounter with Grendel's mother. There is a reiteration of this irony in line 1812a, *meces ecge* — see below. The sentence within which this epithet sits also contains hollow praise relating to the sword's owner, Unferð (line 1807a, *se hearda* — see above; line 1810a, *guðwine* — see below; line 1810b, *godne* — see below; line 1811a, *wigcræftigne* — see below; also perhaps line 1812b, *modig secg* — see below).

1810a guðwine

This epithet should be read in the context of others in the same sentence (line 1810b, *godne* — see below; line 1811a, *wigcræftigne* — see below; also perhaps line 1812b, *modig secg* — see below). The same sentence also contains epithets referring to Unferð's gift (line 1807a, *se hearda* — see above; line 1809a, *leoflic iren* — see above; line 1812a, *meces ecge* — see below). Unferð has been of no effective assistance to Beowulf in battle. His one constructive deed hitherto, to lend Hrunting to Beowulf, was of no avail to the hero when it counted, since the sword could not wound Grendel's mother. This is not to mention the slander he perpetrated against Beowulf prior to the Grendel fight.

1810b godne

This epithet should be read in the context of others in the same sentence (line 1807a, *se hearda* — see above; line 1811a, *wigcræftigne* — see below; line 1812b, *modig secg* — see below).

1811a wigcræftigne

This epithet should be read in the context of others in the same sentence (line 1807a, *se hearda* — see above; line 1810a, *guðwine* — see above; line 1810b, *godne* — see above; also perhaps line 1812b, *modig secg* — see below).

1812a meces ecge

This epithet, attributed to Hrunting, draws attention to that aspect of the precious gift which was found wanting during the fight with Grendel's mother: its cutting edge. It should be read in the context of numerous other epithets within its sentence, especially line 1809a, *leoflic iren* (see above).

1812b modig secg

This epithet may be attributed either to Unferð or to Beowulf. Either way, it is ostensibly a formulaic encomium. If it refers to Beowulf, then it may be read as a contrastive offset to the other epithets of its sentence: one which is not hollow. By such a reading, Beowulf stands as a contrast to the character of Unferð; it is a vindication of his self-defence in the earlier debate about his swimming match with Breca (lines 499-606). This epithet rhetorically serves as the one 'true' phrase among a multitude of obversions. By the other reading (namely, that this epithet references Unferð), it must be decidedly hollow. Beowulf has already stated and substantiated his view of Unferð's courage in no uncertain terms (see line 594a, *searogrim* — above). In the context of the sentence in which it sits, this epithet must be read as inverse if it is attributed to Unferð (compare line 1807a, *se hearda* — see above; line 1810a, *guðwine* — see above; line 1810b, *godne* — see above; line 1811a, *wigcræftigne* — see above). I am tempted to treat both readings as simultaneously valid, a situation that would itself carry ironic tension.

1814b weorð Denum

This epithet, attributed to Hroðgar, is ostensibly a formulaic encomium. As amplified through the narrative, it is ironically pointed. While Hroðgar does not perform heroically in the course of the poem, he does display a great deal of wealth. He may be described as the 'worth of the Danes' in this latter capacity, then, but not the more ethically significant former capacity. The irony is in the tension between those two senses of the phrase. It is compounded by the comparison with Beowulf (line 1816a, *hæle hildedeor* — see below). The preceding sentence (lines 1807-1812 — see above) ensures that this epithet sits in a pro-irony environment: one is on the lookout for irony before this epithet is

uttered. The same dynamic applies to the apposed variant *æþeling* (line 1815a — see below).

1815a *æþeling*

This epithet, attributed to Hroðgar, is ostensibly a formulaic encomium. As amplified through the narrative, Hroðgar's nobility is problematic. Bound up as it is with his capacity and propensity to enact *ellen*, it is a quality the poem finds him wanting somewhat. Compare line 3a, *þa æþelingas* (see above) and line 1804a, *æþelingas* (see above). This epithet is an apposed variant to *weorð Denum* (line 1814b — see above). Like that epithet, it is upstaged by the reference to Beowulf as *hæle hildedeor* (line 1816a — see below).

1816a *hæle*[56] *hildedeor*

This epithet follows almost identically a rhetorical pattern established in line 1646a (see above). Significantly, this epithet is employed as a contrastive offset to two mutually apposed epithets attributing hollow praise to Hroðgar earlier in the sentence (line 1814b, *weorð Denum* — see above; line 1815a, *æþeling* — see above).

1824a *gumena dryhten*

This epithet, attributed to Hroðgar, is ostensibly formulaic in its (encomiastic) style. As amplified through the narrative, it is somewhat hollow. Hroðgar has not displayed leadership in the events of this poem. By contrast, the utterer of this epithet, Beowulf, has displayed that quality. He calls Hroðgar a 'leader of men' in the moment he departs for home. Not insignificantly, this epithet begins with a similar sound, /*gu*-/, to the phrase next attributed to Beowulf's deeds, *guðgeweorca* (line 1825a — see below).[57]

1825a *guðgeweorca*

This epithet, attributed to the activities of Beowulf, contrastively offsets *gumena dryhten* of the previous line (line 1824a — see above). The two

56 The manuscript reading here is *helle*, which Klaeber emends to *hæle*.

57 The sound is similar but not identical: there is a difference of quantity between the long *u* of *gumena* and the short *u* of *guðgeweorca*.

are linked by an alliterative consonance outside the usual intra-linear pattern, both terms starting their lines and commencing with the sound /*gu*-/. Whereas *gumena dryhten* references Hroðgar and attributes certain qualities hollowly, this epithet references Beowulf and amplifies truly through the narrative of the poem. Ironically, one epithet shows up another in much the same way as the one character respectively does the other.

1852a *hordweard hæleþa*

This epithet is attributed to Beowulf. It is reminiscent of an identically formed attribution to Hroðgar (line 1047a, hordweard hæleþa — see above). In this case, the epithet amplifies truly (that is, it does not amplify as hollow), which is in contrast with the earlier instance. The reminiscence is strengthened by the fact that it is Hroðgar himself who utters the phrase this time.

1866a *eorla hleo*

This epithet is one of a common type. See line 429b, wigendra hleo (above).

1870b *cyning æþelum god*

This epithet, attributed to Hroðgar, is ostensibly a formulaic encomium. As amplified through the narrative, Hroðgar's behaviour throughout the poem has not been 'good in nobilities.' On the contrary, the poem has drawn attention to Hroðgar's shortcomings as a noble and to cases of his unmeritorious behaviour. This epithet reiterates and condenses those criticisms.

1874a *ealdum infrodum*

This epithet, attributed to Hroðgar, is ostensibly a formulaic encomium for his wisdom. Hroðgar's wisdom has received attention earlier in the poem: it has not been sufficient to solve the problem of Grendel, nor is it sufficient to stave off the internecine strife that will befall Denmark in coming years. Compare eald ond infrod (line 2449a — see below).

1885b, f. *an cyning æghwæs orleahtre*

This epithet, attributed to Hroðgar, is ostensibly a formulaic encomium for his merits as a ruler. Amplified through the narrative of the poem, it is decidedly hollow. To say that Hroðgar was 'one king not to be laughed at in every respect' is to overlook the numerous shortcomings of his reign. Most obvious has been his inability to rid the kingdom of Grendel's depredations. Implicit also is an inability to secure the future of his regime against the conspiracies of Hroðulf. By contrast, the hero he bids farewell in this scene – Beowulf – is markedly more impressive, hence less ridiculous. The term orleahtre reminds us that the paradigm for laughter in this poem is essentially agonistic.

1890b *landweard*

This epithet, attributed to Hroðgar's coastguard, reiterates an irony of the early part of the poem (line 229b, weard Scildinga — see above). The coastguard is not an effective defensive functionary for Denmark, because the dramatically significant enemies do not come from across the sea. They are internal dangers: Grendel, his mother, and the political intrigues of Hroðgar's court. Thus it is a somewhat hollow epithet, in that it attributes a function which is not wholly (or perhaps even partially) carried through.

1899 *Hroðgares hordgestreonum*

This epithet, attributed to the treasure that Hroðgar has given to Beowulf and that Beowulf is about to take back to Geatland with him, points to its donor rather than its receiver. Beowulf has apparently received a massive quantity of wealth from the Danish king in gratitude for his service (and perhaps also for his promise of future support). This epithet suggests the substantial part of 'Hroðgar's hoarded treasures' has been transferred into his keeping — they are no longer Hroðgar's. Even if that is only a rhetorical effect, the suggestion is that Beowulf was an extremely costly visitor. Hroðgar's munificence, his willingness to pay his way through a situation, is a topic often visited through the poem, which is critical of the materialism of its characters.

1900a batwearde

This epithet, attributed to the Danish coastguard who looks after Beowulf's boat while he is staying in Heorot, reiterates the critique of this functionary's role running through the poem, namely that he is guarding the wrong frontier, holding out against a non-threat. That is not to detract from the non-ironical purposes which are served by this character. There does not seem to be any particular ironic tension around the role of the Geats' hyðweard in line 1914b, although the correspondence between that character and this one in their capacity as liminal figures is strong.

1902a, ff. on meodubence maþme[58] *þy weorþra*[59] *yrfelafe*

This epithet, attributed to the 'boat-guard' who looks after Beowulf's ship while he is in Heorot, reveals several ironic tensions. The suggestion that this thegn is rendered 'that much more worthy' by the gift of this 'heirloom' reflets critically on the materialism of the 'mead-bench' society in which his worth is appraised. In that respect, it reiterates a materialism critique that surfaces frequently through the poem. Shippey also reads a critique of superficiality into the appraisal – the assumption 'that fine feathers make fine birds.'[60] Compounding that irony is the implication of the place of alcohol in the society and its value system. This, too, is a reiterated irony: the role of alcohol is frequently portrayed as problematic throughout the poem. Here, there is a suggestion that the alcohol is a factor with some causative responsibility for the materialistic values of the heroic society in Beowulf.

1922b sinces bryttan

This epithet, attributed to Hygelac, is ostensibly a formulaic encomium for his generosity. As amplified through the narrative of the poem, Hygelac is remembered more for a disastrous raid on the Franks rather than for any successes as an acquirer-and-distributor of wealth. In a perverse sense, by losing much of his wealth abroad, he becomes a

58 The manuscript reading here is *maþma*.
59 The manuscript reading here is *weorþre.*
60 T.A. Shippey, 'The World of the Poem,' pp. 41-42.

'distributer of treasure' for his enemies.[61] Also significantly, it is an epithet overshadowed by the character of Beowulf, who brings a massive booty (line 1899, *Hroðgares hordgestreonum* — see above) back to Scedeland with him.

1932b *fremu folces cwen*

This epithet, attributed to Modþryðo, is ostensibly a formulaic encomium for a queen. Amplified through the narrative of the anecdotal digression that follows it, it reads at first as a thoroughly inverse attribution, and subsequently as a bizarrely true one. Of this 'excellent queen of the people' it is said that she carried on 'in dreadful wickedness.' She would see to the capture and execution of anyone who even looked at her. As the poem goes on to acknowledge, *Ne bið swylc cwenlic þeaw // idese to efnanne* (lines 1940b-1941a — see below). The use of that identical term, *cwen-*, illustrates very clearly the degree of flexibility the poetics of *Beowulf* allow for play on the constituent terms of an ostensibly formulaic epithet. Here the irony of the epithet is compounded by the transformation in Modþryðo's behaviour once she meets and marries Offa. She loved him truly (line 1954) and by inference became a good queen, which is one reason why he was widely esteemed as an outstanding hero (lines 1957b-1960a).

1933a, 1934a *nænig [...] swæsra gesiða*

This epithet is ostensibly a simple negative reference to those associated with Modþryðo who did not dare to show any interest in her (compare line 1933b, *deor* — see below). That said, it is a pointedly ironic reference by virtue of its constituent negation, and by virtue of its relationship to the anecdotal narrative that amplifies it. The litotes, in its stylistic peculiarity (there is almost a whole line intervening between *nænig* and *swæsra*), draws attention to the phrase, hence to the ironic peculiarity of the situation it describes.

1933b *deor*

This epithet is a qualifier attributed to those who encountered Modþryðo in the period before she met Offa. It is syntactically ambiguous,

61 I am indebted to Alex Jones for this reading.

permitting reading as either an adverb or a substantive. Either way, the topic of the attribution is not ambiguous, nor its attendant irony. It is about the extreme danger poeople encountered if they manifested the slightest interest in Modþryðo. The bravery of the action or/and of those who perform it is contrastively offset by the fact that noone dared to — until Offa. Paraphrased: noone was brave enough to act in that brave way.

1936a *wælbende*

This epithet is attributed to the method by which those who incurred Modþryðo's displeasure were seized before their deaths. It forms part of a string of such epithets referring to the technical procedure of the arrests. They had 'slaughter-bonds' ordered for them. Such bonds are, to say the least, an extreme reaction to potentially quite discreet behaviour. The disproportionate quality attributed by this epithet is followed by two semantically playful variants (line 1937a, *handgewriþene* — see below; line 1938a, *mundgripe* — see below).

1937a *handgewriþene*

This epithet is attributed to the method by which those (presumably all, or at least predominantly) men who incurred Modþryðo's displeasure were seized before their deaths. It forms part of a string of such epithets referring to the technical procedure of the arrests (line 1936a, *wælbende* — see above; line 1938a, *mundgripe* — see below). Like the latter example, this epithet draws its implications of violence through the ironical implication of specific body parts, suggesting a location receiving, or in this case probably administering, physical injury. It is a frequent technique throughout the poem. Exactly what sort of 'handwrought' bonds this epithet references is not clear. A conservative reading would infer some kind of restraining device made by hand, however there is an extensive literature, informed largely by comparative folkloric studies, which throws up many possibilities for interpretations of the Modþryðo intermezzo.[62] The equally vivid *mundgripe* could be taken to suggest a figurative rather than literal interpretation of the phrase *wælbende*. Wrestling matches? Sexual congress?

62 See Klaeber's note on lines 1931b-1962.

1938a mundgripe

This epithet forms part of a string of three (line 1936a, *wælbende* — see above; line 1937a, *handgewriþene* — see above), being particularly closely related to *handgewriþene*. It has less instrumental connotations than both the previous two epithets, suggesting that the arresting bonds may be a figurative representation of a straightforward human grasp (reminiscent of Beowulf's own grip, perhaps).

1940b cwenlic þeaw

This epithet is attributed to the conduct of Modþryðo up to the moment when she met her husband Offa. It contrastively offsets the epithet of line 1932a, *fremu folces cwen* (see above). Notably, this epithet is constructed as an abstract phrase, complemented by the lines that follow it. It stands as a somewhat droll authorial comment (lines 1940a-1943).[63] The irony is that Modþryðo was a noblewoman, destined to become Offa's queen. As it happens – this too is an irony of the situation – her behaviour was quite appropriate once she became queen.[64] It is a sentence containing further epithets that reflect ironically on Modþryðo and her behaviour (line 1941a, *idese* — see below; line 1941b, *ænlicu* — see below; line 1942a, *freoðowebbe* — see below; line 1943b, *leofne mannan* — see below).

1941a idese

This epithet, attributed to Modþryðo, is somewhat hollow or inverse. The sentence in which it occurs argues that certain behaviour is not common for a lady — and by implication is not ladylike. Yet Modþryðo's conduct prior to her marriage consists precisely of the behaviour here proscribed: she 'would deprive of life on account of contrived insults her beloved man.' The poet attributes ladyship to her in the same sentence as he questions her ladylikeness. This epithet occurs within a sentence containing a string of epithets concerned with

63 Cf. Liggins, 'Irony and understatement in *Beowulf*,' 3 (also quoted in Chapter 5).

64 In passing, Klaeber notes a strong *Taming of the Shrew* motive here: a vicious woman reformed once she is suitably wedded. Perhaps *King Henry V* would not be so far off the mark either: a dangerous youth (Offa) reformed once given regal responsibility.

Modþryðo and her conduct (line 1940b, *cwenlic þeaw* — see above; line 1941b, *freoðowebbe* — see below; line 1941b, *ænlicu* — see above; line 1943b, *leofne mannan* — see below).

1941b ænlicu

This epithet, attributed to Modþryðo, plays on an ironic tension between divergent senses of the word, which means 'unique' or 'peerless.' Modþryðo was uniquely beautiful, it would seem, but she was also unique in her uncompromising brutality. This epithet occurs within a sentence containing a string of epithets concerned with Modþryðo and her conduct (line 1940b, *cwenlic þeaw* — see above; line 1941a, *idese* — see above; line 1942a, *freoðowebbe* — see below; line 1943b, *leofne mannan* — see below).

1942a freoðowebbe

This epithet, attributed to Modþryðo, is ostensibly a stereotype (see section 3 in Chapter 3). Amplified through the narrative, it is somewhat hollow or inverse. Although it is common to refer to a noble woman in her capacity as a 'peaceweaver' (variants on this attribution are made in respect of Wealhþeow, Hildeburh, and Freawaru), Modþryðo's conduct prior to her marriage has the effect of weaving violence rather than peace. This epithet occurs within a sentence containing a string of epithets concerned with Modþryðo and her conduct (line 1940b, *cwenlic þeaw* — see above; line 1941a, *idese* — see above; line 1941b, *ænlicu* — see above; line 1943b, *leofne mannan* — see below).

1943b leofne mannan

This epithet is attributed in the singular to a generalised group of suitors who fell victim to the typical vicious rejection of courtship overtures by Modþryðo. There is obvious ironic tension between the meaning of this epithet, 'beloved man,' and the behaviour of Modþryðo towards each of its hapless referents. This epithet occurs within a sentence containing a string of epithets concerned with Modþryðo and her conduct (line 1940b, *cwenlic þeaw* — see above; line 1941a, *idese* — see above; line 1941b, *ænlicu* — see above; line 1943b, *freoðowebbe* — see above). Compare line 2127a, *lefone mannan* (see below).

1948b *geongum cempan*

This epithet, attributed to Offa, connotes the delegated role of single combat in ancient Germanic heroic culture.[65] To the extent that Offa is championing anything other than himself here, he is championing all who have had reason to fear Modþryðo — namely all men. The suggestion is that Modþryðo is at war with the opposite sex, and Offa has been assigned the role of fighting for male-kind. There is ironic tension between this idea and Offa's actual purpose, which is to marry Modþryðo. Compare the apposed variant *æþelum diore* (line 1949a — see below), which also focuses on the contextual significance of Offa's heroism in his courtship of Modþryðo.

1949a *æðelum diore*

This epithet is attributed to Offa. As an explanation of the eligibility of Offa's marriage suit, it is appropriate in two senses. First there is the conventional sense in which a man's courage and virtue go a long way towards establishing his worth as a man in heroic society. A heroic man, in this sense, can be ambitious in choosing his wife. Secondly there is the sense in which heroic courage was required simply to court the vicious young Modþryðo. Both senses are simultaneously plausible readings of this epithet, which gives rise to some ironic tension between them. This epithet is an apposed variant to *geongum cempan* (line 1948b — see above), which also focuses on the contextual significance of Offa's heroism in his courtship of Modþryðo.

1977b *se ða sæcce genæs*

This epithet, attributed to Beowulf, reflects proleptically upon Hygelac's disaster at the same time as it reflects upon Beowulf's success. The one narrative amplification of Hygelac's character in this poem is to relate his death in a raid on the Franks (a raid that Beowulf survived). To call Beowulf when in Hygelac's company 'he [who] survived those

65 The term can mean variously 'warrior' and 'champion.' In this instance, both translations are simultaneously tenable. The obvious literary analogue depicting single combat as a delegated phenomenon is the lay of Hiltibrant, Klaeber, *op. cit.*, pp. 290-292.

conflicts,' therefore, draws ironic attention onto his king and host — of whom a similar thing could not truthfully be said in this poem.

2004a *Sige-Scyldingum*

This epithet, attributed to the Danes collectively, is fundamentally similar to *Sige-Scyldinga* (line 597b — see above). Its irony is made explicit through the sentence in which this epithet sits: Beowulf reminds Hygelac of the extent of damage wrought by Grendel against the so called 'victorious Scyldings.'

2010a *hringsele*

This epithet, attributed to Heorot, subtly recalls the innuendo where Hroðgar is described as 'the guardian of rings' (line 921b, *beahhorda weard* — see above). At a surface level, it references the abundant wealth to be found in Heorot. At the same time, there is a *double entendre* referencing the sexual pleasures that have distracted Hroðgar from his heroic duties.

2011 *se mæra mago Healfdenes*

This epithet, attributed to Hroðgar, is ostensibly a formulaic encomium. In almost every respect, this epithet is identical to one occurring earlier in the poem (line 1474, *se mæra maga Healfdenes* — see above). Amplified through the narrative, it is somewhat hollow and complex. Hroðgar has not shown evidence of greatness in this poem. The character who has shown such evidence, Beowulf, is the one pronouncing the epithet. It is also structurally comparable to another epithet (line 1698b-1699a, *se wisa [...] sunu Healfdenes* — see above).

2014a *weorod*

This epithet, attributed (by Beowulf) to those people gathered in Heorot at the feast prior to Beowulf's fight against Grendel, is ostensibly a straightforward reference to a group of warriors in heroic literature. Like *hringsele* (line 2010a — see above) in the previous sentence, however, it carries a *double entendre*, in this case a soundplay. The word *weorod*

here appears to have sounded very similar or identical[66] to the word for a sweet alcoholic drink (for example line 496a, *wered*). The suggestion of alcohol reiterates a collocation well established throughout the poem so far: the Danes are portrayed as heroes of the meadhall rather than the battlefield. In that light, the sentence containing this epithet reads quite ironically (lines 2014-2016a). It contains two similarly pointed ironic epithets (line 2015b, *healsittendra* — see below; line 2016a, *medudream maran* — see below).

2015b healsittendra

This epithet, attributed (by Beowulf) to each of those people gathered in Heorot prior to Beowulf's fight against Grendel, ostensibly denotes a feasting assembly in a straightforward, if poetic, fashion. In pointing to those aspects of the feast which are indoors and sedentary, however, it draws attention to an ironic tension between the Danes' heroic pretensions when feasting and their actual performance in tests of strife. Compare *feþa* (line 1424b — see above). Like other epithets in the same sentence (line 2014a, *weorod* — see above; line 2016a, *medudream maran* — see below), this phrase reiterates the poem's critique of Danish effectiveness, which holds that Hroðgar's court is strong on words but weak on deeds.

2016a medudream maran

This epithet, attributed (by Beowulf) to the joy experienced by those assembled in Heorot prior to Beowulf's fight against Grendel, is ostensibly a formulaic reference to the revelry of a feast. The formulaic *topos* evoked here is of a large crowd, plenty of food and drink, and intense rowdy merriment.[67] Within the poem of *Beowulf*, however, alcohol is a problematic element, at once a necessity for, and to some extent an indictment upon, the ancient heroic society of the north. It is doubly problematic in the case of the Danes, who have committed the

66 The two words have identical vowel quantities, and both were commonly spelled *werod*.

67 Cultural differences notwithstanding, the most salient demonstration of that *topos* is to be found in the quasi-eddic (Old Norse) poem, *Eiríksmál*: see Bjarni Einarsson (ed.), *Ágrip af Noregskonunga Sögum, Fagrskinna – Noregs Konunga Tal*, Íslenzk Fornrit, Vol. 29, Hið Íslenzka Fornritafélag, Reykjavík, 1985, pp. 77-79.

error of substituting alcohol – as one of the superficial affectations of heroism (another is the treasure-hoard) – for the virtues of courage and loyalty that underpin the heroic code.[68] Other epithets in the same sentence point to the superficiality of the Danes' pretensions to be a nation of heroes, with alcohol as a contextual anchor for the critique (line 2014a, *weorod* — see above; line 2015b, *healsittendra* — see above).

2017a friðusibb folca

This epithet, attributed to Wealhþeow, is ostensibly formulaic in style. It attributes to the queen that stereotyped role of acting as both a peace guarantor (compare the very ironical epithet in line 1942a, *freoðowebbe* — see above) and a peace guarantee. As with Hildeburh before her, Wealhþeow's role and her exertions turn out insufficient to hold the peace. It is thus a somewhat hollow epithet, and the hollowness itself has a formulaic ring to it. As with Hildeburh, that untenable peace is one involving the Danes. Beowulf, who utters this epithet, is aware at least that Hroðgar's regime is somewhat fragile. He is aware that there is some ironic tension between the literal sense of his phrase and the actual situation confronting Wealhþeow. Moreover, he is certainly aware of the futility stereotype collocated with this type of situation, as he proves a little further into his speech (lines 2029b-2031).

2018b beahwriðan

This epithet is attributed to the favours that Wealhþeow would 'often' bestow upon a warrior as she circulated through Hroðgar's court. 'Ring-knitted,' or chainmail, is most likely a synecdoche for a variety of valuable gifts. The constituent element *beah-* reiterates a form of sexual innuendo that the poem has already associated with Heorot (line 921b, *beahhorda weard* — see above; reiterated in line 2010a, *hringsele* — see above). Whereas an interpretation of the sentence that holds this synecdoche as only properly intended would acknowledge that its general sense is gift or favour, the *double entendre* extends the sense of gift or favour ambiguously, by collocating an ambiguous level of sexual

68 This error is something of a generic standard in Germanic heroic literature. Compare *The Fight at Finnsburg*, *op. cit.*, and *The Battle of Maldon*, *op. cit*. The ironic link between alcohol and behaviour, manifested in the gap between words and deeds, receives close attention in Chapter 2.

tension between the generous queen and her male beneficiaries. The suggestion, once made, sexualises the following sentence's epithets concerning Wealhþeow's daughter, Freawaru, and her own gift-giving (line 2021b, *ealuwæge* — see below; line 2023b, *nægled sinc* — see below; line 2024a, *hæleðum* — see below; line 2025a, *geong goldhroden* — see below; line 2025b, *gladum suna Frodan* — see below), insofar as the female act of bestowing favours upon males has been invested with sexual tension. The sexual innuendo is also maintained in the second following sentence (line 2031b, *seo bryd* — see below).

2021b *ealuwæge*

This epithet is attributed synecdochically to the various favours bestowed by Wealhþeow's daughter, Freawaru, upon several warriors gathered in Hroðgar's court. The synecdoche is comparable with line 2018b, *beahwriðan* (see above). That earlier epithet, attributed to Wealtheow's similar behaviour, serves to sexualise the connotations of this one, as well as the subsequent *nægled sinc* (line 2023b — see below), *hæleðum* (line 2024a — see below), *geong goldhroden* (line 2025a — see below), and *gladum suna Frodan* (line 2025b — see below).

2022b *fletsittende*

This epithet is attributed to an unnamed member of Hroðgar's court whose function has been to name Hroðgar's daughter, Freawaru, within earshot of Beowulf. It is ostensibly formulaic in style, referencing this character's role as a presence in Heorot. In its constituent elements, however, it resonates with a criticism of the Danes that has been developed throughout the poem to date. Compare *feþa* (line 1424b — see above). As the unknown, hence generalised, 'person sitting on the hall-floor,' this character epitomises the Danes in their passion for indoor revelry at the expense of those real actions that typify the behaviour of real heroes (such as Beowulf himself). The immediate context for this epithet is a sentence conveying an ambiguously defined level of sexual tension around the activities of the feast through numerous epithets. Illicit or excessive sexual motives are thus collocated with the sedentary apathy of the Danes.

2023b nægled sinc

This epithet is attributed by synecdoche to the various favours bestowed by Wealhþeow's daughter upon several warriors gathered in Hroðgar's court. The synecdoche is comparable with line 2018b, *beahwriðan* (see above). That earlier epithet, attributed to Wealþeow's similar behaviour, serves to sexualise the connotations of these favours, as well as (in the same sentence) *ealuwæge* (line 2021b — see above), *hæleðum* (line 2024a — see below), *geong goldhroden* (line 2025a — see below), and *gladum suna Frodan* (line 2025b — see below).

2024a hæleðum

This epithet, attributed to those members of Hroðgar's court upon whom Freawaru bestows gifts or favours, is ostensibly a formulaic encomium. Amplified through the narrative of the poem, it is somewhat hollow. The heroism of the Danes is a concept the poem subverts profoundly and relentlessly. They have not been effective protectors of the dignity of their leader, the security of his regime, nor the integrity of his lands. At the same time, this epithet occurs within an ambiguously sexualised context (line 2018b, *beahwriðan* — see above; line 2021b, *ealuwæge* — see above; line 2023b, *nægled sinc* — see above; line 2025a, *geong goldhroden* — see below; line 2025b, *gladum suna Frodan* — see below). That invests the 'heroes' of Freawaru's favour with an illicit function, one that is in ironic tension with their roles as upholders and defenders of Hroðgar's regime.

2025a geong goldhroden

This epithet, attributed to Freawaru, is ostensibly formulaic in style. Taken in its context, it resonates with an ambiguously defined sexual tension between the female bestower of favours and her male beneficiaries. That context is established in the previous sentence (line 2018b, *beahwriðan* — see above) and is sustained throughout this sentence (line 2021b, *ealuwæge* — see above; line 2023b, *nægled sinc* — see above; line 2024a, *hæleðum* — see above; line 2025b, *gladum suna Frodan* — see below). By depicting the princess as 'a young one adorned with gold,' the poem attributes both her munificence in the bestowing of favours and her material worth as a bride promised to Ingeld of the Heatho-Bards. This worth is then undercut, presumably by

some of the very treasures that Freawaru has distributed (line 2036b, *gomelra lafe* — see below).

2025b *glædum suna Frodan*

This epithet, attributed to Ingeld of the Heatho-Bards, is ostensibly formulaic in style. He is said to be 'glorious' (and/or 'splendid-looking'?) as the man promised the hand in marriage of Hroðgar's *geong goldhroden* daughter, Freawaru. In the context of an ambiguously sexualised sentence (line 2021b, *ealuwæge* — see above; line 2023b, *nægled sinc* — see above; line 2024a, *hæleðum* — see above; line 2025a, *geong goldhroden* — see above), Ingeld's reported gloriousness must be read as also sexual to some extent. It is not the most sophisticated piece of innuendo in the poem. It is something of an antecedent for a more complex epithet in the following sentence (line 2031b, *seo bryd* — see below).

2028b *wælfæhða dæl*

This epithet is attributed to the strife (the 'deal of blood-feuds') that might arise between Danes and Heatho-Bards due to certain partially explicated quarrels. It is the phrase through which the irony of its sentence becomes pointed. Hroðgar is attempting to achieve with his daughter what has not been achieved with the exemplary queen Hildeburh: he is trying to achieve peace through a strategic marriage. As Beowulf comments, it is an unlikely strategy (lines 2029b-2031). Moreover, it is not enough to save Hroðgar's children from usurpation.

2031b *seo bryd*

This epithet is attributed generically to a wife. In this case, the context is her role as 'peaceweaver' (compare line 2017a, *friðusibb folca* — see above). It is said that peace between feuding peoples is rarely maintained, 'although the bride may be good.' The context is also an ambiguously sexualised preceding passage dealing with the roles of women in the essentially masculine heroic polity. How may 'the bride be good' in such a situation? First, by transferring her favours to bestow them upon the occupants of her new court, which role has been sexualised (line 2018a, *beahwriðan* — see above; line 2021b, *ealuwæge* — see above; line 2023b, *nægled sinc* — see above; line 2024a,

hæleðum — see above; line 2025a, *geong goldhroden* — see above). Secondly, by being a support and comfort to her husband, which role has also been sexualised (line 2025b, *gladum suna Frodan* — see above; also compare line 63b, *healsgebedda* — see above).

2036b *gomelra lafe*

This epithet is attributed to some of those treasures and prestigious trappings that a Dane might wear to a wedding between Freawaru and Ingeld. It carries a fairly straightforward irony, pointed out by its constituent term 'old.' The age of the booty in question underlies the fact that it once belonged to the Heatho-Bards (line 2037b, *Heaða-Beardna gestreon* — see below), as an 'old spear-warrior' would recall (line 2042, *eald æscwiga* — see below). It is much more newly a Danish possession.

2037b *Heaða-Beardna*[69] *gestreon*

This epithet is attributed to those treasures and prestigious trappings the Danes might wear to a wedding between Freawaru and Ingeld. As such, it reiterates the ironical history of their ownership: the 'treasure of the Heatho-Bards' is actually in the keeping of the Danes. This epithet should be read in conjunction with others of its sentence (line 2036b, *gomelra lafe* — see above; line 2042a, *eald æscwiga* — see below).

2042a *eald æscwiga*

This epithet is attributed to the unnamed, hence generalised, Heatho-Bard veteran who is old enough to remember that his people were deprived of valuable goods by the Danes in earlier incidents. This epithet reiterates the irony of its sentence (line 2036b, *gomelra lafe* — see above; line 2037b, *Heaða-Beardna gestreon* — see above). The 'old ash-spear warrior' remembers exactly how his comrades were slain and their valuables looted.

69 The manuscript reading here is *heaða bearna*.

2052b hwate Scyldungas

This epithet is attributed to the Danes who in times past had attacked the Heatho-Bards, killing Wiðergyld and other warriors, and looting their valuables. In its context, uttered by the *eald æscwiga* (line 2042a — see above) who incites his young Heatho-Bard comrades into violence against the Dane who accompanies Freawaru, it is hard to read this epithet as other than facetiously intended.

2059a se fæmnan þegn

This epithet is attributed to the doomed Danish man who accompanies Freawaru to give her in marriage to Ingeld of the Heatho-Bards. It resonates with suggestions of effeminacy and/or improper sexual liaison made in respect of the Danish men on several previous occasions in the poem. There is also a subtler, more high-minded ironic tension between the diplomatic and feminised functions served by this official in attending the Heatho-Bard court as 'the woman's thegn' and the masculine offence that motivates his murderer: the deeds of his father.

2065b wiflufan

This epithet is attributed to the feelings Ingeld holds towards his wife Freawaru. It is said that these feelings 'become cooler' after the murder of her escort. His 'wife-love' is here used metonymically to reference Freawaru's capacities as 'peaceweaver': to be unloved by her powerful husband means to lose her political standing. It renders her role as a diplomat reconciling Danes and Heatho-Bards essentially futile — which is ironic, since her marriage to Ingeld was engineered expressly towards that role.

2068b unfæcne

This epithet, 'undeceitful,' is negatively attributed to the Heatho-Bards. The sentence in which it sits is a rather dense example of litotes, finding its climax in a double negative: 'For that reason I do not expect from the Heatho-Bards in their hostilities any measure for peace with the Danes that is undeceitful, a firm friendship.' As with much of this episode concerning Freawaru and the Heatho-Bards, Hroðgar's strategy to effect a lasting peace for Denmark is treated as essentially futile from the

outset. There is also an ironic mimesis: Hroðgar's political ploy is thwarted by further political intrigue.

2071a *sinces brytta*

This epithet, attributed to Hygelac, is ostensibly formulaic in style. Amplified through its context, however, it is offset somewhat by the narrative of the situation. It is Beowulf who brings booty into this encounter. Hygelac, the ostensible 'distributer of treasure,' is in fact a receiver of treasure from his successful thegn. There is thus some ironic tension between the formal role referenced by this epithet and the reality of the situation, which is showed up by the fact that this epithet is uttered by Beowulf. It is a somewhat hollow epithet.

2072a *hondræs hæleða*

This epithet is attributed to the encounter between Beowulf and Grendel. Its constituent elements suggest an element of wordplay underneath the surface level meaning, allowing the possibility that this 'hand-fight of heroes' may be read as their fight for a hand. It is an ironic suggestion in light of the outcome of the fight (Beowulf rips off Grendel's hand and uses it for a trophy). It amplifies the euphemism of those epithets portraying this fight as a handshake. That irony is compounded by Grendel's mother when she seizes back Grendel's hand in her revenge raid. Two other noteworthy epithetic approaches to the hand-severing theme are line 426a, *ðing* (see above) and line 992a, *folmum gefrætwod* (see above). There is also irony in referencing Grendel as a 'hero.'

2076a *Hondscio*

This epithet is the name of the Geat in Beowulf's retinue who gets eaten by Grendel. The word literally means 'glove.' It is subtly ironic. We learn the name of this eaten Geat only when Beowulf is relating his exploits to Hygelac after returning to Scedeland. During the same description, Beowulf refers to Grendel's *glof* (line 2085b), a word that may mean glove or pouch. In line 2085b, a translation of 'pouch' makes better sense, and yet we still have this reference to a *glof* closely following the naming of Hondscio. The suggestion seems to be that Beowulf lost his 'glove,' his henchman, while Grendel still had possession of his *glof*. In that way, the name attributes to this eaten

character a particular relationship with Beowulf. Perhaps this is comparable to a sense that Æschere's death represents a figurative maiming of Hroðgar (see line 1326a, *eaxlgestealla* — see above).

2081b *idelhende*

This epithet is conditionally (that is, subjunctively) attributed to Grendel. It is said that, having entirely devoured Hondscio, the monster 'did not want to depart empty-handed.' This is dramatic irony of a rather inverse kind since, as we know, Grendel eventually departed from Heorot with one of his hands missing. It seems to resonate with the highly corporeal focus of much of the poetics of injury in *Beowulf*.

2082a *bona blodigtoð*

This epithet is attributed to Grendel. Like the epithet that immediately precedes it (line 2081b, *idelhende* — see above) and that which immediately follows (line 1282b, *bealewa gemyndig* — see below), it is conditionally (that is, subjunctively) attributed. Also like the epithet that immediately precedes it, this epithet engages with the physical and corporeal poetics of injury to contrast ironically the blood on Grendel's teeth with the subsequent blood at his shoulder. In one case, the blood indicates the monster's victory; in the other, his defeat. One blood-image dramatically upstages the other.

2082b *bealewa gemyndig*

This epithet is attributed to Grendel. Like the two epithets immediately preceding it (line 2081b, *idelhende* — see above; line 1282a, *bona blodigtoð* — see above), it is conditionally (that is, subjunctively) attributed. Also like those epithets, this one constructs a dramatic-ironic contrast between the violence Grendel anticipates (his triumph over humans) and the violence he actually experiences (his death at the hands of Beowulf).

2083a *goldsele*

See line 1253a, *goldsele* (see above).

2085a gearofolm

This epithet is attributed to Grendel. Like several in this poem (most recently line 2082a, *bona blodigtoð* — see above), it draws upon a physical and corporeal poetics of injury. By referring to the 'eager hand,' Beowulf's rhetoric draws our attention towards the part of Grendel's body that is to be hurt. There is an ironic contrast between the eagerness of the hand reaching out for Beowulf and the outcome of that act (the hand's severance).

2090a dior dædfruma

This epithet is attributed to Grendel. Meaning 'courageous performer of deeds,' it is more strongly inverse than the hollow epithets based on ostensibly formulaic rhetoric so common throughout the poem. Those epithets might be described as subversive, since they play ironically on the attribution of ostensibly applicable positive connotations. The meritorious connotations of this epithet are not ostensibly applicable, hence it is closer to apophasis than to hollowness.

2097b lifwynna

This epithet is attributed to the last moments of Grendel's life. 'For a little while [longer] he partook of life-joys.' It is a droll expression – ironically apophatic – soon offset by the contrasting *modes geomor* (line 2100a). As we have been told, Grendel's life ended in demonstrable agony, evidenced by his dying *wop* (line 785b).

2099a hand on Hiorte

This epithet, attributed to the hand of Grendel, draws attention both to the hand itself and to its location. In drawing attention to the hand, this epithet draws our attention towards the part of Grendel's body that is to be hurt. It is a technique frequently used throughout the poem. In drawing attention to the location of the hand, Heorot, this epithet draws attention to the place where the hand shall stay after the body has left. Again, therefore, the effect is a droll indirect reference to the wound Grendel receives.

2112a gomel guðwiga

This epithet, attributed to Hroðgar, is ostensibly a formulaic encomium for his experience and martial prowess. As amplified through the narrative of the poem, it is somewhat hollow. The immediate context for the attribution (the feast following Beowulf's victory over Grendel) portrays Hroðgar not as a 'war-fighter' but as a warrior-hirer. The element *gomel* suggests not only that he is a venerable figure on account of his age (as the ostensible formula would suggest), but also that it has been a long time since Hroðgar's military prowess was actually tested (a suggestion that subverts the formula). There is irony in Hroðgar lecturing his *giogud* (line 2112b) on matters of *hildestrengo* (line 2113a) while that group contains Beowulf. As we are reminded in line 2120a, the conflict is an instantion of Geatish *wighete*. Compare the interpretations of line 1307a, *har hilderinc* (see above) and line 1678a, *harum hildfruman* (see above).

2127a leofne mannan

This epithet references Æschere. Beowulf uses it pointedly within a litotes to describe the situation of Æschere's death (lines 2124-2128): 'They did not need, once morning came, the Danish people, to burn him up with fire, death-weary, nor to load onto a pyre the beloved man: she[70] carried off that body in a fiend's arms [or 'embrace'][71] under the mountain-stream.' Depicting Æschere as a 'beloved man' plays up an absurd notion, latent in the phrase *feondes fæðmum*, that Grendel's mother was in some sense eloping with Æschere. That is ironically at odds with the fact that she killed him.[72] A remarkably similar, but not quite identical, ironic tension is evident in an identical form on line 1943b, *leofne mannan* (see above).

70 Grendel's mother.

71 Klaeber's reading of the word *fæð(mum)* could be wrong: it might easily be dative singular *fæðme*, rather than plural. Regardless of that manuscript ambiguity, it is not unreasonable to read a dative plural *fæðmum* as referring to the embrace or embraces of Grendel's mother.

72 A similar point is made by Jane C. Nitzsche, 'The Structural Unity of *Beowulf*: The Problem of Grendel's Mother,' *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 22 (1980), 294-295.

2137b hand gemæne

This epithet apparently references the combat between Beowulf and Grendel's mother. The analogy of line 2473b (*wroht gemæne*) and an intertextual analogy in Wulfstan[73] makes that reading most likely. At the same time, the constituent elements of the phrase point to the original reason for the hostilities. Read literally, Beowulf is saying that he and Grendel's mother 'had a hand in common for a while' — they are sorting out the issue of a certain hand. The hand thus referenced is Grendel's. Read thus, there is a contrast between two simultaneously viable meanings of the phrase, an ironic tension. The epithet perpetuates the corporeal specificity of the poetics of injury in *Beowulf*, insofar as it prefaces Beowulf's declaration that he carved the head off Grendel's mother. It also perpetuates the image of a handshake as comical metaphor for the encounter between Beowulf and Grendel. Compare line 426a, *ðing* (see above).

2142a eorla hleo

This epithet is one of a common type. See line 429b, *wigendra hleo* (above). Beowulf has just described how he alone fought Grendel's mother, and how he survived because he was not fated to die. There is no sense that Hroðgar somehow protected Beowulf through that episode. Indeed, he and his Danes abandoned Beowulf once they felt the odds were against him. Hroðgar's role is limited to materially rewarding a successful returner (line 2143a, *maðma menigeo*). So apophatic a characterisation of the king's role is necessarily subversive. The subversiveness of this rhetoric is amplified by the reference to Hroðgar's ancestry (line 2143b, *maga Healfdenes* — see below).

2143b maga Healfdenes

This epithet, attributed to Hroðgar, is ostensibly a formulaic encomium for his lineage. Amplified through its narrative context, it reads as somewhat problematic, hence subversive. There is ironic tension between the ostensibly encomiastic formula dictating the construction of this epithet and the subversive content of the attribution that it conveys. Compare a number of very similar constructions: line 1474, *se mæra*

73 See Klaeber, *Beowulf*, p. 205.

maga Healfdenes (see above); line 1698b (f), *se wisa [...] sunu Healfdenes* (see above); line 2011, *se mæra mago Healfdenes* (see above); and line 2147a, *sunu Healfdenes* — see below.

2144b þeawum

This epithet, attributed to the conduct of Hroðgar within his court, is ostensibly an encomium. Klaeber, for example, glosses the relevant phrase, *þeawum lyfde* (line 2144b), as 'lived in good customs.' Read in its immediate narrative context, however, the quality of the referenced customs is questionable. The custom appears to be one of handsome remuneration for services rendered — rather than of direct participation in rendering public services. Beowulf applauds Hroðgar for granting material recognition to Beowulf's own deeds. It is not clear whether Beowulf himself is drawing out the mercenary materialistic regime of the Danes or whether this is to be read as exclusively an effect of narratorial arrangement. On the one hand, Beowulf is very much a part of that culture, and the poem pointedly draws attention to the materialism of his own motives (especially in anticipation of his encounter with the dragon). On the other hand, his own words are evidence of Danish materialism so frequently that it is hard to read him as totally naive in this respect.

2147a sunu Healfdenes

This epithet, atttributed to Hroðgar, reiterates the ironies of an earlier comparable form (line 2144b, *maga Healfdenes* — see above). As with its antecedent, it amplifies an ironic critique of Hroðgar by referencing his genealogical heritage, compounding the hollow praise.

2161a hwatum Heorowearde

This epithet, attributed to Hroðgar's heir, is ostensibly formulaic in style. Amplified through the narrative of the poem, however, it is decidedly hollow. Heoroweard turns out to be ineffective in defending his own personal interests, let alone the interests of his realm. This is a frequent occurrence for phrases involving (-)*weard* throughout the poem. His name itself is thus somewhat ironic, assuming we may read it as etymologically transparent: 'battle-guardian.' The element *hwat-* is an obviously hollow attribution.

2203a bordhreoðan

This epithet is attributed to the shields of the Geats — to the 'shield-cover' that should have protected Heardred from injury. Ironically, it failed to. The protective device did not protect Hygelac's son.

2245a hringa hyrde

This epithet is attributed to the last survivor of the race that possessed the dragon's hoard before it came into that monster's possession. In its attribution of the role of a custodian of treasure, the phraseology is structurally comparable to a number of epithets attributed to kings throughout the poem (for example line 921b, *beahhorda weard* — see above). The last survivor does not have the splendour or power at his disposal that this epithet would suggest. His wealth is useless to him. In that sense, he is very similar to the dragon who takes control of the treasure after his death. Comparable epithets are also attributed to the dragon.

2282b frioðowære

This epithet is attributed to the cup, stolen from the dragon, which the thieving slave takes back to his master as a placatory offering for having run away. It is ironic that he should offer the cup to his master as a 'peace-token,' when its theft is the reason why the dragon lays waste much of Geatland.

2288b stearcheort

This epithet, attributed to the dragon, is styled as a formulaic encomium for the courage of some praiseworthy human or otherwise goodly character (compare line 2552a, *stearcheort*, attributed to Beowulf). It attributes human virtues to an inhuman and ethically distinctive (if not inscrutable) figure. In this sense, it is in a mutual offset relationship with the following half line (line 2289a, *feondes fotlast* — see below), so that the dragon is metaphorically a virtuous figure and the fugitive slave is metaphorically monstrous: *stearcheort onfand // feondes fotlast*. In substituting the values of one category of beings for those of another, it is an example of what this thesis calls 'attributive metathesis.'

2289a *feondes fotlast*

This epithet is attributed to the vestiges of the fugitive slave after he has stolen the cup from the dragon. In conjunction with the epithet of the previous half line (line 2288b, *stearcheort* — see above), it creates a metaphorical reversal of the normal moral order, so that monstrous qualities are attributed to the human and human virtues are attributed to the dragon. This is 'attributive metathesis.'

2292b, f. *Waldendes hyldo*

This epithet is attributed to the relationship between the absconding cup-thief and the dragon he robs. The thief is harming a monster, and is thus aligning himself against the enemies of God. At the same time, his behaviour is hardly saintly. Not only does he draw the dragon's antagonism by theft (rather than combat), his reason for being there in the first place is ethically questionable. Context for this epithet is a phrase (line 2291a, *unfæge*) that is strikingly comparable with an earlier description of Beowulf's encounters (line 573a, *unfægne eorl*), and yet the character is demonstrably somewhat anti-heroic.

2320a *dryhtsele dyrnne*

This epithet, attributed to the dragon's mound, is adapted from the formulaic style used to praise eminent human abodes. A 'concealed *comitatus*-hall' is not necessarily a contradiction in terms, but it is a problematic notion in the early Germanic heroic cultures. An essential component of the functionality of the *dryhtsele* is its eminence, its visibility. A *dryhtsele dyrn* is at least somewhat paradoxical. At the same time, there is a certain playfulness behind the attribution of the term *dryhtsele* to the dragon's mound. It is a perverse kind of hall, since its assembled *dryht* in the time of Beowulf's reign is the dragon's treasure-hoard. Certainly the dragon itself would make a paradoxical *dryhten*.

2355a *hondgemota*[74]

This epithet is the pointed phrase of a litotes clause. The salient irony here is a euphemism driven by the litotes itself: 'That was not the least of hand-meetings, where one struck Hygelac [down]' (lines 2354b-2355). It also suggests injury by drawing attention to the parts of the body that suffer and/or dispense harm. There is also a reminiscence of the handshake-as-combat topos (see line 426a, *ðing* — above).

2414a *gearo guðfreca*

This epithet, attributed to the dragon, is taken from the formulaic style used to portray human warriors. There is a certain playfulness behind the attribution of the phrase 'eager war-doer' to the dragon, much like several anthropomorphic epithets (for example, line 770a, *reþe renweardas* — see above) that are ironically, and somewhat equivocally, extended to Grendel earlier in the poem.

2415b *yðe ceap*

This epithet is attributed to the prospect Beowulf faces, of a confrontation with the dragon. It is the focal phrase of a litotes clause: 'That [acquisition of the dragon's hoard] was not a pleasant bargain for any person to conduct' (line 2415b-2416). The metaphor negated is clearly absurd. Beowulf's quest to retrieve the dragon's treasure is never conceived of as an exchange or a transaction; it is intended as a unilateral dispossession and seizure. Merely to negate such an attribution is not sufficient to suppress its absurdity entirely, of course (compare line 2541b, *earges sið* — see below). The idea of a 'bargain' has been mentioned, and it is ironically at odds with the actual state of play. Compare also line 2482a, *heardan ceape* (see below). Compare especially the handshake imagery for combat (line 426a, *ðing* — see above; *et cetera*).

2438a *freawine*

This epithet is attributed to Herebeald. It attributes a relationship to his brother and unintending slayer Hæðcyn. There is ironic juxtaposition in

74 The manuscript reading here is *hondgemot*.

portraying the elder brother as a 'lord-friend' to the younger brother in the same sentence as the younger's manslaughter of the elder is related, albeit a bitter sort of irony. That irony is reiterated several times by repeated references to the relationship between the two brothers (line 2439b, *mæg* — see below; line 2440a, *broðor* — see below).

2439b *mæg*

This epithet is attributed to Herebeald. See line 2438a, *freawine* (above).

2440a *broðor*

This epithet is attributed to Herebeald. See line 2438a, *freawine* (above).

2446a *giong on galgan*

This epithet is attributed to the hanged young man. Tripp[75] reads it as a case of punning wordplay, 'with its play upon *giong*, and even perhaps on *gal* (wantonness) and *gan* a second time.' Tripp takes this as evidence for his reading that the hanged young man is Hæðcyn (that is, not hanged at all). One need not accept his reading to perceive irony in the epithet. There are several lines of tension between the homophonic elements of the phrase. First, 'to go' (suggested in *giong* and in *-gan*), which resonates with *ride* (line 2445b), is in tension with the terminal nature of gallows (*galgan*). Secondly, 'wantonness' is clearly a pointed attribution, if it is validly an attribution at all,[76] although its reference is not easy to unpack. Last (and most straightforwardly), there is an obvious tension between 'young' and 'gallows,' which is not reliant upon the punning aspects of the phrase.

2449a *eald ond infrod*

This epithet is attributed to the father of the hanged man. He is described as 'old and very wise' but this is ironic, since neither his eminence nor his wisdom are capable of resolving the one problem he

75 Tripp, 'Digressive Revaluation(s),' pp. 75-76.

76 Vowel quantity makes this a somewhat questionable interpretation (*gal* contains a long vowel while *galgan* does not), however it is still conceivable that the syllables are somewhat mutually resonant.

cares most about: the execution of his son. Compare the very similar form *eald infrod* (line 1874a — see above).

2456a *winsele westne*

This epithet is attributed to the home of a grieving man, now bereft of his hanged son. Insofar as the element *win-* ('wine') connotes joy,[77] it is subliminally an oxymoron. The paradoxical element of this phrase – that oxymoronic quality – captures the bitter irony of the narrative transformation: what has been a festive location is now a wasted place. It is a crystallising moment for the elegy of the grieving father, hence a crucial moment in what is an aesthetically significant digression. See also *hæleð in hoðman* (line 2458a — below).

2458a *hæleð in hoðman*

This epithet is attributed to the hanged son of a grieving man. There is an ironic tension between the two nouns of the phrase, reflecting a sharply (and harshly) transformative biography. The word 'hero' is itself ironic, since hanging is not usually a heroic end to a life. In that respect, the epithet plays with ostensibly formulaic elements to convey a meaning quite other than they would typically convey. See also *winsele westen* (line 2456a — above).

2482a *heardan ceape*

This epithet is attributed to the death of Hæðcyn and its subsequent avenging by Hygelac. Unlike an earlier use of the term 'bargain' (line 2415b, *yðe ceap* — see above), here it is not negated. There is an element of playfulness and flippancy in characterising the *quid pro quo* of battle as a commercial transaction in this way. Against this reading is the distinctly evaluative function served by *wergild* in early Germanic law. Nevertheless, a deed in battle as such is not a commercial transaction as such: to conflate the two is metaphor. It is a distinction Beowulf (the speaker here) understands very well. Compare his

77 Although it is not necessary for the purposes of demonstrating this point, it is worth considering the possibility that long voweled *win* ('wine') resonates with short voweled words *wynn* ('happiness') and *wine* ('friend').

description of the commerce of military service further into the same speech (lines 2490-2508a).

2541b *earges siðe*

This epithet is the focal phrase of a litotes clause. It is attributed in the negative to Beowulf's venture against the dragon: line 2451b, 'Such is not the journey of a coward!' Like line 2415b, *yðe ceap* (see above), the attribution negated would be patently absurd. Also like that earlier instance, this epithet's hilarity is not reduced by its expression in the negative. There is an ironic tension between the absurd epithet on the one hand and the impossibility of its application on the other.

2567a *winia bealdor*

This epithet, attributed to Beowulf, is ostensibly a formulaic encomium for his rulership. Amplified through the narrative of this part of the poem, however, it is somewhat hollow — perhaps in an unexpected way. Whereas it is fair to describe Beowulf as a leader (although there is some irony about a leader whose retainers do not rally to him), it is somewhat anomalous to call the men he leads 'friends' in the episode where they desert him.

2592a *aglæcean*

This epithet is attributed to Beowulf and the dragon. It is another example of what has earlier been described as 'attributive metathesis' (in relation to line 893a, *aglæca* — see above). We see a similar phenomenon in Grendel's depiction as a *rinc* (line 720b — see above). In each case, there is an element of ironic tension between the literal meaning of the term (this epithet means 'monster') and its actual referent (which in this case includes a human). Clearly there is a rhetorical strategy to equate Beowulf with his monstrous antagonists throughout the poem, which in cases such as this one extends to conflating him with them.

2598a *hildecystum*

This epithet, attributed to the Geat warriors who set out with Beowulf against the dragon, is ostensibly formulaic in style. Amplified through

the narrative of this last third of the poem, it is somewhat hollow. The epithet draws attention to the martial aspect of their role: 'the ones selected for war.' In this section of the poem, they are demonstrably failing to live up to their role as comrades in time of need. That may seem a harsh judgement — after all, Beowulf has asked that he be left to fight the dragon alone. Nevertheless, the epithet suggests the Geats should be by his side (a view taken by Wiglaf in the next sentence, and developed further in the subsequent fitt). Their actual behaviour is at odds with that ethic.

2633b *medu*

This phrase stands metonymically as an epithet attributed to the merriment of the Geats in Beowulf's hall. It is linked to the epithet *biorsele* (line 2635a — see below) later in the same sentence. According to generic convention (that is, 'poetic formula') the term 'mead' references a broad array of cultural phenomena associated with feasting. At the same time, the word *medu* by synecdoche references alcoholic drinks in the broad. The ironic relationship between alcohol and behaviour, particularly the role alcohol can play in the ironic relationship between words and deeds, is a common theme throughout the poem (and in a number of other comparable Germanic heroic texts). This sentence is a more or less typical example of the *topos*: Wiglaf berates his comrades for failing to live up to the pledges they made to Beowulf in the relative comfort of the feasting hall and whilst inspired by drink (lines 2633-2638a). See also *guðgetawa* (line 2636a — see below).

2635a *biorsele*

This epithet is attributed to the hall of Beowulf, in which the Geats have enjoyed feasts and made pledges to their king. It points especially to the alcoholic component of this cultural paradigm, a component rendered ironic by the failure of the Geats to live up to the promises they have made whilst drunk. This epithet amplifies and reiterates the *medu* (line 2633b — see above) of earlier in the same sentence. It is ironically complemented by *guðgetawa* (line 2636a — see below) of later in the same sentence.

2636a guðgetawa

This epithet is attributed to gifts bequeathed by Beowulf to his Geatish warriors. Later in the sentence we find they include *helmas ond heard sweord* (line 2637a). Unlike *wiggetawum* (line 368a), the 'war-gear' worn by Beowulf and his Geats in Denmark, the 'battle-gear' in this sentence does not bring fame or reward to the lord who donated it. Other than Wiglaf the Waegmunding, the Geats fail to assist Beowulf in his dragon fight. The 'battle-gear' goes untried in battle. The context for this epithet is a sentence pointing to the role of alcohol in heroic society. See line 2633b, *medu* (above); also line 2635a, *biorsele* (above).

2641a garwigend

This epithet, apparently attributed to Beowulf, is formulaic in style. It is the first in a string of epithets Wiglaf attributes to his king that point up the virtues demonstrated by Beowulf and absent in his Geatish retinue, who fail to assist their leader in his dragon fight. Here the 'spear-warrior' attribution connotes a martial prowess that Beowulf shows but the Geats (other than Wiglaf) pointedly fail to show. There is irony in the fact that these epithets are effectively criteria by which the failings of the Geats may be identified, at the same time as they reference the virtues of Beowulf. See line 2641b, *gode* (below); line 2642a, *hwate helmberend* (below); 2643a, *ellenweorc* (below); line 2646a, *dæda dollicra* (below); and line 2649a, *hildfruman* (below).

2641b gode

This phrase is part of a string of epithets. See line 2641a, *garwigend* (above).

2642a hwate helmberend

This phrase is part of a string of epithets. See line 2641a, *garwigend* (above).

2643a ellenweorc

This phrase is part of a string of epithets. See line 2641a, *garwigend* (above).

2646a dæda dollicra

This phrase is part of a string of epithets. See line 2641a, *garwigend* (above).

2649a hildfruman

This phrase is part of a string of epithets. See line 2641a, *garwigend* (above).

2657a ealdgewyrht

This epithet is the focal point of a litotes. Wiglaf attributes it, in the negative, to one conceivable (but inapplicable) ethical appraisal of Beowulf's situation. Beowulf is fighting the dragon unaided by his Geatish retinue. Wiglaf argues that is not a circumstance 'previously merited' by Beowulf's treatment of his warriors. In fact, it is the opposite.

2712a eorðdraca

This epithet is attributed to the dragon after Beowulf and Wiglaf have killed it. The epithet draws attention to the transformation in the dragon's state of being (namely, its death) by referencing its connection to the earth, and avoiding reference to a significant aspect of the creature's role (namely, flight) which has changed during that transformation: the 'earth dragon' coincides with a creature that has lost the ability to fly. That is a paradoxical dragon, a dead one. It is not to detract from positive readings of the epithet.[78] As a cave dweller, the dragon has certainly lived out a long-lasting connection with the earth. A slightly developed form imparts a more or less identical irony in line 2825a, *egeslic eorðdraca* (see below).

2756a sigehreðig

This epithet is attributed to Wiglaf. Amplified through the narrative of this part of the poem, it is somewhat equivocal. Wiglaf and Beowulf

78 Heaney, *Beowulf – A New Translation*, translates this epithet as 'the ground-burner.' The instance in line 2825a, however, he translates as 'the dragon from under-earth.' Both readings are plausible, and their diversity is plausible also.

have not clearly won a victory in the dragon fight. Beowulf has been killed, while Wiglaf himself has become a last survivor of the Wægmundings, and a leadership figure in the doomed post-Beowulf nation of the Geats. To describe Wiglaf as 'exulting in victory' draws attention to the ambiguity of the actual outcome.

2802a *heaðomære*

This epithet, attributed by Beowulf to his Geat retinue, is ostensibly formulaic in style. Amplified through the narrative of this part of the poem, it reads as somewhat hollow. To reference the Geatish troops as 'battle-illustrious' is at odds with their behaviour, insofar as they have failed to join battle at Beowulf's side in his dragon fight. The narrator goes on to describe them as *hildlatan* (line 2846a) and *tydre treowlogan* (line 2847a). To mention their martial reputation at this moment in the poem draws attention to the apophatic nature of the epithet, the mention itself.

2825a *egeslic eorðdraca*

This epithet is attributed to the dragon after Beowulf and Wiglaf have killed it. As with an earlier instance of the phrase *eorðdraca* (line 2712a — see above), this epithet draws attention to a transformation in the dragon's state of being (namely, its death) by inverting a significant aspect of the creature's role (namely, flight) that has changed: the 'earth dragon' is a creature that has lost the ability to fly. It is a paradoxical dragon, and a dead one. The paradox is compounded by the term *egeslic*, since a good part of the terror of the dragon is related to its powerfulness, hence to its capacity for flight. Similar irony is conveyed by an epithet in the next sentence (line 2830a, *se widfloga* — see below) and again towards the end of the poem (line 3043a, *lyftwynne* — see below).

2830a *se widfloga*

This epithet is attributed to the dragon killed by Beowulf and Wiglaf. It expressly draws attention to the capacity for flight that the dragon had enjoyed up to the moment of its death. Thus it amplifies the sense in which that capacity for flight may be read as symbolic of the dragon's transformed condition: a living dragon flies, a flightless dragon is dead.

Thus it amplifies the ironic attributions of earlier epithets (line 2712a, *eorðdraca* — see above; line 2825a, *egeslic eorðdraca* — see above).

2837a *mægenagendra*

This epithet is attributed to all those warriors who did not confront the dragon alongside (or in place of) Beowulf and Wiglaf. It is the focal phrase of a litotes, and as such is inherently ironic in construction. 'However in the land it was a rare one among men who flourished, among the wielders of might, so I heard, although he was daring in any deed, such that he charged ahead against the venomous scather [the dragon] [...]' The irony is of a fairly high register: such bravery and might as there were were not sufficient, except for Beowulf and Wiglaf themselves.

2851a *guðgewædu*

This epithet is attributed to the arms and armor of those Geatish warriors who failed to follow their lord into battle against the dragon. The context for this epithet is a sentence pointing to its ironic quality: the warriors are described as *hildlatan* (line 2846a) and *tydre treowlogan* (line 2847a). The 'gear' may be for 'war,' but its owners have not been.

2866a *eoredgeatwe*

This epithet reiterates and varies the ironic point made by the narrator prior to Wiglaf's speech (line 2851a, *guðgewædu* — see above).

2867a *ealubence*

This epithet is attributed to the feasting benches on which the Geats sat when Beowulf was presenting them with excellent gifts of wealth and armaments. In mentioning 'ale,' it draws attention to the problematic role of alcohol in Germanic heroic culture. The Geats when indoors and inebriated pledged to be much bolder than they prove when confronted with the test of battle. See also line 2868a, *healsittendum* (below).

2868a *healsittendum*

This epithet is attributed to the Beowulf's Geatish retinue. It reiterates and varies an ironic point already made in this sentence (line 2867a, *ealubence* — see above).

2871b *guðgewædu*

This epithet is attributed to arms and armor of the Geatish warriors who failed to follow their lord into battle against the dragon. It amplifies the ironic point made by the narrator prior to Wiglaf's speech in an identical phrase (line 2851a, *guðgewædu* — see above). That irony is reiterated earlier in the speech (line 2866a, *eoredgeatwe* — see above). This epithet is situated within a sentence developing the idea that, in presenting his retinue with these 'war-equipments,' Beowulf as good as threw the stuff away: it gained him nothing.

2873b *fyrdgesteallum*

This epithet, attributed to Beowulf's Geatish retinue, is ostensibly a formulaic encomium for their loyalty. The narrator has already described these warriors as *hildlatan* (line 2846a) and *tydre treowlogan* (line 2847a). Now Wiglaf's speech is to berate them for precisely those failings. They failed to rally to Beowulf's side, so for Wiglaf to call them 'martial comrades' in this context is quite apophatic.

2882b *wergendra*

The attribution of this epithet is left ironically open. Clearly it references Wiglaf himself. According to the stylistic formula, it ought to reference Beowulf's Geatish retinue. They are warriors by office. And yet, it would be a somewhat hollow epithet if attributed directly to them. As Wiglaf says (line 2882b-2883), 'Too few warriors gathered around the king when his distress set in.' The Geats do not prove themselves warriors in deed.

2884a *sincþego*

This epithet is attributed to the occasions on which the Geats receive gifts from their lord. Here Wiglaf is explaining that an expectation among Beowulf's Geatish retinue that such gift-givings would continue

under a subsequent Geatish ruler is misplaced. More pointedly ironic is this epithet's reiteration of the economy of bequest and heroic loyalty that has been shown up by Beowulf's betrayal. This is at once an irony of the process of that economy – the irony that gifts have not met with the loyalty due in return – and an irony of the motives of that economy – the absence of a motive higher than materialism from the loyalties of these Geatish warriors. The ironic point of this epithet is amplified and varied in line 2884b, *swyrdgifu* (see below).

2884b *swyrdgifu*

This epithet is fundamentally similar to the previous epithet (line 2884a, *sincþego* — see above). Its irony is compounded by the martial teleology of the gifts here referenced: the swords themselves should have been used for defending Beowulf, their giver. This leads Wiglaf to say Beowulf had as good as thrown them away (line 2872a) when he gave them out.

2895a *bordhæbbende*

This epithet is attributed to Geat warriors who were not among the retinue that accompanied Beowulf when he went out to confront the dragon. It is ostensibly a formulaic encomium for their martial role, and yet there is a certain absurdity about their depiction as 'shield-holders,' since they did not hold shields when it counted. This irony of functionality may be subtle, but it reiterates the ironically dysfunctional relationship between Geatish warriors and their war-gear that has been demonstrated by Beowulf's retinue during his dragon fight. The dramatic centrality of Beowulf's metal shield in his dragon-fight makes this epithet especially pointed.

2919b *frætwe*

This epithet is the focus of a litotes. It is attributed in the negative to the remuneration the Geats received from their king Hygelac for their participation in his fatal raid in Frisia. Rather than the treasure they may have expected as a reward, Hygelac gave them troubles — troubles that Wiglaf's messenger anticipates will now visit themselves upon the Geats, once news of Beowulf's death (hence of the vulnerability of the Geats) has spread abroad.

2998a hamweorðunge

This epithet is attributed to Hygelac's only daughter, whom Hygelac gives to Eofor as a wife in recognition of Eofor's contribution to the Geats' victory over Ongenþeow in the battle of Ravenswood. To describe a princess and wife as a 'home adornment' is a function of formulaic style. It is essentially encomiastic. As with an earlier epithet (line 63b, *healsgebedda* — see above), this epithet points to a tension between the private role of a wife and the public role of a royal daughter. How much sexual innuendo may be read into this epithet? Presumably, as with all innuendo, as much as a reader may wish to. Structurally, this epithet is comparable to the (apparently unironic) epithets *hordweoþunge* (line 952a) and *hringweorðunge* (line 3017b).

3003a ealdorleasne

This epithet is attributed to Beowulf after his death. By dint of homophony, this phrase is ironically also applicable to the situation of the Geats. Beowulf is now 'lifeless,' but the Geats are simultaneously 'lordless' — which is precisely the point of the clause in which this epithet is situated. The ironic tension lies in the simultaneous viability of two divergent readings of this one term. A comparable play on an almost identical form is line 1587a, *aldorleasne* (see above).

3005a hwate scildwigan[79]

This epithet is a textual crux. Emended, it reads as ostensibly a formulaic encomium for the courage and martial prowess of the Geats — and yet this reads as a somewhat hollow attribution in the context of the Geats' behaviour, failing to come to Beowulf's aid during his dragon fight. Whether this epithet is taken as emended or as per the manuscript reading (see below), it seems to carry ironic tension.

79 The manuscript reading here is *scildingas* (see below), however most editors emend it one way or another. See Klaeber's note on line 3005, outlining his belief that 'The line as it stands in the MS. has the air of an intruder.' Against that atmospheric critique, the line does stand in the manuscript.

3005a hwate Scildingas

This epithet is a textual crux.[80] Left unemended, it reads as an attribution to the Danes — probably in their capacity as beneficiaries of Beowulf's heroism through the events of the first two thirds of the poem. As such, it is ostensibly a formulaic encomium for Danish courage and martial prowess, whose amplification through the narrative of the poem reveals it to be hollow. To describe the Danes as 'courageous Scyldings' is in keeping with a public reputation, but is at odds with their response to Grendel and Grendel's mother. Such epithets are a common feature of the first two thirds of the poem. Whether this epithet is taken as emended (see above) or as per the manuscript reading, it seems to carry ironic tension.

3043b lyftwynne

This epithet is attributed to the dragon's experience of life — as the 'air-joys' of night-time ventures. It reiterates an ironic contrast between the flight of a living dragon and the ground-bound nature of a dead one evident in several earlier epithets (line 2712a, *eorðdraca* — see above; line 2825a, *egeslic eorðdraca* — see above; line 2830a, *se widfloga* — see above). See also *eorðscrafa* (line 3046a, below).

3046a eorðscrafa

This epithet is attributed to the cave in which the dragon had dwelt, guarding the treasure hoard, until Beowulf and Wiglaf killed it. In linking the dragon's abode so explicitly with the earth, 'earth-cave' reiterates the ironic tension around the dragon's role as a flying creature that several preceding epithets have developed. In this epithet, the irony is compounded by pointing up the dragon's subterranean dwelling. If its death is a kind of grounding, it is also a kind of homecoming.

3111b hæleða monegum

This epithet, attributed to the Geats after Wiglaf's homecoming, is ostensibly formulaic in style. Amplified through the narrative of the last third of the poem, it is somewhat hollow. The Geats have failed to live

80 See the emended form, *hwate scildwigan* — above.

up to the label ‘heroes’ by failing to rally to Beowulf’s aid during the dragon fight, a failure for which Wiglaf has delivered a lengthy and pointed rebuke. This epithet is contrastively offset by another in the following half line (line 3112a, *boldagendra* — see below).

3112a *boldagendra*

This epithet is attributed to the Geats after Wiglaf’s homecoming. It contrastively offsets the hollow epithet of the previous half line (line 3111b, *hæleða monegum* — see above), by pointing to the domesticity of the supposed heroes of the Geat nation. The heroes are ‘home-owners.’ This taps into a line of ironic criticism running throughout the poem: the line that there is a significant difference between heroism purported at home and deeds actually performed in the field. The Geats have failed to rally to the defence of their king Beowulf, which was the true test of their heroism in this last third of the poem. Moreover, their ‘ownership’ of buildings appears doomed.

3116b *isernscure*

This epithet is attributed to the battles initiated by Beowulf during his lifetime. To characterise them metaphorically as ‘showers of iron’ contrastively offsets the statement that ‘flame shall devour – grow the dark flame – the chief of warriors’ (lines 3114b-3115). A very similar distinction is attributed in the following half line (line 3117a, *strœla storm* — see below). Beowulf alive is an agent of figurative precipitation; Beowulf dead is fuel for fire.

3117a *strœla storm*

This epithet is almost identical in its ironic effect to line 3116b, *isernscure* (see above).

3168a *eldum swa unnyt*

This epithet is attributed to the dragon’s hoard. The treasure has been won by Beowulf (and Wiglaf) for the Geats to enjoy,[81] however it is

81 The intention that the Geats should benefit from the treasure is made explicit in lines 2794-2801.

buried with Beowulf's ashes. In an unusually blunt ironical remark, the narrator remarks that, being buried, the treasure is 'as useless to men' as it had been when the dragon possessed it.

3182b lofgeornost

This epithet, attributed to Beowulf as the last word of the poem, invites much inference. Does 'most eager for renown' signify a vainglorious protagonist, one who pushed the pursuit of heroism too far, so that his people suffered? Such a reading seems difficult to sustain on narrative grounds, despite the predicament in which Beowulf's death left his Geat nation: someone clearly had to kill the dragon in the interests of stopping its attacks across the country. Such a reading seems unlikely on lexical grounds also: to the extent that analogues are informative here, *lof* does not attract connotations of vainglory in Old English poetry. *The Seafarer* (lines 72 – 85) shows how affirmative and uncritical the word's use could be.[82] It is nothing like *The Battle of Maldon*'s key word, *ofermod* (line 89).[83] A straight reading of *lofgeornost* still leaves potential for reading it as ironic in context. It is an example of the irony within an amplification discussed in Chapter 5. The opening premise of the poem is that Beowulf was relatively little known, that the English knew much better the (problematically) established fame of the Danes. Beowulf is a great hero. He performs his deeds not out of materialism, but out of eagerness for renown. To enhance his reputation, the Geats bury him in extraordinary splendour, to ensure his fame will echo down the ages. And yet, without this poem, the praiseworthy hero Beowulf would have vanished into obscurity — barrow, treasure, and all.

82 *Op. cit*.
83 *Op. cit*.

Chapter 7. Approaches to a taxonomy of the ironic epithets in *Beowulf*

1. Topics and tropes for the ironic epithets in *Beowulf*

If the formulaic aesthetic is key, the ironic epithets of *Beowulf* are mostly formulaic in their style — play upon their conventionality is a major aspect of ironic tension in approximately half the epithets listed in this thesis. Moreover, there are noticeable patterns or formulae for the structuring of the poem's irony. It is thus possible to identify a number of specific 'ironic types' — topics and tropes by which the majority of ironic epithets may be characterised.

The latter category, tropes, includes all epithets which are to some extent hollow or inverse attributions. It includes all epithets where the thematically 'formulaic' phrase attributes values which are in some way being called into question. It also includes many of the epithets where an attribution highlights an embarassing disparity of some sort between the subject of the attribution and characters or objects that might substitute for that subject (such as the cases where a 'formulaic' praise epithet is hollowly attributed to Hroðgar while he is in the presence of Beowulf). All those cases in which an epithet is described as 'formulaic' or 'ostensibly formulaic' are a reference to formularisation in the former sense, the sense of 'formulaic' topics. This latter category does not necessarily contain poetic play upon formulae, although its epithets may involve this element; it contains the formularisation of poetic play.

The two sets are of interest for different reasons. They are slightly confused, by virtue of the one word operating simultaneously at separate levels of the analysis. One formula (in the latter sense) for the generation of ironic epithets in *Beowulf* is play upon a formula (former sense).

This critical model obviously turns around the adaptability of a certain definition of the poetic formula. It requires a certain measure of independence from established definitions of the 'formula,' such as the

'oral formula.' At the same time, the term is barely useful as a conceptual tool without some relation to those preceding usages. It derives from the patterns of analysis shared by the scholarly commentaries around oral-formulaic poetics, the related 'type scene' theory,[1] and studies in 'metrical grammar.'[2] It posits a particular coinage of key semiotic patterns in *Beowulf* and comparable poems.

Within the oral-formulaic framework, a formula is a compositional unit that generates the constituent elements of poetry. Oral-formulaic theory derives from a view that a phraseological tradition is the fundamental resource of a poet. It is at once a lexicon of phrases available for a poem, a rhetoric for their deployment, and a prosody for their arrangement. Thus formulae establish patterns of common referencing, including common variations under 'the appositive style.' They tend to reinforce the cultural values of a poet and her or his audience — the virtue of heroic courage, the importance of loyalty, the centrality of feasting in the (idealised) heroic society, the respective roles of husbands and wives, *et cetera*. If the formula intentionally serves the purposes of composition and poeisis, it also serves the purposes of cultural reaffirmation – it reaffirms a culturally normative social and political conception – whether intentionally or no.

There is a further function of the formula, both conscious and unconscious: in its normativity, it generates and reaffirms expectations about the content of a given poem. A formulaic representation of a hero, for example, invokes a set of expectations about that character which are more or less in conformity with the paradigm of values within which that formula has been employed. A reader will expect certain conduct and outcomes as a corollary – an amplification – of that representation.

Beowulf wæs breme blæd wide sprang (line 18)

An entropy-and-redundancy model of communications, such as that posited by Shannon and Weaver,[3] holds that meaning is established in

1 See, for example, Renoir, *A Key to Old Poems*, pp. 107-132.

2 See, for example, Calvin B. Kendall, *The Metrical Grammar of* Beowulf, Cambridge Studies in Anglo-Saxon England 5, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1991.

3 Claude E. Shannon and Warren Weaver, *The Mathematical Theory of Communication*, Illinois University Press, Urbana, 1971.

the by-play between redundant and entropic forms of information. 'Entropy,' in this sense, encompasses all innovative signification, while 'redundancy' encompasses both unnecessary and regularised signification. In such a model, the poetic formula clearly rests near the redundant pole. How then do formulaic theorists explain the act or moment of poetic creativity? This thesis is premised on a notion that formula is not the limit of poetry, that there is an entropic agent also observable. That agent, which must be closely linked to 'creativity,' is the poet's independence from formula; it is a necessarily rebellious attitude against the constraints of normative or systemic poetics. There can be no poetry without it. Any efforts to describe this agent, this 'poetic entropy,' turn out to be inadequate — either they are too definitive (hence miss important elements), or else they are not definitive enough (hence do not really describe it).[4] Some of its effects are demonstrable, however. One, opposed to the formulaic tendency to reaffirm cultural norms, is a tendency to attack them, subvert them, question them, and most of all to manipulate them. That tendency is manifested in moments of poetic irony. The ironic voice in *Beowulf* frequently draws on the formula's anticipatory tendency by playing off expectations against outcomes. It is perhaps the most significant permutation of Liggins' analysis of the poetics of *Beowulf*. A related effect is a tendency to manipulate norms of the poetic tradition or genre in which a given text is situated. It, too, is an ironic tendency. It, too, draws on the formula's anticipatory tendency by playing off generic expectations of the text against the actual course taken by it. This latter effect is the most pointed indicator of a self-consciously ironical author.

This conception of the formula – a generator of of the constituent units of poetry – is relevant to many theoretical approaches to poetics and communication. In sociolinguistic terms, the distinction between a formulaic tradition and a genre style is hard to define. Both are conceived of as systemic to some extent. For a deconstructionist model, the formula is a 'marker of the field of play.' In a Foucauldian sense,

4 This is not to belittle the efforts of those who have attempted to surmount that theoretical peak. One strong contribution in that direction is Nicolas Abraham, *Rhythms – On the Work, Translation, and Psychoanalysis*, Trans. Benjamin Thigpen and Nicholas T. Rand, Stanford U.P., 1995. Even Abraham leaves one with the feeling that there is plenty still to be understood about the moment of poetic creation.

both impose their disciplines (including 'poetic disciplines' such as prosody) on the speaking subject; both are coercive with regard to the subjective consciousness. There is a sense in which a system or a discourse or a genre or a discipline or a formula imposes limits. Some would argue the sonnet form in modern English is a perfect demonstration of that theoretical point. At the same time, it would not be satisfactory to say that there is no subjective agency for poets beyond the expounding of a paradigm. *Beowulf* shows time and time again that its author was conscious of many patterns characteristic of the poem's style, and capable of harnessing or caricaturing those patterns to achieve culturally – poetically and socially – entropic ends.

A metatheory for the relationship between poet and discourse is the type of dialectic relationship that is outlined by Voloshinov.[5] Poet and discourse are in a kind of symbiosis (without the one there cannot be the other). The paradigm of available formulae is in tension with the argument of the poem, the actual poetic text serving as a field for the playing out of their permutations. There are inevitable harmonies and discordances between the poetic formula and the poetic argument. In such a relationship, the two agents have dispositions fundamentally arbitrary with respect to each other. The significance of this arbitrariness for *Beowulf* is that it allows us to see how a style upholding certain values can coexist with a textual arrangement otherwise calling those same values into question.

This brings us back to the nature and uses of formulae. The above discussion has distinguished two levels of the formula in respect of *Beowulf*'s ironic epithets. One is a formula that is inherent in the genre of the poem, the formulae that are manipulated through the poem to serve ironic ends. It is a matter of topical formulae which the poem frequently treats ironically. The other is a formulaic quality about the ironies of the poem. It is a matter of tropes regularly used to generate irony. This latter sense is obviously reflexive where it captures a formulaic quality to the poem's ironic plays upon formulae. For the

5 Some claim the author was in fact M.M. Bakhtin. V.N. Voloshinov, *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language*, trans. Ladislav Matejka and I.R. Titunik, Harvard University Press, Cambridge (Massachusetts) and London, 1986. See the Translator's Preface for a discussion of authorship, p. ix. See also Katerina Clark and Michael Holquist, *Mikhail Bakhtin*, Belknap Press (Harvard University Press), Cambridge (Massachusetts) and London, 1984, pp. 212-237.

purposes of acknowledging that reflexiveness, it is useful to maintain the one term for discussing the two levels. This seems rather counterintuitive. The definition of formula was conceived by Parry and his successors to describe one level (the topic) and here it is being stretched to accommodate the considerations of another level (the trope). On the other hand, to fail to acknowledge the continuity of phenomenon from one level to the other would be to acquiesce in a reification of critical jargon.

a. Play upon formulae (topics)

Numerous formulae are played upon, although they are played upon in quite a wide variety of ways (see discussion of tropes below):

1. Encomium.
2. Alcohol and feasting.
3. Public function (peaceweaver, protector).
4. Religion.
5. Wealth/value.
6. Interpersonal relationships.
7. Historiography.
8. Words and deeds.
9. Corporeal dislocation.
10. Others.

1. Encomium

Encomium – formal expression of praise – is the topos most frequently treated ironically by the epithets of *Beowulf*. The contrastively offset epithets that attribute, or report the attribution of, some ostensibly positive quality number 201 of the 291 epithet readings in this survey.

As well as expressing a positive public judgement, the act of encomium promotes the object of praise; it reaffirms the values that underpin its positive appraisal, and it reaffirms also the cultural

significance of the situation of the act (the location, the participants, the timing, the language, and other circumstantial elements). Importantly, while it is always good to possess a given praiseworthy characteristic, some characters are expected to possess one or more of them; not to possess a given praiseworthy characteristic may be a defect of character.

Beowulf frequently treats aspects of the act of praise with irony. The poem thwarts praise attributions through offsets of the narrative amplification, problematises the values attributed, undercuts the formality of the settings, and embarrasses the objects of attribution (by juxtaposing more fitting ones).

Across cultures, encomium tends to be manifest in highly stylised and self-conscious languages and settings. Such stylisation and self-consciousness make for straightforward targets for ironical treatment, of course. By drawing attention to the pretension in an encomiastic expression – an easy enough task, given sufficient reflexive conscioussness – a poet can undercut the attributions (of valour, wisdom, or whatever) for which it was constructed.

'Encomium' as a category of the ironic epithets of *Beowulf* is so large a set that it begs further division into subcategories, reflecting the topical substance of the ostensibly encomiastic attributions. Each of these sub-topoi (except 'others') is itself a formulaic topic:

a) Martial prowess.

b) Courage.

c) Protective value.

d) Virtue.

e) Loyalty.

f) Wisdom.

g) Competence/quality.

h) Generosity/munificence.

i) Renown.

j) Age.

k) Nobility.

l) Sovereignty (locus/eminence/leadership).

m) Others.

a) Martial prowess

In a warrior-heroic milieu such as the world of *Beowulf*, the ability to win fights is at a premium. Martial prowess is thus a stock attribution among praise topoi of the poem. The *felahror* Scyld Scefing (line 27a) is an epitome of a heroic ruler, mighty up to and beyond his death. Due to the formulaic quality of the attribute, it is remarkably easy to manipulate. An epithetic phrase pointing up a character's battle-worthiness may be ostensibly innocuous, drawing attention to a quality essential to all good adult male citizens of this imagined ancient Germanic heroic society. Amplified through its narrative context, however, it may draw attention to a shortcoming of the character. By pointing up so conventional an attribution, there is a cultural legitimacy to the epithet that makes it quite subtle. Thus the Geat retainers, having failed Beowulf in his hour of greatest need, are described as *fyrdgesteallan* (line 2873b) by Wiglaf: their warrior role is invoked ironically, as an image of what they have failed to be. The most blatant example of this topic ironically used is the numerous depictions of the Danes as victorious (*Sige-Scyldingas*, *sigefolc*) when the narrative amplification has them unsuccessful in the fights of this poem.

4b, sceaþena þreatum; 6a, eorlas; 199b, guðcyning; 246a, guðfremmendra; 476b, fletwerod; 477a, wigheap; 499b (etc.), Ecglafes; 583a, billa brogan; 597b, Sige-Scyldingas; 616b, eþelwearde; 619b, sigerof kyning; 644a, sigefolca; 662b, hæleþa gedryht; 664a, wigfruma; 719b, healðegnas; 768b, cenra gehwylcum; 804a, sigewæpnum; 838b, guðrinc monig; 864a, heaþorofe; 893a, aglæca; 919a, swiðhicgende; 922b, getrume micle; 923a, cystum gecyþed; 981, gylpspræce guðgeweorca; 986b, hilderinces; 1011b, maran weorode; 1013b, blædagande; 1016a, swiðhicgende; 1026a, sceotendum; 1035a, eorla hleo; 1039, hildesetl heahcyninges; 1042a, widcuþes wig; 1044a, eodor Ingwina; 1047a, hordweard hæleþa; 1064, Healfdenes hildewisan; 1069a, hæleð Healf-Dena; 1170a, sinces brytta; 1189b, hæleþa bearn; 1212a, wyrsan wigfrecan; 1250b, tilu; 1299a, blædfæstne beorn; 1307a, har hilderince; 1311a, sigoreadig secg; 1424a, fuslic fyrdleoð; 1424b, feþa; 1576a, hilderinc; 1590, heorosweng heardne; 1601a, hwate Scyldingas; 1634b, cyningbalde men; 1646a, hæle hildedeor; 1678a, harum hildfruman; 1787b, ellenrofum; 1807a, se hearda; 1809a, leoflic iren; 1810a,

guðwine; 1810b, god; 1811a, wigcræftig; 1816a, hæle hildedeor; 1825a, guðgeweorca; 1852a, hordweard hæleþa; 1922b, sinces bryttan; 1948b, geongum cempan; 1977b, se ða sæcce genæs; 2004a, Sige-Scyldingas; 2014a, weorod; 2024a, hæleðum; 2112a, gomel guðwiga; 2414a, gearo guðfreca; 2458a, hæleð in hoðman; 2592b, aglæcean; 2598a, hildecystum; 2636a, guðgetawa; 2641a, garwigend; 2642a, hwate helmberend; 2649a, hildfruman; 2756a, sigehreðig; 2802a, heaðomære; 2836a, mægenagendra; 2873b, fyrdgesteallan; 2882b, wergendra; 2895a, bordhæbbende; 3111b, hæleða monegum.

b) Courage

Courage is a concomitant of the martial role whose emphasis differs from that of simple prowess. One can be brave without being successful, as the *Battle of Maldon* makes clear in its own ironic fashion.[6] Courage is a distinct aspect of the martial ethos. It is distinctively attributed within *Beowulf*, as another quality essential to the good warrior citizen. Thus *Beowulf wæs breme* (line 18a). As with martial prowess, the conventional nature of the attribute makes it a ready object for ironic manipulation. In his flyting exchange, Beowulf draws attention to the lack of bravery in Unferð through the phrase *searogrim* (line 594a). Other instances are subtler, typically hollow epithets attributing either a form of bravery that is not borne out in the narrative, or that, being apposite, embarasses another character or group of characters who ought to display similar bravery (for example line 1806a, *cuma collenferhð*).

3a, þa æþelingas; 476b, fletwerod; 499a (etc.), Unferð; 499a (etc.), Hunferð; 594a, searogrim; 1046b, mære þeoden; 1601a, hwate Scyldingas; 1634b, cyningbalde men; 1787b, ellenrofum; 1806a, cuma collenferhð; 1807a, se hearda; 1812b, modig secg; 1933b, deor; 1948b, geongum cempan; 1949a, æðelum diore; 2052b, hwate Scyldungas; 2090a, dior dædfruma; 2161a, hwatum Heorowearde; 2288b, stearcheort; 2541b, earges sið; 2642a, hwate helmberend; 2643a, ellenweorc; 2646a, dæd dollicra; 3005a, hwate Scildingas.

c) Protective value

A third conventional aspect of the warrior, especially the warlord, is his ability to protect the people and goods entrusted to his care. Scyld Scefing's name says he is the shield of his people.[7] The dying Beowulf reminds Wiglaf of his track record as protector of the Geats:

6 E.V. Gordon (ed.), *op. cit.*

7 See section 1.a in Chapter 5 for a detailed discussion of this point.

Ic ðas leode heold
fiftig wintra næs se folccyning
ymbesittendra ænig ðara
þe mec guðwinum gretan dorste
egesan ðeon. (lines 2732b-2736a)

Again, the conventional nature of the attribution makes it a ready object for ironic manipulation. Hroðgar in particular is often characterised in terms of his responsibility to protect the people he rules through epithetic phrases that attribute a protective value to him which is not borne out through the narrative context. Hygelac receives a similar treatment during those later sections of the poem that deal with his kingship. On several occasions Hroðgar or Hygelac is made to look inept by the demonstrably superior protective value of their protégé Beowulf.

182a, heofena Helm; 229b, weard Scildinga; 269a, leodgebyrgean; 428a, eodor Scyldinga; 429b, wigendra hleo; 476b, fletwerod; 477a, wigheap; 594a, searogrim; 616b, eþelwearde; 657a, ðryþærn; 663a, eodur Scyldinga; 667a, seleweard; 719b, healðegnas; 722a, fyrbendum fæst; 770a, reþe renweardas; 906b, aldorceare; 921b, beahhorda weard; 971a, lifwraþe; 971b, last weardian; 1035a, eorla hleo; 1044a, eodor Ingwina; 1227b, dreamhealdende; 1299a, blædfæstne beorn; 1321b, helm Scyldinga; 1390a, rices weard; 1580b, heorðgeneatas; 1623b, lidmanna helm; 1741b, se weard; 1866a, eorla hleo; 1890b, landweard; 1900a, batwearde; 1942a, freoðowebbe; 2017a, friðusibb folca; 2142a, eorla hleo; 2203a, bordhreoðan; 2642a, hwate helmberend; 2851a, guðgewædu; 2866a, eoredgeatwe; 2871b, guðgewædu; 2895a, bordhæbbende.

d) Virtue

Somewhat separate from the martial variety of encomium, there are seven occasions where an epithet plays on an attribution of virtue. The sample is not sufficiently large to furnish much insight on the nature of virtue in the world of Beowulf or the eyes of the poet, save the unsurprising point that it was a stock topic for encomium, and consequently that it was ironically manipulated from time to time by the poet.

499a (etc.), Unferð; 1259a, ides aglæcwif; 1810b, godne; 1932a, fremu folces cwen; 2144b, þeawum; 2288b, stearcheort; 2641b, gode; 2657a, ealdgewyrht.

e) Loyalty

Loyalty may be a martial or a socio-political quality: loyalty to one's lord, subject, or comrade on the battlefield is treated as of a piece with loyalty to one's family or political allies in the hall.[8] Loyalty is a personal quality integral to heroic society.[9] It is naturally an often used attribute by which to praise members of that society. Like all such attributes, it lends itself easily to use as an ironic topic. There are fourteen epithets in *Beowulf* that rely on this formula. Several focus on the Geats' desertion of Beowulf in his dragon fight, and the rest focus on various acts of disloyalty from the Danes.

> 499a (etc.), Hunferð; 1018a, freondum; 1019a, Þeod-Scyldingas; 1142b, weorodrædende; 1180b-1181a, minne [...] glædne Hroþulf; 1231a, druncne dryhtguman; 1326a, eaxlgestealla; 1580b, heorðgeneatas; 1601a, hwate Scyldingas; 1602a, goldwine gumena; 1714a, eaxlgesteallan; 1810a, guðwine; 1810b, godne; 1933a, 1934a, nænig [...] swæsra gesiða; 2873b, fyrdgesteallan.

f) Wisdom

It is good to be wise, and some get praised for it. Some characters are expected to show wisdom (such as the *selerædende* in line 51b); the poem does not let their shortcomings go unnoticed. There is a clichéd conflation of age and wisdom that is probed ironically on a couple of occasions (*eald ond infrod* in lines 1874a and 2449a). Kaske argues 'that the *sapientia et fortitudo* ideal is [...] the most basic theme in the poem, around which the other themes are arranged and to which they relate in various ways.'[10] Kaske's reading of *Beowulf* is unique in the degree of emphasis it places on that theme. For the purposes of this study, it is worth noting that *sapientia* is treated as a fairly cogent theme in the irony of the poem's ostensible encomium epithets (there are nine that play on a topos of wisdom-encomium) whereas the notion of *fortitudo* seems more broadly spread, more thematically pervasive, since

8 Cf. Hugh Magennis, *Images of Community in Old English Poetry*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1996, pp. 75-81, a section titled 'Treachery and betrayal in *Beowulf*'.

9 Cf. MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, pp. 121-130.

10 R.E. Kaske, '*Sapientia et Fortitudo* as the Controlling Theme of *Beowulf*,' in Nicholson (ed.), *An Anthology*, pp. 269-310; reprinted from *Studies in Philology* 55 (1958), 423-457.

it is addressed through a variety of praise-topoi (*Martial Prowess*, *Courage*, *Protective Value*, *Renown*, and *Sovereignty*).

> 51b, selerædende; 157a, witena; 778b, witan Scyldinga; 1384a, snotor guma; 1400b, wisa fengel; 1591b, snottre ceorlas; 1698b (ff), se wisa [...] sunu Healfdenes; 1874a, ealdum infrodum; 2449a, eald ond infrod.

g) Competence/quality

Aside from epithets focussing on the competence and quality of rulers (dealt with under Sovereignty below), the two epithets that play ironically on questions of fitness for service both focus on the sword Hrunting, whose reputed quality goes unsubstantiated throughout the course of this poem.

> 130a, æþeling ærgod; 1809a, leoflic iren; 1812a, meces ecge.

h) Generosity/munificence

One of the hallmarks of good rulership in the world of *Beowulf* is a readiness to distribute riches among one's subordinates. Thus to be called a generous ruler is a conventional encomium topic throughout Germanic heroic poetry. But all good things must come in good measure: the poem frequently presents a gift or a payment as a band-aid solution to the problem at hand. Hroðgar's munificence is no substitute for Beowulf's hands-on heroics in getting rid of monsters, however helpful it may have been in saving Ecgþeow's life. Nor does it avail Hroðgar's efforts to consolidate his dynasty. Meanwhile, the death of Beowulf cuts across his own claims to munificence, in that the Geats bury alongside his body the treasure he won for them. The poem establishes a link between this ostensible encomium topic and a critique of *wealth and value*, discussed below, to prompt an inference that the world of Beowulf was overly fond of material wealth.

> 464b, Ar-Scyldinga; 996, secga gehwylcum þara þe on swylc starað; 1012a, sincgyfan; 1039, hildesetl heahcyninges; 1046b, mære þeoden; 1047a, hordweard hæleþa; 1171a, goldwine gumena; 1177a, beahsele beorhta; 1198a, hordmaðum hæleða; 1253a, goldsele; 1279b, Hring-Dene; 1476a, goldwine gumena; 1487a, beaga bryttan; 1602a, goldwine gumena; 1852a, hordweard hæleþa; 1899, Hroðgares hordgestreonum; 1902a (ff), on meodubence maþme þy weorþra yrfelafe; 1922b, sinces bryttan; 2010a, hringsele; 2018b, beahwriðan; 2021b,

ealuwæge; 2023b, nægled sinc; 2025a, geong goldhroden; 2071a, sinces brytta; 2636a, guðgetawa; 2884a, sincþego; 2884b, swyrdgifu.

i) Renown

There is a link between this topic of encomium and the *historiography* topic, discussed below, which explains the high incidence of overlap between members of the two sets. The renown or illustrious reputation of a character, object, or phenomenon is a significant aspect of its value in the world of Beowulf. To have an inflated reputation is to be overvalued. Frequently the epithetic phrases of the poem attribute illustrious reputations to referents which are not sustained through the amplificatory narrative context. Frequently they play on some additional encomium topic in order to convey the sense of an ostensible renown, most often that additional topic is *martial prowess*.

3a, þa æþelingas; 129b, mære þeoden; 130a, æþeling ærgod; 201a, mære þeoden; 597b, Sige-Scyldingas; 619b, sigerof kyning; 644a, sigefolca; 768b, cenra gehwylcum; 828a, ellenmærþum; 863b, god cyning; 864a, heaþorofe; 893a, aglæca; 922b, getrume micle; 923a, cystum gecyþed; 1011b, maran weorode; 1013b, blædagande; 1019a, Þeod-Scyldingas; 1039, hildesetl heahcyninges; 1042a, widcuþes wig; 1046b, mære þeoden; 1047a, hordweard hæleþa; 1064, Healfdenes hildewisan; 1069a, hæleð Healf-Dena; 1177a, beahsele beorhta; 1189b, hæleþa bearn; 1198a, hordmaðum hæleða; 1253a, goldsele; 1279b, Hring-Dene; 1299a, blædfæstne beorn; 1308a, aldorþegn; 1474, se mæra maga Healfdenes; 1489b, widcuð man; 1787b, ellenrof; 1852a, hordweard hæleþa; 1941b, ænlicu; 2004a, Sige-Scyldingas; 2011, se mæra mago Healfdenes; 2015b, healsittendra; 2024a, hæleðum; 2320a, dryhtsele dyrnne; 2802a, heaðomære; 3111b, hæleða monegum; 3182b, lofgeornost.

j) Age

The world of Beowulf attaches a positive value to old age, meaning that age connotes wisdom and social eminence. In four cases, the epithets of the poem play on these loadings by a tension between the ostensible praise intention of an attributive phrase and its less than compatible narrative context. In two of those cases there is play on the idea of the veteran (*eald æscwiga*, *gomel guðwiga*); in the other two there is a questioning of wisdom (*eald [ond] infrod*).

130a, æþeling ærgod; 2042a, eald æscwiga; 2112a, gomel guðwiga; 1874a, ealdum infrodum; 2449a, eald ond infrod.

k) Nobility

Æþelu, or nobility, is attributed to several characters in *Beowulf* as evidence of their ostensible praiseworthiness. The 'Spear-Danes in days of yore' are taken as worthy of epic treatment on account of their reputation as *æþelingas*. Nobility is essentially a virtue in itself (as well as being a system of virtues), so the attribution of nobility needs no qualifying to count as praise. Where the amplification is at odds with the attribution, however, it does qualify the nobility: it mitigates it. To prove this point requires some way of measuring up the two. Finding where to start is not easy, since, for all that has been written about the morality of *Beowulf*, little has been said about that key word *æþelu*. That it is a system of virtues seems self-evident, although I can easily imagine this may be my imposition on a culturally remote phenomenon. 'A system of virtues' describes the way nobility is conceived. On the one hand, nobility is an innate quality. One is born with the level of nobility one has. On the other hand, nobility is manifested in behavioural outcomes. There is plenty of scope for personal and political irony within this conception. A noble person does what is noble, enacting courage, wisdom, good temper, and so forth by virtue of good birth. Therefore, a failure to act nobly calls into question not only nobility of the individual, but also the nobility of her or his family, the bloodline.

> 3a, þa æþelingas; 1308a, aldorþegn; 1804a, æþelingas; 1815a, æþeling; 1870b, cyning æþelum god; 1941a, idese; 1949a, æðelum diore; 2025b, glædum suna Frodan; 2143b, maga Healfdenes; 2147a, sunu Healfdenes.

l) Sovereignty (locus/eminence/leadership)

Sovereignty is an asserted phenomenon. A good sovereign is not objectively established, nor is a good society, a good polity, a good court, a good place. But there are numerous criteria by which the appraisal may be made. Good sovereignty brings security, underpins prosperity, encourages virtue, and so forth. Different conceptions of the role will naturally involve different criteria, so whereas the poet seems to push the idea that sovereignty should promote the love of God, it is not clear how the world of *Beowulf* felt about this. The ironic epithets of the poem that ostensibly praise their referents through the attribution of this topic focus on sovereignty as it is manifested through place, eminence, and qualities of leadership. The comment that a place passes on a

sovereignty is also significant in *Beowulf*. It should be read in light of the *locus amoenus* topos as discussed by Magennis.[11]

> 5b, meodosetla; 129b, mære þeoden; 199b, guðcyning; 201a, mære þeoden; 428a, eodor Scyldinga; 429b, wigendra hleo; 609a, brego Beorht-Dena; 616b, eþelwearde; 619b, sigerof kyning; 663a, eodur Scyldinga; 717, Hroþgares ham; 768a, ceasterbuendum; 863b, god cyning; 906b, aldorceare; 1012a, sincgyfna; 1019a, Þeod-Scyldingas; 1039, hildesetl heahcyninges; 1044a, eodor Ingwina; 1046b, mære þeoden; 1142b, weorodrædende; 1142b, worold rædenne; 1170a, sinces brytta; 1171a, goldwine gumena; 1177a, beahsele beorhta; 1209a, rice þeoden; 1231a, druncne dryhtguman; 1321b, helm Scyldinga; 1390a, rices weard; 1398a, mihtigan Drihtne; 1474, se mæra maga Healfdenes; 1476a, goldwine gumena; 1487a, beaga bryttan; 1580b, heorðgeneatas; 1587a, aldorleasne; 1602a, goldwine gumena; 1634b, cyningbalde men; 1643b, meodowongas; 1678a, harum hildfruman; 1684b (ff), woroldcyninga se selesta be sæm tweonum ðara þe on Scedenigge sceattas dælde; 1698b (ff), se wisa [...] sunu Healfdenes; 1788a, fletsittendum; 1814b, weorð Denum; 1824a, gumena dryhten; 1866a, eorla hleo; 1870b, cyning æþelum god; 1885b (f), an cyning æghwæs orleahtre; 1922b, sinces bryttan; 1932a, fremu folces cwen; 1933a, 1934a, nænig [...] swæsra gesiða; 1940b, cwenlic þeaw; 2011, se mæra mago Healfdenes; 2071a, sinces brytta; 2142a, eorla hleo; 2143b, maga Healfdenes; 2147a, sunu Healfdenes; 2320a, dryhtsele dyrnne; 2567a, winia bealdor; 2868a, healsittendum; 3003a, ealdorleasne; 3112a, boldagendra.

m) Others

The one example it has not been possible to categorise within these topics of encomium, *winsele westen*, is as much an attribution of what Magennis has called 'the inverted *locus amoenus*.'[12]

> 2456a, winsele westen.

2. Alcohol and Feasting

The link between alcohol and feasting may seem an unnecessary one, however the two phenomena are thoroughly intertwined in *Beowulf*.[13] Consistently throughout the poem, alcohol and feasting stand figuratively for the joy and merriment they are supposed to facilitate. This expectation leads to frequent disappointment, which is ironic to

11 Hugh Magennis, *Images of Community*, pp. 138-143.
12 *Ibid.*
13 *Ibid.*, pp. 60-81. Also Edwards, 'Art and Alcoholism in *Beowulf*,' 127-131.

varying degrees. Writing of the feast that is described between lines 1010 and 1237 (incorporating the Finnsburg intermezzo), Magennis writes:

> The most magnificent of feasts – the largest scale in extant Germanic poetry – is insistently seen from an ironic perspective. Indeed the feast concept itself contributes significantly to the force of the irony, since the image of the feast represents the most powerful expression of communal joy available to the poet. This joy is presented, however, in the context of strife to come among the Danes in the future, and of the looming presence of Grendel's mother: 'Wyrd ne cuþon [...]'[14]

It also sets up the highly ironic 'morning after the feast' syndrome (for example, when the Danes wake up to find some of their comrades have been eaten), which has parallels to a broader human experience of hangovers.[15] The naïvety implicit in this topos evinces a *negative expectation* that the cycle will recur, as is clearly shown in the closing two lines of Hroðgar's first speech to Beowulf:

> '[...] Ful oft gebeotedon beore druncne
> ofer ealowæge oretmecgas
> þæt hie in beorsele bidan woldon
> Grendles guþe mid gryrum ecga.
> Ðonne wæs þeos medoheal on morgentid
> drihtsele dreorfah þonne dæg lixte
> eal bencþelu blode bestymed
> heall heorudreore ahte ic holdra þy læs
> deorre duguðe þe þa deað fornam.
> Site nu to symle ond onsæl meoto
> sigehreð secgum swa þin sefa hwette.' (lines 480-490).

There is a tendency for the poem to treat combat metaphorically through other forms of social interaction. Frequently a fight is referred to as *symbel*, once as *ealuscerwen*. Comparable here is some of the transaction imagery of the poem. Beowulf's encounter with Grendel is a *hondgemot* — which seems to have been resolved by a handshake. It is

14 *Images of Community*, pp. 67-68.

15 This development is echoed in numerous other Germanic heroic poems. Cf. *Atlaqviða in grænlenzca* and *Hamðismál* from Gustav Neckel (ed.), *Edda: Die Lieder des Codex Regius nebst verwandten* Denkmälern, rev. Hans Kuhn, Carl Winter Universitätsverlag, Heidelberg, 1983, pp. 240-247 and 269-274.

also referred to as a *ðing*. Thus there is a ready exchange between the poetics of war and the poetics of conciliation. This affords plenty of scope for irony.

> 4b, sceaþena þreatum; 5b, meodosetla; 480b, beore druncen; 482a, beorsele; 484a, medoheal; 531a, beore druncen; 564a, symbel; 721a, dreamum bedæled; 769a, ealuscerwen; 992a, folmum gefrætwod; 1008a, symle; 1010b, symbel; 1016a, swiðhicgende; 1231a, druncne dryhtguman; 1240b, beorscealca sum; 1372b, heoru stow; 1416a, wynleasne wudu; 1643b, meodowongas; 1788a, fletsittendum; 1902a (ff), on meodubence maþme þy weorþra yrfelafe; 2014a, weorod; 2015b, healsittendra; 2016a, medudream maran; 2021b, ealuwæge; 2633b, medu; 2635a, biorsele; 2867a, ealubence.

3. Public Function

To some extent, all the characters in *Beowulf* are defined by public aspects of their role: a hero's role includes defending the public; a king's role includes ruling the public; a queen's role includes serving drink in public; it is possible that Unferð's role includes selectively offending members of the public. These public functions are more or less a fixed corollary of the characters and their biographies. Being fixed, they generate expectations about the manners and outcomes of character behaviour. As with any expectations generated by formula in the poem, there is a potential for play in the disappointment of those expectations. The poet uses this potential to ironic effect. In fact, so frequently are certain expectations disappointed (for example, the role of expatriate wives as 'peaceweavers' is consistently pathetic) that it is often more appropriate to talk of *negative expectations*, of formula driven hopelessness, where the fulfilment (rather than disappointment) of that negative expectation is itself ironic. See the discussion of tropes below.

> 51b, selerædende; 52a, hæleð under heofenum; 63b, healsgebedda; 142a, healðegnes; 157a, witena; 229b, weard Scildinga; 269a, leodgebyrgean; 428a, eodor Scyldinga; 429b, wigendra hleo; 476b, fletwerod; 477a, wigheap; 609a, brego Beorht-Dena; 616b, eþelwearde; 619b, sigerof kyning; 657a, ðryþærn; 663a, eodur Scyldinga; 664a, wigfruma; 709b, beadwa geþinges; 717, Hroþgares ham; 719b, healðegnas; 720b, rinc; 768a, ceasterbuendum; 768b, cenra gehwylcum; 770a, reþe renweardas; 778b, witan Scyldinga; 838b, guðrinc monig; 863b, god cyning; 921b, beahhorda weard; 924b, mægþa hose; 986b, hilderinces; 1010b, symbel; 1011b, maran weorode; 1012a, sincgyfan; 1026a, sceotendum; 1035a, eorla hleo; 1039, hildesetl heahcyninges; 1044a, eodor Ingwina; 1046b, mære þeoden; 1064, Healfdenes hildewisan; 1069a, hæleð Healf-Dena; 1082b, meðelstede;

1142b, weorodrædende; 1170a, sinces brytta; 1171a, goldwine gumena; 1177a, beahsele beorhta; 1231a, druncne dryhtguman; 1321b, helm Scyldinga; 1384a, snotor guma; 1390a, rices weard; 1424b, feþa; 1487a, beaga bryttan; 1580b, heorðgeneatas; 1601a, hwate Scyldingas; 1602a, goldwine gumena; 1678a, harum hildfruman; 1788a, fletsittendum; 1804a, æþelingas; 1824a, gumena dryhten; 1825a, guðgeweorca; 1866a, eorla hleo; 1890b, landweard; 1900a, batwearde; 1922b, sinces bryttan; 1933a, 1934a, nænig [...] swæsra gesiða; 1940b, cwenlic þeaw; 1941a, idese; 1942a, freoðowebbe; 2014a, weorod; 2015b, healsittendra; 2017a, friðusibb folca; 2022b, fletsittende; 2031b, seo bryd; 2059a, se fæmnan þegn; 2142a, eorla hleo; 2144b, þeawum; 2598a, hildecystum; 2642a, hwate helmberend; 2643a, ellenweorc; 2649a, hildfruman; 2836a, mægenagendra; 2868a, healsittendum; 2873b, fyrdgesteallan; 2998a, hamweorðunge; 3111b, hæleða monegum; 3112a, boldagendra.

4. Religion

Much has been written about the religiosity or otherwise of *Beowulf*. Of interest here are those instances where an epithet attributing or referencing some religious quality displays irony. Some of these take quite a high register, especially in denouncing pagan religious practice (for example, line 182a, *heofena Helm*). If there is a disappointment of expectations, it is exclusively the heathen religious aspirations of ancient Nordic society that are controverted. None of these epithets questions the doctrines of the Christian faith. If religious doctrine is one of the measures by which the poem distances itself and its receiving public from the world and public it portrays, this may suggest something more broadly about the ironical disposition of the poem. It may suggest that there is a dismissive aspect of the poem's attitude towards all or part of its subject matter, justified partly or wholly on religious grounds. This is a disconcerting possibility, perhaps, but one with which the question of irony in *Beowulf* inevitably confronts us (see subsequent chapter).

51b, selerædende; 52a, hæleð under heofenum; 182a, heofena Helm; 1201b, ecne ræd; 1398a, mihtigan Drihtne; 1741b, se weard; 1922b, sinces bryttan; 2097b, lifwynna; 2292b (f), Waldendes hyldo.

5. Wealth/value

Wealth is a topic frequently treated through the encomiastic topic of munificence or generosity (see above). In other cases there is epithetic reference to the wealth or value of a character or object that is not

constructed as an attribution of generosity or munificence. This category generally frames both types. Both types tend to suggest a materialism that is ironic from a perspective subscribing to Christianity's moral revelation (the naïve but encomiastic conflation of wealth and goodness, as in line 863b, *ac þæt wæs god cyning*) or a faith in material value that is ironic in light of events (the futility of trying to buy peace or friendship, the fickle nature of material goods such as Hrunting, *et cetera*). Perhaps the most open expression of this skeptical attitude towards material wealth comes from the narrator as Wiglaf is collecting the dragon's hoard to show *Beowulf* (in what may be read, in one light, as an ironical comment on the fates of both Beowulf and the dragon):

> Sinc eaðe mæg
> gold on grunde gumcynnes gehwone
> oferhigian hyde se ðe wylle! (lines 2764b-2766)

Material wealth then serves as an ironic counterpoint either to practical effectiveness,[16] or to spiritual and moral wealth. Wiglaf's speech to the Geats brings out this aspect most strongly, along with the aspect of alcohol and feasting and the distinction between words and deeds:

> Þæt la mæg secgan se ðe wyle soð specan
> þæt se mondryhten se eow ða maðmas geaf
> eoredgeatwe þe ge þær on standað
> þonne he on ealubence oft gesealde
> healsittendum helm ond byrnan
> þeoden his þegnum swylce he þrydlicost
> ower feor oððe neah findan meahte
> þæt he genunga guðgewædu
> wraðe forwurpe ða hyne wig beget. (lines 2864-2872)

And further on in the same speech:

> Nu sceal sincþego ond swyrdgifu
> eall eðelwyn eowrum cynne
> lufen alicgean londrihtes mot
> þære mægburge monna æghwylc
> idel hweorfan syððan æðelingas
> feorran gefricgean fleam eowerne

16 The ironically constructed assumption in *Beowulf* that 'fine feathers make fine birds' is addressed directly by Shippey, 'The World of the Poem,' pp. 41-42.

domleasan dæd. Deað bið sella
eorla gehwylcum þonne edwitlif. (lines 2884-2891)

464b, Ar-Scyldinga; 921b, beahhorda weard; 996, secga gehwylcum þara þe on swylc starað; 1012a, sincgyfan; 1039, hildesetl heahcyninges; 1046b, mære þeoden; 1047a, hordweard hæleþa; 1170a, sinces brytta; 1171a, goldwine gumena; 1177a, beahsele beorhta; 1198a, hordmaðum hæleða; 1209a, rice þeoden; 1253a, goldsele; 1279b, Hring-Dene; 1476a, goldwine gumena; 1487a, beaga bryttan; 1602a, goldwine gumena; 1719a, breosthord blodreow; 1809a, leoflic iren; 1812a, meces ecge; 1814b, weorð Denum; 1852a, hordweard hæleþa; 1899, Hroðgares hordgestreonum; 1902a (ff), on meodubence maþme þy weorþra yrfelafe; 1922b, sinces bryttan; 2010a, hringsele; 2018b, beahwriðan; 2023b, nægled sinc; 2025a, geong goldhroden; 2036b, gamolra lafe; 2037b, Heaða-Beardna gestreon; 2071a, sinces brytta; 2083a, goldsele; 2245a, hringa hyrde; 2282b, frioðowære; 2636a, guðgetawa; 2884a, sincþego; 2884b, swyrdgifu; 2919b, frætwe; 3168a, eldum swa unnyt.

6. Interpersonal Relationships

By 'interpersonal relationships' is meant ties of blood, marriage, friendship, service, protection, contract, or some other link that creates a paradigm of mutual obligations between two or more individuals. The similarity to the basic conditions of 'public function' is clear. Characters in such relationships are obligated in certain ways, generating a textual expectation that they will behave in certain ways under given conditions. This expectation begets disappointment. Brothers are expected not to kill one another, but occasionally do. Foster fathers should do their utmost to protect and honour their foster children, but occasionally neglect to. It is important to acknowledge that some ironic epithets playing on interpersonal relationships do not primarily turn around the disappointment of any particular expectation. Sexual innuendoes are one such. As with the discussion of 'public function,' perhaps it is more appropriate to talk of a 'negative expectation' that such instances play upon, where the fulfilment (rather than disappointment) of that negative expectation is itself ironic.

530b, wine min Unferð; 588a, heafodmægum; 709b, beadwa geþinges; 1018a, freondum; 1019a, Þeod-Scyldingas; 1171a, goldwine gumena; 1180b-1181a, minne [...] glædne Hroþulf; 1227b, dreamhealdende; 1231a, druncne dryhtguman; 1237b, hand gemæne; 1263a, fæderenmæge; 1326a, eaxlgestealla; 1465b, mago Ecglafes; 1522b, gist; 1545a, selegyst; 1580b, heorðgeneatas; 1602a, goldwine gumena;

1714a, eaxlgesteallan; 1810a, guðwine; 1810b, godne; 1933a, 1934a, nænig [...] swæsra gesiða; 1943b, leofne mannan; 2028b, wælfæhða dæl; 2031b, seo bryd; 2065b, wiflufan; 2068b, unfæcne; 2076a, Hondscio; 2127a, leofne mannan; 2282b, frioðowære; 2415b, yðe ceap; 2438a, freawine; 2439b, mæg; 2440a, broðor; 2482a, heardan ceape; 2633b, medu; 2884a, sincþego; 2884b, swyrdgifu.

7. Historiography

Throughout *Beowulf* runs an acute awareness of received historiography:[17] The first manifest example of this awareness is the first sentence of the poem: 'Well, we have heard of the Spear-Danes in days of yore, of the power of people-kings, how those nobles performed courage.'[18] This acknowledgement serves also to acknowledge readerly expectations about the conduct of the narrative. We are led to expect an exploration of Danish might, splendour, martial prowess, and sundry heroic virtues. The characteristic forms of this expectation are frequently defined and made salient through the epithetic phrases of the poem, before the amplification of the epithets undercuts and disappoints those characteristics. Thus we see many epithets that report a given character's reputation which are contrastively offset by their narrative amplification. More than that, the poem explicitly undercuts the received historiography from time to time. The author, as well as other poets reported throughout *Beowulf*, has an insight on the passage of historical events that claims superiority to otherwise publicly available knowledge. Whether it is a knowledge of the inscriptions on the sword hilt found by Beowulf or a knowledge of the role played by Fitela in Sigemund's legendary dragon slaying, the voice of the poet (and of poets reported in the poem) is engaged in a critical dialogue with received historical knowledges. This is clearly manifested through the assertion of new or superior information, a form of historiographic competitiveness. It is also manifested through ironical treatment of the expectations generated by that received historiography, against which the poetic voices of *Beowulf* contend. Most frequently this involves an epithet that ostensibly reaffirms the judgements of received

17 Roberta Frank, 'The *Beowulf* Poet's Sense of History,' Bloom (ed.), *Modern Critical Interpretations*, pp. 51-61.

18 Lines 1–3.

historiography, but that is contrastively offset in some way that undercuts the epithet's ostensibly uncontroversial attribution.

> 3a, þa æþelingas; 129b, mære þeoden; 130a, æþeling ærgod; 201a, mære þeoden; 464b, Ar-Scyldinga; 506a, se Beowulf; 597b, Sige-Scyldingas; 619b, sigerof kyning; 644a, sigefolca; 657a, ðryþærn; 662b, hæleþa gedryht; 717, Hroþgares ham; 778b, witan Scyldinga; 828a, ellenmærþum; 863b, god cyning; 864a, heaþorofe; 893a, aglæca; 922b, getrume micle; 923a, cystum gecyþed; 1011b, maran weorode; 1013b, blædagande; 1018a, freondum; 1019a, Þeod-Scyldingas; 1039, hildesetl heahcyninges; 1042a, widcuþes wig; 1046b, mære þeoden; 1047a, hordweard hæleþa; 1064, Healfdenes hildewisa; 1069a, hæleð Healf-Dena; 1071a (etc.), Hildeburh; 1198a, hordmaðum hæleða; 1250b, tilu; 1279b, Hring-Dene; 1299a, blædfæstne beorn; 1307a, har hilderinc; 1474, se mæra maga Healfdenes; 1580b, heorðgeneatas; 1591b, snottre ceorlas; 1601a, hwate Scyldingas; 1684b (ff), woroldcyninga se selesta be sæm tweonum ðara þe on Scedenigge sceattas dælde; 1698b (ff), se wisa [...] sunu Healfdenes; 1787b, ellenrofum; 1804a, æþelingas; 1809a, leoflic iren; 1810b, godne; 1814b, weorð Denum; 1815a, æþeling; 1824a, gumena dryhten; 1852a, hordweard hæleþa; 1870b, cyning æþelum god; 1885b (f), an cyning æghwæs orleahtre; 1932a, fremu folces cwen; 1941b, ænlicu; 2004a, Sige-Scyldingas; 2011, se mæra mago Healfdenes; 2142a, eorla hleo; 2144b, þeawum; 2592b, aglæcean; 2641b, gode; 2646a, dæda dollicra; 2756a, sigehreðig; 2802a, heaðomære; 3005a, hwate Scildingas; 3111b, hæleða monegum.

8. Words and Deeds

There is only one epithet in *Beowulf* that plays directly on this topic, although the distinction between intentions and outcomes is an ironic aspect of many of the poem's epithets. The exemplar is in line 981, *gylpspræce guðgeweorca*. The solitary nature of this example means that it is possibly inaccurate to describe it as a topical formula for the poem's epithets. We have seen how it is a prominent topic of the poem, however. For this reason 'words and deeds' deserves to be identified within the taxonomy, albeit as an almost empty set.

> 981, gylpspræce guðgeweorca.

9. Corporeal dislocation

There are frequent references to the poem's characters which draw attention to a wound they have received or are about to receive, by drawing attention to some part of the body. Typically the character is

referenced directly, but not always. In two connected cases the wounding referenced is of a generic male character, the man who stares at Modþryðo (line 1937a, *handgewriþene*; line 1938a, *mundgripe*). In one case there is an oblique reference to Grendel through a suggestion of his recent injury (line 992a, *folmum gefrætwod*). The ironies of these epithets are essentially playful,[19] if grimly so, rather than satiric or critical. That is, these epithets are not argumentatively pointed, and yet they display ironic tensions quite clearly.

426a, ðing; 718a, aldordagum; 719a, heardran hæle; 757a, ealderdagum; 766a, se hearmscaþa; 1071a (etc.), Hildeburh; 1586a, guðwerigne; 1936a, wælbende; 2082b, bealewa gemyndig; 2289a, feondes fotlast; 2446a, giong on galgan; 2712a, eorðdraca; 2825a, egeslic eorðdraca; 2830a, se widfloga; 3043b, lyftwynne; 3046a, eorðscrafa; 3116b, isernscure; 3117a, stræla storm.

10. Others

Not surprisingly, there is a number of epithets that elude placement in the above topic categories. The same is quantitatively less true for the taxonomy of tropes (see below). The level of coincidence between topic 'others' and trope 'others' in this study is low. Only line 1936a, *wælbende* is thoroughly 'other'. Of these topic 'others' it is not easy to find any thematic continuity beyond obvious connections between those epithets that contain identical or substantially similar constituent terms. For example, two instances of *lean* (line 114b, line 1584b) are obviously linked to the one *endelean* (line 1692b), but it is not clear how they may be topically related to the remaining ironic epithets in this group. Several share common trope characteristics, which are reflected in the taxonomy of tropes (below). It is not clear how one might identify topical formulae that are subjects of ironic play among the epithets in this group, however.

426a, ðing; 718a, aldordagas; 719a, heardra hæl; 757a, ealderdagas; 766a, se hearmscaþa; 1071a (etc.), Hildeburh; 1586a, guðwerig; 1936a, wælbende; 2082b, bealewa gemyndig; 2289a, feondes fotlast; 2446a, giong on galgan; 2712a, eorðdraca; 2825a, egeslic eorðdraca; 2830a, se widfloga; 3043b, lyftwyn; 3046a, eorðscræf; 3116b, isernscure; 3117a, stræla storm.

19 'Playful', that is, after Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*: the principal textual function of these epithets is to occasion 'fun'.

b. Formularised play (tropes)

There are numerous typical patterns in *Beowulf*'s ironical treatment of aspects of its subject matter. Often several are in evidence at once:

1. Contrastively offset epithets.
2. Subversion of cultural paradigm.
3. Innuendo.
4. Myth-identifying.
5. Scorn.
6. Negative expectation.
7. Paradox.
8. Others.

1. Contrastively Offset Epithets

As discussed in Chapter 5, offsetting is the process of counterposing two or more mutually contrastive elements. A 'contrastive offset,' then, is an element in such a process, viewed in terms of its relationship to the others. The contrastively offset epithet is a technique central to the irony of epithets in *Beowulf*. Of the techniques for formularised play listed in this chapter, it is far and away the most frequent. The methodological significance of the technique is discussed in Chapter 5 . Below are set out the subcategories of contrastively offset epithets that may be distilled from the poem:

a) Hollow epithet.
b) Apophatic epithet.
c) Dramatic upstaging.
d) Euphemism.
e) Paradox.

a) Hollow Epithet

This is far and away the most frequent ironic trope among the epithets of *Beowulf*. A character or an object is referenced by the attribution of qualities that, according to the narrative amplification, are wanting in the character or object. A hollow epithet is a classic manifestation of irony in its capacity as dissimulation – calling something what it is not. Naturally, then, the hollow epithets of *Beowulf* touch on almost all of the topical formulae listed above. As the principal manifestations of such a central aspect of irony, they are pervasive in the argument of the poem.

> 3a, þa æþelingas; 51b, selerædende; 52a, hæleð under heofenum; 129b, mære þeoden; 130a, æþeling ærgod; 157a, witena; 199b, guðcyning; 201a, mære þeoden; 229b, weard Scildinga; 246a, guðfremmendra; 269a, leodgebyrgean; 428a, eodor Scyldinga; 429b, wigendra hleo; 476b, fletwerod; 477a, wigheap; 499b (etc.), Ecglafes; 583a, billa brogna; 597b, Sige-Scyldingas; 609a, brego Beorht-Dena; 616b, eþelwearde; 619b, sigerof kyning; 644a, sigefolca; 657a, ðryþærn; 662b, hæleþa gedryht; 663a, eodur Scyldinga; 664a, wigfruma; 717, Hroþgares ham; 722a, fyrbendum fæst; 768a, ceasterbuendum; 768b, cenra gehwylcum; 804a, sigewæpnum; 828a, ellenmærþum; 838b, guðrinc monig; 863b, god cyning; 864a, heaþorofe; 919a, swiðhicgende; 921b, beahhorda weard; 922b, getrume micle; 923a, cystum gecyþed; 1011b, maran weorode; 1012a, sincgyfan; 1013b, blædagande; 1016a, swiðhicgende; 1018a, freondum; 1019a, Þeod-Scyldingas; 1026a, sceotendum; 1035a, eorla hleo; 1039, hildesetl heahcyninges; 1042a, widcuþes wig; 1044a, eodor Ingwina; 1046b, mære þeoden; 1047a, hordweard hæleþa; 1064, Healfdenes hildewisa; 1069a, hæleð Healf-Dena; 1142b, weorodrædende; 1170a, sinces brytta; 1177a, beahsele beorhta; 1180b-1181a, minne [...] glædne Hroþulf; 1189b, hæleþa bearn; 1198a, hordmaðum hæleða; 1212a, wyrsan wigfrecan; 1227b, dreamhealdende; 1250b, tilu; 1299a, blædfæstne beorn; 1307a, har hilderinc; 1311a, sigoreadig secg; 1321b, helm Scyldinga; 1384a, snotor guma; 1390a, rices weard; 1400b, wisa fengel; 1424a, fuslic fyrdleoð; 1424b, feþa; 1474, se mæra maga Healfdenes; 1576a, hilderince; 1580b, heorðgeneatas; 1590, heorosweng heardne; 1591b, snottre ceorlas; 1601a, hwate Scyldingas; 1602a, goldwine gumena; 1678a, harum hildfruman; 1684b (ff), woroldcyninga se selesta be sæm tweonum ðara þe on Scedenigge sceattas dælde; 1698b (ff), se wisa [...] sunu Healfdenes; 1741b, se weard; 1787b, ellenrofum; 1807a, se hearda; 1809a, leoflic iren; 1810a, guðwine; 1810b, godne; 1811a, wigcræftigne; 1812a, meces ecge; 1812b, modig secg;[20] 1814b, weorð Denum; 1815a, æþeling; 1824a, gumena dryhten; 1866a, eorla hleo; 1870b, cyning æþelum god; 1874a, ealdum infrodum; 1885b (f), an cyning æghwæs orleahtre; 1890b, landweard; 1899, Hroðgares hordgestreonum; 1900a, batwearde; 1922b, sinces bryttan; 1932a, fremu folces cwen; 1940b, cwenlic þeaw; 1941a, idese; 1942a,

20 This epithet can be read as hollow only if it references Unferð. See Chapter 6.

freoðowebbe; 2004a, Sige-Scyldingas; 2011, se mæra mago Healfdenes; 2014a, weorod; 2017a, friðusibb folca; 2024a, hæleð; 2036b, gamolra lafe; 2037b, Heaða-Beardna gestreon; 2052b, hwate Scyldungas; 2083a, goldsele; 2112a, gomel guðwiga; 2142a, eorla hleo; 2144b, þeawum; 2161a, hwatum Heorowearde; 2203a, bordhreoðan; 2438a, freawine; 2439b, mæg; 2440a, broðor; 2449a, eald ond infrod; 2567a, winia bealdor; 2598a, hildecystum; 2636a, guðgetawa; 2756a, sigehreðig; 2802a, heaðomære; 2825a, egeslic eorðdraca; 2830a, se widfloga; 2836a, mægenagendra; 2851a, guðgewædu; 2866a, eoredgeatwe; 2871b, guðgewædu; 2873b, fyrdgesteallan; 2895a, bordhæbbende; 3005a, hwate Scildingas; 3111b, hæleða monegum.

b) Apophatic Epithet

Hollowness is stating what is not; apophasis is stating the opposite of what is. It is calling a coward courageous or calling a friend an enemy. Whereas hollow epithets in *Beowulf* consist of attributing qualities found wanting in the narrative amplification, the poem's apophatic epithets consist of attributing qualities that are directly contradictory to the amplification. The affective difference is perhaps more a question of the degree of contrastive offset than of its mode: a hollow epithet may be subtle in ways that an apophatic epithet cannot be, but this seems to be a quantitative more than qualitative distinction.

4b, sceaþena þreatum; 426a, ðing; 530b, wine min Unferð; 564a, symbel; 594a, searogrim; 718a, aldordagum; 757a, ealderdagum; 769a, ealuscerwen; 971a, lifwraþe; 971b, last weardian; 986b, hilderinces; 1008a, symle; 1082b, meðelstede; 1259a, ides aglæcwif; 1522b, gist; 1545a, selegyst; 1942a, freoðowebbe; 1943b, leofne mannan; 2090a, dior dædfruma; 2097b, lifwynna; 2127a, leofne mannan; 2320a, dryhtsele dyrnne; 2541b, earges sið; 3043b, lyftwynne.

c) Dramatic Upstaging

Dramatic upstaging is where an epithet is attributed ironically to a character or object, although a more appropriate object of the attribution is also present. For example, the occasions when Hroðgar is described as 'victorious' by, or in the presence of, Beowulf. This trope is closely related to other contrastively offset epithetic ironies. It is frequently used to highlight hollow or apophatic epithets.

3a, þa æþelingas; 6a, eorlas; 142a, healðegnes; 182a, heofena Helm; 229b, weard Scildinga; 246a, guðfremmendra; 269a, leodgebyrgean; 428a, eodor Scyldinga; 429b, wigendra hleo; 499a (etc.), Unferð; 499a (etc.), Hunferð; 583a, billa brogan; 594a, searogrim; 597b, Sige-Scyldingas; 609a, brego Beorht-Dena; 616b, eþelwearde; 619b, sigerof kyning; 644a, sigefolca; 662b, hæleþa gedryht; 663a, eodur Scyldinga; 664a, wigfruma; 667a, seleweard; 717, Hroþgares ham; 719b, healðegnas; 766a, se hearmscaþa; 768a, ceasterbuendum; 768b, cenra gehwylcum; 769a, ealuscerwen; 770a, reþe renweardas; 828a, ellenmærþum; 838b, guðrinc monig; 863b, god cyning; 919a, swiðhicgende; 1010b, symbel; 1011b, maran weorode; 1012a, sincgyfan; 1013b, blædagande; 1026a, sceotendum; 1044a, eodor Ingwina; 1047a, hordweard hæleþa; 1198a, hordmaðum hæleða; 1311a, sigoreadig secg; 1321b, helm Scyldinga; 1390a, rices weard; 1398a, mihtigan Drihtne; 1591b, snottre ceorlas; 1601a, hwate Scyldingas; 1602a, goldwine gumena; 1623b, lidmanna helm; 1634b, cyningbalde men; 1646a, hæle hildedeor; 1678a, harum hildfruman; 1684b (ff), woroldcyninga se selesta be sæm tweonum ðara þe on Scedenigge sceattas dælde; 1787b, ellenrofum; 1804a, æþelingas; 1806a, cuma collenferhð; 1812b, modig secg; 1815a, æþeling; 1816a, hæle hildedeor; 1824a, gumena dryhten; 1825a, guðgeweorca; 1852a, hordweard hæleþa; 1866a, eorla hleo; 1870b, cyning æþelum god; 1890b, landweard; 1899, Hroðgares hordgestreonum; 1900a, batwearde; 1922b, sinces bryttan; 1977b, se ða sæcce genæs; 2004a, Sige-Scyldingas; 2014a, weorod; 2071a, sinces bryttan; 2082a, bona blodigtoð; 2142a, eorla hleo; 2438a, freawine; 2439b, mæg; 2440a, broðor; 2641a, garwigend; 2641b, gode; 2642a, hwate helmberend; 2643a, ellenweorc; 2646a, dæda dollicra; 2649a, hildfruman; 2802a, heaðomære; 2873b, fyrdgesteallan; 2882b, wergendra; 2895a, bordhæbbende; 3111b, hæleða monegum; 3182b, lofgeornost.

d) Euphemism

Euphemism is saying or implying something less significant than the phenomenon that is being discussed. It can often take the form of litotes, however there is not a single euphemistic epithet phrase that is itself a negation in *Beowulf*. Where an epithet attributes one or more understated qualities to its referent, and where the understatement is itself a point of irony, the epithet is noted as a euphemism in this thesis. As a contrastive offset trope, the proof of that understatement is generally a contrast between the attribution in the epithet and its amplificatory context-of-narrative.

709b, beadwa geþinges; 719a, heardran hæle; 981, gylpspræce guðgeweorca; 1201b, ecne ræd; 1237b, hand gemæne; 1586a, guðwerigne; 2072a, hondræs hæleða; 2355a, hondgemota; 2415b, yðe ceap; 2482a, heardan ceape; 3046a, eorðscrafa.

e) Paradox

Paradox is all those cases where an epithet is oxymoronic or where it is to some extent an absurd (as distinct from apophatic) attribution within its context of narrative amplification. Frequently a paradoxical epithet draws attention to the problematic or difficult aspects of the referenced character or object.

> 919a, swiðhicgende; 981, gylpspræce guðgeweorca; 1016a, swiðhicgende; 1212a, wyrsan wigfrecan; 1253a, goldsele; 1259a, ides aglæcwif; 1263a, fæderenmæge; 1299a, blædfæstne beorn; 1424b, feþa; 1719a, breosthord blodreow; 1902a (ff), on meodubence maþme þy weorþra yrfelafe; 1933a, 1934a, nænig [...] swæsra gesiða; 1933b, deor; 1940b, cwenlic þeaw; 1941a, idese; 1941b, ænlicu; 1942a, freoðowebbe; 1948b, geongum cempan; 2083a, goldsele; 2245a, hringa hyrde; 2282b, frioðowære; 2446a, giong on galgan; 2456a, winsele westen; 2458a, hæleð in hoðman; 2712a, eorðdraca; 2825a, egeslic eorðdraca; 2884b, swyrdgifu; 3168a, eldum swa unnyt.

2. Subversion of Cultural Paradigm

This set includes all epithets that ironically attribute to a character or object qualities that it would not normally be said to possess, and where this challenges received notions about the distinctions between classes of being and object. For example, there are numerous anthropomorphic epithets attributed to monsters throughout the poem, several of which are ironically subversive, insofar as they reflect back on humans as monstrous. These are instances of the process referred to in Chapter 5 as 'attributive metathesis.' The argument that many monsters were conceived of as part human does not detract from this point, for two reasons. First, it demonstrably does not apply to some monsters, such as Beowulf's dragon.[21] The membership of the *subversion of cultural paradigm* set overlaps significantly with the set of epithets classed as *contrastively offset*, partly because the subversive attributions are frequently used as a contrast to offset the *hollow*, *apophatic*, and *dramatic upstaging* epithets. There is also a significant overlap with the

21 Although see Tripp, *Literary Essays*, p. 95 and *passim*, who infers a 'man-dragon.' Also Tripp, *More about the fight with the Dragon:* Beowulf *2208b-3182: Commentary, Edition, and Translation*, University Press of America, Lanham, 1983.

epithets classed as *innuendo*, since the connotations of a subversive epithet often include (or have the potential to include) slurs of a sexual nature.

> 142a, healðegnes; 720b, rinc; 770a, reþe renweardas; 893a, aglæca; 924b, mægþa hose; 986b, hilderinc; 1008a, symbel; 1046b, mære þeoden; 1814b, weorð Denum; 1902a (ff), on meodubence maþme þy weorþra yrfelafe; 1932a, fremu folces cwen; 1933a, 1934a, nænig [...] swæsra gesiða; 1943b, leofne mannan; 1949a, æðelum dior; 2015b, healsittend; 2016a, medudream mara; 2065b, wiflufan; 2072a, hondræs hæleða; 2090a, dior dædfruma; 2127a, leofne mannan; 2288b, stearcheort; 2289a, feondes fotlast; 2292b (f), Waldendes hyldo; 2320a, dryhtsele dyrnne; 2414a, gearo guðfreca; 2592b, aglæcean; 2919b, frætwe.

3. Innuendo

Innuendo is masked slur, criticism or mockery by connotation. It need not be sexual (although most epithets with innuendo in *Beowulf* are sexual innuendo). It need not be masked, but generally is. Innuendo is qualitatively distinct from high scorn or direct mockery, which may themselves be ironic, but do not dissimulate in the same way. Some innuendo in the epithets of *Beowulf* is extremely subtle. Frequently it is only accessible after perceiving a more obvious irony — a subversively jarring reference to Hroðgar in train as emerging *mægþa hose* (line 924b) opens questions both about the king's manliness and about the maidenhood of his companions.

> 63b, healsgebedda; 583a, billa brogan; 588a, heafodmægum; 662b, hæleþa gedryht; 663a, eodur Scyldinga; 664a, wigfruma; 717, Hroþgares ham; 719b, healðegnas; 769a, ealuscerwen; 863b, god cyning; 921b, beahhorda weard; 922b, getrume micle; 923a, cystum gecyþed; 924b, mægþa hose; 996, secga gehwylcum þara þe on swylc starað; 1010b, symbel; 1046b, mære þeoden; 1177a, beahsele beorhta; 1231a, druncne dryhtguman; 1253a, goldsele; 1279b, Hring-Dene; 1487a, beaga bryttan; 1489b, widcuðne man; 1602a, goldwine gumena; 1810a, guðwine; 1902a (ff), on meodubence maþme þy weorþra yrfelafe; 1937a, handgewriþene; 1938a, mundgripe; 1943b, leofne mannan; 2010a, hringsele; 2014a, weorod; 2015b, healsittendra; 2018b, beahwriðan; 2021b, ealuwæge; 2022b, fletsittende; 2023b, nægled sinc; 2024a, hæleð; 2025a, geong goldhroden; 2025b, glædum suna Frodan; 2031b, seo bryd; 2059a, se fæmnan þegn; 2083a, goldsele; 2127a, leofne mannan; 2633b, medu; 2867a, ealubence; 2884a, sincþego; 2998a, hamweorðunge.

4. Myth-Identifying

If one of the functions served by epithets is to distill or make salient a given perspective on the object of attribution, this is especially clear in the use of many ostensively formulaic epithets to posit received and simple understandings of characters, objects, and the relationships between them — before proceeding to undercut these with irony. It is a form of the 'straw man' trope. The splendour of the Danes is an example of this: aspects of their splendour are repeatedly highlighted through the attributive use of epithets, and those are contrastively offset as amplified through the poem and its narrative. Clearly, there is a relationship between this technique and the topic of received historiography. Epithets are used formulaically to posit a received historiographic proposition, while an ironic technique (typically the contrastive offset) is used to contest its validity.

> 3a, þa æþelingas; 129b, mære þeoden; 130a, æþeling ærgod; 201a, mære þeoden; 428a, eodor Scyldinga; 429b, wigendra hleo; 464b, Ar-Scyldinga; 597b, Sige-Scyldingas; 609a, brego Beorht-Dena; 619b, sigerof kyning; 644a, sigefolca; 662b, hæleþa gedryht; 717, Hroþgares ham; 768b, cenra gehwylcum; 828a, ellenmærþum; 838b, guðrinc monig; 863b, god cyning; 864a, heaþorofe; 893a, aglæca; 922b, getrume micle; 923a, cystum gecyþed; 1011b, maran weorode; 1012a, sincgyfan; 1013b, blædagande; 1018a, freondum; 1019a, Þeod-Scyldingas; 1039, hildesetl heahcyninges; 1042a, widcuþes wig; 1046b, mære þeoden; 1047a, hordweard hæleþa; 1069a, hæleð Healf-Dena; 1170a, sinces brytta; 1177a, beahsele beorhta; 1189b, hæleþa bearn; 1198a, hordmaðum hæleða; 1250b, tilu; 1279b, Hring-Dene; 1299a, blædfæstne beorn; 1307a, har hilderinc; 1384a, snotor guma; 1474, se mæra maga Healfdenes; 1580b, heorðgeneatas; 1591b, snottre ceorlas; 1601a, hwate Scyldingas; 1602a, goldwine gumena; 1684b (ff), woroldcyninga se selesta be sæm tweonum ðara þe on Scedenigge sceattas dælde; 1698b (ff), se wisa [...] sunu Healfdenes; 1787b, ellenrofum; 1809a, leoflic iren; 1814b, weorð Denum; 1824a, gumena dryhten; 1852a, hordweard hæleþa; 1866a, eorla hleo; 1870b, cyning æþelum god; 1885b (f), an cyning æghwæs orleahtre; 1932a, fremu folces cwen; 2004a, Sige-Scyldingas; 2011, se mæra mago Healfdenes; 2142a, eorla hleo; 2144b, þeawum; 2756a, sigehreðig; 2802a, heaðomære; 3005a, hwate Scildingas; 3111b, hæleða monegum.

5. Scorn

Using an ironic figure to mock or criticise a character, object, or relationship explicitly. This is the least subtle of the rhetorical

techniques for irony observable through the epithets of *Beowulf*. Although it serves a similar function to innuendo (namely a rhetorical attack), stylistically it is farthest removed from it among all the techniques listed here. It employs a particularly obvious style of dissimulation, which is effectively a transparent figure of rhetoric (to perceive it, one need only perceive the amplificatory contrast). Martínez Pizzaro investigates the links between Beowulf's *flyting* with Unferð, the doomed truce of the Finnsburg intermezzo, and other early Germanic (principally Old Norse) scorn poems, or *sennur*.[22] There is a faint echo of such a standoff between Beowulf and the dragon, although the dragon's breath issues fire, not words. There are only four epithets that carry a scornful sentiment in the poem, however. Three come from Beowulf's exchange with Unferð and one is from the narrator's comments on the Danes' heathen worship near the start of the poem.

182a, heofena Helm; 506a, se Beowulf; 531a, beore druncen; 594a, searogrim.

6. *Negative Expectation*

One of the peculiarities of an irony revolving largely around the disappointment of expectations is that certain expectations may be fulfilled — and this is ironic. Negative expectations are ironic without reference to fulfilment. At times there is tension between an ostensibly positive expectation (which is thwarted) and an underlying, more genuine negative expectation (which is fulfilled), one example being the futility associated with the 'peaceweaver' role of wives attempting to arbitrate conflict between their biological and marital families. Names that are ironic epithets frequently fit into this category. It seems likely that we can read some level of cynicism into many of these epithets. This thesis does not attempt to analyse *Beowulf* with a view to its cynicism, however.[23]

22 *SENNA*, pp. 27-28 and pp. 58-64.

23 One theoretical starting point for such an analysis might be Peter Sloterdijk, *Critique of Cynical Reason*, trans. Michael Eldred, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis and London, 2001. Sloterdijk devotes extensive discussions to the influence of normative phenomena such as heroism in the establishment of cynical attitudes.

476b, fletwerod; 477a, wigheap; 480b, beore druncen; 482a, beorsele; 484a, medoheal; 499a (etc.), Unferð; 499a (etc.), Hunferð; 499b (etc.), Ecglaf; 722a, fyrbendum fæst; 778b, witan Scyldinga; 906b, aldorceare; 1064, Healfdenes hildewisan; 1071a (etc.), Hildeburh; 1142b, worold rædenne; 1171a, goldwine gumena; 1209a, rice þeoden; 1231a, druncne dryhtguman; 1240b, beorscealca sum; 1251b, sare; 1326a, eaxlgestealla; 1465b, mago Ecglafes; 1474, se mæra maga Healfdenes; 1476a, goldwine gumena; 1487a, beaga bryttan; 1602a, goldwine gumena; 1643b, meodowongas; 1698b (ff), se wisa [...] sunu Healfdenes; 1714a, eaxlgesteallan; 1788a, fletsittendum; 2011, se mæra mago Healfdenes; 2028b, wælfæhða dæl; 2031b, seo bryd; 2042a, eald æscwiga; 2065b, wiflufan; 2068b, unfæcne; 2081b, idelhende; 2082b, bealewa gemyndig; 2085a, gearofolm; 2143b, maga Healfdenes; 2147a, sunu Healfdenes; 2633b, medu; 2635a, biorsele; 2646a, dæda dollicra; 2657a, ealdgewyrht; 2867a, ealubence; 2868a, healsittendum; 3112a, boldagendra; 3116b, isernscure; 3117a, stræla storm.

7. Pun

By pun is meant those epithets involving some form of ironic soundplay. Two of the four examples involve play on the word *aldor* or *ealdor* (both forms meaning either 'life' or 'lord'). The other two play on words for hand: *folm* and *hand*.

992a, folmum gefrætwod; 1308a, aldorþegn; 1587a, aldorleasne; 2076a, Hondscio; 2099a, hand on Hiorte; 2446a, giong on galgan; 3003a, ealdorleasne.

8. Others

The remaining ironic epithets are difficult to class in a trope taxonomy. There are only five. Each of them fits quite easily into one of the categories in the topic taxonomy set out above.

5b, meodosetla; 721a, dreamum bedæled; 1372b, heoru stow; 1416a, wynleasne wudu; 1936a, wælbende.

2. Conventional types of irony in *Beowulf*'s epithets

This thesis constructs a somewhat idiosyncratic taxonomy. The ironic epithets have been classified according to categories that are quite different from, or tangential to, conventional (that is, classically styled) ironic categories. The principal rationale for this methodological peculiarity has been that the task itself is peculiar. The task is not to classify ironies but to explore ironic epithets. A second rationale has been that the taxonomic categories of conventional rhetorical analysis are significantly more arbitrary a mode with respect to the cultural situation of the poem than the taxonomy adopted. This thesis uses categories suggested by a reading of the poem, categories built on the poem's highly developed and distinctive patterns of diction and arrangement, and thereby assumes in the author of *Beowulf* no particular level of acquaintance with classical rhetoric. As discussed in the Introduction, that is a conservative non-assumption. A third rationale, linked to the 'principal rationale,' has been one of the reasons for focussing this thesis on the epithets of the poem: they teach distinctive lessons about the uses of irony in Germanic heroic verse. Since any system of communications is to some extent functionally informed, it is important to construct a taxonomy that reflects the functions of the data wherever possible, rather than construct or adapt one that imposes arbitrary functions upon the data.

Nevertheless, analysis of the irony of *Beowulf* in conventional terms must be of some value, at least for the rhetorically-minded reader. To some extent, that requires a broader data set than is available in this thesis. Schematic data, for example, would allow analysis of the poem's ironies of plot to an extent that this thesis cannot sustain. Much that is ironic lies outside the moment and its context-of-amplification. Also, much that is the moment is not epithetic. The moment of negation, for example, can be profoundly ironic. This thesis has not collected comprehensive data from the litotes of the poem, although it contains some discussion of that trope.

Within the primary data set for this thesis, conventional ironic analysis is not impossible. Conventional ironic analysis, concerned with scheme and trope types rather than trope and topic types, is more generalised than the formula-driven method pursued in this thesis. In its

modern form, it revolves largely around the place and purpose of the narrative subject, the 'I.' If we take as a taxonomic framework the categories outlined by Muecke,[24] those are:

1. *Sarcasm* — according to Muecke, sarcasm is only barely ironic.[25]
2. *Impersonal irony* — 'That way of being ironical which does not rely on any weight being given to the ironist's personality. Most verbal irony is of this kind [...] Irony in this mode is normally characterised by a dryness or gravity of manner; the tone is that of a rational, casual, matter-of-fact, modest, unemotional speaker. Understatement, consequently, is a frequent form of impersonal irony.'[26]
3. *Self-disparaging irony* — 'The self-disparaging ironist understates himself, and the impression he gives of himself is part of his ironic strategy.'[27]
4. *Ingénu irony* — 'The ingénu may ask questions or make comments the full import of which he does not realize. The effectiveness of this ironical mode comes from its economy of means; mere common sense or ignorance may suffice to see through the complexities of hypocrisy or expose the irrationality of prejudice.'[28]
5. *Irony of self-betrayal* — 'Putting a self-contradictory argument into the mouth of a would-be wise or virtuous character.'[29]
6. *Irony of simple incongruity* — 'It is an ironic technique to juxtapose without comment two contradictory statements or incongruous images.'[30]
7. *Dramatic irony* — 'Someone serenely unaware of being in a predicament, especially when this predicament is the contrary of the situation he assumes himself to be in.'[31]

24 D.C. Muecke, *Irony*, Methuen, London, 1970.
25 *Ibid.*, p. 51.
26 *Ibid.*, p. 52.
27 *Ibid.*, p. 56.
28 *Ibid.*, p. 58.
29 *Ibid.*, p. 59.
30 *Ibid.*, p. 61.

8. *Irony of events* — 'The victim [of the ironic situation] expresses reliance on the future, but some unforseen turn of events reverses and frustrates his plans, expectations, hopes, fears, or desires. He gets at last but too late what he once desired; he throws away what he later finds is indispensable; to reach a certain goal he takes precisely the steps that lead him away from it; the means he takes to avoid something turn out to be the means of bringing it about.'[32]

9. *General irony* — 'An irony inherent in the human condition.'[33]

10. *Romantic irony* — 'Romantic Irony [...] is the irony of a writer conscious that literature can no longer be simply naïve and unreflective but must present itself as conscious of its contradictory, ambivalent nature.'[34]

Muecke's framework distinguishes between 'verbal' and 'situational' irony, in a fashion more or less identical to the classical distinction between tropes and schemes. In this account, verbal irony corresponds with types 1 – 6, while types 7 – 10 are forms of situational irony.

The epithets of *Beowulf* exhibit characteristics of some of those conventional types much more than others. The category of romantic irony is only very marginally evidenced, if at all. On the other hand, there is a wealth of impersonal irony and irony of simple incongruity. A breakdown of the poem's epithets according to the Muecke framework may furnish us with comparative information, then; it may allow us to compare tendencies in the irony of *Beowulf*'s epithets with the ironies we find in other poetics; and in this it is a useful analytical method that a classical rhetorical approach may take to the data set. There are further uses for such a taxonomy, of course, including (but certainly not limited to):

- Comparative literature studies, including literary history.
- Comparative theological studies.
- Comparative philology.

31 *Ibid.*, p. 63.
32 *Ibid.*, p. 66.
33 *Ibid.*, p. 67.
34 *Ibid.*, p. 78.

- Studies in the history of ideas.
- Studies in grammatical and stylistic genealogy.

On the other hand, a serious shortcoming of constructing a conventionally styled taxonomy for the irony of the epithets in *Beowulf* remains the arbitrariness of the framework — it is a framework devised without sympathy for the agenda of the *Beowulf* poet.[35] That said, it is an achievable task, and is clearly of some value.

The principal reason why this thesis does not set out a taxonomy of conventional irony in the epithets of *Beowulf* is that the results are not diverse enough to be interesting. The ironies of the poem's epithets turn almost exclusively around impersonal irony and/or irony of simple incongruity. That there should be an overwhelming preponderance of verbal irony ahead of situational irony is hardly surprising in a survey of epithets. That there should be such a restricted set of verbal ironic types is rather more discouraging for the conventional ironic typologist. It makes dull reading by taxonomic standards. The main finding from efforts to explore the conventional typology, however, has been that the approach itself is inappropriate to the matter at hand. Despite its clarity – its categories are necessarily more tightly defined than those of the formula-driven approach this thesis has relied upon – it fails to draw distinctions and connections between different epithetic manifestations of the poem's irony with anything like the diversity and depth of the topics-and-tropes taxonomy outlined in this thesis.

Against those general points, there are five exceptions, one particularly salient, and another three not much less so. First, the trope called *dramatic upstaging* in this chapter (see above) has self-evident links to the classical situational type, 'dramatic irony.'

Secondly, there is a strong element of sarcasm running through the exchanges between Beowulf and Unferð, which comes through in the epithets used by both those characters:

35 That is not a criticism of Muecke, of course. Nor should it be read as a suggestion that his work is ahistorical, at least in respect of *Beowulf* — which clearly he had read before he completed his overview of irony. It is principally a reflection of the functional tension that naturally arises between a generalist work such as his and a particular study such as this.

506a, se Beowulf; 530b, wine min Unferð; 531a, beore druncen; 583a, billa brogan; 594a, searogrim.

Thirdly, there is a consistent irony of events running through all epithetic references to alcohol. The alcohol topos is used in *Beowulf* to suggest forthcoming trouble, which is more or less consistently amplified through the narrative of the poem:

1240b, beorscealca sum; 1643b, meodowongas; 1902a (ff), on meodubence maþme þy weorþra yrfelafe; 2014a; weorod; 2016a, medudream maran; 2021b, ealuwæge; 2456a, winsele westen; 2633b, medu; 2635a, biorsele; 2867a, ealubence.

Fourthly, there is a strong irony of events running through several of the epithets that point up bodily harm through reference to specific body parts:

588b, heafodmæg; 1326a, eaxlgestealla; 1714a, eaxlgesteallan.

Last, there is an irony of self-betrayal, when Hroðgar describes himself as *se weard* (line 1741b). There is an instance of the irony of events with no reference to bodily harm or alcohol: *dreamhealdend* (line 1227b). The epithet *freoðowebbe* (line 1942a) is a classic dramatic irony. Also, there are three instances of general irony, the third of which is also an irony of events:

1201b, ecne ræd; 2097b, lifwynna; 2456a, winsele westen.

Conclusion

> During this whole investigation, I have continually had something *in mente* [in mind], namely, the final view, without thereby laying myself open to the charge of a kind of intellectual Jesuitism or of having hidden, sought, and then found what I myself had found long ago. The final view has hovered over each exploration as a possibility. Every conclusion has been the unity of a reciprocity: it has felt itself drawn to what it was supposed to explain and what it is supposed to explain is drawn to it. In a certain sense it has come into existence by means of this reflecting, although in another sense it existed prior to it. But this can scarcely be otherwise, since the whole is prior to its parts. If it has not come into existence, then at least it is born again. I hope, however, that the fair and reasonable reader will recognise this as circumspection on my part, even though the form of the whole treatise thereby departs from the now widespread and in so many ways meritorious scholarly method. If I had posed the final view first of all and in each particular portion had assigned each of these ... considerations in its place, then I would easily have lost the element of contemplation, which is always important but here doubly so, because by no other way, not by immediate observation, can I gain the phenomenon.[1]

In the process of contemplation, this thesis has come to one finding I confess I had always intended for it. I am pleased to conclude from the aforegoing discussion that the poem of *Beowulf* is filled with irony. Irony is abundant. It flows richly through every fitt, every turn of the story. The names are ironic. The plot is ironic. The poetic voice is often clearly ironic. Its last word is pointedly ironic. For those who heed it, the ironic wit of *Beowulf* rings still, after a thousand or more years, like a bell whose note has been miraculously sustained.

In a less prejudiced fashion, we have seen that the poem is fundamentally contrastive, that its contrastiveness naturally predisposes it to an ironic consciousness, and that the poet has readily exploited that predisposition by developing ironic tensions:

- Between what is purported and what is actualised (‘words and deeds’).

1 Søren Kierkegaard, *op. cit.*, pp. 155-156. Translators’ parenthesis. An editors’ footnote is omitted from this quotation.

- Between ends and beginnings, like and unlike ('alpha and omega').
- Between what is and what is not ('the negative mode,' including litotes).
- Between a moment of attribution and its contextual amplification (epithets).

Those tensions operate at every conceivable level of the poem, ranging from whimsy and paronomasia to the religious, ethical, and political disposition of the poem. The question of political disposition is significant for reasons outside the principal concerns of this thesis, as discussed (briefly) below.

Additionally, we have seen that the irony generated by such contrastive poetics can be examined systematically, through the examples of closely read ironic epithets. It has been possible to establish a methodology for determining whether a given epithet is ironic, and subsequently to create two or more independent and comprehensive taxonomies for the comparative discussion of those epithets. It appears that the same could be achieved with respect to other features of the poem, including:

- Litotes.
- Pledges made against outcomes achieved
- Characterisation.

There are features missing from this analysis, of course. The most notable is humour. Of course, much of *Beowulf* is funny: that is an almost inevitable consequence of an ironic disposition. To discuss humour in a poem requires that we be able to build a methodology for reading it, for separating with some certainty what is humorous 'within the text' from the fool's gold of humour that appeals only anachronistically, humour perceived without reference to what the poet or a contemporary audience may have found funny. To achieve such a task requires that we have a clear sense of the tools for humour available to the poet and her or his audience. Irony is one such tool. This thesis may thus be taken as one element of the prolegomena to a study of humour in *Beowulf*. This thesis is not complete, in a sense, until that

subsequent study is carried out, but still, it is not that subsequent study. It is what it is. The same argument could be made with respect to the spirit of play in the poem. An ironic poem is full of play. This study touches on the question of play, especially wordplay, at numerous levels, but it is not an effort to apply to *Beowulf*, say, Huizinga's theory,[2] nor is it a survey of whimsy or paronomasia in the poem. We notice many instances of playful poetics in the course of, or as a function of, the discussion of irony: perhaps this thesis will be useful to another subsequent study of another promising area for inquiry.

I can imagine that those with a strong interest in the provenance of the poem might infer much argument for or against their cases from the argument that *Beowulf* is deeply ironic. Equally likely, some may accept *my* case principally or partially on the basis of a given theory about the poem's provenance. I prefer the former fate, if I have a choice. This thesis does not argue that the poem is anti-Danish, although there is plenty of evidence to support such an argument. It is a possibility that has been given far too little attention by modern readers, so I look forward to the day when somebody tries it on. Instead, this thesis proceeds more moderately, showing a systematic questioning of, a thoroughly ironic attitude towards, the reputation of the Scylding dynasty (the dynasty's namesake and progenitor, Scyld, does not seem to be subjected to the same treatment). This is not pro-Danish or anti-Danish. Indeed, it is hard to imagine that a work purely pro-Danish or anti-Danish, a factionally motivated history of the Danes, could be half as good as the *Beowulf* we have. Irony is so much more satisfying, so much more *cwic* – vital – than propaganda.

Accepting this thesis means that arguments for an early provenance of *Beowulf*, or for a Danelaw provenance need supplementary rationale, if they are based on variants of Whitelock's argument that the poem is too simply pro-Danish to be written in an England hostile to the Vikings.[3] That argument is too simple: the poem could easily have been composed in England after 793AD, not necessarily under Danish rule. While Kiernan's palaeographic and linguistic arguments for a late Old English provenance are at least as satisfying as any alternative theories

2 *Homo Ludens.*
3 *The Audience of Beowulf.*

built on such evidence,[4] the political sentiment of the poem furnishes no reason why the poem need date to the court of Canute rather than, say, Æthelred. The language may seem 'obviously sympathetic to the Danes,'[5] but that is demonstrably a superficial reading: had Kiernan and Whitelock been listening for the irony, they might have recognised that the poem's true disposition is much less clear. A close reading of the poem's irony shows its political sentiment cannot be used to explain away any theory that has the poem deriving from any English court or scriptorium later than 793AD. I am drawn to the possibility of a ninth century Mercian provenance, founded on evidence from Mercian genealogies and on the fact that Mercia's king for some of the period 825-851 was called Wiglaf.[6] That said, I cannot help feeling provenance is an insoluble problem, and am inclined to regard it as a side issue. What matters is the text we have and how we read it.[7] *Beowulf* is too good a poem, certainly too complex a poem,[8] to be reduced to a partisan political ideology. It is too universally caustic, too wryly skeptical, too powerfully governed by contradiction[9] to be used as propaganda. It is no Dane's puff piece.

Some elements of the irony of *Beowulf*, being also concerns of humour or play, may remain forever mysterious. To suggest that any modern reader might be across the full extent of innuendo in the poem, for instance, is absurd. Do the poem's uses of the noun *gewit* (lines 2703a and 2882a) hint at libido? It seems there is no way of knowing, based on the available evidence. Is there a linguistics of rhyme correspondence (rhyming slang or something comparable) informing any of the vocabulary? It is quite possible, but there seems to be no evidence of it. Here we directly encounter Kierkegaard's *nisse*, wearing its hat of

4 Kevin Kiernan, Beowulf *and the* Beowulf *Manuscript*, University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor, 1999.

5 *Ibid.*, p. 15.

6 G.N. Garmonsway (trans. and ed.), *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, J.M. Dent, London, 1977, pp. 60-65.

7 Here I find that Kiernan is persuasive, this time in his call for a radically conservative edition. Mitchell and Robinson hint at such a version, Beowulf – *An Edition*, pp. 315-318, but it is a task yet to be accomplished.

8 This is the principal critical argument put by Earl, *Thinking about* Beowulf.

9 See Hugh Magennis, *Images of Community in Old English Poetry*, Cambridge U.P., 1996, pp. 73-75 ('Contradiction in *Beowulf*').

invisibility.[10] In answering such questions, no methodology can be assembled. Like many of the ongoing scholarly debates that form a context for this discussion – epic or elegy, oral or literary, early or late, one source or several, *et cetera* – and like so many of the textual *cruces*, ultimately, nobody can have the last word here. That is less a failure for studies such as this thesis, more a success for the artful inscrutability of the *Beowulf* poet. As the doctoral dissertation of Kierkegaard has shown, the ironic mode is marked by questions, not assertions. Irony, argues Kierkegaard, is an unknowingness, the worldly confusion that is epitomised by the character of the philosopher Socrates; it is not a confident belief.[11] That is its repulsiveness and its allure.

As the Introduction states, I accept that the present argument stretches the bounds of credibility on many occasions. I am not sufficiently capable a writer to explore the possibilities of irony in *Beowulf* in a fashion that consistently acknowledges the extent to which a given reading should be taken as contingent or contestible. In many cases, the contingency or contestedness of a reading is all that is certain about it, and this has not been acknowledged to the extent that a properly completed argument should have achieved. Among numerous flaws in this thesis, that one is the most significant. For all that, I hope my readers will put this thesis down gently, feeling they have been led to consider possibilities in the poem that are new to them, possibilities resulting from a view of the poem that is well worth considering. In my own mind, this poem, which I have been reading zealously for nine years now, is as this thesis essentially portrays it: full of irony.

10 Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Irony*, p. 12.
11 *Ibid.*, pp. 5-6 and *passim*.

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